Decolonising Exeter – Teaching Toolkit: Project Summary

Introduction

The aim of this project was to co-create resources with fellow educators to support our ongoing efforts to decolonise their curricula. We had initially planned to achieve this by conducting an extensive literature review and document analysis, the results of which would underpin the creation of bespoke guidance documents and training sessions which reflect the culture and spirit of the University of Exeter.

However, early conversations with stakeholders revealed that we had insufficient Institutional data to accurately capture the zeitgeist of the University of Exeter when it comes to decolonisation and we did not want to use anecdotal evidence or bring other data sets from departments to scale in order to inform the contents of the toolkit. We also realised that many of our colleagues were at an earlier phase of the decolonisation process than we initially realised; for example, not only was there some uncertainty about how one might decolonise the curriculum (a topic we had planned to cover in the toolkit), but there was also substantial uncertainty about how 'decolonisation' should best be defined and whether it was even something that educators should care about. Based on this early feedback, we decided to refocus our efforts on researching current attitudes towards decolonising the curriculum (assessing knowledge, desire and obstacles) so that we would have a detailed understanding of how best to pitch and package the eventual toolkit in a way that would maximise its value and efficacy.

We therefore renegotiated the project outputs, placing primary emphasis on understanding the decolonisation culture at the institution, with the development of a toolkit structure and contents wishlist as a secondary goal to be informed by our research findings. We opted to push back the creation and population of the toolkit itself until Term 1 of the 2021/22 academic year, during a second phase of the project supported by the same project team.

Methods

We performed two cross-campus surveys: one of staff and another of students. For both, questions were designed and selected in consultation with a wide group of stakeholders in order to ensure clarity, sensitivity, appropriateness, and usefulness. We followed this quantitative data collection phase with a qualitative phase during which we held focus groups with interested staff and students to discuss the findings and ask some more nuanced questions.

To ensure that our findings were useful not just to the toolkit but also to wider institutional discussions and strategic work, we have presented our results to various groups including the Success and Inclusive Education Working Group, the Race Equality Group Self Assessment Team, the Provost Commission, and education strategy groups within specific colleges and disciplines.

We also worked with the Provost Commission to hold a special collaborative meeting involving colleagues from the Exeter Decolonising Network, Success and Inclusive Education Working Group, and the Race Equality Group Self Assessment Team in order to collaboratively develop a robust institutional working definition of 'decolonisation' and 'decolonising the curriculum' more specifically. While this is still in progress, it was a successful approach that yielded a variety of

interesting perspectives that can be used to triangulate a university-wide understanding of what is in and out of scope when we talk about decolonisation[1].

Alongside this work, we also liaised separately with both the Provost and the Exeter Decolonising Network to raise concerns about institutional decolonisation practices more generally and to clarify how decolonisation of the curriculum sits within the larger institutional decolonisation agenda. These are key points that need to be expressed in the toolkit so that colleagues understand what they are and are not being asked to do as they review and revise their curriculum through a decolonial lens. Several colleges also requested our attendance at local away days and strategy group meetings so that we could have these same conversations in a way that was less formal and more tailored to particular disciplines; again, the outcomes of these conversations fed back in to the wider project by clarifying what information would need to be included in the toolkit and, in some cases, by yielding up case studies and suggestions for how we could best support colleagues in developing the skills needed to decolonise their curriculum.

Finally, we are using insights from all of the above work to support Dr Vrinda Nayak in developing the University's transformative education framework, which includes 'Decolonising the Curriculum' as one of three themes linking education to social justice. The toolkit and related activity are firmly embedded in, and will help facilitate, institutional priorities associated with this work.

Results and discussion

We performed a cross campus survey of staff and students. Overall, only 168 staff (of over 6,500; 2.3%) responded to the survey; respondents were a mixture of professional services and academic staff representing a variety of departments and disciplines across the university's four campuses. Please see **Appendix 1** for an infographic summary of the outcomes, and **Appendix 2** for the full outcomes of the CfSM staff survey on decolonising the curriculum.

Overall, 273 students responded to the survey. The majority were undergraduates in either their first or third year at the institution. Most survey participants were based at the Streatham Campus (followed by Penryn, St Luke's, and then Truro), and they tended to be enrolled on HASS courses (in HUMS and CSSIS in particular, followed by CLES, CEMPS, CMH, and UEBS). Nearly two-thirds of respondents selected 'white' as their ethnicity. Please see **Appendix 3** for an infographic summary of the outcomes, and **Appendix 4** for the full outcomes of the CfSM student survey on decolonising the curriculum.

Overview of accounts

To date, we have spent £3,285.53 of our £5,000 budget; we have approval to use the remainder of the budget which will allow us to continue working with our student interns to build the toolkit (on SharePoint) and populate it with resources, including materials developed in conjunction with colleagues in particular disciplines[2]. We are thrilled to be able to continue with our strong staff-

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[1] In fact, having multiple accepted definitions may ultimately be more useful than having a single one; when teaching sensitive topics such as those related to religions and worldviews, it is common practice to take more of a comparative approach across multiple possibilities than to accept that any one possibility captures all relevant ideas.

