Perceptions of curriculum decolonisation and identification of actionable points to decolonise the psychology and neuroscience curriculum: Participatory research with students from around the globe

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Abstract

Universities play a crucial role in promoting social justice and fostering an open, plural society. Decolonising the curriculum is essential in the effort to resist colonisation and racialisation while enhancing student engagement and learning. This is particularly important in programmes that directly impact societal practices, such as neuroscience and psychology, which underpin much of the global mental healthcare system. However, it remains unclear how diverse student groups conceptualise curriculum decolonisation and what changes they perceive as necessary. To address this gap, we co-developed an open-ended survey with three MSc students from different ethnic backgrounds. This collaborative approach ensured the survey's relevance, clarity, and inclusivity. Students from two online MSc programmes in neuroscience and psychology participated in the study. A thematic analysis of the survey responses (n=16) revealed diverse understandings of curriculum decolonisation and its significance. Despite these varied perspectives, students identified common barriers and actionable points to enhance the cultural inclusivity of psychology and neuroscience education. Based on these findings, we propose a three-stage participatory roadmap as an initial framework for decolonising journeys beyond these programmes.

Introduction

Through their role in inspiring students to become active citizens, universities are pivotal in promoting social justice and nurturing a society that is open and plural (Lo Presti et al., 2024). To fully achieve this vision, contemporary higher education (HE) must overcome its monocultural, primarily Western/Eurocentric approaches to knowledge practices, teaching, and learning (Seats, 2020). Besides, colonial power dynamics and neocolonial oppressive systems of cultural dominance in universities may negatively impact student engagement and learning; for instance, colonialism/neo-colonialism have been suggested as part of the factors underpinning high rates of dropouts, for example, among students of African descent (Uleanya et al., 2019). In this context, decolonising the curriculum in HE emerges as an effort to resist colonisation and racialization (Stein & Andreotti, 2016), an effort that, although many universities seem to recognise, is only being implemented very slowly (Nordling, 2018).

Decoloniality concerns a critical discussion and action-based approach to issues such as institutional racism, lack of belonging, inequitable services, and limited representation and diversity in staff and student bodies (Pillay et al., 2024). Besides addressing and confronting such impacts of colonialism and the Eurocentric bias ubiquitously present in the university experience

(Gopal, 2021), in practice, curriculum decolonisation also refers to engaging and amplifying the voice of students and staff especially from ethnically diverse backgrounds to lead changes in educational practices through: 1) recognition that the knowledge produced in Western, economically developed countries is one but not the only way to understand a given phenomenon, and 2) inclusion and acknowledgement of the historical contributions, as well as the academic and scientific value, of knowledge produced in different countries, especially those in the global south (Akena, 2012; Demeter, 2020; Mazzocchi, 2006). This view is aligned with that of (Chaussee et al., 2022), who point out that efforts to decolonise the curriculum should be constructively seen as a crucial element in the quality processes that drive curriculum design and delivery to support more authentic and inclusive learning.

Decolonising the curriculum can also be seen as a key movement to enable the realisation of the universities' potential in fostering a society that is more inclusive and that values and legitimises diversity. This is particularly key when considering the curriculum of programmes that have a direct impact on societal practices, such as the biomedical sciences and dietetics, which underpin much of the healthcare system globally (Lu et al., 2024; Stein et al., 2023). In this context, (Makhene, 2023) outlines that the nursing curriculum has been imbued with Victorian values for decades. Curriculum decolonisation in healthcare, therefore, emerges as a movement to dismantle structural biases rooted in a historically dominant Eurocentric medical system that prioritises white, male, and heteronormative perspectives (Lokugamage et al., 2022). Here, we also highlight neuroscience and psychology as part of the disciplines that ground healthcare decision-making and practices globally. Interestingly, the need to decolonise education has also been recognised in the context of partnerships in global health, where international health partnerships may mirror colonialism through, for instance, the perpetuation of implicit hierarchies in educational interventions (Kulesa & Brantuo, 2021). A call for a much-needed redistribution of decision-making power in global health (and we add here, in all health disciplines, given the international nature of contemporary HE and educational partnerships) is made (Hellowell & Nayna Schwerdtle, 2022; Perkins et al., 2023).

Hearing the student voice is crucial in any effort to decolonise the curriculum (Maine & Wagner, 2021; Takhar, 2024), given that this is a movement that goes beyond increasing inclusivity: it is about rectifying what is taught through the experiences and perceptions of those most affected by colonial history and Eurocentric biases (Phiri et al., 2023). Involving students as partners in the curriculum decolonisation process is also essential to prevent the continuation of a system where educational models and frameworks are imposed on them. However, it is important to note that discussions with students, especially at postgraduate level, have suggested that curriculum decolonisation is conceptualised differently depending on ethnicity, age group, and previous educational and professional experience. Therefore, despite students recognising that curriculum decolonisation is a necessary step towards equity in education and societal practices in general, it is unclear what different student groups perceive as necessary for an inclusive and decolonised psychology and neuroscience curriculum.

