DECOLONISATION OR DECORATION? UK DOCTORAL CURRICULA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Abstract

With growing calls of decolonisation in the UK, my study looked to understand the extent to which doctoral curricula in the UK includes, or erase, non-western epistemologies, and uniquely traditions from the Global South, and South Asia. Using desk-based content analysis of publicly available syllabi, handbooks, institutional frameworks, and researcher-development methods, I coded 47 documents across 5 institutions including UCL, Oxford and SOAS. I coded and analysed these documents using frequency counts and pivot tables in Excel.

I found that explicit references to decolonizing frameworks were present in only 25% of learning outcomes texts and instead they would reference diversity and global learning, but these rarely signalled epistemic plurality. Reading lists were predominantly Euro-American (61.1% contained more than 70% Western authors). Where there was a strong commitment to decolonisation, much focus remained on indigenous or Latin American perspectives, while South Asian epistemologies—where present—were more tokenistic illustrations instead of integrated or assessed knowledge.

As a Pakistani student at UCL studying Politics and International Relations, exploring this question was a quest of navigating my own lived experiences with Western-centric research training.

Introduction

Across the UK, calls for decolonisation have become increasingly visible. Such discourse has expanded to universities and their curriculum and in response, we have seen universities organise conferences, fund initiatives and publish statements affirming their commitment to inclusive and equitable education. However, much of these promises are still stuck at the level of rhetoric and often focus on symbolic recognition but without changing the structures that govern the training, education, and development of doctoral researchers.

In earlier literature, I found much scrutiny over undergraduate curricula, while doctoral curricula was relegated to a site of neutrality and assumed to be both rigorous and universal. However, I chose to focus on doctoral education specifically because it plays a significant part in reproducing academics, which means it does not only shape individual trajectories but also the systems of knowledge that will populate classrooms and research communities. In fact, research shows that what is considered "rigorous" is often just Euro-American epistemologies.

My positionality in this project was central to me. As a Global South student situated within the very structures I criticise, I have seen the gaping lack of implementation for decolonisation rhetoric. In classrooms that promised inclusivity but shaped my entire understanding of political philosophy through Western centric authors, I found my motivation for this question. Taking a more nuanced approach, instead of focusing on identity-based narratives, I specifically wanted to unravel curriculum texts that could reveal the extent to which operationalisation of decolonialism took place.

Therefore, the core question guiding my project is the following:

How are South Asian knowledge traditions represented (or erased) in UK doctoral training curricula, and what can this reveal about research training?

Research Problem

By uniquely focusing on the content of doctoral curricula, my project contributes to filling a gap in existing literature. Presently, even though this literature is wide ranging, it is uneven, and my preliminary review of the scholarship uncovered several gaps.

Firstly, much of existing research is concentrated on Australia, New Zealand or North America and looks to incorporate knowledge philosophies from these areas, but the context of the UK is unexplored. Second, even within this discourse of decolonising, Global South, and specifically South Asian, traditions, whether philosophical (Nyaya, Vedanta, Buddhist logics), religious (Sufism, Islamic scholarship) or post colonial theory (Chatterjee, Spivak, Alatas) are rarely integrated. In fact, more focus remained on studying the inclusion of indigenous, Latin American, or African schools of thought.

Moreover, I also noticed that most existing studies focus on lived experiences, so they aim to document BIPOC doctoral students' feelings of exclusion, imposter syndrome, or cultural alienation. However, these accounts seldom discuss the curricula itself, i.e the reading lists, learning outcomes and assessment designs that shape doctoral training. Lastly, most studies abstractly discussed decolonisation through lived experiences but rarely operationalised what this could look like in the context of the UK doctoral curricula.

Such a landscape produced a clear problem statement: whilst there is recognition that doctoral education is highly colonial, there is little to no curriculum level analysis which shows how

exclusion manifests in practice. My project, therefore, looked to address this gap by analysing doctoral training artefacts, and uniquely focusing on South Asian epistemologies instead of the over theorised ones.

My aim while designing the question was primarily descriptive. I simply wanted to map how South Asian knowledge traditions appear in UK doctoral education at a structural level to help inform the effectiveness of institutional commitments to decolonisation.

Methodology

My study adopted a desk-based content analysis of doctoral documents. Unlike interview-based approaches which centre the lived experiences of individuals, I chose to narrow in on the structures shaping training itself. Therefore, I looked at module descriptions, departmental handbooks, researcher development guides, reading lists and institutional decolonization frameworks. I followed strict criteria when including the documents and universities.