[2] We have already collected case studies and guidance documents from several disciplines and are scheduled to meet with additional disciplines at pre-term education away days. In one case, an Education Incubator-

student collaboration, which has been incredibly rewarding for all members of our team and is one of the drivers of its success. Riadh Ghemmour and Fatuma Mohamud worked with us as student interns for the duration of the project and we benefited greatly from their subject matter expertise, relevant skills, and networks as well as their understanding of the student experience. We asked Riadh for his thoughts on working on the project, please find an excerpt below:

'Working on the decolonising the curriculum toolkit project enabled me to act on my agency, share my voice and be an integral part in shaping multiple decision making which the research team took. What I particularly enjoyed in the project was the relationships which the team and myself developed and sustained throughout the time to cultivate a collaborative understanding and action planning towards the decolonial project at Exeter. In addition, the democratisation and distribution of power within the team was also an aspect which I also valued the most; as a result, knowledge production was co-created than solely owned by a specific individual. This is in itself a core aspect of what decolonisation is; dismantling power hierarchies to reach a democratic approach in how decisions are made, how knowledge is produced, and how individuals are valued and respected.'

Outputs

The outputs that have been produced to date are:

1. Circulation of staff and student surveys, the results of which have been shared with colleagues across the institution via oral presentations and accompanying slides. The video can be viewed at: https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/af9c2934-58b0-4437-ade9-c469920f2806
2. Written reports (Appendices 2 and 4) and infographic summaries (Appendices 1 and 3) of the findings of the survey findings are in the appendixes of this document.
3. Creation of case studies highlighting aspects of good practice so that colleagues have exemplars to consult when decolonising their curriculum.
4. Formation of partnerships with key educational and EDI committee governance groups across the institution - Exeter Students Guild, Falmouth and Exeter Students Union, EDI staff within each discipline/college, and the Exeter Decolonise Network Steering Group.
5. Development of a draft outline of the toolkit, audit of existing decolonisation resources, and collection of decolonisation materials for posting to the toolkit SharePoint when it goes live.

The outputs still under development are as follows:

1. Institutional working definition(s) of 'decolonising the curriculum' to support the ongoing work in developing Institutional strategic goals related to Decolonising the Curriculum and to use as the introduction to the toolkit.
2. Launch of the toolkit SharePoint, featuring helpful documents compiled centrally by our project team (as in point 4 above) and submitted by colleagues (e.g., solicited via the partnerships listed in point 3 above
3. Supporting the development of a Decolonising the Curriculum website, hosted by the University, which will house the toolkit.

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funded student-led project led to the creation of a college-specific survey building on ours, and the generation of STEMM-specific data and recommendations that can be uploaded to the toolkit.

Future plans

One of our interns successfully submitted an abstract entitled 'Staff-student partnership to decolonise the curriculum: the case of University of Exeter' for presentation at the 2021 HEIR Conference, Inclusive Institutional Research. The event will take place from 22-24 September and all members of the team will be invited to participate in the 45-minute 'long talk'.

We will be looking for opportunities to present at additional events, both internal and external, in the future. For example, CK will use the project as a case study in her national 'Decolonising Academic Development' action learning group for managers. We also plan to pursue publication and are interested in contributing articles on the survey, our collaborative approach to this work, and also on the use of the toolkit to coordinate this sort of academic development. We are interested in a collective endeavour with other CfSM researchers and also in both informal (e.g., The Conversation, WONKHE) and formal (e.g., academic journals) outputs.

Evaluation of the scheme

What worked well for us:

- We have always known that it is important to work with students as partners but it never ceases to amaze us how much knowledge, skill and expertise our students have.
- Using Teams to coordinate asynchronous collaboration and collaboration across three campuses. It was surprisingly easy to organise the entire project online and to use our digital infrastructure to keep track of communications, documents, datasets, and so on. Without the collaborative tools put in place during Project Enhance, we would really have struggled to make this work given that we had one person in Penryn, another at St Luke's, and two more at Streatham.
- Having institutional support – e.g., enthusiasm, engagement, and sign-off from colleagues at all levels of the organisation because colleagues understood the importance of this work and were willing to donate their time and expertise to the project.
- Meeting regularly with the other CfSM researchers in order to compare notes not just about the logistics of running our projects, but on the pedagogical and theoretical ideas underpinning them.
- Being able to use the CfSM infrastructure (including funding, staff, 'brand', etc.) to help us build on our existing work; without CfSM backing, we would never have been able to undertake the survey, connect all the diverse groups, and get such wholesale buy-in for this work, so even though the project was related to something we were already doing, it really did help us take those efforts to the next level and generate data and insights that have been invaluable.
- Being taken seriously even though we were 'just' professional services staff. Opportunities like this are often denied to PS staff, so it was great to be successful in our application. Further, the fact that this money allowed us to engage in genuine research and scholarship has helped to reframe us – personally and also PS more generally – as people who can carry out this sort of work in a rigorous and meaningful way. This pushes back against entrenched prejudices and will help in our other work as well.

What was challenging:

- Recruitment processes – figuring out which option of many available was appropriate, and completing this process quickly so that we could get the project underway.
- Challenging existing misconceptions of the topic and dealing with the negativity that many colleagues threw our way as leaders on this project, specifically, and in this area of work, more generally.