This study reports the first steps towards the decolonisation of the curriculum of two large MSc programmes in a London-based, Russell group university: the online MScs in Applied

Neuroscience and Psychology & Neuroscience of Mental Health. These programmes are international in nature, having students based in more than 100 countries worldwide. They are, therefore, well situated to consider changes in the curriculum that reflect its diverse studentship and its potential for positive impact in numerous communities around the globe. By using qualitative methods, we aimed to explore how students from different cultural groups perceive curriculum decolonisation and identify actionable points for its implementation. Given the potential usefulness of structured frameworks to support decolonisation initiatives in other educational programmes (Lu et al., 2024), we also propose a data-driven three-stage model to scaffold initial efforts in decolonising journeys.

Methods

Design

This study used principles of participatory research, following the successful experience reported by other colleagues (Icaza Garza & Vázquez, 2018). Our methodological decisions were guided by an active effort not to inadvertently reproduce the very epistemic exclusions that decolonisation seeks to dismantle. The study used qualitative methods of data collection (anonymous open-ended surveys) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The choice of this method is justified on several grounds. By using anonymous open-ended surveys, we allowed students to speak freely and honestly about their experiences and perceptions of the curriculum, reducing the social desirability bias (Bispo Júnior, 2022) and power dynamics inherent to other methods of data collection in qualitative research, such as focus groups and interviews. Such an approach also aligns with Freire's (1970) argument that education should be dialogic and transformative, enabling students to question power structures within academic knowledge.

Moreover, in comparison with closed-ended questions and standardised questionnaires, the use of open-ended surveys allows students to articulate critiques and recommendations using their own words (Flick, 2018), increasing the nuance and depth of subsequent data analysis. This is particularly important in research with postgraduate students, given the multitude of educational backgrounds, professional experience, and cultural and epistemological perspectives that this student body often brings, and which may not be adequately captured through closed-ended questions.

The survey was collaboratively developed with three MSc students from different ethnic backgrounds (Black African, Asian, and White). These students actively contributed to the decision-making regarding survey content and language. Their involvement ensured that the survey was relevant and aligned with the priorities and perspectives of the student body (Dollinger et al., 2018). Additionally, they played a crucial role in testing the survey's usability, providing valuable feedback to refine and enhance its effectiveness. The methodological approach used in our study therefore facilitated an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of students from minority and non-minority backgrounds with regards to cultural diversity and representation in the teaching of neuroscience and psychology across the participating programmes. Moreover, through suggestions for curriculum change, participants

are seen as co-leading the efforts for decolonisation of both the content and pedagogical practices adopted in the programmes. The practice proposed here is aligned with a radical reform previously proposed (de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015) where there is an acknowledgement of an existing dominant epistemology to be confronted by centering and empowering groups that have been historically marginalised.

Participants

Participants were students in the postgraduate taught programmes, MSc in Applied Neuroscience and MSc in Psychology and Neuroscience of Mental Health. These programmes are fully online and follow a carousel model of delivery, where a set block of modules rotates every eight weeks, with six teaching periods being offered over the calendar year: students first take four foundation modules, upon completion of which they move to an advanced carousel where they also need to complete four modules. Successful completion of these modules allows them to progress to the final carousel, where they take 60 credits of research skills modules. Students are not allowed to take more than one module at any given teaching period. Students can also graduate with a Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma, if they have successfully completed the foundation or the foundation and advanced carousels, respectively.

The initial inclusion criteria for participation in this study were: 1) active enrolment in the programmes; 2) having completed at least one carousel on the programmes (i.e., currently completing either the Advanced or Research Skills modules), and 3) identifying themselves as members of one of the participating ethnical groups (Arab; Asian or Asian British; Black or Black British; Chinese; Latin American; Mixed backgrounds). Due to low response rates and willingness of non-minoritised groups to take part in the study, we later expanded inclusion criteria 3 to allow students from any ethnic background to have their voices heard. Participants were discouraged from taking part if they believed that engaging with the survey questions would be a cause of substantial psychological discomfort or stress. No incentives were offered for participation in the study.

Sixteen students offered complete survey responses, and these were included in the final analysis. Table 1 shows the demographic information of our sample:

