



University  
of Glasgow



## **A Toolkit for Thinking About Decolonising the Curriculum: An Example-Based Approach**

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## **1. Conceptual Foundations and Purpose of This Toolkit**

This toolkit is one of the outcomes of the project that was funded by the University of Glasgow's Student-Staff Partnership Scheme. It draws on the working group's research into decolonising the curriculum of a research course - *Introduction to Educational and Social Research*, referred to hereafter as IESR.

The toolkit is presented as a reflective and developmental example-based resource, offering practical ideas for decolonisation rather than a compliance checklist. Its purpose is to share evidence-informed dialogue, identify feasible priorities for change, and support shared responsibility for a more epistemically plural and equitable learning environment.

One of the findings from the research conducted to produce this toolkit was that some members of the teaching team had not engaged in decolonising a course and were uncertain about what this process should involve in practice. This toolkit therefore aims to support staff and students who are seeking practical guidance on how to begin and develop this work.

The research informing this toolkit also shows that students are aware that epistemic injustice exists in higher education. Students recognised that certain forms of knowledge and academic expression are treated as more legitimate than others, often privileging Western frameworks. This can disadvantage students, particularly when they return to their home countries and find that the skills, theories and approaches acquired in the UK are not always fully transferable or responsive to the social, cultural and professional contexts in which they later work. Decolonisation the curriculum is therefore necessary and urgent.

Decolonisation is understood here as an ongoing, context-dependent and contested practice. The toolkit does not assume that adding authors from under-represented regions is sufficient, nor that all Western knowledge should be rejected. Instead, it emphasises meaningful change by interrogating how authority, legitimacy and universality are produced, whose knowledge is centred, and what role institutions play in all this.

Suggested users include module leaders, teaching teams, programme directors, students, learning developers and professional services colleagues who are involved in curriculum review, assessment and quality enhancement.

## 1.1 An Introduction to Colonialism

Decolonisation cannot be fully understood without first considering the political, economic, and cultural impacts of colonialism. Colonialism emerged in the 15th century as One-Third World powers<sup>1</sup> imposed territorial, political, economic, and cultural domination on societies in the Two-Thirds World (Kollmeyer, 2025; Conolly et al., 2025). From the late 15<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Spain and Portugal pursued overseas expansion through systems of conquest, trade and extraction. These systems increasingly reflected mercantilist principles, including the accumulation of precious metals and the use of colonies to enrich and strengthen the imperial state.

With the rise of industrial capitalism from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Britain gradually moved towards freer trade and expanded its imperial influence through a combination of direct administration and indirect rule through existing local authorities. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, France likewise pursued colonial expansion for political and economic purposes, generally favouring more centralised and direct forms of administration, although its practices varied across territories. Colonialism, thus, changed over time and took different administrative forms, while continuing to depend on political domination, economic extraction and the exploitation of colonised peoples.

This logic of domination also influenced colonial education. Across many colonial settings, governments and missionary organisations established or reshaped schools to serve administrative, economic, religious and assimilationist objectives. These institutions often privileged European languages, histories and systems of knowledge while marginalising Indigenous languages, knowledge and cultural practices. In many colonies, schooling also reinforced social hierarchies by educating a relatively small local elite for clerical, professional or administrative roles while restricting wider access to secondary and higher education. Colonial education therefore functioned both as a means of cultural assimilation and as a mechanism for reproducing political and social inequalities. Its legacies remain influential in many postcolonial education systems through inequalities in access, continued dominance of colonial languages and the marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge.

Against this historical backdrop, decolonisation can be understood both as the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this toolkit, the terms 'One-Third World' and 'Two-Thirds World' are used in place of the more commonly cited 'Global North' and 'Global South,' respectively. This terminology follows Chandra Talpade Mohanty's usage in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003) as this framing emphasises global inequalities as historically produced power relations rather than fixed geographic divisions.

struggle to end formal colonial rule and, in its broader contemporary usage, as resistance to the structures of colonial power that have persisted beyond political independence. These enduring structures include racialised and gendered hierarchies, extractive economic relationships, unequal control over land and resources, and political, legal and educational institutions shaped by colonial systems. They also operate epistemically through the continued privileging of Eurocentric theories, languages and methods, the marginalisation of Indigenous and other non-dominant knowledge traditions, and inequalities in determining whose knowledge is recognised as authoritative.

Decolonisation therefore seeks not only to confront historical domination but also to transform the institutions, relationships and systems of knowledge through which colonial forms of power continue to be reproduced in the present (Udah, 2025).

## **1.2 The Influence of Colonialism on Knowledge**

The end of formal colonial rule did not necessarily bring an end to colonial influence on education. Colonial hierarchies and epistemologies have continued to be reproduced, although also contested and transformed, through educational, scholarly and cultural institutions (Godsell et al., 2024). Colonial logics may therefore continue to shape contemporary thought and experience by influencing which forms of knowledge are treated as authoritative, whose perspectives are recognised, and which histories and epistemologies are marginalised.

The literature considered here suggests at least four interconnected ways in which colonialism continues to structure knowledge. First, colonialism has shaped the organisation and valuation of knowledge systems. European intellectual traditions have frequently been presented as universal, objective and normative, while Indigenous and other non-Western epistemologies have been devalued or excluded from formal institutions (Le Grange, 2022). Indigenous knowledge has nevertheless continued through diverse forms of community practice, language, oral tradition and intergenerational transmission, as well as through growing efforts to establish its place within formal education and research (Shah, 2026).

Second, knowledge production is structured by racialised inequalities. Within many academic institutions, credibility and authority have historically been distributed in ways that privilege white and Western scholars, institutions and theoretical traditions. These inequalities affect who is recognised as a legitimate knower, whose work is cited and published, and which concepts are treated as universally applicable. Some scholars and institutions in the Two-Thirds World may also reproduce these

hierarchies through reliance on intellectual traditions and systems of validation centred in the One-Third World, contributing to patterns of academic dependency (Moosavi, 2020).

Third, educational curricula and institutions continue to reflect colonial legacies. Race et al. (2022), for example, discuss research showing how British-style private education in Nigeria can reproduce ideas about the cultural and educational superiority of Britain while marginalising local histories and perspectives. In the Nordic context, Conolly et al. (2025) show how narratives of national innocence, equality and cultural sameness can obscure colonial complicity, protect white privilege and restrict meaningful engagement with Indigenous and minoritised epistemologies. These examples illustrate how educational systems can reproduce colonial hierarchies even where their stated aims are equality, inclusion or academic excellence.

