

Our White Assessment: Minimising inequality in higher education for international students

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Introduction

The calls for decolonising the curriculum in UK universities are a fairly recent phenomenon. 'Why is My Curriculum White' UCL (2020), a student campaign at University College London, is widely acknowledged to be the initiator of the recent debate in the UK. The campaign emerged from a National Union of Students (NUS) Black Students Campaign national student survey in December 2014, which found that 42 percent of respondents (out of 938 participants) did not believe their curriculum reflected issues of diversity, equality, and discrimination. In addition, 34 percent of the respondents stated they felt unable to bring their perspective as a Black (a cohort of BME groups) student to lectures and tutor meetings. The survey successfully highlighted that courses were designed and taught by non-Black teachers, and often did not take into account diverse backgrounds and views.

While the Black Lives Matter movement (a social movement dedicated to fighting racism and police brutality against Black people) can be traced back to 2013, the tragic death of George Floyd in the United States added further incentive to the movement resulting in widespread protests in the UK. The discussion of decolonising the curriculum in UK higher education also got further impetus from this. While 'Why is My Curriculum White' can be viewed as a response to the lack of diversity found on UK university reading lists and the course content, a Guardian report suggests that only a fifth of UK universities (24 out of 128) were committed to decolonising their curriculum highlighting a reluctance in British higher education institutions towards addressing the impact of colonialism on present-day racism (Batty, 2020). However, in the work presented here, in addition to the decolonising of the curriculum, we highlight that the agenda and discussion should also embrace the assessment process in UK universities as most of the existing assessment process, especially in business studies and Social Sciences (the subjects the authors teach and have taught in several UK universities) are also very White and Eurocentric. At the time of writing this piece, the world is going through a global pandemic which has presented particular challenges for UK universities to recruit international students. It is believed

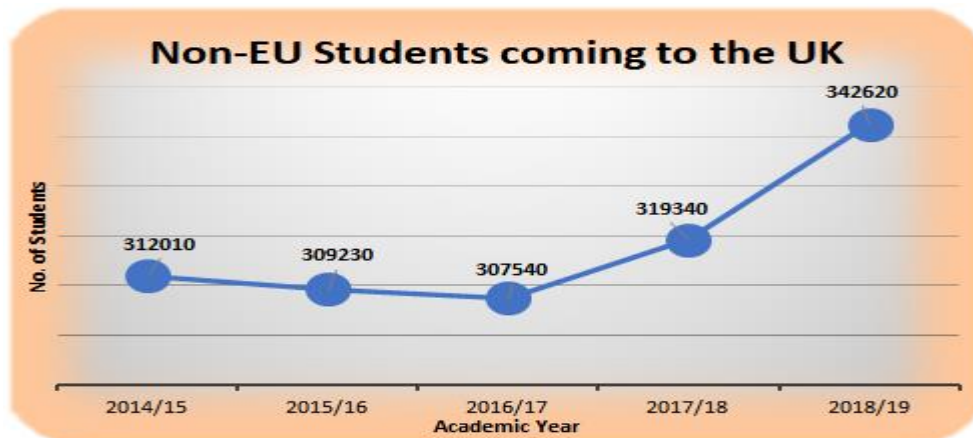
that many universities will face difficult financial challenges as a result of this. Adding the contexts of international students into the discussions and debates of decolonising the curriculum and extending it further to existing assessment process seems timely and of great significance.