First, I included elite Russell Group universities (LSE, Oxford, UCL, Cambridge) since frameworks and practices by these often shape what universities across the UK tend to follow and these have the most funding to invest in decolonization. Secondly, including Oxford and Cambridge ensured some level of regional diversity outside of London. Lastly, specialist institutions with decolonial reputations like SOAS ensured diversity in symbolic power and institutional positioning. Since I was running on a time crunch, I could not include more regional or specialist universities like Sussex, Glasgow, or Manchester.

For shortlisting material within these universities, my inclusion metric was simple. I only included material from London, specific to doctoral level (PhD or EdD), and documents that were publicly available and pertained to curricula, including syllabi, handbooks, reading lists or grey literature tied to doctoral education (internal policy documents, REF Case studies etc). Therefore, I excluded anything from non-UK contexts, undergraduate/master's programmes, or generic diversity policies unrelated to doctoral training.

Once I had picked 45+ documents from a mix of the above, I moved on to my coding. My conceptual categories from the literature were then translated into measurable variables through a code book in Excel. This was a gradual iterative process. I first drafted variables based on my initial literature review (type of assessment, language policy, presence of South Asian writers) and then tested them on a small pilot of the documents. Doing this helped reveal some ambiguities, for instance how to distinguish between a “tokenistic” inclusion of a South Asian text and an “integrated” one? To resolve this, I created scales to mark my findings. 0=absent; 1=tokenistic (single optional text, unintegrated); 2=illustrative (referred to a few times, but not part of core theory); 3=integrated (central to module, required text or assessed engagement).

All my other variables were similarly operationalised. I noted whether learning outcomes specifically referenced decolonization or other epistemic pluralities, what the level of decolonization claims was, whether any translation training was offered and whether the assessment design or method of study included south Asian traditions, among others. Specifically for reading lists, I used numeric counts, recording the total items and then noting the number of those authored by South Asian scholars and those by Euro-American theorists. These numbers allowed Excel to automatically calculate percentages. I used a total of categories to classify and sort through each document, including metadata (university, programme, year), descriptive variables and evidence strength ratings.

My coded data was compiled into an Excel Master Sheet. I used pivot tables to help me generate descriptive summaries. For example, one pivot table showed the distribution of decolonization level (0-3) across all my documents, while another helped count the total presence of South Asian epistemologies in reading lists across all documents.

Frequency counts were useful in showing both presence and absence. For example, the pivot table showed that out of 18 syllabi documents with reading lists available, only 8 included any South Asian author. I also used conditional formatting in Excel to highlight cases where Western authors made up >70% of the reading list. This "red flag" allowed me to see, briefly, how many universities used curricula that was entirely Eurocentric.

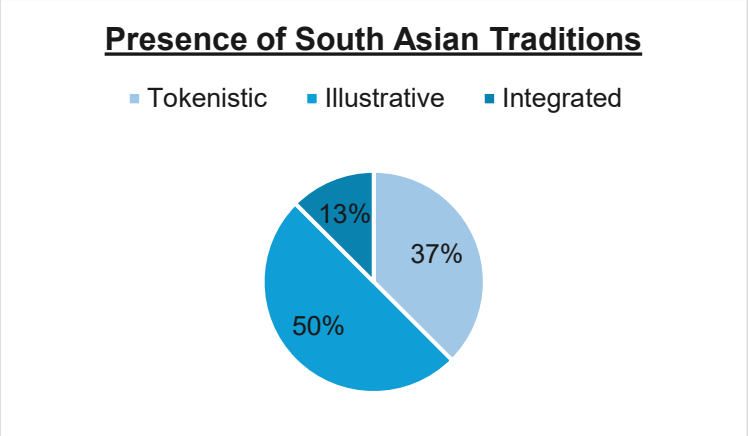
At the end, I used basic bar charts and box-plots to visualise this data. Even though my project was mostly descriptive, these visualisations and patterns allowed me to narrate my findings with greater nuance.