Fourth, coloniality operates through epistemic injustice and epistemic violence. Individuals and communities may be denied credibility as knowers, excluded from the institutions in which authoritative knowledge is produced, or required to express their experiences through Western conceptual frameworks. Curricula can also exclude the knowledge and interpretative resources needed to understand racialised and colonial social conditions (Akbar, 2024). Drawing on Spivak's critique, Moosavi (2020) further highlights how scholars and institutions in the One-Third World can marginalise, translate or speak over voices from the Two-Thirds World, even within projects presented as decolonial.

Consequently, colonialism operates as a historical legacy as well as a changing and contested structuring force within contemporary knowledge systems. It influences what is recognised as knowledge, who receives authority as a knower, and how knowledge is produced, validated and disseminated.

Decolonisation must therefore be understood as both an intellectual and an institutional project. It involves challenging entrenched hierarchies, redistributing epistemic authority, seriously engaging with marginalised knowledge traditions and creating more pluralistic conditions for knowledge production. Without such changes, academic institutions risk continuing to reproduce colonial patterns even while formally endorsing diversity and inclusion.

### **1.3 An Introduction to Decolonisation**

Decolonisation refers to the dismantling of colonial structures that were established

through the governance of subordinate territories and entails both the removal of these systems and the reconstruction of alternative frameworks (Akinmolayan et al., 2024).

Central to this process is the critical interrogation of colonial ideologies and institutional arrangements that, while foundational to modern societies, have become normalised and obscured over time. Thus, decolonisation involves exposing suppressed histories and restoring visibility to marginalised perspectives, knowledge systems, and communities (Tegama, 2023). Epistemic decolonial theory advocates for the transformation of knowledge production itself, calling for the epistemologies of Two-Third Worlds and historically oppressed groups to be recognised and engaged with on equal and substantive terms (Manning, 2022).

Decolonisation should not be conflated with diversification, representation or inclusion alone. These may be valuable steps, but they can leave dominant assumptions about knowledge, evidence, authority and academic success unchanged. A decolonial approach asks not only who is included, but also who sets the terms of inclusion, which standards are treated as universal, and whose intellectual traditions are positioned as foundational, optional or absent.

Building on this distinction, genuine decolonisation of education requires more than the addition of supplementary perspectives; it necessitates a fundamental reconfiguration of epistemic frameworks themselves. This involves a critical re-examination of long-standing Eurocentric systems of knowledge production, including sustained scrutiny of their claims to authority, universality, and legitimacy (Race et al., 2022). In this respect, the object of decolonial work is not isolated bodies of knowledge, but the broader architectures through which knowledge is produced and validated.

Critical interrogation does not require the wholesale rejection of scholarship produced in Western institutions, nor the uncritical celebration of any knowledge labelled 'non-Western.' All knowledge traditions should remain open to ethical, methodological and contextual scrutiny. The aim is to challenge unequal epistemic hierarchies and create conditions in which multiple traditions can enter substantive dialogue without one being treated automatically as the universal norm.

#### **1.4 The Importance of Decolonisation for Contemporary Higher Education**

Colonialism profoundly reshaped the production, classification and circulation of knowledge. Colonial institutions frequently marginalised, appropriated or

delegitimised Indigenous and other non-European knowledge traditions while establishing European epistemologies, with which they were comfortable, as authoritative or universal. Higher education is an important site of knowledge production and can contribute significantly to social and economic development (Chankseliani et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many higher-education institutions, particularly those shaped by European colonial histories, continue to operate through curricula, disciplinary structures and standards of knowledge that privilege Eurocentric intellectual traditions. Scholars have consequently characterised the university as a site in which racialised, gendered and colonial epistemic hierarchies can be reproduced, granting disproportionate authority to knowledge associated with white, male and Western intellectual traditions (Tegama, 2023; Le Grange, 2022).

The tension between higher education's developmental and emancipatory potential and its capacity to reproduce epistemic inequality strengthens the case for decolonial transformation of curricula. Accordingly, this section examines the significance of decolonisation in contemporary higher education through three key dimensions.

First, decolonising higher education can challenge epistemic hegemony, recentre historically marginalised knowledge traditions and create conditions for greater epistemic plurality that would benefit an international student body. From a social-justice perspective, this involves ensuring that diverse communities and knowledge traditions receive equitable opportunities for recognition, participation and critical engagement. Decolonisation therefore seeks to confront epistemic injustice by questioning institutional assumptions that treat dominant Western or Eurocentric knowledge as universally authoritative while relegating other ways of knowing to peripheral or inferior positions. Its aim is not simply to replace one dominant canon with another, but to transform the relations of power through which knowledge is produced, evaluated, taught and disseminated, thereby fostering a more inclusive and pluralistic intellectual environment (Udah et al., 2025; Akbar, 2024).

Secondly, the significance of decolonisation in contemporary higher education lies in its potential to expose and challenge institutional oppression and systemic inequality. Colonial assumptions and Eurocentric hierarchies may remain embedded in university curricula, pedagogical and assessment practices, institutional policies, disciplinary conventions and cultural norms. These structures can privilege particular traditions of knowledge and standards of academic legitimacy while marginalising other histories, perspectives and ways of knowing. Decolonisation therefore involves

critically examining and transforming the apparently neutral institutional arrangements through which unequal power relations may be reproduced. Rather than constituting a single act of removing barriers, it is an ongoing process of making inequalities visible, challenging exclusionary practices and creating greater space for epistemic plurality and equitable participation (Tegama, 2023).

Thirdly, decolonising work in contemporary higher education can support a stronger sense of belonging, identity and agency among students from the Two-Thirds World and other historically marginalised communities. Research indicates that students' sense of belonging may be weakened when curricula, academic staff and institutional cultures fail to reflect their racial, cultural and intellectual backgrounds (Museus et al., 2018; Thomas & Quinlan, 2022). Our own research also supports this and argues that sense of belonging is paramount for internationalisation of higher education in which decolonising the curriculum plays a very important role in fostering that belonging. More inclusive curricula can enable students to relate more meaningfully to course content and to recognise their identities and communities within academic knowledge. Decolonisation may therefore promote epistemic inclusion by broadening the range of knowledge traditions treated as legitimate and by strengthening students' recognition as active participants and knowers within the university (Sakata et al., 2023; Akbar, 2024).

At institutional level, decolonisation requires universities to move from statements of commitment to sustained changes in policy, curriculum design, teaching practice, assessment, and student support. In higher education, this means moving beyond tokenistic inclusion and creating curricula, pedagogies, and assessment practices that recognise diverse intellectual traditions, cultural frameworks, and student experiences. At the University of Glasgow, decolonising the curriculum has been identified as part of wider work on anti-racism, inclusion, and transforming learning and teaching practice. The University also has a *Decolonising the Curriculum Community of Practice*, which brings together staff and students to share resources, develop initiatives, and support curriculum change across disciplines. The School of Education also has its own *Decolonising Education Interest Group*, which was established by the staff member of the working group for this toolkit. This toolkit builds on that existing work by focusing specifically on how curriculum can better reflect the diverse educational backgrounds, cultural contexts, and forms of knowledge that students bring to the classroom.

