

Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast

Decolonising the Curriculum

Hello and welcome to Episode Ten of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast.

My name's Ben Steel and I'll be your host for this episode as we reflect on Black History Month.

This episode of Learning and Teaching podcast is going to focus on Decolonising the Curriculum,

specifically the things we are doing here at Newcastle University.

In a moment, we'll hear from Professor Tom Ward, our Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education,

and his views on Decolonising the Curriculum and why it is important to Newcastle University.

We'll then hear from Livia Scott, our Education Officer, and we'll hear more about what is happening in the student union.

Finally, we'll hear from Dr Paula Waterhouse, a senior lecturer in dentistry.

But first, Tom Ward looking at why this is such a key priority for Newcastle University.

So I think there are three abstract intellectual reasons. Decolonising is so important and such an important conceptual framework.

First of all, a society that is not honest about its own past cannot gain insight into how it works and how it should prepare for the future.

Second, it's often the elephant in the room that gets ignored.

Some of the energy in the so-called hidden curriculum debate is predicated on the visible curriculum being accepted as canonical.

Third, it is the task of higher education to challenge prevailing thinking, how can we boast about the critical thinking of our graduates

if we not critically engaged ourselves with thinking about our own curricular assumptions? And there are three concrete reasons,

there's compelling evidence that how the curriculum in the widest sense is shaped at school,

in higher education, in newspapers, on television, in parliament, entrenches disadvantage for certain groups.

There's also the issue of simply aspiring to a good curriculum.

How is it possible that someone educated at Eton and Oxford in the Humanities thought it reasonable to invoke Drake and Raleigh to conjure up images

of a glorious maritime trading post and paints a glorious maritime trading future without acknowledging the complexity of their historical legacy?

Offensive certainly, but also ignorant.

We need to produce better informed graduates and to become better informed citizens about the reality of our own history.

And finally, who owns the curriculum? Is it something academics impose on students or is it something we own together and create together?

Who should own the curriculum? Is the central debate that we should be grappling with?

And there's also an overarching political and cultural argument.

The United Kingdom is hamstrung in its dealings with itself and with the wider world by the legacy of national imperial arrogance,

bred in part from ignorance of the real meaning of our own history.

We keep missing opportunities. We keep causing offence on the world stage as a result.

What further steps can Newcastle take? There are many things and I'll just highlight a couple.

First, we should understand where our intellectual resources are really located.

Universities often like to boast about having students from 150 countries or from every background.

But how is their presence adding to and changing the university?

It's great to have academics who research decolonization and lead projects on it, but you sometimes end up with a lack of buy-in.

While the huge asset of our own students and staff, is not fully engaged.

I've attended learned seminars full of graphs and long words about the experience of being a black British

student on campus in a setting where we were not asking our own black British students what it felt like.

Working in partnership with the student voice is central to making progress.

We also need to understand this is a complex long term and multi scale issue.

There are some big picture things, but in the end,

if there isn't change at module level and in the feeling of what it's like to walk into a seminar room,

then we aren't making progress and that work needs to be done by all of us.

It's not a task for our students who come from specific backgrounds.

We should also understand that there's an awful lot of good intentions out there in the academic community, but sometimes a lack of knowledge.

We need to be kind to each other and help each other with quite concrete and specific questions and actions.

We need to get away from some of the nonsense. Adding a few texts to reading lists does not mean anything. Critically engaging in partnership with

the assumptions and possibly lazy thinking behind reading lists is important and it's hard work.

This all needs to keep being pulled back to three principles.

The curriculum should be honest and helpful in equipping students for the real world and the real history, not the fantasy one.

Critical thinking about our own assumptions should be at the centre of higher education.

And students should always be partners in their own learning.

And we need to be alert to people who want to encourage an oppositional culture war on campuses.

There are lots of phony headlines about this,

but we need to just get on with working with our students to improve the quality and the sense of reality about the curricular experience here.

And finally, we need to do more of this, talking to each other, listening to each other and debating what it means to truly embrace decolonising.