Findings

1. Representation of South Asian Traditions

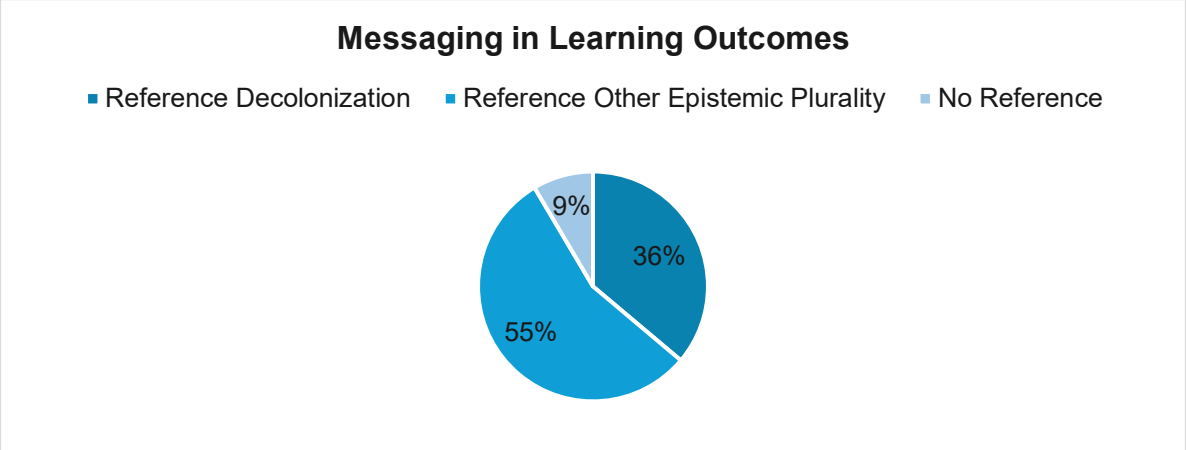
My pivot analysis showed that only 44% of documents out of 18 included any South Asian tradition in their core theory. Among these, 37.5% was tokenistic, which would mean a single reading or a handful of mentions to diversity, 50% were illustrative, used as examples but not part of core theory. Strikingly, only 12.5% of the documents mentioned South Asian traditions as integrated/core. Numerically, this meant only one document had more than 5 writers present in the core reading list.

These findings suggest that wherever South Asian knowledge appeared, it was treated as secondary content, rather than as part of the core theory for research. For example, a syllabus might include one chapter from Partha Chatterjee in a module otherwise dominated by Foucault, Weber, and Boudieu. Also interestingly, most documents mentioning South Asian traditions were modules specifically catered to decolonization and decolonial theory. Out of broad core modules on quantitative or qualitative data analysis, only 1 had Global South epistemologies beyond a tokenistic mention.



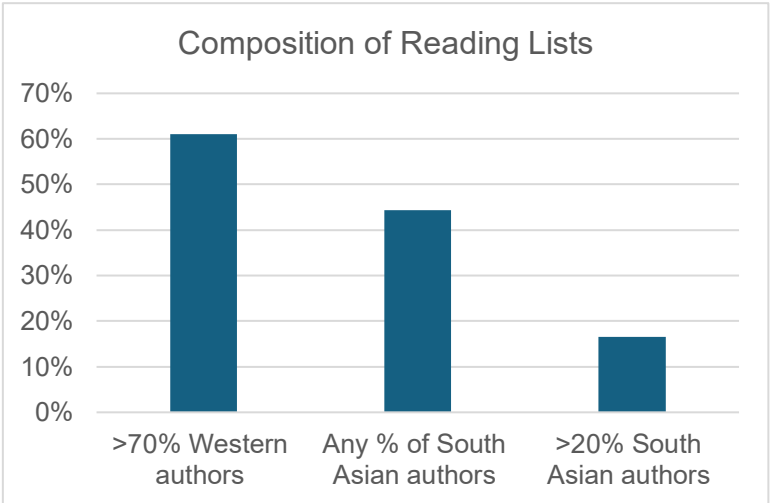
2. Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes listed in module descriptions or in researcher training handbooks rarely explicitly referred epistemic plurality in any university. In fact, only 25% of the material used the word "decolonization" or named any non-Western epistemology in the learning outcomes text. Instead, most used vague terms like "diverse" or "inclusive." This suggests most decolonization efforts are symbolic and more under the ambit of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity initiatives rather than explicit decolonization. This finding was important because LOs define what the students are assessed for. If a commitment to epistemic diversity does not appear here, it is unlikely to influence progression at all.