### **1.5 Key Terminology Glossary**

Before using this toolkit, it is important to clarify several key terms. This section

defines key concepts underpinning the theoretical and analytical framework of the toolkit. Because many of these terms are contested and used differently across disciplines and contexts, the definitions below are working definitions rather than fixed or universally accepted meanings. Their purpose is to promote conceptual clarity and to situate the toolkit within critical decolonial, anti-racist and epistemological scholarship.

### **(1) Whiteness**

Whiteness refers not simply to a racial identity but to a historically produced and socially normalised system of power through which ideas, practices and institutions associated with white European experience have often been treated as neutral, standard or universal. Within dominant knowledge institutions, whiteness can shape which histories, languages, intellectual traditions and forms of expression are recognised as authoritative, while other perspectives are marked as particular, deficient or outside the norm.

Whiteness is sustained through processes including racial socialisation, institutional practices and the continuing legacies of colonialism. It may influence recruitment and promotion, curriculum design, citation practices, standards of academic professionalism and everyday institutional relationships. Describing whiteness as normalised or unmarked does not mean that it is invisible to everyone. In fact, its operation may be least apparent to those whose identities and practices most closely align with institutional norms (Shah, 2026).

### **(2) Global South and Global North; One-Third World and Two-Thirds World**

The terms Global South and Global North are often used in writings about decolonisation but they do not describe two exact geographical hemispheres. The Global South commonly refers to parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and Oceania, but it is a contested and relational category rather than a fixed list of countries. China and India, for example, are generally included in discussions of the Global South despite being located wholly or predominantly north of the equator.

The Global South may describe countries and regions that have experienced colonial domination and unequal incorporation into the global political economy. It may also refer to political projects that challenge a world order dominated by powerful states and institutions, as well as to transnational spaces of resistance and anti-hegemonic struggle. Because these meanings do not always coincide, the term should be defined in relation to the particular context in which it is used (Haug et al., 2021).

The terms One-Third World and Two-Thirds World, adopted by Mohanty from Esteva and Prakash, shift attention from national geography to transnational relationships of power, privilege and marginalisation. Broadly, the One-Third World refers to socially and economically powerful minorities, while the Two-Thirds World refers to social majorities whose lives are shaped by exploitation, insecurity or exclusion.

These categories should not be treated as fixed labels. A person may occupy different positions in relation to race, class, gender, citizenship, institutional authority and colonial history. The terms are therefore best used to analyse relationships and structures rather than to classify individuals mechanically. Because they may be unfamiliar to readers, they should be clearly explained and should not replace attention to specific places, histories and identities. Where greater precision is possible, named regions, communities or institutional relationships should be used.

### **(3) Epistemic Privilege and Epistemic Authority**

Epistemic authority concerns the socially recognised capacity to produce, interpret and validate knowledge. It shapes whose testimony is believed, whose concepts are treated as legitimate, who is authorised to speak on particular subjects and whose work becomes part of an established curriculum or disciplinary canon.

Colonial and racialised institutions have often distributed epistemic authority unequally. Scholars and institutions associated with dominant Western traditions may be granted greater credibility, visibility and access to publication, while marginalised communities are positioned as objects of research or providers of data rather than as theorists and producers of knowledge. Western researchers may consequently be authorised to represent people whose own accounts are ignored or considered insufficient without external mediation (Manning, 2022).

Epistemic privilege should be distinguished from epistemic authority. In some feminist and standpoint traditions, epistemic privilege refers to the distinctive insights that may arise from experiencing marginalisation and observing structures of power from positions excluded from dominant institutions. In other contexts, the phrase may describe the credibility and authority disproportionately granted to socially dominant knowers. To avoid ambiguity, this toolkit uses more precise terms such as dominant epistemic authority, credibility privilege or marginalised standpoint where appropriate.

Neither authority nor marginalisation follows automatically from a person's

nationality or geographical location. Epistemic positioning is shaped by intersecting factors including race, class, gender, language, citizenship, institutional affiliation and disciplinary status.

#### **(4) Eurocentrism**

Eurocentrism is an intellectual and institutional orientation that centres European histories, experiences and systems of thought and treats them as the principal or universal standards through which the world should be understood. It may present European modernity as the model of human progress while representing other histories and knowledge traditions as derivative, traditional, local or incomplete.

Eurocentrism operates not only through the inclusion or exclusion of particular authors but also through disciplinary categories, historical narratives, research methods, institutional structures and assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge. Universities played an important role in institutionalising and circulating these frameworks through colonial and postcolonial systems of education.

Eurocentrism is connected to colonial and racial hierarchies because the elevation of European knowledge has historically accompanied the devaluation or suppression of Indigenous, African, Asian and other non-European intellectual traditions. Decolonising knowledge does not require the wholesale rejection of European scholarship. Rather, it involves questioning its assumed universality, examining its relationship to colonial power and creating space for multiple intellectual traditions to engage on more equitable terms (Le Grange, 2022).

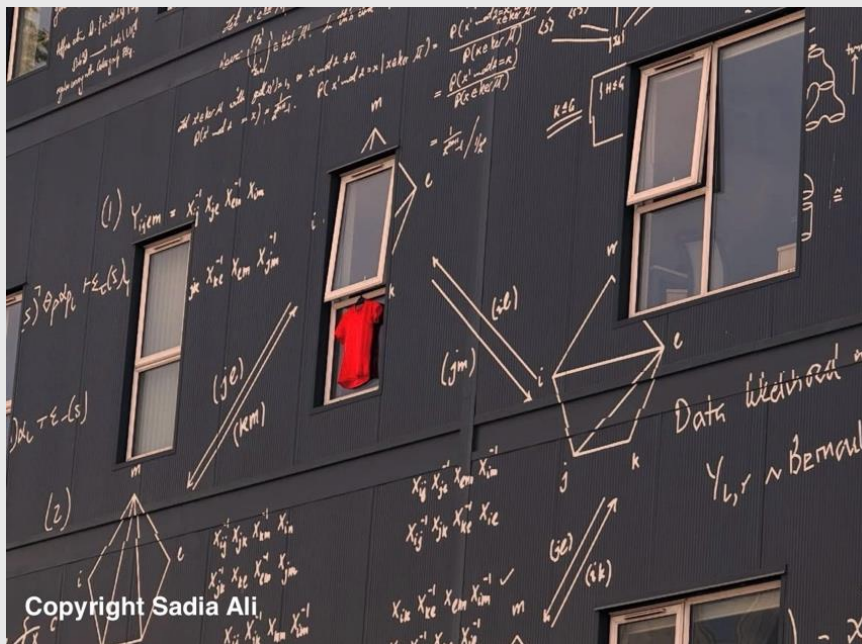
#### **(5) Marginalisation**

Marginalisation refers to processes through which individuals or communities are excluded from resources, decision-making, recognition and full participation in social and institutional life. It is not simply a condition of being numerically small or located at society's edges; it is produced through relationships and structures of power.