Support:

- Proactively supporting recruitment processes especially since the projects are over short periods of time and there is a lot of red tape around appointments over 12 weeks.
- Setting up a CfSM Team with project channels (or something similar) to facilitate the sort of asynchronous collaboration that we benefitted from within our project team. Not all project members could make all our meetings, so an asynchronous collaborative space might have helped facilitate quick conversations (e.g., sharing of resources, asking for recommendations on techniques or for contacts in the field) that we otherwise weren't inclined to have because that sort of thing had been solved by the next time we met formally.
- Anna's idea about a collaborative article (e.g., something comparing the three different approaches for tackling this similar theme) or even a collaborative special issue (e.g., something with 3 different articles representing the different teams) is still really appealing, and if that goes ahead it would be great to get support for coordinating that.
- A visual means of more easily tracking the budget use might be helpful – though ultimately, we did figure out we could tally our expenditures using eClaims, folks who have other types of expenditures might find it helpful to access that information through some other mechanism.
- In the future, it might be helpful to have an introductory conversation (or an info pack?) that explicitly explores how exactly our given work relates to the CfSM agenda, the WP agenda, and overall institutional priorities. This was all sort of implicit in the application process, and some colleagues may already know this, but inevitably there are certain details and links that you're unaware of, so having it spelled out might be helpful for informing certain decisions.
- The Education Incubator has excellent resources on managing research projects and it may be worth offering some of these to recipients of these awards.

Appendix 1: Infographic showing the outcomes of the CfSM staff survey on decolonising the curriculum

Decolonising the curriculum
Results of the staff survey

Who were the survey respondents?

Overall, only 168 staff (of over 6,500; 2.3%) responded to the survey; respondents were a mixture of professional services and academic staff representing a variety of departments and disciplines across the university's four campuses.

66.1%
of staff indicated that they felt confident engaging with the concept of decolonising the curriculum

83.8%
of staff felt that decolonisation was relevant to their discipline

37.9%
of staff felt there was insufficient institutional support for decolonising the curriculum

27.1%
of staff indicated they did not have the capacity to engage with decolonising their curriculum

43%
of staff reported being involved in groups or discussions focusing on decolonising the curriculum

Key quotes from free-text questions:

- 'To me, decolonisation is ultimately about removing barriers.'
- '[Decolonisation] means opening teaching and learning to the voices of those who traditionally have not been considered or included in narratives of the past.'
- 'The avoidance of any clear definition of [this term] is a major problem and one of the reasons I can't endorse it.'
- 'Because it's such a debated concept, I find it hard to know how to get it right (or, perhaps more importantly, how not to get it wrong) ... I feel afraid to say that I'm doing anything for fear of being told that I'm getting it wrong. I also then become afraid that this can turn into an excuse for not trying.'
- 'This is slow, long-term work that must include our students from the start.'
- 'We need to know what we want the outcomes of decolonisation to be.'
- 'I question the motives, and the fundamental intellectual underpinnings [of decolonisation].'

Summary

Staff repeatedly remarked on how charged a topic decolonisation is, and how this is perpetuated by the lack of a clear and consistent definition. Further, they expressed frustration about not knowing what 'decolonising the curriculum' should look like within their context. In general, they indicated a willingness to engage with this work, but also anxiety over the potential to get it 'wrong'.

A full version of the survey and its results can be found in the Decolonisation Toolkit.

Appendix 2: Outcomes of the CfSM staff survey on decolonising the curriculum

Background

Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of George Floyd's death, University of Exeter colleagues have been increasingly vocal about their desire for educators at the institution to use a decolonial lens to scrutinise, and ideally reshape, their curriculum. University-wide surveys were distributed in Term 3 of the 2020-21 academic year to explore current staff understandings of and attitudes towards decolonising the curriculum, with the intent to use this information to create a decolonisation toolkit that addresses the needs and concerns highlighted by the survey outcomes.

Findings

Overall, only 168 staff (of over 6,500; 2.3%) responded to the survey; respondents were a mixture of professional services and academic staff representing a variety of departments and disciplines across the university's four campuses.

There were several types of response to the question 'what does "decolonising the curriculum" mean to you?' These broadly fall into the four categories below:

1. Expressions of uncertainty, in some cases accompanied by the hope that the upcoming decolonisation toolkit would help address this ignorance.
2. Discussions of how it means pausing and reflecting on various aspects of practice in order to address bias, reduce exclusion, and/or improve and support diversity.
3. Explorations of specific aspects of practice that this work might target – e.g., changing reading lists, challenging student privilege, looking for additional/alternative subject content, including new teaching activities and/or establishing different dynamics within the classroom.
4. Critiques of the concept and complaints that it over-represents and over-values minority views and places potentially illegal limits on academic freedom.

Of these, the most common were the second and third category; responses overwhelmingly indicated an open-minded curiosity about and/or a commitment to understanding and embodying decolonial approaches.

Some key quotes (from the free-text responses to this question) include:

- 'Never heard the term before…', 'no idea', 'I do not understand what you mean by that terminology'
- 'It means an attempt by political activists to impose a set of fringe theories on academics that contravenes the equality act and academic freedom laws and places the university in a very precarious legal position.'
- 'To me, decolonisation is ultimately about removing barriers.'
- 'Addressing how the legacies of colonial thought and history still shapes our teaching.'
- 'This is the real challenge for me. I believe it involves getting a greater diversity of voices and perspectives, but I'm not sure how much this is supposed to be about the people and how much it's about the types of approaches. I think it's also about interrogating the assumptions we make about how we should go about our teaching and research…'

- 'It means opening teaching and learning to the voices of those who traditionally have not been considered or included in narratives of the past.'
- 'Never heard the term before…', 'no idea', 'I do not understand what you mean by that terminology'
- 'The avoidance of any clear definition of [this term] is a major problem and one of the reasons I can't endorse it.'