Now, as this is a movement that has been driven by students.

Let's hear from Livia Scott of Student Union Education Officer.

Firstly, I asked Livia, what is Newcastle University Student Union doing to support decolonising the curriculum?

So last year, our team of sabbatical officers worked to create Decolonising NCL, the campaign,

which was essentially a campaign to urge the uni to prompt the uni for full commitments

and to see DeCol embedded across in every decision the university is making.

So we're wanting to champion that and continue it.

So as a union, what we want is we don't want decolonization to just be something that is a tick box.

We don't want it to be something you can touch up your reading lists and and focus on like call diversity and inclusion.

Don't get me wrong there important,

but peppering reading lists with more non-white authors isn't the same as trying to dismantle those systems of white supremacy,

and tackle overlays of colonialism, which is what DeCol is.

Generally, anyway, we want to have firm commitments from the university,

which I think it seems to be that it seems to be high on their agenda now to

go beyond this and see DeCol embedded in every decision that they are making really.

So what are our students telling us? I think one thing that was quite important for NUSU, especially last year,

was kind of creating a little bit of a fact file- like a glossary of those important terms and just kind of

explaining what DeCol is in these this Decolonising NCL work is for us in just explaining why it's important,

but just kind of put in that contextually into a unit, into the higher education context.

I think you say these things like Decolonising and it seems like quite a hard time to understand.

And I think sometimes in your day-To-Day life you do think, well, how can I do this?

Like as a white person, how can I actively challenge any biases I have,

challenge these things and work so they create it like a set of aims and objectives and a set of glossary terms,

just explaining why it's important and because I think it's something that students who bring into us that they really this is on everybody's minds,

I think, particularly after 2020. And these things report the forefront and again, which as they should be.

But I think it's just creating

those glossary terms for people who will show up because like I'm a history student and I like to think I have a decent understanding,

but it's something that I constantly have to challenge myself and go and read.

And just making sure that I'm understanding these issues and trying to understand the different voices and different opinions,

because again, the day as a white person, I can never fully understand the impacts of this.

So just making sure that I'm understanding and we wanted students to have that as well,

but also speak up for our students like the students of colour non-white students and just

making sure that the we out this commitment to them and to them both to the wider issue, really.

How can stuff on students get involved?

So at the moment, we have our decolonization DeCol pledges, as we're call calling them.

So the idea of dates on the NUSU website, it's just nusu.co.uk/decol.

You can click make pledge. You fill in a form. You can make a pledge as an individual student if you would like.

But also what we're encouraging as we want every school, every course, at least at least half our societies,

ideally all of them to just make a commitment to the decolonising NCL project so that it is the university doing as well.

But it's across the student populations because it is is really important.

And we're happy to provide resources and explain how they can do that,

because I think you can get involved in in terms of the pledge or come to us to run your own campaign result.

All students are more than welcome news to support students to run their own campaigns, whether it's within a society or within an individual.

But I just think the pledges are a great way to show that commitment.

And it gives real practical solutions of how are you going to do these different things.

So, for example, when me and Eleanor, our post-grad officer met with every head of school at the beginning of the year.

And we've been asking all of them, how is it going and your schools?

Anything we can do to support. And some of the work that's going on is like so much that schools are already doing.

I know. Computing were just explaining it to us. And I was thinking 'Oh wow' I have never thought.

How would you decolonise a computing in degree?

It seems, I think to some people it seems will that is for the humanities, but it isn't.

There's so many things that structurally we can do. So we want to celebrate those things as well.

And we don't want it to kind of be a rod that would beat people over the back within it to become another thing that people think,

oh, gosh, I have to do this because it shouldn't be that everybody needs to do it.

But it's a time to really think about how we as a university constructively challenge.

White supremacy and challenge the overlays of colonialism and racism and look at them and think

why we need as a commitment as a university that claims to be very progressive and liberal,

that's what people think of universities as these liberal spaces.

We need to constantly be thinking about how we can make sure we are being progressive and actively anti-racist.