Drawing on Smith's (1999) analysis of imperialism and research, colonial marginalisation of Indigenous peoples can be understood as operating across interconnected dimensions. Epistemically, it has involved dismissing Indigenous knowledge as primitive, irrational or merely folkloric and separating it from the communities and relationships through which it acquires meaning. Ontologically, colonial discourse has represented Indigenous peoples as deficient, less civilised or not fully human. Institutionally and psychologically, colonial education and administration sought to impose foreign values, categories and identities.

Discursively, research, law, literature and official histories have reproduced representations that legitimise colonial authority.

These processes should not be understood as eliminating Indigenous agency. Indigenous communities have continually resisted, adapted, protected and regenerated their languages, knowledge systems, relationships and political traditions. Marginalisation therefore describes both the exercise of structural power and the conditions against which communities organise and resist (Smith, 1999).



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*'Western developed countries...transmit knowledge and culture to us, and we are expected to consider our problems based on their cultural background.'*

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## 2. Foundations of the Toolkit

The preceding section examined the various ways in which colonialism has influenced knowledge systems and processes of knowledge production (Le Grange, 2022; Shah, 2026; Moosavi, 2020; Akbar, 2024). These include: the *systemic dimension*, where Eurocentric knowledge is prioritised and treated as legitimate while knowledge from other regions is marginalised or overlooked; the *production dimension*, where knowledge produced within White/Western institutional traditions has historically been more readily recognised, while scholars and communities from other regions have often been denied authority as knowledge producers; the *curriculum dimension*, where students predominantly encounter Eurocentric knowledge while knowledge from the Two-Thirds World is neglected; and *the cognitive dimension*, involving the denial or devaluation of the epistemologies and authority of scholars from the Two-Thirds World.

To understand these dimensions, this project used a mixed-methods design to collect data from students and staff on the IESR course to understand their experiences and expectations from the course. This was done to develop evidence-based recommendations for making the course more inclusive, culturally relevant, and representative of global knowledge systems. Data were collected by combining questionnaires completed by staff and students with focus group discussion with students. 33 students and 16 staff completed the survey, and 14 students participated in the focus group. Quantitative findings are reported descriptively, while qualitative data are used to provide further insight into patterns, tensions, and lived experiences. Given the sample size, interpretation of the findings should remain proportionate. The evidence presented here is therefore locally valuable, but it should not be treated as statistically representative of all students or staff in the School of Education.

The findings suggest that students and staff broadly support decolonisation but understand and experience its progress in different ways. As Table 1 shows, students tended to describe decolonisation as an unmet practical need, pointing to the dominance of Western theories, the marginal position of non-Western perspectives, and the pressure to conform to established academic norms in order to succeed. Staff, by contrast, were more likely to frame decolonisation as an aspirational and pedagogical goal, with emphasis on diversifying course content, inclusive teaching practices, and the inclusion of non-Western scholarship.

### Summary of findings

Theme	Students	Staff
<b>1. Commitment to Decolonisation</b>	Support decolonising the IESR course but experience it as an unmet practical need in their learning.	Support decolonisation largely as an aspirational goal, emphasising ideas like epistemic plurality and inclusion of non-Western scholarship.
<b>2. Western-centrism and Marginalised Knowledge</b>	Perceive Western theories and paradigms as dominant in the curriculum. Non-Western perspectives feel minimal, peripheral, or filtered through Western lenses.	View the inclusion of selected non-Western materials as evidence of progress toward decolonisation.
<b>3. Knowledge Authority and Academic Legitimacy</b>	Feel pressure to conform to Western epistemologies and academic norms (essay structure, referencing, literature) to succeed.	Focus more on diversifying course content, with less emphasis on questioning the underlying academic standards used to evaluate knowledge.
<b>4. Assessment as a Mechanism of Epistemic Control</b>	Experience assessments as culturally narrow and prescriptive, privileging Western modes of argumentation and reinforcing colonial knowledge structures.	Tend to focus more on curriculum and teaching methods, with less attention to how assessment design may reproduce epistemic dominance.
<b>5. Views about Pedagogy</b>	Appreciate participatory Western teaching approaches but note that it does not resolve deeper epistemic imbalances in curriculum and assessment.	Emphasise importance of pedagogical strategies and inclusive teaching practices in decolonisation efforts.

**Table 1 – Summary of findings from surveys and focus group discussion**

A key tension emerging from the findings is that students connected decolonisation not only to curriculum content, but also to assessment, knowledge authority, and the standards through which academic legitimacy is judged. These findings, therefore, should be understood as context-specific evidence that can inform further course review, dialogue, and piloting, rather than as proof that the curriculum is uniformly exclusionary or that any single intervention would address all inequities.

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*'They demand we adopt their education structure, telling us theirs is the correct way - and even we start thinking, "if only I'd learned this earlier." But if you want international students, you will have to change how you teach them so it's useful.'*

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### **3. Course Content Audit**

#### **3.1 The Purpose of the Course Content Audit**

Decolonising a research course is of significant interest to both staff and students because it directly shapes whose knowledge is recognised and reproduced within academic spaces. It goes beyond pedagogy or classroom dynamics, extending into the deeper structures that determine how course content is curated, validated, and positioned as authoritative. For educators, this process offers an opportunity to critically reflect on disciplinary norms, challenge inherited biases, and design a curriculum that is more inclusive, representative, and intellectually robust. For students, it creates a learning environment that acknowledges diverse epistemologies, making the material more relevant, engaging, and reflective of global perspectives.

It is important to recognise, however, that course or curriculum decolonisation is an ongoing process rather than a one-off activity. Decolonisation is also an arduous and long task because it challenges colonial control over the definition, validation, and production of knowledge (Weber-Pillwax, 1999). Therefore, this toolkit should be understood as a starting point for reflection, dialogue, and practical action, rather than as a complete or final solution. Its purpose is to support staff and students in identifying areas for review, experimenting with context-sensitive changes, and continuing collective work towards a more inclusive, critically reflective, and epistemically just curriculum.

Using the IESR curriculum as an example, a systematic audit of course content allows for a critical examination of what is placed at the centre of the curriculum, what is marginalised, and what is absent altogether. This process reveals underlying hierarchies of knowledge and opens space for dialogue about alternative voices, methodologies, and perspectives that have historically been excluded or undervalued.