Age M (SD)	41.69 (11.66)
Gender	Female (n = 11), Male (n = 5), Non-binary (n=0)
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual (n = 13), Bisexual (n = 2), Prefer not to say (n = 1)
Ethnicity	Arab (n = 1) Asian or Asian British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, or other Asian) (n = 3) Chinese (n = 3) Mixed background (n = 3) Other ethnicity (Iranian (n = 1), European White (n = 1), Caucasian (n = 1), Malay-Chinese-Indian (n = 1), South American (n = 1), Persian (n = 1))
Country of birth	Brazil (n = 1) Canada (n = 1) England (n = 1), United Kingdom (n = 2) Iran (n = 2) Italy (n = 1) Lithuania (n = 1) Singapore (n = 4) South Africa (n = 2) United Arab Emirates (n = 1)
Country of residence	Australia (n = 1) Canada (n = 1) England (n = 2), United Kingdom (n = 6) Malaysia (n = 1) Qatar (n = 1) Singapore (n = 2) South Africa (n = 1) United Arab Emirates (n = 1)
If currently living country of birth, have you ever lived in a different country?	No (n = 11) Yes (Qatar, n = 1; Singapore, n = 1; several, n = 1; Sweden, n = 1; UK/USA/Europe, n = 1)
Employment status	Business owner (n = 1) Full-time employment (n = 5) Full-time mum (n = 1) Intern (n = 1) Part-time employment (n = 1), Part-time employment and self-employed part time (n = 1) Self-employed full-time (n = 2), Self-employed part-time (n = 1) Unemployed (n = 3)
Religion or belief	Christian (n = 6) Muslim (n = 2) No Religion (n = 4), Prefer not to say (n = 1) Spiritual (n = 3)
Neurodivergent	No (n = 12) Prefer not to say (n = 1) Yes (Dyslexic and ADHD, n = 1)
Programme of study	Applied Neuroscience MSc (n = 4) Psychology & Neuroscience of Mental Health, MSc (n = 11) Psychology & Neuroscience of Mental Health, PGDip (n = 1)
Current carousel	Advanced (n = 8) Research Skills (n = 8)

Table 1: Participant demographic information. Age is shown as Mean (Standard Deviation); all other demographic categories are shown as raw numbers.

Procedures

Participants were notified about the research through announcements on the programmes' Moodle pages between May and June 2023. An anonymous Qualtrics link was created with the following sections: Information Sheet, Consent Form, Demographic Information Questionnaire, and open-ended questions. Table 2 shows examples of questions asked in the open-ended section of the survey.

What do you understand by 'curriculum decolonisation'?

What would a culturally inclusive curriculum in psychology and neuroscience look like for you?

What examples of good practice, if any, have you seen in the programme that could be used to improve cultural inclusion in the curriculum?

Are there any barriers that are preventing you from making the most of your studies? If so, please describe these.

Do you feel represented by the curriculum? Why or why not?

How culturally inclusive are the teaching material and assessment practices in your programme? Please give examples of where improvements could be made as well as any examples of good practice.

To what extent do your learning materials challenge Eurocentric narratives?

Do you have any suggestions for greater representation of non-Eurocentric culture or knowledge? For example, which topics on which specific modules should have a place in our teaching and learning that don't already?

Has the content covered in the curriculum so far been relevant to your current or future professional practice given the people and cultural environments in which you may work? Please give examples and, if possible, suggestions for improvement of the curriculum in this regard.

Do you feel that culturally inclusive education is necessary for your success? Why?

Do you think the methods by which you're assessed provide equal, fair opportunities for students of all ethnicities and cultures to show what they've learned?

How confident do you feel about challenging white privilege within the curriculum of your programme?

Do you feel that the level of diversity within your curriculum impacts your level of engagement with your studies? How?

Do you feel that the level of cultural diversity within your curriculum impacts your wellbeing? How?

Do you find that race impacts your relationship with staff and/or students? How?

Do you feel represented in the staff and/or student body?

Would you feel more comfortable going to a staff member who is of the same race as yourself? Why?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Table 2: Open-ended questions as displayed in the survey

Data Analysis

Survey responses were downloaded from the Qualtrics platform and transferred to a table on an MS Word document for uploading onto NVivo 14, where data analysis took place. Both authors engaged with the dataset and took part in all six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, following familiarisation with the data through reading and re-reading responses, the authors used a line-by-line approach to coding. In the coding process, labels representing units of meaning were given to each data unit (this could be a clause, part of a sentence or a complete sentence) that was interpreted as encapsulating significance to participants. Codes that were interpreted as capturing patterns of meaning were merged. Related codes were grouped into sub-themes; these, in turn, were grouped into themes, again according to their level of relatedness as interpreted by the authors. Sub-themes and themes were refined as the authors continued to engage iteratively with the dataset. Due to the small size of the dataset, demographic data were manually inputted in a table on an MS Word file. The mean and standard deviation for age were calculated on MS Excel.

Findings

Five themes were developed from the survey data: 1) *Current state of the curriculum: What and how we teach and assess*; 2) *Importance of culturally inclusive education*; 3) *What curriculum decolonisation means to me*; 4) *What makes a decolonised curriculum*, and 5) *Barriers to decolonising the curriculum*.

Further interpretation of these five themes led us to propose a 3-step roadmap for curriculum decolonisation: *1. Understand current practices* (encompassing theme 1); *2. Explore evidence and meaning* (themes 2-3), and *3. Co-produce a shared vision towards an action plan for change* (themes 4-5) (Figure 1).

1. Understand current practices

1.1 Current state of the curriculum: What and how we teach and assess

One of our first aims to establish a path towards decolonising the curriculum of the programmes was to understand how students perceive the current curriculum. This would give us an indication of areas of good practice that deserve to be continued and those where efforts for change should be deployed. This is particularly important when we consider that various aspects of pedagogy render uneven perceptions among both students and educators (Light & Calkins, 2015; Parizeau, 2022; Popov et al., 2014), reminding us of the importance of resisting the temptation to adopt blanket approaches when planning curriculum reform.