The majority of staff responded positively when asked how confident they currently feel about engaging with the concept of decolonising the curriculum; 66.1% reported feeling 'somewhat' or 'very' confident, while 15.8% were neutral and 18.2% were not confident at all.

When provided with the space to leave comments expanding on their confidence level ranking, staff again responded in a variety of ways. These included:

1. Urging an approach that does not just take the curriculum into account, but looks at decolonising other aspects of the institution as well
2. Requesting training and other guidance, such as case studies related to their own area of work, and generally expressing a desire to learn more about this concept
   a. Amongst STEMM colleagues in particular, hoping for a better understanding of how this concept applies to their disciplines, given that much of the existing work is from HASS fields
3. Expressing fears about whether/how this work will be mandated and regulated and whether those in charge of overseeing and supporting will fully understand the size and scope of this project
4. Worrying about incurring the wrath of staff or students – e.g., because something is done 'wrong'
5. Cautioning that this work needs to involve the entire university, including, e.g., external partners, prospective students and their families, and the local community

Some key quotes include:

- 'I would be more confident if I weren't the only person of colour in my team and the rest of my team cared/knew what decolonising is. I feel this is one of the biggest barriers to progress at the university.'
- 'This does all depend on whether the agenda is a nuanced and critical one, or a clumsy policy of politicised control.'
- 'Because it's such a debated concept, I find it hard to know how to get it right (or, perhaps more importantly, how not to get it wrong) … I feel afraid to say that I'm doing anything for fear of being told that I'm getting it wrong. I also then become afraid that this can turn into an excuse for not trying.'
- 'This is slow, long-term work that must include our students from the start.'
- 'Happy to engage but not sure where to begin—I do need guidance about how to approach it systematically in an informed way.'

Survey respondents were given a list of potential concerns/challenges and asked to indicate which they were grappling with in their own practice. The results, which can be seen in **Figure 1** below, are consistent with themes that arose in response to the free-text question associated with confidence levels.
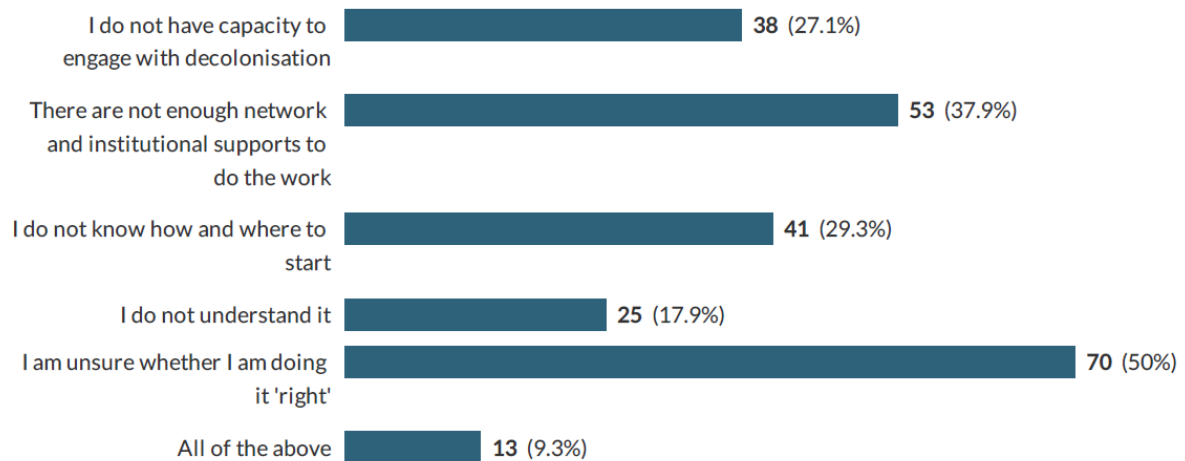
Figure 1. Responses to survey question 4a, 'In your view, what are some of the concerns/challenges you might be facing to approach decolonisation in your teaching and curriculum development? (tick as many options as you wish)'

When given an opportunity to add their own items to this list via free-text answers, survey participants raised the following issues:

1. Confusion caused by conflicting voices within the decolonial canon; struggles to pinpoint a definition of decolonisation and accepted means of tackling decolonisation make it difficult to decide how to move forward (individually and as a discipline)
2. An inability to see how this work relates to their practice, and a disagreement with the principles and concepts of decolonisation
3. Feeling uncomfortable and exposed as a member of a minority group, a junior member of staff, and/or staff with a precarious teaching contract
4. Uncertainty around and dissatisfaction with how this will be coordinated and facilitated by the institution, including how the workload will be spread amongst colleagues and how academic autonomy can be maintained
5. Frustration with how challenging it is to have discussions of decolonisation with colleagues who have particularly strong feelings about the topic

Key quotes include:

- 'This presupposes that we should be doing this (which is so often the case with left wing wokeists.'
- 'Lack of buy-in from colleagues who think it's all just a gimmick and want to teach what they've always taught.'
- 'Yet another thing to do, with no time/recognition of time-cost.'
- 'I question the motives, and the fundamental intellectual underpinnings.'
- '[there are] inherent tensions of doing decolonising work as someone positioned as privileged, in the global north.'
- 'We need to know what we want the outcomes of decolonisation to be.'
- 'I'd like to see much more dialogue among staff on decolonising, to help understand what it means.'