It is important to clarify that this curriculum content audit is not intended as an evaluative tool for assessing teaching staff or judging the quality of individual courses. Rather, it functions as an analytical and reflective resource that supports critical engagement with curriculum revision and/or design. By making visible patterns in how knowledge is selected and prioritised within the curriculum, the audit creates opportunities for teaching teams to reflect on the assumptions that shape course content.

This type of reflective activity is important because it supports critical engagement with knowledge, fosters more inclusive learning environments, and contributes to ongoing curriculum enhancement - principles that are widely recognised within contemporary higher education teaching and learning practices (cf. Katsamposaki-Hodgetts, 2025, on peer observation as a reflective tool for inclusive curriculum development). Examining whose knowledge is highlighted within course materials allows educators to consider how curricula can better reflect diverse intellectual traditions and student experiences. Thus, a curriculum content audit provides a practical mechanism for supporting reflective teaching practice and informed curriculum development.

### **3.2 Data Source and Audit Method**

The IESR content audit reviewed the course outline, and core and recommended reading lists. An Excel dataset was used to classify first authors and generate descriptive charts. The audit documented the date of the reading list, inclusion and exclusion criteria, treatment of repeated texts, coding categories, ambiguous cases and any quality-assurance checks. This transparency was necessary for the analysis to be reproducible and for future cohorts to compare change over time.

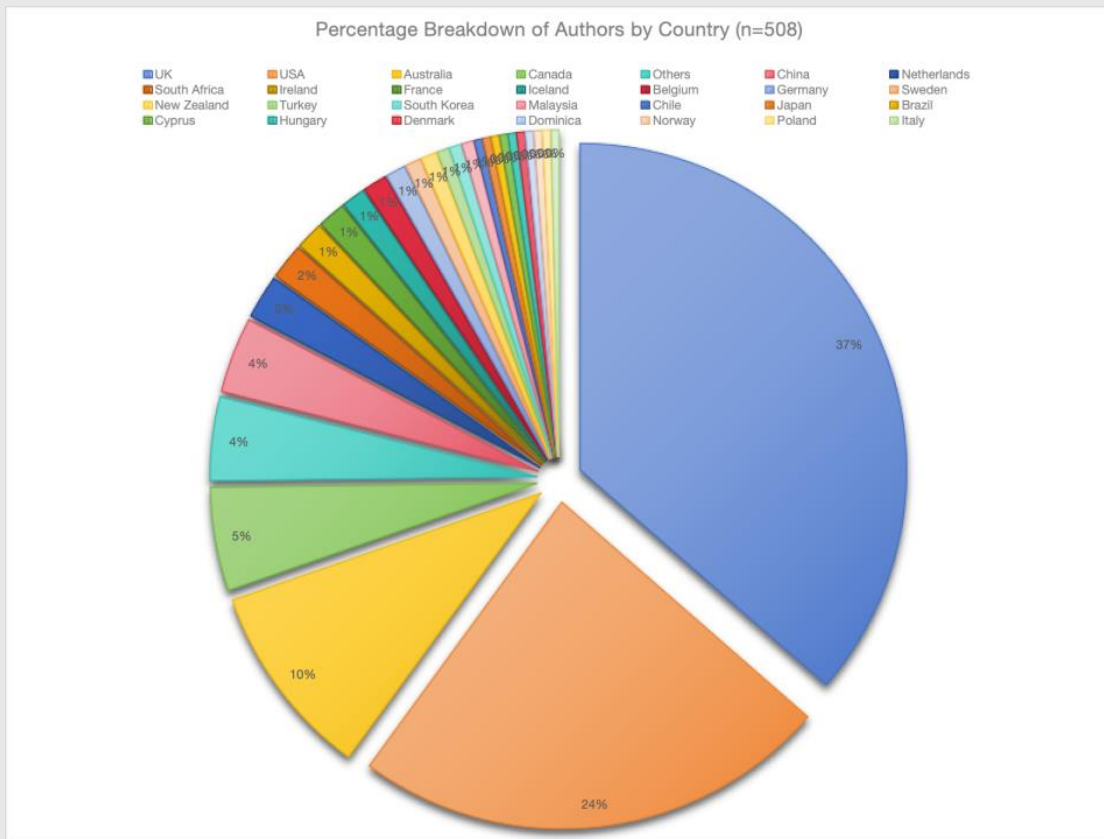
First authorship was used as one indicator of whose scholarship is emphasised. This provides a pragmatic but limited way of approximating epistemic authority. Author order varies across disciplines, geographic location does not necessarily reflect epistemological position, and names or affiliations cannot be used to reliably determine aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, class, or lived experience. The audit therefore avoids inferring race, nationality or worldview from names alone and triangulates authorship data with the intellectual traditions, contexts, methods and roles assigned to each text.

By identifying these patterns, the audit contributes directly to the aims of this project, which seeks to support critical reflection on how knowledge is selected and presented within the IESR curriculum. Examining whose scholarship is most frequently emphasised makes it possible to consider how alternative perspectives might be more meaningfully incorporated into course design and teaching practice.

### **3.3 Who Is Cited, Taught and Legalised?**

In this project, the analysis of first authorship is informed by one of the student partner's MSc dissertation that examined the IESR reading lists (Li, 2025). The analysis shows that the majority of first authors represented in the course materials originate from Anglophone academic contexts, particularly the United Kingdom, the

United States, Australia and Canada (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1 - Percentage breakdown of authors by Country (Li, 2025; p 57)**

In teaching, ‘quoted’, ‘taught’ and ‘legalised’ are not neutral processes. Authors and theories that are presented frequently are normally naturalised into ‘basic knowledge’ or ‘standard framework’, thus gaining a higher epistemological status. For example, students shared in the focus group that they were not allowed to cite any studies that were not published in English. Consequently, other academic traditions often appear in the form of supplementary or situational materials or are absent altogether.

This distribution model should not be understood as the result of individual course selection but reflects the broader structure of knowledge production and dissemination within the field of educational research.

### 3.4 The Dominant Academic Model and the Influence of Eurocentrism

Critical scholarship has long questioned the assumption that academic canons are neutral collections of the ‘best’ or most authoritative ideas, arguing instead that they are shaped by historical, institutional, colonial, and geopolitical conditions of

knowledge production (Said, 1978; Connell, 2007; Bhabra et al., 2018). Read in this light, the patterns identified in the curriculum audit can be understood not simply as isolated curricular choices, but as reflecting wider structures within global academia, in which European and Anglophone scholarship has often been more visible, more institutionally privileged, and more readily positioned as foundational. Within the context of a research course, this pattern is particularly significant. The School of Education at the University of Glasgow attracts students from diverse geographical, cultural, and educational backgrounds, and the course seeks to support critical engagement with educational knowledge across global contexts. Where theoretical frameworks and core readings are drawn predominantly from a relatively narrow set of academic traditions, this may influence how students understand what is recognised as legitimate, authoritative, or foundational knowledge within education and educational research.