International students and assessment in UK universities

A mostly Eurocentric model of education in Western universities, where curriculums are decided, produced and taught mostly by the White academics, has raised some concerns and led some to decolonise the higher education system (Battiste, 2013). Broadly speaking, the term 'decolonising the curriculum' advocates for including the colonial history of Black people into higher education not just through the coloniser's lens but also through the lens and lived experiences of the colonised embedded throughout one's academic journey. In the context of UK universities, it is widely acknowledged that curriculums are also White, Western, and Eurocentric (Hussain, 2015; Batty, 2020; Muldoon, 2019; Wingfield, 2017). In their recent study, Bird and Pitman (2020) insist that their analysis of reading lists found the empirical basis for concerns that university curricula are dominated by White, male and Eurocentric authors, with only a very few exceptions. The reading lists did not represent the diverse local student body but came closer to representing the demographic profile of academic staff. Needless to mention that perspectives of the international students were ignored and excluded. This trend has led to growing debates among students and some academics, that content, curriculum, and the classrooms (modes of course delivery) need to be decolonised. Yet, to date, these discussions have failed to address another practice in UK higher education - the assessment processes. We can confidently contend from our experience that similar to reading lists and other contents of curriculum, assessment process is also largely White and Eurocentric. Most assessment tasks, especially in business studies and social sciences are based on the data, facts, figures, and cases related to Western organizations and societies. While non-engagement from the students is a much broader issue, in our experience the Eurocentric or White course content and assessment tasks are one of the key detriments that exclude one significant group of the student population in UK universities, namely the international students. While we concur with the main arguments of the decolonizing the curriculum campaign, we also would like to underscore the fact that the White and Eurocentric nature of the existing assessment process largely prohibits international students from meaningful engagements while they pay a very high course fee for their degrees.

UK universities host a significant number of international students (see Figure 1) not just to sustain an effective business model, but also to become truly international/global in nature. It is thus important that international students receive good value for their money and are able to meaningfully engage with the course content and assessment tasks.

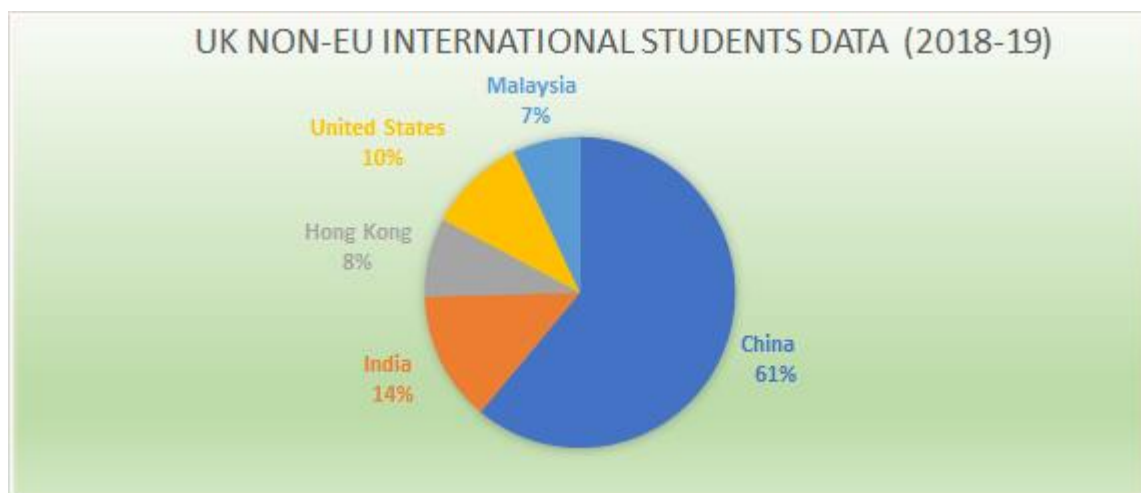
Figure 1: International (Non-EU) Students to the UK Universities in the last five years



Source: Adapted from HESA, 2020a

In 2018-19, one in every five students was from non-UK countries, and 70% of all non-UK students are from non-EU countries (HESA, 2020a). Figure 2 below suggests that in the previous academic year, more than half of the total students that come from international (non-EU) backgrounds are from the five countries mentioned below. While China and the special administrative region of China (such as Hong Kong) alone accounts for nearly 40% of the total non-EU population, a few other non-EU countries such as India and Malaysia are following the Chinese lead (HESA, 2020b).