The majority of staff felt that the concept of decolonisation is relevant to their discipline; 83.8% indicated some level of agreement with this statement, while only 8.8% were neutral and 7.5% indicated some level of disagreement.

Colleagues were given space to elaborate on their responses. Some of the major themes included:

1. An interest in incorporating new and different viewpoints
2. A worry that the curriculum would be compromised if they were not allowed to include as many white and/or Western authors
3. Fears that there might be pressure to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater' when deciding how to decolonise the curriculum
4. An acknowledgement that they have already been engaging with decolonisation and/or ant discriminatory critical thinking practices
5. Support for decolonisation of the discipline, but uncertainty about how it applies to their particular specialism

Some key quotes include:

- 'No idea how we are going to do this in [my] department…the curriculum/subject is pretty much rich white European men all the way down.'
- 'Isn't decolonisation relevant to everything?'

The free-text answers also included a wealth of discipline-specific anecdotes and case studies. These were often characterised by a methodical and scholarly approach to exploring not just the idea of 'decolonisation' but also related topics such as 'curriculum', 'education', and 'inclusivity' in order to consider how and why decolonisation should be pursued. The below is an extract from a particularly thorough and nuanced consideration of mathematics:

'Perhaps I'm yet to be convinced, but I have been presented with the narrative that mathematics inherently contains cultural bias and racism due to the idea that there is 'one right answer'. Apparently this (supposed) method of approach favours the 'colonial powers' and seeks to isolate and oppress other cultures which aren't included in this blanket statement. With this in mind, I should firstly point out that the development and discovery of mathematics over the millennia has inclusively involved many different civilisations and diverse cultures (a massive contributor, for example, was the acceleration of mathematics in the Islamic world). The recognition of this, firstly, is definitely important, but I believe such recognition exists, for example, through the immortalisation of words like "Algebra" and "Algorithm", which are intensely common in mathematical vocabulary. Secondly, all mathematically active civilisation have subscribed to this same idea - mathematics is a rigorous discipline, and absolute proof matters. With that considered, I don't believe that maths isolates or oppresses, but unifies the world with a common language (the applied side of which has very clear merits).'

Approximately 57% of staff were not currently involved in any groups or discussions focusing on decolonising the curriculum, while the remaining 43% indicated that they were; colleagues in this latter group were given a free text box to supply contact details, if appropriate, so the survey team could pursue further dialogue and collaboration.

The remaining survey questions were geared towards collecting recommendations for how to ensure that the decolonisation toolkit was accessible, inclusive, and user-friendly. Responses are not

reproduced here in the interest of brevity, but they are available upon request (please email academicdevelopment@exeter.ac.uk) and were consulted closely in the toolkit design phase.

Interpretation
There are three main takeaways from this survey, though of course these outcomes should be treated cautiously given the overall low engagement amongst staff across the institution.
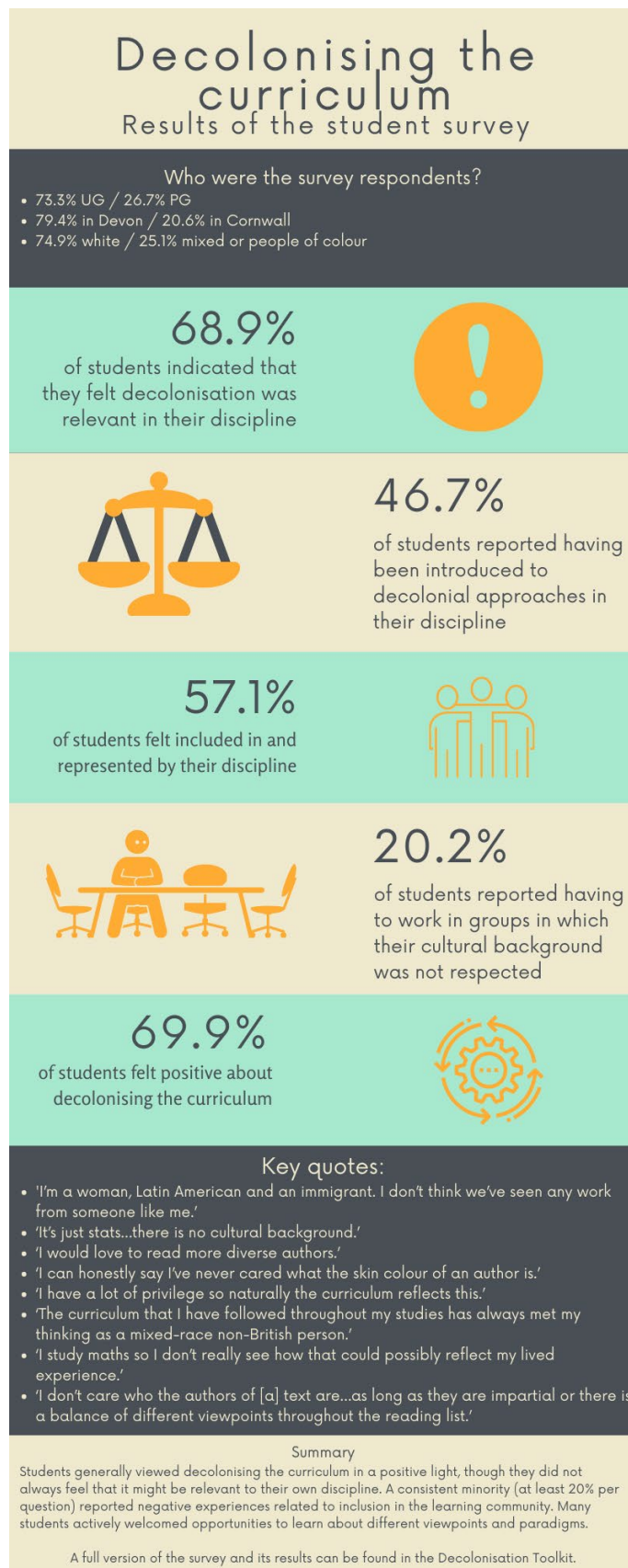
1. Decolonisation remains an extremely charged topic about which many staff are not only unconvinced, but actively angry and unwilling to have a civil discussion. In the final section of the survey where colleagues could leave their email addresses if they were interested in being contacted in the future, one respondent wrote: 'I have no objection to others following this left-wing agenda, but I have no interest in doing so, and would strongly resent being forced to do so.' This exemplifies the fraught environment in which decolonisation discussions are taking place, and helps illuminate why some colleagues feel nervous engaging in open discussions about this topic with others at the university.