Recognising these processes is therefore central to the aims of this project. By making visible how particular knowledge traditions become normalised within course materials, the curriculum audit offers a basis for reflective discussion about how curricula might engage more explicitly and substantively with a wider range of intellectual traditions, contexts, and perspectives.

### **3.5 Silence, Absence and Epistemological Hierarchy**

While the curriculum content audit highlights patterns in what knowledge is included or excluded, decolonising the curriculum extends beyond content alone. It also requires attention to how knowledge is taught, assessed, and experienced within the programme.

#### **3.5.1 What is taught: Content**

As discussed in previous sections, scholarship from non-Anglophone contexts and the Two-Thirds World appears less frequently within core reading lists and is often positioned as supplementary rather than foundational. This uneven representation contributes to the reproduction of a curriculum in which certain intellectual traditions are more readily recognised as central to the field, while others are encountered primarily as additional, contextual, or alternative perspectives. Consequently, the issue is not simply one of numerical inclusion, but of curricular positioning to assess where knowledge is placed, how it is framed, and whether it is presented as shaping the conceptual foundations of education and educational research.

This is necessary because core readings often signal to students which theories, authors, and debates are understood as essential for developing scholarly competence. When these core materials are dominated by Anglophone and Euro-American traditions, students may come to associate educational theory and research methodology with a limited set of epistemological assumptions, institutional locations, and academic histories. Conversely, scholarship produced in other linguistic, geographical, and intellectual contexts may appear less central to the discipline, even where it offers significant theoretical, methodological, and empirical contributions or alignment with their own contexts.

Addressing this imbalance therefore requires more than adding isolated examples from under-represented contexts. It involves considering how diverse knowledge traditions can be integrated into the conceptual architecture of the course, including how research questions are framed, which methodological debates are foregrounded, and whose intellectual contributions are treated as foundational. Such an approach would support a more critically reflexive curriculum, enabling students to examine how educational knowledge is produced, circulated, authorised, and contested across different global contexts.

### 3.5.2 How is learning measured: Assessment

Assessment practices play a key role in shaping what is recognised as legitimate knowledge within a course. In the IESR course, for example, traditional forms of academic writing appear to remain the central mode of assessment. These formats are important because they support students in developing One-Third World's academic skills such as critical analysis, argumentation, engagement with literature, and formal academic communication. However, they are not neutral forms of knowledge expression. They are shaped by particular linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary conventions that may be more familiar to some students than others.

As a result, reliance on traditional academic writing can unintentionally privilege particular ways of organising, presenting, and validating knowledge. It may favour students who are already confident in dominant Anglophone academic conventions, while making it more difficult for other forms of intellectual expression, reflection, or situated knowledge to be fully recognised. This does not mean that academic writing should be displaced or devalued, but it does suggest the need to reflect critically on whether assessment practices allow students to demonstrate understanding in diverse and meaningful ways.

Expanding or diversifying assessment formats could therefore support a more

inclusive approach to knowledge production. For instance, opportunities for reflective, dialogic, multimodal, or practice-based forms of assessment may enable students to connect theoretical debates with their own educational, professional, linguistic, and cultural contexts. Such approaches could help broaden what counts as rigorous academic engagement, while still maintaining clear expectations around criticality, evidence, and scholarly depth.

### 3.5.3 How is content taught: Pedagogy and teaching practices

Teaching practices also play an important role in shaping how students encounter, interpret, and engage with knowledge. The seminar format, which is widely used within the programme, may be understood as emerging from particular European academic traditions that value discussion, debate, and the verbal articulation of critical thought. Seminars can provide valuable pedagogical spaces for dialogue, collaborative learning, critical reflection, and student participation. They can allow students to connect course materials to their own educational, cultural, and professional experiences, and to bring different perspectives into conversation with the theoretical frameworks introduced in the curriculum.

Focus group data for this project indicate that several students experienced a degree of autonomy within classroom discussions and felt that some lecturers actively encouraged the inclusion of diverse viewpoints. This indicates that seminars can function as spaces in which knowledge is not simply transmitted from lecturer to student but negotiated through discussion and interaction. However, the data also point to uneven patterns of participation. Some students may find it more difficult to contribute, whether because of language confidence, unfamiliarity with seminar-based discussion, different prior educational experiences, uncertainty about the legitimacy of their perspectives, or the dynamics of power and authority within the classroom.

These findings suggest that diversifying the curriculum cannot be separated from questions of pedagogy. Even where course content includes a wider range of perspectives, students may not experience these perspectives as meaningfully integrated unless teaching practices actively support inclusive participation. Attention therefore needs to be paid not only to what knowledge is included in the curriculum, but also to how classroom spaces are structured, whose voices are heard, and how students are supported to engage critically with both dominant and marginalised knowledge traditions.

### 3.5.4 Research methods: Diversity of approaches

The types of research methods introduced within the curriculum also play an important role in shaping how knowledge is produced, interpreted, and validated. Research methods are not merely technical tools for collecting and analysing data; they are closely linked to epistemological assumptions about what counts as evidence and whose experiences will be made visible. A curriculum that presents a narrow range of methodological approaches may limit students' exposure to the diverse ways in which knowledge can be generated across different intellectual, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Expanding engagement with a wider range of research methods can therefore support more inclusive and critically reflective understandings of knowledge production. This might include greater attention to participatory, Indigenous, decolonial, feminist, arts-based, narrative, and community-based approaches, alongside more established qualitative and quantitative traditions. Such approaches can help students recognise that methodological choices are never neutral, but are shaped by ethical, political, cultural, and epistemological considerations.

In the context of contemporary higher education, it is difficult to include 'alternative' methodologies because universities often prioritise productivity, measurable outputs, individual achievement, and institutional reputation. However, this difficulty should not be treated as a reason to avoid alternative methodologies altogether. We can begin by initiating dialogue to challenge academic structures that privilege market-driven research practices and only specific forms of knowledge. Indigenous methodologies require more than simply adding Indigenous content into existing frameworks; they demand a shift in how research is understood, conducted, and evaluated. This includes centring relationality, accountability to communities, respect for land and place, and ethical forms of knowledge-sharing that move beyond extractive academic practices.

We can begin broadening the methodological scope of the curriculum with participatory, community-based, decolonial, and feminist methodologies. This may support a more plural and globally responsive research education, in which students are better equipped to engage with different forms of evidence, diverse knowledge traditions, and the complex conditions under which educational research is conducted.

