CASE STUDY: DECOLONISING DMU

Overview

To truly address sustainability, the root causes of social injustice need to be addressed for a joined-up approach transecting social, environmental and economic factors. To address the root causes of structural inequalities and injustice in our education system, there is growing effort for decarbonising and decolonising our education institutions.

"There will inevitably be people who will be profoundly opposed to this approach because it is existentially opposed to widely adopted world views however Decolonising DMU recognises the need to not be limited by existing practice, but build a wider dialogue and consensus."

Kashika Patel, Project Director, Decolonising DMU, 2019

De Montfort University have worked hard to introduce a range of measures to narrow the awarding gap[1] between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students, and white students – these are measures they called Freedom to Achieve in the first phase of the project [2]

DMU recognise there should be no gap at all, no distinction between the opportunity available to all their students. So, they want to go further and work harder to give each one of their students the same chances of success and the same freedom to achieve as any other.

In November 2019 they introduced Decolonising DMU, their ongoing institution wide project to ensure there is no racial disparity in their institution, in the makeup of their staff, in the way they teach, in the experience their students receive or the choices they make as educators. Decolonising DMU goes far beyond the curriculum. It acknowledges that the scale of the challenge runs deep into examining the everyday norms of university life and will require all DMU staff and students to acknowledge, identify, discuss and seek to understand the issues.

The nature of this work is challenging: they have to work together and be prepared to reflect on themselves and their behaviours as much as the choices they make as an institution. The process of Decolonising seeks to create a positive vision of education guided by a philosophy that is based on the contributions of a global population, humanity and democracy.

Decolonising DMU, working definition, 2019

1. Links racial inequality in Britain and colonialism.

2. Decolonising imminent to the anti-racist university.

---

[1] The awarding gap has often been described as the attainment gap, the shift in verbiage recognises the structural and systemic roots of differential levels of attainment across groups of people. This shift takes the onus from the individuals' potential for attainment to one of structural disparity in progression and award causing social injustice.
[2] Atkins, L. (2018) Freedom to Achieve: Project Evaluation Report. Leicester: De Montfort University. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2p9x8y8m

STUDENTS ORGANISING FOR SUSTAINABILITY UK

3. A celebration of the rich diversity and heritage of DMU.

4. Shifting the burden/conversation away from deficit, blame and shame.

5. Against historical systems, hierarchies and behaviours that reproduce disadvantage, and that tend to materialise dominant forms of privilege.

6. Decolonising DMU stretches far beyond the curriculum, into the everyday norms of university life.

7. It is critical and collective.

APPROACHES: DDMU PHASE 1

In Phase One of DDMU, there were four key areas of focus:

- Institution – this aims to provide the foundations required to enable the Library, Staff and Student work streams to succeed. It will look at institutional processes and practices that are required to enact change and consider issues that impact on staff and students alike. The breadth of this workstream spans from simple changes, through to changing practices that have evolved over decades, and which will take time to change as the journey of decolonisation takes place.
- Library (and learning services) – This work stream covers the following areas: Decolonising the Library collection; Developing more culturally aware Library spaces and services; develop a more diverse workforce in the Library and Learning Services; Raising awareness with Kimberlin Sessions and Read to debate
- Staff - The staff work stream aims to involve staff in the discussions about what Decolonising DMU looks like within different contexts in the institution and for staff to influence the direction of Decolonising DMU. It moves away from only considering curriculum development and design, to looking at starting the journey of decolonising all aspects of work in which staff are engaged.
- Students - The Student workstream looks to work closely with De Montfort Students' Union (DSU) to give the Students a chance to co- create and define the shape of Decolonising DMU. The stream will enable existing groups to better reach the students using a partnership approach to student facing activities.

These work streams are underpinned by a programme of research and evaluation, which monitors the impact of the project and helps to develop our understanding of the decolonisation process and its effect on our staff and students.

APPROACHES: DDMU PHASE 2

From February 2022, the project enters a second phase, following the publication of an Interim Report.[3] The report highlighted the range of student-engagement projects, led by students, and in particular the Unapologetically BAME network. Alongside this, a range of staff development resources for academic and professional services' staff have been developed for awareness-raising and implementation. Work is being undertaken in Library and Learning Services, around the use of the space and staff development, alongside developments in relation to reading lists. A decolonising research network has been set up, focusing around decolonising research and methodology, postgraduate student journey, and making available a self-audit tool for research

---

[3] Hall, R. et al. (2022). Decolonising DMU: Interim Report. De Montfort University, Leicester. Available at:

SOS

groups. This means the University is fully prepared to make a new Race Equality Charter submission at the core of its institutional work.