2. The lack of consensus around what decolonisation is, and what it means to decolonise the curriculum, is both a driver of this tension and a result of the tension: Because there is no agreement, it is challenging for staff to argue the merits of the idea and various approaches to it, which creates and maintains the divide. This is exacerbated by the fact that there seems to be a misunderstanding of what is meant by 'curriculum'. Many answers indicated that 'curriculum' was seen solely as the *subject content* being taught – which is why, for instance, there were fears about decolonisation in disciplines where white western men have been the major contributors. However, 'curriculum' does not just refer to *what* is taught, but also *how* it is taught, and *in what sort of environment*. A better understanding of this would, perhaps, open up avenues of discussion amongst colleagues whose main objection to decolonisation is how it might impact reading lists.

3. Unsurprisingly, there tended to be a STEMM/HASS divide, reflecting the fact that decolonial thought originated in association with, and has historically been most frequently applied to, HASS disciplines. While many STEMM colleagues were interested in decolonisation, they seemed particularly likely to struggle with understanding how it could proceed in their area of work. This was partly related to the narrow understanding of 'curriculum', as noted above, but was also associated with strong opinions about the need to sometimes recognise a single 'right' answer as opposed to a plurality of possibilities (e.g., as in mathematics or engineering calculations). Further, one respondent wrote, 'I believe that science provides an objectively superior approach to understanding the universe than any other approach.' The same colleague stated, 'I have no intention of teaching views that I don't agree with as intellectually equivalent to views that I do agree with.' Collectively, these responses indicate a need to support colleagues in gaining skills in cultural competency so that they can learn civil and satisfactory ways of acknowledging and exploring different worldviews in a way that is not condescendingly dismissive of their students (or others) but also does not compromise their own beliefs and values.

4. While respondents were generally quite positive about decolonisation, and expressed willingness to engage with this concept and associated practices, they listed a number of reservations about doing so at the University of Exeter. Many were unconvinced about the motivations and approaches of senior management; there were worries about having sufficient time, headspace, and academic freedom to tackle this in a meaningful way; the need for guidance and support was mentioned frequently; and a number of staff were fearful of the repercussions associated with 'getting things wrong'.

Although it was encouraging to see so many thoughtful responses (both those in support of and those against decolonisation), it was also somewhat troubling to see how many of those responses suggested a general lack of reflexivity and critical thinking. A worrying number of staff provided free-

text answers that indicated a generally entrenched and inflexible approach to analysing new and different ideas and epistemologies (from any point along the political spectrum). This rigid mentality and propensity to discuss the opposing view in a way that signalled dismissive intolerance was surprisingly similar to that found amongst many of the respondents to the student survey – '– the team felt that the tone and terminology of the comments indicated a lack of experience working collaboratively with peers and engaging with academic scholarship with an open mind.

It was disheartening to see responses signalling an unwillingness to engage in cognitive empathy, seeking to fully understand and review contradictory arguments before disagreeing – and, further, an unwillingness or inability to disagree civilly and respectfully. Decolonisation aside, these are crucial skills for any teacher and researcher, and their absence amongst a not insubstantial number of respondents is a cause for concern.

Appendix 3: Infographic showing outcomes of the CfSM student survey on decolonising the curriculum

Decolonising the curriculum
Results of the student survey

Who were the survey respondents?
- 73.3% UG / 26.7% PG
- 79.4% in Devon / 20.6% in Cornwall
- 74.9% white / 25.1% mixed or people of colour

68.9%
of students indicated that they felt decolonisation was relevant in their discipline

46.7%
of students reported having been introduced to decolonial approaches in their discipline

57.1%
of students felt included in and represented by their discipline

20.2%
of students reported having to work in groups in which their cultural background was not respected

69.9%
of students felt positive about decolonising the curriculum

Key quotes:
- 'I'm a woman, Latin American and an immigrant. I don't think we've seen any work from someone like me.'
- 'It's just stats...there is no cultural background.'
- 'I would love to read more diverse authors.'
- 'I can honestly say I've never cared what the skin colour of an author is.'
- 'I have a lot of privilege so naturally the curriculum reflects this.'
- 'The curriculum that I have followed throughout my studies has always met my thinking as a mixed-race non-British person.'
- 'I study maths so I don't really see how that could possibly reflect my lived experience.'
- 'I don't care who the authors of [a] text are...as long as they are impartial or there is a balance of different viewpoints throughout the reading list.'