Figure 2: UK Non-EU International Students data 2018-19



Source: Adapted from HESA, 2020b

Currently, on the one hand, we do not know of any degree courses in business studies and/or social sciences that focus on the expectations of the international students coming to UK universities particularly in relation to the decolonization of the teaching content development, teaching delivery and assessments. One probable reason for this failure could be that it is difficult to determine their expectations before they join the UK universities. These expectations are shaped by various organisational context such as organisational socialisation, competitive organisational climate, perceived ethical climate etc. (Tekleab et al., 2019; Li et al., 2016; Wang and Hsieh, 2014). On the other hand, degrees that highlight UK universities' obligations and responsibilities in fulfilling and delivering the expectations of the international students (most commonly found promises include delivering high-quality student learning experience without clearly outlining the process how this will be achieved) are also very limited. A commonly used theory in Business and Management, the theory of the psychological contract (Conway and Briner, 2005; Griep and Cooper, 2019), can explain international students' expectations from their degrees. Like any other contract (e.g. legal) the psychological contract must be formed between the two or more parties. While international students are one party in this contract, we emphasise that UK universities should also have clear guidelines with specific details on curriculum and assessment, highlighting how international students' expectations will be delivered.

We think it is important that there are genuine initiatives, not just a lip service to understand how a rich learning experience can be delivered to the international students, what connects and engages them inside and outside the classrooms. Emphasis should be given on using the teaching and learning resources, case studies, facts, and figures that resonate with their life and lived experiences, which is more meaningful and relatable to them during their learning in the UK. If this cannot be ensured, we concur with Charles (2019) that 'decolonizing' then may morph into just another buzzword that will soon lose currency and recede into the background. But, to stop that from happening, there is the need to diversify the voices included in the curriculum as well as those who teaching it, and the need to be more inclusive, but on merit, not as a tokenistic gesture or a tick-box exercise. We suggest that the agenda should be extended beyond Black people's history/experience and include a more global outlook, both for reviewing the curriculum and extant assessment process that is consistent and cognate to the experiences of the international students coming from Asia, Africa, and Latin America among others. We contend that this will offer a more enjoyable and fair learning experience for international students. With regards to assessing students' progress, fairness may require a greater level of clarity as what counts as 'fair' is highly subjective. There seem to be various 'lenses' that can be used from different schools of thoughts (Nisbet and Shaw, 2019). While it is now common knowledge that curriculum and course content in UK universities are White and Eurocentric, we would like to draw on our experience to add that the same is also true for existing assessments. The assessment tasks could be more inclusive, looking into the relevance of course materials beyond the UK, Europe and Western societies. Where possible and appropriate, there should also be flexibilities within the

tasks that would require synergies between Western and non-Western contexts. It is hoped that this will allow all students, including international students, to engage with assessment tasks more innovatively.

Conclusion

Challenging the White curriculum in UK Universities, Hussain (2015) from her own experience as a student feels that BME (Black Minority Ethnic) students find themselves unrepresented, their histories and cultures completely ignored in the academic field. She thinks this makes many students become disillusioned with their courses, feeling that what they are learning has little relevance and thus the degree is exclusionary. In the same vein, it is argued in the work presented here that current assessment practices can exclude, disassociate and even penalise international students for not being able to express themselves in a meaningful way simply because there is not enough space for them to engage with the system. The onus, therefore, is on UK universities to make it clear whether the focus should be on international students' linguistic abilities on western elements of curriculum and assessment, or to seek ways to assess their analytical and critical thinking skills in alternative ways. If the latter seems to be a more appropriate and realistic option, then it is imperative to focus on other priorities in international students' assessments. It is time to offer them the opportunity to engage themselves in a way that is closer and reflective of their lived experience and cultural knowledge. The culture theories (e.g. Hofstede, 1980) could be used to determine those preferences of learning and being assessed.

In the contexts of decolonising the curriculum and BLM movements, it is an appropriate time to reduce, preferably eliminate, existing inequalities in the assessment process for the sake of international students as well as for the sake of professional integrity of UK universities. If UK universities continue to describe themselves as international/global, it is now time to stop a White, Eurocentric approach to learning and assessment and adopt a truly international outlook in this regard.

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