

Transforming Education with Curriculum Liberation: A case study on diversity, inclusivity and engagement within the MSc Business and Sustainability (BaS) curriculum and proposals for change.

Kyiga Wilberforce
The Bartlett School of Architecture

Supervised by Priscila Carvalho
The Bartlett School of Environment, Energy and Resources
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Abstract

Five years after the peak of the Decolonise the Curriculum movement, universities across the globe have begun long-term plans to correct institutional colonialism within curricula. In the 'Pathways to Decolonisation' 2020-2022 research project at the Bartlett School of Energy, Environment and Resources at UCL, the literature and readings across eleven MSc programmes were analysed to investigate its curriculum design and delivery. An assessment of 284 sources “authored by 746 individuals, with 74% being male lead authors and a notable 95% of sources linked to Western institutions and affiliations” resonates with the critical findings of Schucan Bird, K., Pitman, L., and Wilson, K. (2020), emphasising the dominance of white, male, Western-centric perspectives in reading lists¹.

A case study of the MSc Business and Sustainability source list is exemplary in providing a deeper critical study of diverse viewpoints where the presence of diverse literature and authors prove insufficient to claim a liberated curriculum. As a particularly internationally-minded degree, the course has a great responsibility to promote truly global viewpoints; evaluation of the sources stratified into essential, recommended and optional reading make it an important case study for similarly formatted curricula at UCL and beyond. Moreover, as internal politics surrounding decolonisation of higher education and public establishments continue to reverberate throughout the world, social movements and student activism are maintaining momentum. The curricula in place yield immense power; their ability to perpetuate or disrupt longstanding narratives, represent or marginalise social causes, and empower or disempower student bodies; the literary diet of a degree evokes ideas and emotions – whether positive, negative, or somewhere in between – and has the means to culture complex ideas whilst challenging prevailing perspectives.

This research aims to investigate the extent to which the MSc Business and Sustainability programme at UCL is decolonised and inclusive as well as provide a comprehensive understanding of the representation of global contexts and viewpoints. Through a multi-lens research process employing critical analysis to author gender and demographic data followed by representation of geographical regions and guest lecturers, this project will shed light on the depth and complexity of decolonial action and curriculum liberation.

¹ Schucan Bird, K., Pitman, L. How diverse is your reading list? Exploring issues of representation and decolonisation in the UK. *High Educ* **79**, 903–920 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00446-9>

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Introduction

On June 11th 2020, UCL's President & Provost Professor Michael Arthur formally asked the university's 'Buildings Naming and Renaming Committee' to immediately begin the process of reviewing the current naming of buildings after two prominent eugenicists Francis Galton and Karl Pearson² (UCL News 2020). Following the Black Lives Matter movement catalysed by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis the earlier May, outcries against colonial pasts and presents spread like wildfire across the globe.

In response, universities such as UCL began the process of unearthing, reflecting on and strategising reparations for racial historical injustice and pedagogical negligence. At the Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment, the "Pathways to Decolonisation" project, initiated in 2020, has undertaken the significant task of recognising and amending curriculum inequalities. This paper analyses data concerning the gender and ethnicity of the lead author of each source and its geographic coverage and focus, as well as gender, ethnicity and affiliation of each guest lecturer that have been researched for this paper. The data that concerns the extent to which guest lectures have been non-Western-centric has been evaluated by students present in the lectures and verified through cross-referencing lecturers' digital publications.

Assumptions

To analyse data on lead author gender and demographic identity, assumptions have been made based on physical presentation and country of origin as to whether an individual is a person of colour or white as well as male or female. The same method of identification has been applied to guest lecturers although their gender and ethnicity has additionally been cross-referenced with assumptions made by students who attending the in-person lecture.

Lead author gender and demographic identity

To evaluate the diversity of lead authors within the academic curriculum, this paper will focus on two primary considerations: gender and demographic identity. These variables must be cross-referenced with the three categories of importance that organise the reading list - the UCL Library Services uses the term 'essential resource' to refer to those key or core texts which students are required to read to gain sufficient understanding of a topic, to enable them to participate in seminars, or to complete an assignment. The terms 'Optional' and

² UCL. "UCL Starts Process of Renaming Buildings Named after Prominent Eugenicists." *UCL News*, 10 June 2020, www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/jun/ucl-starts-process-renaming-buildings-named-after-prominent-eugenicists. Accessed 21 Sept. 2024.

'Recommended' highlight readings as important but frame these as further reading, for optional topics, or in a general bibliography area ³ (UCL Guides and Databases 2024).