Students identified several areas of good practice. The current curriculum can be described as one that 1) engages a *global community of learners* ('I enjoyed watching chats with guests from other countries'; 2) has *a somewhat culturally inclusive curriculum* – note that by 'somewhat' we highlight the existence of space for improvement – ('While some of the modules do explore this [culturally inclusive content], it's not present in every module.'; 'there are no routes apparent in

the inclusion of this wide diverse group in the studies or discussions.'; '[a culturally inclusive curriculum is] like the one you have developed.'); 3) is *effective* in its *design and delivery* ('actual content has been great and has been communicated properly and all resources for learning provided'; 'The curriculum is comprehensive and inclusive, covering a wide range of subjects and perspectives. It incorporates diverse voices, cultures, and experiences, which allows students from various backgrounds to feel included and engaged in the learning process.'); 4) is designed/delivered by *culturally diverse academic staff* ('We have had a culturally diverse group of lecturers'); 5) fosters a *respectful culture* ('The overall tone of humility and respect'); 6) makes an effort for continual improvement regarding inclusivity, the *curriculum decolonisation project* being one example ('I also like the course offering on decolonisation'), and 7) uses a *student-centered approach*, with student feedback driving change ('there is open communication').

Notably, the examples of good practice towards cultural inclusivity highlighted above were not consensual. When asked 'What examples of good practice, if any, have you seen in the programme that could be used to improve cultural inclusion in the curriculum?', several students responded 'none', 'not sure', or 'nothing in particular that I can identify right now'. Moreover, when describing their current experience in the programme, a student outlined the Western-centered nature of the curriculum ('The programme to date is designed from a British or American perspective. There does not appear to be anything related to cultural differences, cultural awareness, perspectives, or the research within the context of other countries'; 'There are no routes apparent in the inclusion of this wide diverse group in the studies or discussions'). The tension between positive experiences of inclusivity and concerns about Eurocentrism suggests that decolonial efforts remain partial and unevenly implemented (Stein & Andreotti, 2016).

Participants also highlighted assessments as an important area of the current state of the curriculum, where a discussion on cultural inclusivity requires attention. Through engagement with the dataset, we identified *variable levels of inclusivity in assessment practices*. While some students highlighted anonymity as a measure of inclusion and removal of bias during the marking process ('The assessments look to be anonymous, conducted with consistent marking criteria and the exam is consistent for all students.'; 'anonymous marking helps'), others pointed out that language differences can pose an extra hurdle towards inclusivity in assessments ('Language might be a difficulty for some.'). The lack of inclusive assessments in the context of ethnicity and social justice is not new; most higher education institutions are known for using traditional ways of assessing students that value specific knowledges and modes of knowing (Arday et al., 2022). Our findings suggest the need for improvement in the direction of critical pedagogy, where the educator's ongoing reflection on their own practice contributes to professional identity (Stîngu, 2012) and may open up avenues for less traditional ways of designing assessments. Notably, the co-creation of assessments through partnering with students should take centre-stage in this process (Curtin & Sarju, 2021).

2. Explore evidence and meaning

2.1 Importance of culturally inclusive education

In our exploration of students' perceptions of curriculum decolonisation as a means towards culturally inclusive education, we were interested in understanding how important it is for them to engage with a learning experience that is not Western-centered. Here, they indicated that *curriculum decolonisation brings benefits* for all ('This implicitly helps learners become truly global citizens who are inclusive of their fellow beings.'; 'By recognising diverse knowledge systems and fostering critical thinking, it nurtures an education that is truly socially just.'), also being important for their *professional development* ('[helps me] stay relevant in where I am located at'). Interestingly, the idea that curriculum decolonisation benefits students from all ethnic backgrounds, and the higher education community as a whole, finds resonance in previous literature arguing that a decolonised curriculum enhances learning for all (Bhambra et al., 2018).

Participants also suggested that a decolonised curriculum would have an *effect on engagement and wellbeing* ('Sometimes [it impacts on my wellbeing], because English is not my first language.'; 'I need to work harder, more hours of study.'). Again, it is noticeable that responses were not homogeneous, with some participants highlighting that the level of diversity in the curriculum does not influence their levels of engagement and wellbeing ('I'm not a snowflake'; 'Hasn't been an issue - my closest buddy is a Caucasian female who is in her 20's').

Another topic that merited our attention was the idea that *representation may affect belonging*. Here, going to a staff member of the same race was deemed important by some participants ('more commonalities'; 'Yes, I feel at home.'; 'yes, in terms of perception and communication') but not all ('I thought it would, but it seems like it does not make a difference.'; 'Not necessary. I would go to a staff member that is willing to listen and able to resolve or advise suitably.').