Phase two of DDMU launches in February 2022, and will modify the project's focus, to serve staff and students at DMU more appropriately, and narrow the differential awarding gap. Through this refocusing they commit to challenge racism, in all forms, and build an anti-racist university that creates fair outcomes for staff and students. The project mission remains to dismantle racist barriers and structures so that staff and students can succeed, and this will be achieved by changing cultures and behaviours, improving representation, progression and talent, and measuring this through governance and accountability frameworks, to ensure equity in education.

This next phase of the project will focus its work around 4 key commitments.

1. Equity in Education and Research – *decolonising teaching, learning and research practices.*
2. Progression, talent and representation – *enhancing recruitment and professional development to support meaningful career progression.*
3. Governance and Accountability – *reviewing our existing structures and processes through an anti-racist lens.*
4. Raising Awareness, Changing Cultures and Behaviours - *creating an environment where conversations about race and racism are supported and progressed.*

PARTNERSHIP WORKING

The project has engaged in a range of dissemination events, in higher education institutions and with third sector/voluntary organisations.[4] Staff have also been engaged in development and dissemination work with Advance HE and the Office for Students, in order to contribute to the range of networks now pushing for structural and cultural change through the decolonising movement.

Here, one area for development is in connection with decarbonising and the need for institutions to commit to environmental justice, in relation to the outcomes from COP26 and the IPCC sixth assessment report. As a result, DDMU has partnerships with DMU's Education for Sustainable Development network, and underpins its role as a global hub for UN Sustainable Development Goal 16, peace, social justice and strong institutions.[5]

Recommendations for other branches

DDMU has met with the recognised, campus trade unions, Unison and UCU, and a core member of the DDMU team is a branch UCU negotiator and committee member. As a result, both formal and informal communications have been opened-up with trade unions. These channels are crucial in connecting grassroots action around decolonising (and also decarbonising), in relation to a broader social justice agenda, to top-down and institutionally-managed change projects.

Crucially, such projects impact issues around dignity at work, grievance policies, bullying and harassment, and so on. Moreover, they also impact upon the core of the Four Fights' agenda, in relation to casualisation, workload, remuneration, and inequality, which are experienced

---

[4] Link to presentations on new website.
[5] See: https://www.dmu.ac.uk/community/sdg/index.aspx

intersectionally and differentially across the labour force. It is crucial that such projects connect to labour rights and labour relations, by mobilising existing, local energy and campaigns. Here, being able to work with a diverse group of caseworkers, able to understand the lived experiences of members, is of huge importance.

One way in which branches can develop this work is by an active process of engaging with these lived experiences of those struggling against bullying and harassment in the workplace, and by enabling an open discussion around decolonising, white privilege, whiteness and social (in)justice. At its heart, these lived experiences are central to campaigns for decolonising and intersectional justice, and here, the full range of EDI Officers and networks play a fundamental role.

One final issue is the ways in which all recognised trade unions, with links to local trades councils, can generate mutual modes of support, in order to address issues of decolonising in their own structures, cultures and practices. It is incumbent upon those trade unions, their officers and their members, working through the full range of relationships, to model the world they wish to see.

DDMU Twitter account/branding

DDMU Podcast

The Inclusive University
What impact can equality, diversity and inclusion strategies and processes have on the lived experiences of staff an ●

BAME Researchers
What challenges do Black, Asian and minority ethnic researchers face in the University? Is there a lack o ●

Re-thinking BAME
The use of the terminology BAME, which stands for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic, as a catchall term to describ ●

DMU Unapologetically BAME Discussion Event Poster

Further information and resources

Decolonising DMU website:

Decolonising DMU toolkit:

Journal article: Hall, R., et al. (2021). Struggling for the anti-racist university: learning from an institution-wide response to curriculum decolonisation. *Teaching in Higher Education,* Special Issue*,* Possibilities and complexities of decolonising higher education: critical perspectives on praxis. DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2021.1911987

SOS

Let's talk about decolonising and decarbonising education (article): https://www.sos-uk.org/post/lets-talk-about-decolonising-and-decarbonising-education