Regarding gender diversity across the entire reading list for MSc Business and Sustainability, 23.2% of lead authors are female, whilst 76.8% of authors are male. Regarding demographic identity, 17.2% of authors are people of colour whilst 82.8% of authors are white. Out of the female authors, 17.1% are women of colour, therefore females of colour are the least represented group, constituting 4.0% of all lead authors.

To understand how the curriculum is delivered and received by students, it is crucial to take an intersectional perspective towards the importance of respective sources within the course.

Out of the 38 essential readings, 32.3% of lead authors are female and 67.7% of lead authors are male, with 11.1% of female lead authors being women of colour, and 4% of male lead authors being men of colour.

Out of the 102 recommended readings, 19.2% of lead authors are female and 80.9% of lead authors are male, with 30.8% of female lead authors being women of colour, and 10.9% of male lead authors being men of colour.

Out of the 103 optional readings, 28.2% of lead authors are female and 71.7% of lead authors are male, with 19.2% of female lead authors being women of colour, and 15.1% of male lead authors being men of colour.

In the entire reading list, there is only one instance of representation of institutions and affiliations from the African continent; Kenya Meteorological Department, which is categorised as an optional reading by the male Professor Moses Kibe Kihiko⁴ (Kihiko 2016). The only other non-Western university body represented is EAFIT University of Colombia - a recommended reading in two modules, with sources led by the female Professor Maria Alejandra Gonzalez-Perez, and University of Buenos Aires - as an optional reading, with the source led by the female Professor Melisa Escosteguy⁵ (Willan 2024).

Therefore, the literature provided to students has severely insufficient representation of varied voices and perspectives, remaining inadequate throughout the hierarchies of sources' prominence within the MSc Business and Sustainability coursework.

Coursework focal points on diverse geographical regions

Secondly, it is key to analyse how much of the coursework focuses on diverse geographical regions to determine if and how the curriculum extends beyond Western-centric views to encompass a broader, global perspective. The geographic scope of the texts must again be cross-referenced with the three categories of importance denoted on the reading list.

According to the student survey by current students enrolled in the degree, out of all the sources, 45.6% sources are considered global, which is to say, without an explicit bias to Western countries or case studies. The students report 12.8% to be focussed on the global

³ "Guides and Databases: Reading Lists @ UCL: Requesting Resources." *Ucl.ac.uk*, 2024, library-guides.ucl.ac.uk/readinglists/essential-resources#:~:text=The%20library%20prioritises%20purchase%20of, Accessed 19 Sept. 2024.

⁴ Kihiko, Moses & Kinoti, Mary. (2016). The Business Case for Climate Change: The Impact of Climate Change on Kenya's Public Listed Companies. 19. 133-157. 10.1108/S2051-50302016000019007. Accessed 21 Sept. 2024.

⁵ Willan, Catherine. "BENV0009: Business and Sustainability." *ReadingLists@UCL*, 11 July 2024, rl.talis.com/3/ucl/lists/F33BFBDC-30B0-7715-C711-4E50BF8DF78E.html?lang=en-GB. Accessed 21 Sept. 2024.

north, with 6.0% on the USA, 2.4% specifically on Europe and 0.9% of these focussed on the UK. The results report that only 3.3% sources are focussed on the Global South, with 0.2% source focussed on Asia, 0.7% on Africa and 1.8% on South America.

Out of the essential sources, 63.7% are focussed globally, and 36.3% are focussed on the Global North – in particular, 16% are focussed on the USA. There are no essential sources that focus on geographic regions in the Global South. Concerning sources tied to specific geographies, Chile and Argentina each feature as the source focus once then twice together, and Guyana, Kenya and the wider Sub-Sahara African region are each the source focus once. The USA is grossly overrepresented, and the Global South is severely underrepresented as sources focussing on those countries comprise 1.5% of all readings. Hence, the literature provided to students does not maintain a global range of geographical focal regions, acutely limiting the perspectives portrayed on marginalised regions as positive case studies.

Representation and engagement of case studies within the Global South

Thirdly, to evaluate the degree to which diverse geographies are included, the *approach* towards representation and engagement with issues, scenarios and perspectives from less commonly explored regions must be analysed. This requires assessment of the dominant and neglected narratives as well as efforts to involve the experience of all those affected, especially those outside academic backgrounds, echoing