The topic of belonging was not constrained to staff representation, though, but also to feeling represented in the curriculum itself, in alignment with previous literature that highlighted similar findings on representation and sense of belonging for Students of the Global Majority (Cook, 2024). In this regard, when asked whether they felt represented in the curriculum, participants from non-Western ethnicities more homogeneously expressed their concerns about cultural representation in what is taught in the programmes ('too Eurocentric'; 'very UK based'; 'does not mention much about Asia or where I am from'; 'I don't feel represented by the curriculum. It is an academic module with knowledge based on research and findings that centres on the Western world'). As expected, this was not the case for students from Western backgrounds who organically felt represented in the curriculum ('I do, as I identify with a colonial background.'). Interestingly, some participants did not have expectations around feeling culturally represented in the curriculum and did not see a problem with a Western-centered approach ('I expect a Eurocentric narrative in your teaching and content. I'm here to learn from you, and it has been a privilege. Nothing wrong with that.').

Despite similarities in the literature with regard to decolonising curriculum and pedagogy, the meanings and challenges of decolonising efforts are contextual (Shahjahan et al., 2022) and

therefore, varied. This calls for decolonising initiatives to resist the assumption that curriculum decolonisation means the same thing to everyone. In that light, after exploring how students attribute importance and relevance to cultural inclusivity in education, we attempted to understand what curriculum decolonisation means to them.

2.2 What curriculum decolonisation means to me

Curriculum decolonisation can mean different things to different people and groups. Without an understanding of *what curriculum decolonisation means* to our specific population of interest – in this case, the students from the participating MSc programmes - efforts to collectively create and sustain a decolonised curriculum may be fruitless. Here, responses varied from a very honest *not sure what it means* ('I do not understand it'; 'This is actually first I've heard of the term') to *a culturally inclusive curriculum* ('accepting all race, culture and beliefs; 'One that incorporates the perspectives of different countries, relevance to other countries, awareness of the principles when looking at psychology and neuroscience within the context of different cultures and norms of behaviours or perspectives'; 'Being taught what psychology and neuroscience looks like in other countries, not just the Western views'). Specifically, a culturally inclusive curriculum – interpreted here as an initial step towards a decolonised curriculum – would be one where there is *consideration of cultural aspects* ('[a curriculum] that makes the effort to look into the understanding of the concepts from different cultures rather than centering it only to a particular culture's perspective on common knowledge') and active *efforts to address bias* in what and how the content is presented and assessed ('Bias to proceed with the curriculum').

A decolonised curriculum was also perceived as *a form of inclusive pedagogy* ('A way to acquire knowledge permanently, inclusively and comprehensively'), one that *fosters critical thinking* ('By nurturing critical thinking abilities') and becomes *a means to address colonialism in higher education* ('making the lectures and course language more appropriate, and understanding of the history and traumas people have and continue to experience due to colonisation'; 'Culturally inclusive curriculum would reflect an awareness that the white, western tradition has dominated the knowledge system and create spaces and resources for dialogue and discussions to consider non Western concepts. Decolonisation would be looking at the limitations and biases of the current curriculum and challenging the legacies of the colonised approach'). One personal account of what curriculum decolonisation may mean to a student from a non-Western ethnic background is particularly enlightening: 'It's academia's #metoo. Being from a former colony, I frankly can't tell the difference. I have always been the minority in various programmes of study and professional settings. I assume however, that the 'stuff' my generation X just 'got on with', the racism, sexism, you're a Muslim so you're at the bottom of the food chain, from a developing country, dark skinned, speaks no English, is there running water in your country, do you still gather fruits and nuts to pay tuition, why don't you have a Christian name, is now being taken to task.'

Participants also indicated that a decolonised curriculum is facilitated *when there is multicultural representation of staff* ('Diverse lecturers, with language and teachings that open the door to

culturally diverse populations and areas of study'), bringing up again the topic of representation as central to decolonisation efforts (Cook, 2024).

As stated previously, partnering with students in the co-creation of pedagogical practice is a central element of inclusive education and genuine curriculum decolonisation (Hall et al., 2022). With that in mind, in the next section, we will explore the topic of engaging with students towards a shared, actionable vision for curriculum reform.

3. Co-produce a shared vision towards an action plan for change

3.1 What makes a decolonised curriculum?

Closely related to the meaning of curriculum decolonisation to our population of interest is the theme '*What makes a decolonised curriculum?*'. Here, though, a nuanced prompt towards actionable points is present.

A central aspect to decolonising the curriculum appears to be the presence of *decolonised educators* ('In my point of view the heart of a successful educational programme is firstly a motivated kind teacher (or a teaching team) who understands deeply about the cultural (including the different language) effects on the studying process and then pleasant motivating contents of studying materials.'). The decolonised educator would be this focal point that co-creates *content that is critical and global*: for instance, in the case of psychology, mental health and (applied) neuroscience, content that considers *cultural differences in stigma in mental health* ('Current stigma issues with mental health in particular countries as well as access to support and help seeking behaviours depending on ethnicity') and the *history of psychology in different countries* ('The inclusion of history of psychology in different countries.'). Here, we could add that a similar approach to neuroscience – that is, *the inclusion of history of neuroscience in different countries* – is also relevant and applicable.