3. Reading List Composition

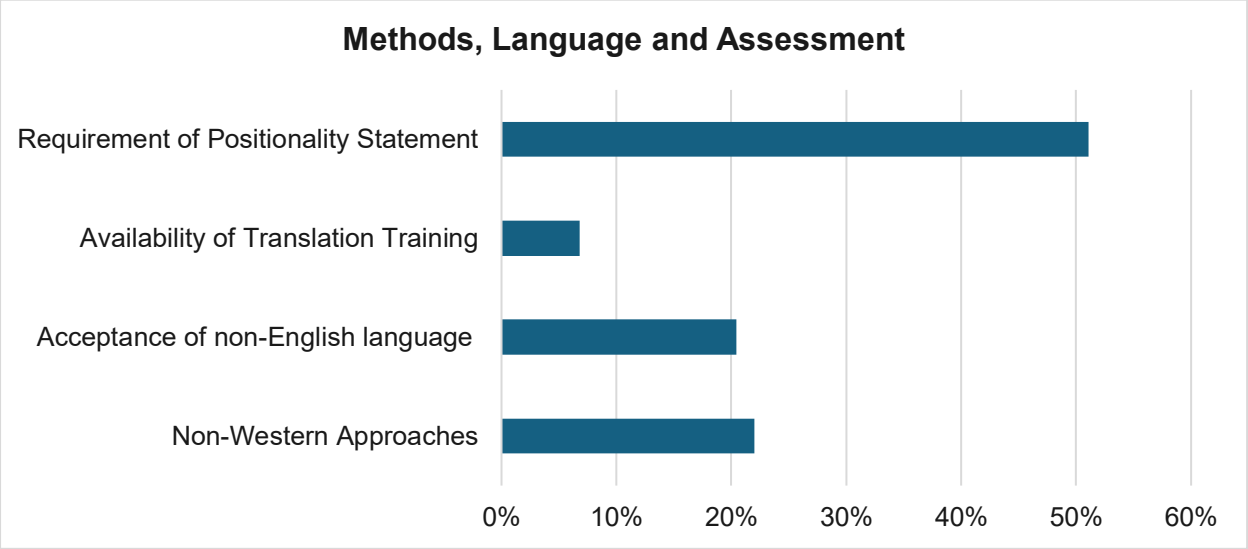
Analysis of reading lists, where available, for core/optional modules were the clearest indication of an epistemic hierarchy. Across documents where reading lists were available (module descriptions in particular), only 8/18 included any South Asian writers at all, and out of total reading lists, the average % of South Asian writers was only 7.8%. In contrast, Euro-American authors made up more than of 70% of readings in almost 61.1% of the syllabi. This showed me that most universities did not even have tokenistic inclusion as the norm; outright exclusion defined their core theory. There is an important limitation to note here, however. Most modules do not have publicly available reading lists, so data was only extrapolated from the few that did.



4. Methods, Languages and Assessment

Methods training dominantly involved Euro-American approaches: qualitative interviews, surveys, quantitative statistics. Only 22% of documents included non-western approaches like oral histories or explicitly discussed decolonial and critical approaches to research. Moreover, only 20.45% of documents mentioned acceptance of non-English language research in policy, and a mere 6.8% offered any translation training, even though doctoral researchers from South Asia or focusing on South Asian cases often work with sources in Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, or Persian.

Interestingly, approximately 51.1% of the documents required some elements of community coproduction and/or positionality statements. However, even though it was implied that students reflect on their positional and epistemic biases, they still had limited formal space to refer to non-western frameworks in assessed work.



5. Institutional Frameworks and Policy Signals

Even when I found a lack of modules with public reading lists, I did find that all the institutions had some element of decolonization strategies online. Such frameworks would usually articulate broad values about global perspectives, inclusivity etc. However, when these were cross tabulated with doctoral documents, the translation into curricular policy was negligible. For example, only 4 institutional policy frameworks mandated decolonial practices, and even within that, there was no concrete operationalisation i.e. no requirement that syllabi had to include Global South authors, include translation training, or even include a specific percentage of non-western methodologies/writers. Most policy language, instead, was typically aspirational ("promote inclusivity") with little operationalisation. In my code book, this distinction was captured through the variable decolonization_claims_level (none, commitment, policy, operational) and most of the documents fell into the commitment category i.e. public affirmation but no evidence of practical engagement. This disconnect between rhetoric at the institutional level and absence of implementation at the curricular level was one of my most consistent findings.