The four Chilean and Argentinean sources investigate the geopolitics and ethics of lithium mining - drawing power relations between ecology, economy and indigenous communities. Each paper intentionally examines both tensions and solutions provided by the actors involved, maintaining an unbiased, grounded approach that does not favour Western perceptions of Chile, Argentina and/or the wider Global South. Indeed, the papers “focus[] on both contradictions and flexibilities of lithium production”⁶ (Bustos-Gallardo, 2021), “illustrate and assess the diverse perceptions and strategies of local actors”⁷ (Malte Dorn, 2022) and expound that whilst state actors abandoned their role as guarantors of indigenous citizens’ rights, the latter communities “asserted their agency through mainly protests and roadblocks navigating the socio-environmental impact landscape amidst evolving state-company-community dynamics.”⁸ (Metehan Ciftci, 2023). The inclusion of two Latin American female leads⁹ (Willan 2024) as well as two men of colour as author leads facilitates the possibilities of local dialogue, allowing primary research to help negotiate the “power assymetries” in research methodology between locals, industry professionals,

⁶ Bustos-Gallardo, Beatriz. “Harvesting Lithium: Water, Brine and the Industrial Dynamics of Production in the Salar de Atacama.” *Geoforum*, 1 Feb. 2021, www.sciencedirect.com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/science/article/pii/S0016718521000014?via%3Dihub. Accessed 13 Sept. 2024.

⁷ Dorn, F. M. & Gundermann, Hans, (2022) “Mining companies, indigenous communities, and the state: the political ecology of lithium in Chile (Salar de Atacama) and Argentina (Salar de Olaroz-Cauchari)”, *Journal of Political Ecology* 29(1), 341–359. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5014> Accessed 20 Sept. 2024.

⁸ Metehan Ciftci, Mehmet . “Deciphering the Impacts of “Green” Energy Transition on Socio-Environmental Lithium Conflicts: Evidence from Argentina and Chile.” *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 5 Dec. 2023, linkinghub-elsevier-com.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/retrieve/articleSelectSinglePerm?Redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sciencedirect.com%2Fscience%2Farticle%2Fpii%2FS2214790X23001624%3Fvia%253Dihub&key=439dd24d0267872f07b200d89ee83a3711530f7c. Accessed 20 Sept. 2024.

⁹ Willan, Catherine. “BENV0009: Business and Sustainability.” *ReadingLists@UCL*, 11 July 2024, rl.talis.com/3/ucl/lists/F33BFBD-30B0-7715-C711-4E50BF8DF78E.html?lang=en-GB. Accessed 21 Sept. 2024.

government and academics that have an “enduring influence on local actors' possibilities for acting”¹⁰ (Malte Dorn, 2022).

However, given the fact that sources focused on the Global South comprise 1.5% of all reading materials, the perspective through which the MSc degree represents these geographies form a critical voice in the narrative of the wider programme towards the Global South. The four sources focussing on lithium mining act as a microcosmic example of how diverse viewpoints within and across sources can form a more coherent and accurate body of knowledge. In turn, this promotes student engagement and critical thinking. Certain sources criticise the “limitations of (Western) economic or scientific frameworks in the developing world”¹¹ (Ramos 2018) which “disproportionately impact developing economies” through negligence of “regional values” that counteract “Western-weighted assumptions”¹² (Ameli 2021). Whilst these are salient points to discuss, the rarity of diverse representation indicates that as the curriculum stands, there is extremely inadequate overall representation of issues and scenarios in the Global South and beyond.

Efforts made to host guest lecturers beyond Western institutions and expertise from beyond the Western academic context

Finally, a decolonised curriculum requires the hosting of guest lecturers from non-Western universities, and a sustained effort to introduce students to a broad range of perspectives and expertise, particularly those that may not be classically featured in a Western academic context. In the MSc Business and Sustainability, no guest lecturers were affiliated with non-Western universities. 29.6% of guest lecturers were people of colour, 29.6% were women, 7.4% were taught by men and women therefore 63% of lectures were taught by men. In an open enquiry after the lectures took place, 33.3% of students classified the lecture as non-Western centric and 66.7% of lectures as Western-centric.

To contextually understand the efforts made to invite speakers from beyond the Western regions, it is important to recall that UCL is subject to the Right to Work requirements upheld by the national UK immigration system. This superintends rules and criteria for working people beyond the European Economic Area, with the present government’s intention stated as “to reduce net migration levels into the UK significantly.”¹³ If invited by UCL, guest lecturers are processed under Tier 5, which allows visiting academics to stay in the UK for more than one month or the Permitted Paid Engagements (PPE) route for stays of less than one month¹⁴.

To obtain the PPE pass, visitors must have a written invitation from UCL for the described lecture, be able to demonstrate that they’re an expert in their profession and that the engagement must be relevant to their expertise, qualifications and main job in their home

¹⁰ Dorn, F. M. & Gundermann, Hans, (2022) “Mining companies, indigenous communities, and the state: the political ecology of lithium in Chile (Salar de Atacama) and Argentina (Salar de Olaroz-Cauchari)”, *Journal of Political Ecology* 29(1), 341–359. doi: <https://doi.org/10.2458/jpe.5014> Accessed 20 Sept. 2024.