Thinking about those student union pledges. How are things going?

I would say at the moment the DeCol pledges, we don't have as many as we would like to in all honesty, and we've had a few.

Different schools. I do think this is partly because the campaign came out towards the end of the year.

Schools have been quite busy as are students.

So I do think we are trying to re invigorate it this year.

We've got Our Black History Month campaign as well, and which obviously is a very separate, but the project of decolonization underpins that as well.

So it would be great to see more pledges, whether that be from individual schools, individual students and societies.

And yet we would love to have more pledges because I would love to kind of make a list of the

all and be able to display them and outside of the union or something and celebrate them,

because I think it just shows our commitment to grappling with that colonial legacy.

And it shows our commitment as a union that is it's vital as a whole institution that we tackle this issue.

Thank you to Livia for that great insight into the student union is supporting Decolonising in the Curriculum.

We'll hear from Livia again at the end of the podcast. Now let's hear from Dr.

Paula Waterhouse. Paula, works in our School of Dentistry. And they have been doing some great work in addressing Decolonising in the Curriculum. But how did this get started?

Well, we were really kind of polarised by the students and thinking about what we could do,

essentially following the murder of George Floyd in the States.

Our students got together and made a group called Newcastle Changemakers,

and they were they were primarily dental students and they made a video which was directly aimed at staff within the dental school.

This video was placed on to Twitter and lots of us saw it.

Members of the EDI committee, because we had a non active EDI committee prior to doing all this work.

And a very supportive head of school. And we were so disturbed by what was being said with the video by our students

that we had an extraordinary meeting with them to discuss in more detail.

What they wanted was to help them with what they wanted us to spearhead and how we could work together,

going forwards with with them, with the things that they wanted.

So they told us in that meeting about micro-aggressions within the school, about unconscious bias affecting things in the school.

They were concerned about the awarding gap that we must we must make an effort to recruit more black students and to decolonise the curriculum

that massive phrase that encompasses so many, so many different things.

And the stuff that was that really were touched by what the what the students had to say.

And so we decided we would pledge to them that we would start addressing these concerns.

One by one as soon as possible, but also said to the students that it was it would take time.

You know. Years, really to to move through all the all the areas that they wanted us to move through.

We're lucky you know because we have a very supportive head of school and a very active faculty as well.

So, you know, support wise, it's been very good.

But the sorts of things that we're doing are very simple local things and things within the region and things nationally as well.

So one of the first things that was stolen by staff and students, they worked together as we were one of the first schools to go on to canvas.

We thought it was a great opportunity to make sure that the pathway for reporting unacceptable behaviours from whoever they came from,

that was explicit income based on our EDI page and and that the students were

made aware that there was a an escalation pathway and a de-escalation pathway.

So the escalation pathway perhaps would be to lodge a formal complaint either via the school or via the university button.

But it's got the, you know, would be for Central University.

And then there was also the de-escalation, making sure that the students were aware and the staff as well were aware that there were

safe spaces within the school and with particular people within the school that are earmarked,

such as the EDI, I lead the academic lead and the professional services EDI lead and whereby people, you know,

students or staff could go and chat and talk through the problems that they maybe have seen,

the issues they've seen, get advice or just talk in in a safe way.

That's very simple thing that we did right by beginning.

We audited whether the students were finding that's on campus because I had my misgivings that they weren't finding it.

So we've made it even more clear income vis where it is because it can be a little bit tricky to negotiate campus at times.

So that pathway is working nicely now and the students know that there are safe spaces and that they can talk to people.

The other thing that we got started with was decolonising in the curriculum. And by that, I don't just mean changing reading lists.

That's not what decolonized in the curriculum is about at all.

And some people might say, well, how on earth do you decolonize dentistry its teeth, you know?

But actually, when we sat down and thought about it, there was a lot we could do.

For instance, I give a lecture. I'm a children's dentist.

And I give a lecture on painful conditions in children,

which often involve skin rashes and skin rashes on different coloured skin from very pale to very dark look very different.