The decolonised educator, through facilitating critical and global content, would also foster a sense of confidence in students towards *challenging whiteness in the curriculum.* Interestingly, this was underscored by our participants as an effort for students from minoritised and Western groups, with students from both groups expressing their confidence in doing so ('I have lived in Britain as a Chinese minority speaking fluent English for over 20 years and having worked in large Corporate organisations where management has mainly been male dominated, I have learned that I can educate a Western person and help them to be aware of their attitude and the way the treat a non-White person. With this attitude, I find myself confident to challenge, speak out, educate, and even challenge any biases that I face because of my ethnicity'; 'I feel confident due to my own privilege'). The professional development of decolonised educators is, therefore, something that the higher education sector should establish as a key priority. In this context, teacher training approaches that promote curriculum decolonisation and cultivate respect for diverse identities may be a starting avenue in this direction (Cardani, 2024).

Participants also highlighted that working towards the *co-production of curriculum with non-Western universities* would help make a decolonised curriculum ('Perhaps the programme would be developed in cooperation with universities in different countries'). Finally, *assessments that*

encourage engagement with global south research were pointed as another means towards a decolonised curriculum, something already in place in one of the modules of the Applied Neuroscience programme ('There was coursework which encouraged using research from all continents.').

Together, these elements could be part of an action plan towards a decolonised curriculum based on a shared vision of what makes a decolonised curriculum for that specific group of students. The effective implementation of such an action plan will depend, however, on identifying and addressing potential barriers to decolonising the curriculum.

3.2 Barriers to decolonising the curriculum

No action plan is good without the anticipation of barriers and the subsequent identification of contingency actions to overcome them. Participants highlighted two potential barriers to decolonising the curriculum of psychology and neuroscience: *language* (the potential difficulty in students understanding tutors and vice-versa) and *lack of confidence in challenging whiteness in the curriculum*. The former is seen as a concern for *inclusive teaching* ('it has been difficult to understand the tutor when they have a strong local accent. But that comes with being inclusive, and it is necessary to ask the individual to repeat to understand the content. This behaviour of asking and looking for clarification need to be appreciated, and there needs to be a protocol to stress that there is no offence caused when questioned') and for *inclusive assessments* (as already highlighted previously, 'Language might be a difficulty for some').

The lack of confidence in challenging white privilege in the curriculum was also outlined as a barrier. While some students already feel confident in this regard (as described in 3.1), for others this is a skill that a genuinely inclusive educational culture could support them towards ('Not confident enough to point it out as I still felt that it would have been held against me, and frankly I wanted to avoid the drama'; 'Working to have the knowledge, expertise of the subject and adequate self-esteem').

These findings will be further explored in the discussion, particularly in relation to the role of faculty diversity, student engagement, and assessment practices in decolonising efforts.
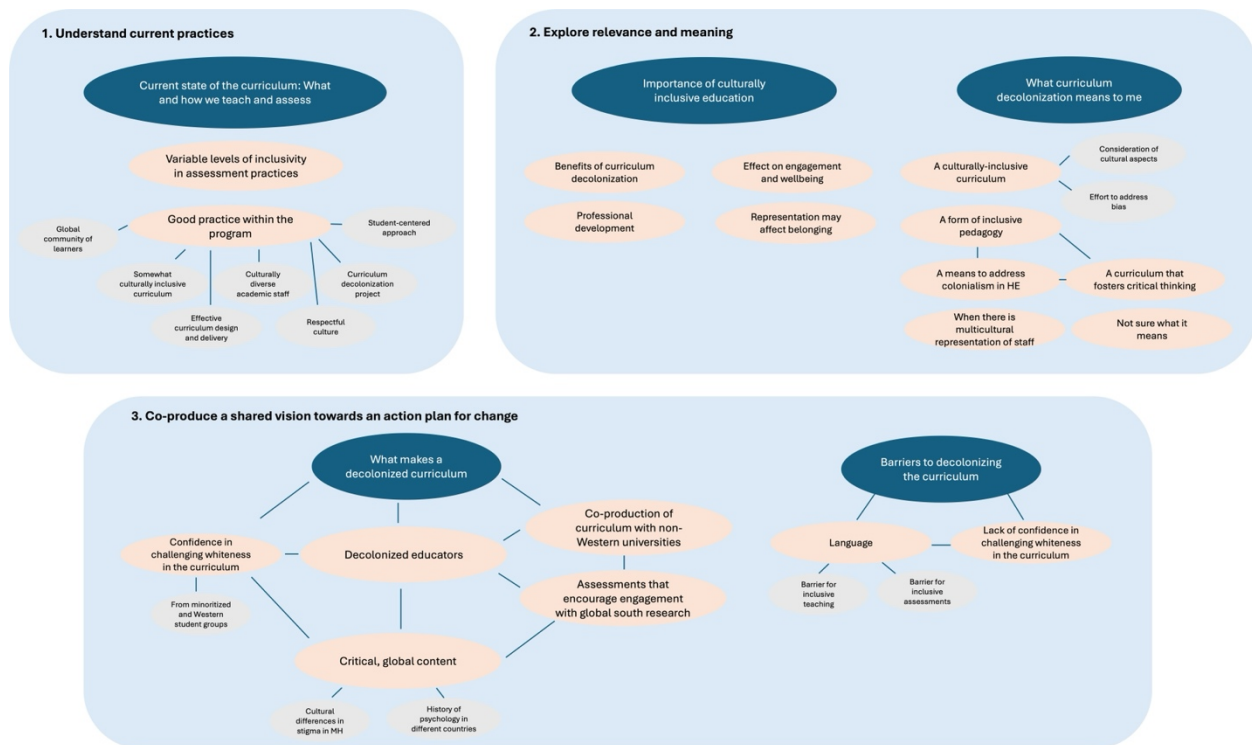
Figure 1: Proposed roadmap to curriculum decolonisation.