¹¹ Ramos-Mejía, Mónica . “Sustainability Transitions in the Developing World: Challenges of Socio-Technical Transformations Unfolding in Contexts of Poverty.” *Environmental Science & Policy*, 23 June 2018, [rl.talis.com/3/ucl/items/ec557be4-5f63-4244-9fe2-17aaeca793b4.html?lang=en-GB](https://www.talis.com/3/ucl/items/ec557be4-5f63-4244-9fe2-17aaeca793b4.html?lang=en-GB). Accessed 21 Sept. 2024.

¹² Ameli, N., Dessens, O., Winning, M. *et al.* Higher cost of finance exacerbates a climate investment trap in developing economies. *Nat Commun* 12, 4046 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-24305-3>

¹³ UCL Human Resources, “UCL HUMAN RESOURCES UCL Right to Work Information and Guidance,” April 25, 2018, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/sites/human-resources/files/immigration_2017_-_right_to_work_and_immigration_guidance_v1.2.pdf.

¹⁴ Government Digital Service. “Visit the UK as a Standard Visitor.” *GOV.UK*, 24 Apr. 2015, www.gov.uk/standard-visitor/paid-engagement-event. Accessed 21 Sept. 2024.

country. To lecture on a subject not relevant to their current role, lecturers must provide evidence of any previous employments held in this area, subject publications or other recognised qualifications.

Therefore, there is a clear but multi-step pathway to facilitate guest lecturers to introduce students to a wide range of perspectives. This likely contributes to 88.9% of guest lecturers hailing from UK institutions, with 29.6% of speakers affiliated with UCL and 11.1% of guest lecturers from wider Europe – representing Nestle, the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, and ESGenius consultancy (Green Growth Partnership 2024)¹⁵.

Additionally, there are increasing pressures to and alternative methods for academics to not travel, including but not limited to carbon emission and pollutant concerns, the structural issues posed by publishing houses and decreased funding to host individual lecturers. Conversely, the rise of pre-recorded or live online lecture technology has improved certain logistical issues. As the data provided by students only pertains to guest lectures that took place, the efforts made to *invite* guests from beyond Western institutions remain undetermined. However, the data conveys an evident lack of effort to firstly include diverse perspectives and expertise from beyond UCL let alone the Global South, resulting in an imbalanced and ill-informed foundation. Narratives from Western institutions will greatly limit discussions within transnational modules such as International Dynamics and Global Governance of Business, and over the MSc Business and Sustainability degree course as a whole.

Conclusion

Overall, through analysis of the MSc Business and Sustainability degree sources, the academic curriculum is decolonised and inclusive to an extremely inadequate extent. As the reading list authors' gender and demographic pose the most fundamental injustice, with female lead authors of colour forming 4% of the entire reading list, it is clear that increasing diversity in the reading list must be the first area of progress.

The inclusion of diverse geographical regions in sources and case studies proves similarly lacking, with an unacceptable 3.3% sources focussed on the Global South, none of which are classed as essential reading. Whilst there is very low visibility of diverse regions throughout the sources, in case studies situated in the Global South, efforts have been made to portray local knowledge and expertise as bases of solutions whilst rejecting unfit imports of Western theoretical frameworks. These results collectively form an evaluation of the status of curriculum decolonisation, providing a comprehensive understanding of not only data on diversity and inclusivity within the curriculum but the presence and absence of views and narratives in relation to one another.

¹⁵ Green Growth Partnership. "Zitouni Ould-Dada | Green Growth Knowledge Partnership." *Greengrowthknowledge.org*, 22 July 2024, www.greengrowthknowledge.org/person/zitouni-ould-dada. Accessed 21 Sept. 2024.

Following proposals

As the Pathways to Decolonisation project continues, further partnering of diverse students with staff to co-perform audits of the curriculum must remain a core component of understanding the delivery and effect of reading lists, case studies and guest lectures on the student experience and learning process. Whilst end-of-term workshops to review these elements is key, there are gaps in the student-staff feedback loops on guest lectures and modules due to the passage of time resulting in less precise recall of Western-centricity and less students available for out-of-ours audits. Hence, supplementary inquiries on students' valuations of the extent to which guest lectures support inclusive and non-Western views directly after the lectures in person or through email would prove useful. These discussions should widen to consider funding of source material and authors' potential conflicts of interest as well as students' views on the most urgently inadequate curriculum literature. The goal should be to improve visibility and engagement around diverse regions and perspectives and to advocate further inclusive and diverse materials, case studies and theoretical frameworks to be integrated into the curriculum.

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