So what I have now introduced into that lecture are images of the same condition in different ethnicities

so that students can start to hone the diagnostic skills when they're out in the real world.

And another example is head of school gives them a lecture on facial pain.

And he decided that he would look into the differences between different ethnicities and how they react to facial pain and also how they react to

the medications that are used in facial pain so that you get a broader data set for the students to to be able to have a more balanced view of.

And so we're doing that. But that takes a lot of work to decolonize, a lecture or a seminar.

It takes along quite a lot of, you know, a few hours and finding the images is really difficult, finding a creative commons stuff you can use.

This is actually difficult. So we as a school have gone to Dental Schools Council nationally,

and our director of education actually leads the Education Committee in Dental

Schools Council and she is spearheading and hopefully we will get a shared

repository for images from all the dental schools because some of the dental schools

in the UK have a much more diverse patient base than we do here in Newcastle.

We also were very concerned about micro-aggressions. So I gave a short presentation to staff around what micro-aggressions were and are EEI lead.

Hawa Fathi and she has developed an online package of teaching, which is now gone to other dental school.

So it's very clinical that dental and it's and it's some kind of flavour, if you will.

But it's it's teaching people how to deal with microaggressions in a professional way and what they actually are.

So we're really, really pleased to like the latest place that's gone since Queen Mary, University of London.

They've asked for for that package. I'm so delighted to share it.

And you know that with the dental schools and use that with the students and their staff, we're currently monitoring awarding data.

Now, we don't classify all our degrees in normal subjects do.

They they you know, they pass or they don't pass. But we do award merits and distinctions.

And so what we're doing is we're looking at our merits,

the distinctions that are being awarded at BDS and looking to see whether there is an awarding gap.

So that's work in progress. And we will obviously look at the data and then try and formulate ways to to address that.

We're also trying really hard through the medicine and dentistry days and the partner scheme.

And whenever we go out to local schools to try and recruit more black students,

we have lots of South Asian students in dentistry, which is fantastic, but we have very few black students.

And so we are very conscious of that. And we want to try and make a concerted effort to get into schools at the age where these children,

a young enough, to to to realize that that, you know, the university is for them.

And maybe, you know,

think about dentistry and we can talk about the scholarships and the mentoring that the university provides for the Cowrie scholarship.

And we are advertising that a lot.

When we had our admissions round last year for this intake and any offer holder who ethnically was some black heritage was contacted and

we told them about the Cowrie scholarship just so that they were aware of it.

You know, in case they wanted to apply for it. So we were trying our best and kind of to work with the university stuff as well.

Our students are really active and we have gone from two EDI student reps to five EDI student reps

because with so much going on in the school and we don't want to overwork those poor students.

So we've expanded to five and we try and spread them through the years if we can.

They have developed a teaching package around EDI.

What's EDI, you know, what should you expect from your school, et cetera, that they give to first years.

And it's a two session thing at the moment. It's a zoom thing. And it was given synchronously this year, which was fantastic.

But hopefully that will morph into a face to face thing. They talk about different cultures and et cetera.

So they they've developed that themselves. And obviously it's gone through the staff to make sure the touching learning outcomes.

But that's something that the students are really very keen to do.

And I think, you know, the younger students seem the more senior students being active in this way,

I think sets the scene really nicely to say, hey, we're a school that take this seriously.

And hopefully they will get you know, they'll get that message. One of our EDI meetings probably five or six months ago.

One of the students actually fed back to us and said that they were so pleased that we really rolled

our sleeves up and done tangible things for the school and for the students and for the cause.

And they said that they wanted to do it on the video because I think they realized how hard that video, that first video hits us.

And so some staff were involved in doing a kind of follow up video of what we've done within the school.

And that was completed just before the end of term.

So if we now kind of almost kind of completed the circle there with the students, although we've got all these different things going on.

And we'll probably have more as time goes by.

But these are the main the main projects, some sometimes some part time and some with perhaps a little time needed.