Summary
Students generally viewed decolonising the curriculum in a positive light, though they did not always feel that it might be relevant to their own discipline. A consistent minority (at least 20% per question) reported negative experiences related to inclusion in the learning community. Many students actively welcomed opportunities to learn about different viewpoints and paradigms.

A full version of the survey and its results can be found in the Decolonisation Toolkit.

Appendix 4: Outcomes of the CfSM student survey on decolonising the curriculum

Background

Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of George Floyd's death, University of Exeter students have been increasingly vocal about their desire for educators to use a decolonial lens to scrutinise, and ideally reshape, their curriculum. University-wide surveys were distributed in Term 3 of the 2020-21 academic year to explore whether and to what extent students felt their educators were engaged with decolonising curricula, and to capture attitudes and recommendations that might be used to inform future work in this area.

Findings

Overall, 273 students responded to the survey. The majority were undergraduates in either their first or third year at the institution. Most survey participants were based at the Streatham Campus (followed by Penryn, St Luke's, and then Truro), and they tended to be enrolled on HASS courses (in HUMS and CSSIS in particular, followed by CLES, CEMPS, CMH, and UEBS). Nearly two-thirds of respondents selected 'white' as their ethnicity.

While nearly half (46.7%) of respondents indicated that they had been introduced to decolonial approaches in their discipline, over a third (35.3%) said they had not, and the remainder (18%) were unsure. A majority (68.9%) of students agreed that decolonisation was relevant in their discipline, but approximately a quarter (26.3%) felt that it was not. The chart below (**Figure 1**) captures respondents' perceptions of what 'decolonising the curriculum' means:
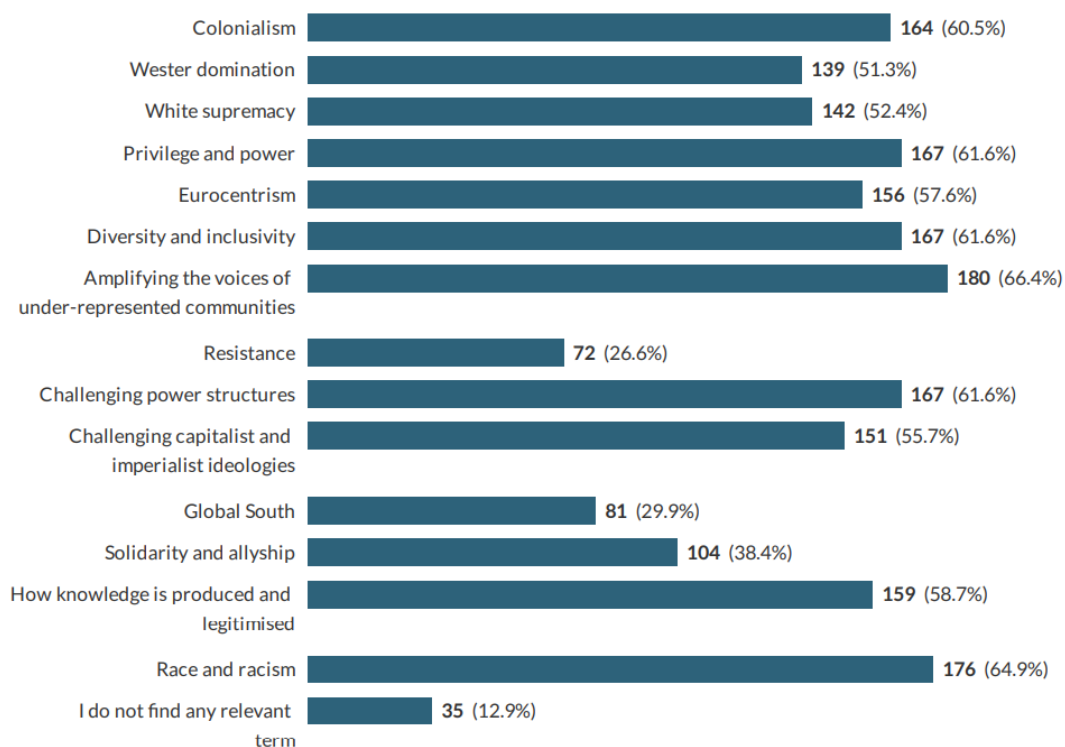
Figure 1: Response to the question 'What does decolonising the curriculum mean to you?' Students could select as many answers as they felt were appropriate.

The majority of respondents (57.1%) felt included in and represented by their curriculum; 14.4%, however, felt that their thinking, lived experience, and cultural background was not reflected in the curriculum. In free comments associated with this topic, many white students indicated an opinion that the curriculum related to them because it was designed by and for people like them (for example, 'I have a lot of privilege so naturally the curriculum reflects this'). Students from other racial backgrounds, and those with minority and/or protected characteristics sometimes agreed with this view (for example, 'The curriculum that I have followed throughout my studies has always met my thinking as a mixed-race non-British person'), while others indicated a sense of exclusion (for example, 'I'm a woman, Latin American and an immigrant. I don't think we've seen any work from someone like me'). Students from STEMM fields consistently and strongly indicated that they felt that decolonisation was not relevant for their disciplines and/or that it was inappropriate to try to relate lived experience or individual characteristics with the curriculum (for example: 'I study maths so I don't really see how that could possibly reflect my lived experience'; 'Kinda hard with science'; 'It's just stats…there is no cultural background').