### 3.5.5 Language: Academic English and legitimacy

In an English-medium university context, academic English necessarily remains the

shared language of instruction, assessment, and scholarly communication. However, a decolonising approach to curriculum design requires attention to how academic English is positioned and used within the course. Rather than treating academic English as a neutral or universal mode of expression, course teams might recognise that it is shaped by particular histories, conventions, and institutional expectations. These conventions can make some forms of knowledge, argument, and communication appear more legitimate than others.

This does not mean replacing English as the medium of instruction. But we should be asking how a course can make space for linguistic diversity while still supporting students to work confidently in academic English. For example, students may be encouraged to draw on concepts, examples, texts, and intellectual traditions from other languages where relevant, and to explain how these shape their understanding of educational issues. Course materials might also acknowledge the role of translation, interpretation, and linguistic context in the production and circulation of knowledge.

Another practical step is to allow students, where appropriate, to undertake group discussions and collaborative work in languages other than English, while reporting key points, reflections, or outcomes back to the wider class in English. This approach recognises students' full linguistic resources as valuable for thinking, discussion, and knowledge-making, without changing English as the shared medium of instruction. In this way, English can function as a common language for collective exchange, rather than as a gatekeeping mechanism that limits the range of perspectives, experiences, and intellectual resources students are able to bring into the course.

### 3.5.6 Conceptual framing: Cultural inclusivity

The way key concepts are introduced, explained, and applied can shape how accessible and meaningful they are for students from different backgrounds. Concepts may appear neutral or universal when taught without cultural or historical context, but they often reflect particular intellectual traditions, institutional histories, and social assumptions. In educational research, terms such as *validity*, *evidence*, *participation*, *criticality*, *inclusion*, *achievement*, and *learner voice* can carry different meanings across cultural, linguistic, and educational contexts. If these concepts are presented as fixed or self-evident, students may have fewer opportunities to question how they have been constructed, whose experiences they represent, and whose ways of knowing they may marginalise.

Greater attention to inclusive conceptual framing can therefore support more

critical and meaningful engagement. This involves defining key terms clearly, situating them within the contexts in which they emerged, and exploring how they may be understood differently within various global educational settings. Students could be encouraged to compare how concepts are interpreted in different national, cultural, professional, or policy contexts, and to reflect on how these differences shape educational research.

### 3.5.7 Curriculum design and voice

Finally, questions of curriculum design are closely connected to power, voice, and participation. Decisions about course content, structure, sequencing, assessment, and the designation of 'core' knowledge are usually made within institutional and academic hierarchies, most often by academic staff. While such decisions are shaped by practical constraints, disciplinary expectations, accreditation requirements, and staff expertise, they also determine which forms of knowledge are made visible, which are treated as authoritative, and which remain marginal or optional. In this sense, curriculum design is not a neutral administrative process, but a site where epistemic authority is organised and reproduced.

Students, particularly those from diverse linguistic, cultural, professional, and geographical backgrounds, may encounter course materials in ways that reveal assumptions or exclusions that are less visible to those designing the curriculum. Creating meaningful spaces for student perspectives to inform curriculum review can therefore support more participatory and inclusive approaches. However, such participation should go beyond consultation as a procedural exercise. For student voice to be meaningful, it needs to be embedded in ongoing processes of curriculum reflection, with clear mechanisms through which student feedback can influence course design, reading selection, pedagogical approaches, and assessment practices.

Epistemic hierarchies are not produced only through what is taught, but also through how knowledge is selected, structured, delivered, discussed, and evaluated within the curriculum. They are shaped by the positioning of readings as core or supplementary, the organisation of theoretical and methodological debates, the forms of participation encouraged in the classroom, and the criteria through which students' knowledge is assessed. Recognising both the constraints and the existing strengths within the IESR course therefore provides a basis for constructive, context-sensitive reflection. Rather than framing curriculum change as a simple matter of replacing one canon with another, this approach invites a more dialogical and ongoing critical engagement with how curricula can become more reflexive, plural, and responsive to the diverse intellectual resources that students and

scholars bring to educational research.

### **3.6 From Course Content Audit to Reflective Use**

The course content audit is intended to support practical reflection and discussion rather than to prescribe a fixed plan for curriculum reform. Its purpose is to help teaching teams identify where changes may be needed, where existing strengths can be built upon, and which questions should be considered when reviewing course content, reading lists, teaching activities, and assessment practices.

The course audit for this project draws on several sources of evidence: curriculum materials, a systematic review of reading lists, staff survey responses, and student focus group conducted as part of this project. The reading list analysis pays particular attention to patterns of authorship, geographical location, and the positioning of texts as core or supplementary. Together these sources help to show what is formally included in the curriculum and how students and staff experience the course in practice.

By making these patterns visible, the audit provides a practical starting point for curriculum conversations. Teaching teams might use the findings to reflect on questions such as: Which theories, methods, authors, and research traditions are presented as foundational to the course? Whose knowledge, experiences, and contexts are less visible or absent? Are perspectives from marginalised, Indigenous, non-Anglophone, or Two-Thirds World contexts integrated into the core structure of the course, or positioned mainly as optional, additional, or case-specific? How are students invited to bring their own intellectual, cultural, linguistic, and professional knowledge into discussions of research? What forms of participation are encouraged or discouraged in teaching spaces? How do assessment tasks define what counts as valid research knowledge, and which students are most supported by these forms of assessment? How does language use in the classroom shape students' ability to participate, express their ideas, and draw on their own linguistic and cultural knowledge?

These questions link directly to the reflective prompts in the following sections of this toolkit. The audit can therefore be used as a practical resource to guide discussion, support course review, and identify small, context-sensitive changes that contribute to the ongoing work of curriculum decolonisation.



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*'I quite like the current Western teaching approach. For example, group discussions... it pushes me to think more deeply.'*

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#### **4. Translating Findings into Practice**

Guided by a pragmatist perspective, the project employed quantitative data to identify patterns and qualitative data to gather in-depth individual reflections on decolonising the IESR curriculum. By drawing on thematic analysis of student focus group, alongside descriptive analysis of staff survey data, findings were translated into tips for practical and adaptable course-level change.

Two dominant themes emerged from the student data. The first concerned Western

epistemic dominance in **pedagogy** and knowledge framing, particularly the ways in which certain theoretical traditions, authors, and research approaches were perceived as being positioned as central or authoritative within the course. The second related to concerns about inequitable and culturally restrictive **assessment** practices, including the extent to which assessment formats, criteria, and expectations may privilege particular academic conventions while limiting students' ability to draw on diverse intellectual, linguistic, and cultural resources.