The figure shows a thematic map organised by three steps to curriculum decolonisation. The first step, *Understand current practices*, encompasses an exploration of the *Current state of the curriculum: What and how we teach and assess*. In the case of our dataset, students shared that the programmes carry varying levels of inclusivity in assessment practices, giving an early indication of an area where decolonisation work should be deployed. Participants also highlighted examples of good practice within the programmes, suggesting areas where efforts to sustain these current practices should be applied. These include *culturally diverse academic staff*, *effective curriculum design and delivery*, a *respectful culture,* and the *curriculum decolonisation project* itself.

The second step towards curriculum decolonisation would be to *Explore relevance and meaning*, without which efforts to collectively create and sustain a decolonised curriculum may be fruitless. Here, our participants highlighted the *importance of culturally diverse education* (a decolonised curriculum brings *benefits*, supports *professional development* in a culturally diverse world, promotes *belonging* and has a positive *effect on engagement and wellbeing*) and *what curriculum decolonisation means* to them (a *culturally-inclusive curriculum* that *considers cultural aspects* and where there is an *effort to address bias*; a *form of inclusive pedagogy* that *fosters critical thinking* and serves as *a means to address colonialism in HE*; a curriculum developed and delivered by *multicultural staff*).

Finally, once the current state of the curriculum and an assessment of the importance and meaning of curriculum decolonisation are established, it is time to *co-produce a shared vision*

towards an action plan for change. This would entail an exploration of *what makes a decolonised curriculum* and *identifying barriers to decolonising it*. Various elements make a decolonised curriculum: *decolonised educators*, who co-create *critical, global content* and foster *confidence in challenging whiteness in the curriculum*; decolonised educators will also *engage with non-Western universities* to co-produce a decolonised curriculum and will co-design *assessments that encourage engagement with research in the global south*. Curriculum decolonisation efforts should consider barriers such as *language* and *lack of confidence in challenging whiteness in the curriculum* and plan against these. HE = Higher education. Lines represent where links between themes and subthemes may exist.

Discussion

Cultural issues have been pointed out as one of the barriers to student engagement (Crabtree, 2023). Therefore, curriculum decolonisation emerges as an important movement not only towards epistemic repair but also to enhance engagement and learning. Collaboratively involving students as partners (Meighan, 2024), this qualitative study reports the findings of a survey aimed at investigating the perceptions of curriculum decolonisation in psychology and neuroscience among postgraduate students based in different areas of the globe, starting with their own understandings of the agenda and actionable points to implement it. Through this dialogue we identified a 3-step roadmap for curriculum decolonisation: 1. Understand current practices; 2. Explore evidence and meaning 3. Co-produce a shared vision towards an action plan for change. Below, we further explore certain topics within this roadmap.

Current state of the curriculum: *What and how we teach and assess*

The student-voice highlighted how curriculum decolonisation means different things to different people and how expectations varied, with some students never having heard the term 'curriculum decolonisation' or considered this activity, and others being able to give knowledgeable definitions and ideas for achieving this goal (Lu et al., 2024; Williams & Benjamin, 2022).

There was much that was seen as positive about the curricula of the MSc Psychology and Neuroscience of Mental Health and the MSc Applied Neuroscience programmes. Students cited the inclusion of diverse voices, cultures, and experiences, the breadth and delivery of the curriculum, and the respectful and student-centred approach of the lecturers. However, the need to decolonise the curriculum was particularly notable when the discussion turned to assessment. Although students thought anonymity of scripts helped remove bias, they wanted an assessment that moved away from the established 'Westernised' concept of a 'good student' (McArthur, 2016; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), to one that was authentic and valued alternative narratives and formats, as also expounded by other authors (Tai et al., 2022). For this to happen, we need to question and reflect on how we assess learning, an activity that also requires us to connect with students and understand how and why they learn (Castillo-Montoya & Madriaga, 2024). Co-creation can bring together these activities, enabling academics to reflect on current practices while giving students agency and accountability through allowing them to communicate and

reflect on how they can best express their knowledge and understanding (Harrison et al., 2023). Another documented means of decolonising assessment that lends itself well to science curricula is the use of problem-based learning; an approach that incorporates active learning and can be centred on real-world problems (Lalujan & Pranjol, 2024).