Many students (47.3% vs 31.9% indicating the negative) felt that their curricula included a diversity of voices and epistemologies and that the historical and colonial foundations of the discipline were examined in the course (46.9% vs 36.6% indicating the negative). Approximately a quarter (22.6%) of students indicated that authors on their course did not represent both Western and non-Western contexts. Less than a quarter of students (17.8%) indicated that they felt the reading list was alienating or othering. However, in free text responses associated with this theme, many students critiqued some aspect of the reading lists that rendered them exclusionary (for example, 'The reading list is not only majority white men, but it is also extremely Western and "canon"'; 'I would love to read more diverse authors'; 'Very few readings by female or BIPOC'). As with the previous question about the curriculum more generally, STEMM students argued that identity—their own or the authors'—was not relevant when considering reading list contents (e.g., 'I can honestly say I've never cared what the skin colour of an author is'; 'Why would I feel alienated or othered? It's not about me nor necessarily needs to be'; 'I don't care who the authors of [a] text are…as long as they are impartial or there is a balance of different viewpoints throughout the reading list'). The majority (51.9%) of students felt that a lack of diversity negatively impacted their university experience; 33.8% of respondents indicated that it did not.

Students generally (47.1% vs 28.4% indicating the negative) felt able to speak to their module convenor about desired changes to the module, and a substantial proportion (56.9%) also felt empowered to critically challenge dominant narratives in their discipline. The majority (54.8%) indicated that the learning experience mostly took the format of teacher-to-student transmission, but, at the same time, 71% of students also reported that knowledge was co-constructed with their lecturers/tutors/supervisors. Although a large number (47.6%) of students indicated they could work in groups in which they were respected, quite a few (32.2%) neither agreed nor disagreed with this statement, and 20.2% reported having to work in groups where collaborators did not respect their cultural backgrounds.

Over a quarter of students (27%) felt that assessment practices were not inclusive, and nearly a third (30%) were unsure or were neutral about this issue. However, a majority of students (58.%) reported being able to approach their assessments authentically; that said, nearly a quarter (21.2%) did not.

Students were also fairly supportive of assessment criteria, with a majority (64.4%) indicating that these were clear, transparent, and inclusive, and that marking rubrics were fair (64.3%); again, however, nearly a quarter (21.6% and 20.3%, respectively) responded in the negative. Although many students (56.5%) reported fair assessment practices and the ability to use unique/inclusive citations, many students were unsure of how to answer this question (31.1%) and a handful (12.3%) responded in the negative. Overall, students did not report having the freedom to negotiate assessment methods with their module convenors (45% answering in the negative vs 21.4% answering in the positive).

Most students (55.7%) were not sure about what resources the library might have on decolonisation; likewise, many respondents (38.9%) were unable to comment on whether the university library provided non-mainstream sources of knowledge in their discipline.

When asked about support mechanisms in place to respond to racist and discriminatory behaviours, many students (49.1%) indicated that they either had no opinion or were unsure; about a quarter (25.5%) of respondents felt mechanisms were appropriate, while another quarter (25.4%) felt they were insufficient.

Most respondents indicated positive feelings about decolonising the curriculum; on a scale of 0-10, 69.9% of responses fell in the top half, with 38.3% (the largest voting bloc) of these indicating 10/10 levels of support for decolonisation. However, over a quarter (26.7%) of students fell in the top half, with 15.2% (the largest voting bloc) indicating 0/0 levels of support.

Interpretation

A majority of students consistently responded positively with respect to their experiences receiving, researching, reading about, and being tested on knowledge within their discipline; they also overwhelmingly indicated positive relationships with their lecturers and an ability to engage in co-creation and enjoy a learning environment that offered opportunities for autonomy, feelings of inclusion, and authenticity. However, this is not entirely surprising given that the majority of respondents were white.

A not insubstantial portion of respondents consistently indicated negative experiences related to colonial curricula – e.g., feeling othered by the reading list, being unable to find appropriate resources in the library, feeling forced to work with collaborators who did not respect them. Despite the fact that this group is in the minority, this is an unacceptable result, since the goal is equitable inclusion, respect, growth, and success for *all* students.

Although it is encouraging to see that many disciplines have directly acknowledged the impacts of colonial, the free text responses – particularly from STEMM students – indicate that work remains to be done with respect to supporting critical thinking, critical literacy, and social justice awareness amongst students. The fields of biosciences, statistics, engineering, mathematics, and astronomy – just to name a few – are rife with examples of sexism, racism, appropriation, and exclusion, with repercussions for learners, researchers, and members of the public impacted by developments in these fields (e.g., the design of racist artificial intelligence software). These situations can all ultimately be traced to colonial attitudes and structures and could fruitfully be tackled with decolonial approaches tailored to each discipline. Ideally, students would be made aware of such instances and both they and their educators would be empowered to work towards ways of knowledge sharing and development that work to combat these inequities.

Rates of 'neither agree nor disagree' and 'I do not know' responses also indicate that it will be vital to undertake a general awareness-raising campaign so that students are better equipped to see injustices where they exist and to advocate for themselves and their peers as and when needed.