So as Paul looks to why the involvement, how did she get students and staff from other dental schools involved?

I put a call out early on through Twitter to ask staff, or students in dental schools, you know, for any ideas about making the environment more inclusive.

And by way of that, I am now in contact with some staff in the dental schools, dental schools, which are much more diverse than than ours.

And with a much more diverse patient base as well.

And one of the big surprises is they have the same issues that we have, even though they're so diverse, they have the same.

And we're actually going to be writing the paper to Queen Mary and myself when we're writing a paper on racism within dental schools,

and what the actions are that you can do to counter that.

And you know that you could probably pin that on what we're going to write probably on on any school.

And some of the data we got from the Dental Schools Council National Survey,

I found really quite surprising in that some staff replied that they'd never been aware of any racism within within their school.

It doesn't happen. Everyone's fine. And I'm not just that.

And they aren't being. Members of staff, so white members of staff are saying it's grand.

Everything's fine. That was the biggest surprise.

But I'm also amazed at how dynamic the students are.

It's been kind of on their side, if you will. I'm working for them.

You know, they at the time that they're prepared to give in the actual lived experience that they've been prepared.

Tell us about. As being quite humbling.

It's not the easiest subject to talk about.

You know, they've had a life of micro-aggressions and to suddenly tell us how they feel about that and what they actually are.

You know that that's amazing that they can do that so that we can help.

And finally, from Paula, what advice would you give other schools who are looking to pledge and decolonize the curriculum further?

To school level? I would say get your pledge sorted to do some. That is the crux, I think is the school action plan .

And we did that early on. We pledged to NUSU.

And we've been in the pledge. We've encompassed more than I've talked to you about, actually.

But we've put in weight, you know, we've pledged around research, et cetera, as well as clinical and engagement as well,

making sure that we engage with the people who are seldom heard et cetera.

So we're quite proud of that pledge and that will keep us going as well in years to come.

Kind of program level, faculty level. You know, you look at the medical faculty and this there's so many different schools doing different things.

But we've shared some of the stuff that we've done with medicine.

We know with the medical schools so that, you know, they don't have to reinvent the wheel.

And I'm sure it will be reciprocated in, you know, in time to come. So, you know, that sort of thing is helpful.

I spoke to the business school as well and given them an idea of how we started.

And I think you've got to- you can't put people off by overloading people because people are busy and you've got to find the people who are really,

truly fired up by this that will that will say something to the end and actually produce something tangible with an outcome.

And luckily, in Dentistry, we we do have a knob of people. The EDI committee but people beyond that who will work together really well.

And with the students, you've got you've got to bring the students in a degree program level as well.

And our last word is going to be with Livia again. Why is it important to our students and to the student union that we get this right?

I think that at the core of all these discussions, especially in Britain, is the need for white people to grapple with the colonial legacy.

I think especially when you look at what we're taught from school level into a universe, it's a university's responsibility.

In my opinion, to be at the forefront, to be progressive and to actively challenge these things.

There's this assumption that universities are very liberal, very progressive, inclusive spaces.

But that's not necessarily the case unless we actively challenge them.

And I think Decolonising NCL not just the curriculum is a way that we can involve deep structural change.

And it has to be in collaboration with like anti-racist activism and students.

The university at all levels. It's just vital that we keep this as a separate agenda

item doesn't kind of get shoved under the rug because without this we're not

challenging those deep structural inequalities that remain as an overlay from colonialism,

which in turn breeds prejudice and racism.

So without that, I don't think we can claim to be a progressive liberal space, which I think a university inherently wants to be.

We need to constantly be challenging ourselves to be that inclusive space.

Thank you very much to our guests, Tom, Livia and Paula. It's been a great episode and a great insight into some of the things we

are doing here at Newcastle University to tackle Decolonize in the Curriculum.

There are links in the show notes. And please get in touch if you have any further comments regarding this episode.

Remember to download, like, subscribe, get your friends to download and we'll see you in two weeks time.

Thank you.