Explore evidence and meaning

A key insight was students recognising curriculum decolonisation as inclusive pedagogy where the impact and domination of Western concepts and knowledge are admitted, and the knowledge and history of all peoples become valued and are recognised as important. This was seen as crucial for subjects like neuroscience and psychology, where knowledge gained can underpin treatments and healthcare decisions as well as set healthcare research priorities. Students specifically cited a need to understand how culture influences mental health treatment and support (Henderson et al., 2013; Krendl & Pescosolido, 2020). Indeed, as educators, it is also important to understand that our cultural values and how we perceive ourselves can influence our cognitive and emotional functions (Ames & Fiske, 2010; Han & Humphreys, 2016; Kitayama & Uskul, 2011) and therefore impact what and how we teach. Overall, students sought a curriculum that was both insightful and global, one that reflects the multi-ethnic student body and develops understanding and critical thinking based on a diverse knowledge system.

Co-produce a shared vision towards an action plan for change

When considering what makes a decolonised curriculum, students advocated for a multicultural teaching team, rooted in the idea of a 'decolonised educator' as being central to decolonisation efforts. Embedded in this was the need to build confidence in students to question and challenge a Western/white viewpoint while also acknowledging issues of race, racism, and power (Kishimoto, 2018). This was seen as a barrier to the decolonisation process and one that was aggravated by fluency in English (Hommes et al., 2021). This ability to challenge is important as contesting 'whiteness' in the curriculum makes it more visible, promotes knowledge exchange and, most importantly, enables students' lived experiences to be validated, giving them a sense of agency and belonging (Housee, 2022; Moncrieffe et al., 2020; Takhar, 2023). For this to work, however, educators need to see education as non-hierarchical, to value students' knowledge and see sharing this knowledge as key to the learning process (see Kishimoto, 2018; Marin, 2000).

Students also raised the idea of decolonising the curriculum through co-production with universities in the global south. This is an excellent point and would highlight the importance of sharing knowledge and challenges at all levels. However, it is worth remembering that these universities are, in many ways, also working to recreate their own identity and decolonise their curricula; challenging the dominance of Western education strategies and reevaluating their course materials to make sure they present a diverse knowledge base (Brand et al., 2023; de Almeida-Filho, 2023; Mpofu & Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020; Ngunyulu et al., 2020; Sharma & Mir, 2019; Wong & See, 2021).

Recently, other colleagues also reported a three-point framework (Rediscovery, Representation, and Readiness) for decolonising the biomedical science curricula, developed through discussion with staff and students (Lu et al., 2024). It is significant that there is good alignment between the suggested processes, with Rediscovery focusing on acknowledging the Eurocentric nature of the current curricula and working to rectify this through integration of diverse opinions and knowledge from across the world, and Representation highlighting the need for diversity in both the teaching faculty and in examples used when explaining concepts. This aligns with stages 1 and 2 of our roadmap. Readiness speaks to the importance of students as co-creators and sits well with our stage 3. Perhaps what is most distinctive about our proposed roadmap is the explicit nod to co-developing a plan towards action and implementation.

Moving forward, as decolonised educators (or as we attempt to become ones), we should work to address these and other points raised by our students on an ongoing basis, in these programmes and beyond. Programme teams should continue to include them in all discussions exploring the limitations of the current neuroscience and psychology curricula offered by universities in the UK and abroad. We believe that only by such actions and by sharing insights with colleagues around the globe can we reach our goal of providing a learning experience that is inclusive and authentic for all.

Conclusion

Universities are important players in promoting social justice and in shaping a society that equally values the contributions from countries across the globe. For this, universities must engage in decolonising efforts, overcoming current approaches to teaching and learning that are mainly focused on contributions to knowledge from economically developed countries. This study highlights the importance of student-led approaches in curriculum decolonisation, where postgraduate students voiced both the challenges and opportunities for creating a more inclusive curriculum in neuroscience and psychology education. Our proposed three-stage roadmap offers educators, students, and leaders in higher education a structured yet flexible framework that can guide future decolonisation efforts in the sector. Notably, our findings also underscore the need for institutional commitment, particularly in diversifying faculty representation, revising assessment methods, and ensuring that cultural inclusivity is embedded across all aspects of pedagogy (Maine & Wagner, 2021).

Future research should explore the long-term impact of decolonisation initiatives on student engagement, belonging, and learning outcomes. Additionally, global partnerships, particularly with institutions in the Global South acting as leaders of collaborative efforts, could bring valuable insights into best practices for co-producing knowledge in a truly inclusive and ethical manner. By embracing a participatory approach, universities can move beyond superficial diversity efforts and performative metrics towards genuine change. We hope that our study serves to showcase one way of working towards curriculum decolonisation where participants act as co-leads of new avenues to teach and assess. This framework, we believe, is conducive to students shaping the curriculum and supporting future cohorts to feel more represented and valued in their historical and ethical roots.

Ethical approval and informed consent statements

Ethical approval was obtained from the KCL Psychiatry, Nursing and Midwifery (PNM) Ethics Committee (LRS/DP-20/21-22090) on March 23rd 2021. All participants were asked to provide online informed consent before beginning the online surveys. Data were processed under the General Data Protection Regulation (2016) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Moreover, it was highlighted that participants could withdraw at any point, without the need for giving any reasons. Participants were also reassured that participating or not would not have any influence on their studies or degree completion.

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