Limitations

However, there are some limitations in data to be mindful of. The first major limitation was that many doctoral programmes did not make their full reading list publicly available. Instead, the syllabi would often only include either the module description or a short sample of indicative readings. In my codebook, this meant that a significant portion of the reading_list_total_items and SA_authors_count variables were coded as NA. This reduced the statistical accuracy of my analysis. The reported percentages of South Asian authors are therefore based on a subset of institutions instead of all of them consistently. There is the possibility that the excluded data could have more (or less) representation and potentially shift the overall pattern. However, running frequency counts both with and without the NA cases and triangulating reading list data with other variables (learning outcomes, assessment types etc) reinforced the same pattern of absence of south Asian epistemologies.

Moreover, while some universities had detailed, multi-page handbooks with learning outcomes and assessment criteria, others only had brief overviews. This unevenness meant that some codes were based on sparse information (e.g. a single paragraph describing a module). This means that the strength of evidence may vary and be inconsistent, since a thin outline might underreport engagement with South Asian traditions. To mitigate the risks, I built an "evidence_strength" variable in the codebook to rate each data point from 1 to 5. This allowed me to remain cautious in interpreting low evidence cases and prevented them from skewing overall conclusions. More notably, however, was that the absence of South Asian traditions was not limited to low evidence cases and was, in fact, equally visible in strong evidence documents.

Lastly, some cases were more ambiguous to codify. For example, a South Asian author might have appeared on a reading list but be framed as a "case study" rather than theory. Should that have been classified as tokenistic or illustrative? This subjectivity in coding decisions could have introduced bias but refining the four-point scale and keeping reflexive notes in my Master sheet helped me document these moments of hesitation. Even though this reflection does not eliminate subjectivity entirely, it helps make it transparent.

It is important to know that missing data and variability means that the exact percentages cannot be taken as definitive. However, the consistency of the pattern across multiple variables—learning outcomes, reading lists, assessment types, translation training etc—provides strong descriptive evidence. The weight of most data points in the same direction: South Asian traditions are systematically underrepresented.

Instead of undermining the findings, the limitations are strong areas for future research. Future projects could (a) use insider access to secure complete reading lists or (b) replicate the coding with multiple coders for reliability checks.

Reflection

Completing this project has been as much a journey of personal growth as a research exercise. One of the most important lessons I learned was the value of systematic method. Designing a codebook, piloting variables, and generating pivot tables initially felt like mechanical tasks but were invaluable in ensuring that my claims were based on consistent and reliable categories. Even though my analysis was descriptive, I could point to structured evidence rather than anecdote.

Secondly, I also learned about the opacity of doctoral education. I found that most reading lists were hidden behind internal portals. Even though I am a student myself, it was striking to see how inaccessible curricula are to outsiders. This raised broader questions: if doctoral training materials are not visible, how can they be scrutinised for equity or epistemic diversity? Exclusion is not only, therefore, what is taught, but also in who is allowed to see what is taught.

More personally, the project sharpened my awareness of my own positionality. As a Pakistani student at UCL, I am both inside and outside the system. I benefit from all the resources, networks, and prestige of UK higher education. At the same time, the intellectual traditions that shaped me in Pakistan; Sufi thought, South Asian political philosophy, and the writings of scholars like Partha Chatterjee; are absent in the curricula that claim to train "global" researchers. This absence is not merely exclusionary but also diminishes the richness of doctoral education. Recognising this duality has deepened my commitment to advocating for curricular reform.

My finding also forced me to confront the gap between rhetoric and reality. Most bold statements by universities never translate into concrete changes. This helped clarify for me the need for meaningful interventions. One cannot just demand institutional commitments; what matters are operational mechanisms to embed epistemic plurality into regular doctoral training.

Moving forwards, I want this project to be more than an academic report. I want to keep working on this with UCL Change Makers, where I can work collaboratively with staff and peers to pilot reforms. In my next steps, I want to organise workshops with doctoral students from Global South backgrounds to design decolonized reading lists, partner with library services to expand visibility of South Asian scholarship and propose departmental policies that mandate formal acknowledgement of non-western epistemologies in research training syllabi. Such steps can signal a shift from critique to construction.

In terms of personal trajectory, the project gave me transferable skills in content analysis and reflexive practice. It also taught me to see that descriptive work is not "lesser" than analytical work but as foundational.

In conclusion, mapping the marginalisation of South Asian epistemologies taught me how to combine methodological rigour with personal commitment. Going forward, I view myself as an emerging scholar who can contribute to rewriting the structures of doctoral education, starting at UCL but with implications far beyond.