The staff survey findings were used to complement these themes by offering insight into the extent to which teaching staff recognise, prioritise, or engage with these issues in their own practice. Rather than presenting the themes as abstract critiques, this section of the toolkit treats them as practical entry points for rethinking how knowledge is selected, taught, discussed, and evaluated within the IESR course. The aim is not to prescribe a fixed or universal model for curriculum decolonisation, but to offer research-informed guidance that can support reflective action. The recommendations are intended to be adaptable, allowing other programmes and courses to use, interpret and apply them in ways that respond to their own disciplinary, institutional, and student contexts.

Section 4.1 deals with pedagogy and teaching practices, and section 4.2 covers assessment and feedback practices.

#### **4.1 Rethinking Pedagogy and Teaching Practices**

Data analysis revealed a widespread perception amongst both staff and students that Eurocentric epistemic hierarchies shape the IESR curriculum. Students consistently described the course as 'definitely Western' (S3)<sup>2</sup>, including reading lists, case studies, and theoretical frameworks that were found to be predominantly drawn from Europe and North America, with minimal engagement with knowledge traditions from Asia, Africa, or Latin America.

Student focus group indicate that concerns about epistemic hierarchy were not limited to course content but also extended to broader questions of knowledge creation and validation within research education. Reflecting on the role of knowledge production in a research-focused course such as IESR, one student stated that they had always understood that 'Western powers' shape what is recognised as 'valid knowledge' (S9). This concern was echoed by another student,

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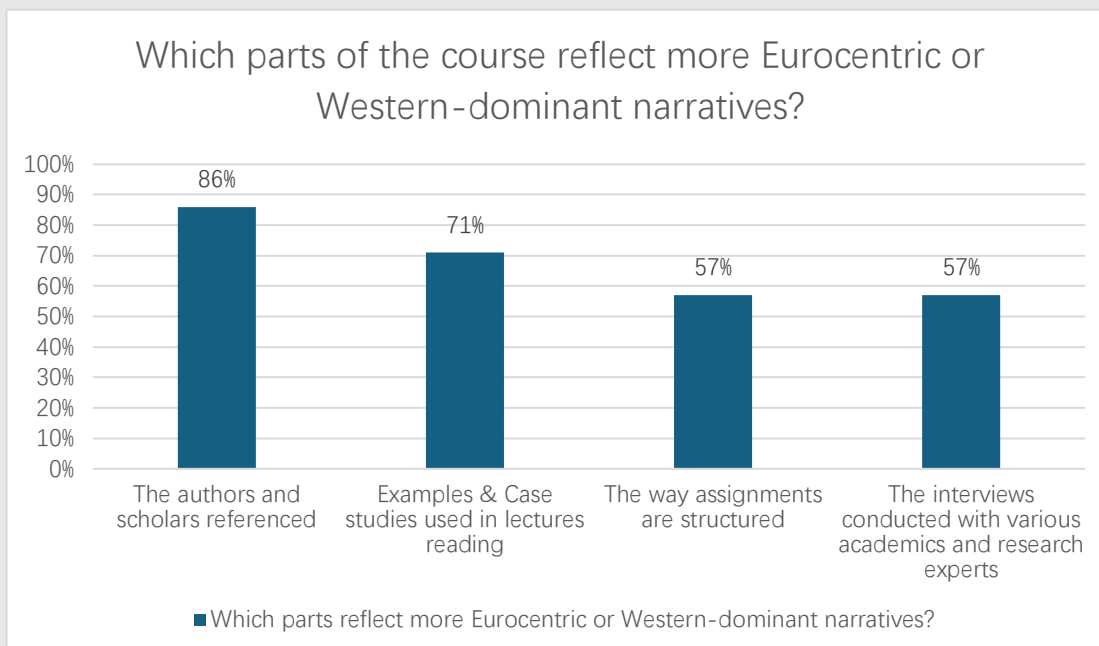
<sup>2</sup> The notation S3 corresponds to the transcript of the third student in the focus group conducted for this study. All subsequent instances of the format S followed by an Arabic numeral are used to reference the transcript of the respective student in the focus group.

who observed that European knowledge appeared to be positioned within the course as 'the only kind truly worth learning' (S14). These reflections suggest that students are attentive not only to whose knowledge is represented, but also to how certain knowledge traditions are implicitly granted greater legitimacy than others.

This critique also extended to the concept of critical thinking, which is often treated as a central feature of contemporary Western education. One student questioned whether 'only the Western definition of critical thinking' should be regarded as valid (S6), drawing attention to the existence of culturally specific forms of critical engagement. For example, reflective practices that are central to many Far Eastern traditions may offer alternative ways of questioning, analysing and producing knowledge. These accounts indicate that a decolonised curriculum should not only diversify the geographical origins of texts and case studies, but also critically examine the standards through which knowledge, critique and intellectual authority are defined.

Student observations also suggest that they recognise higher education as a contested space in which what is taught, cited and assessed is not neutral, but shaped by wider historical, colonial and geopolitical conditions. Therefore, teaching teams need to consider not only which knowledge traditions are included in the curriculum, but also how those traditions are assessed. This requires learning and assessment practices that enable students to draw on diverse methodological, cultural and linguistic resources without being disadvantaged for working within non-dominant knowledge traditions.

Staff survey data reinforced these student perceptions, suggesting that concerns about epistemic dominance were not limited to students' experiences alone. As illustrated in Figure 2, a substantial majority of staff respondents, 86%, reported that the authors and scholars referenced in the course are predominantly drawn from the One-Third World. This dominance of Western knowledge traditions, therefore, is not simply a matter of individual student perception, but a wider structural issue within the course that is also visible to staff. Therefore, these responses point to a need for more systematic reflection on how knowledge is selected and legitimised through the curriculum.



**Figure 2 - Eurocentric dominance in the IESR curriculum (staff perspective).**

A similar pattern was identified in relation to the broader course content. 71% of staff respondents indicated that the examples and case studies used within the IESR course largely reflect One-Third World contexts and perspectives. In addition, 57% of staff respondents reported that both the structuring of assignments and the selection of academics and scholars interviewed for the course reflect a predominantly Western-oriented approach. Therefore, it can be concluded that Western frameworks shape the content of the course and influence who is positioned as an authoritative voice within the learning environment.

Furthermore, staff rated the extent to which the current course reproduces epistemic hierarchies privileging Western knowledge production at an average of 3.85 out of 5. Notably, 91% of staff reported not engaging with any decolonising initiatives in their teaching, suggesting a gap between recognising the problem and actively addressing it through practice. Reasons given for this include limited institutional support in terms of time and workload distribution, uncertainty about how to embed decolonising approaches, and differing understandings of what such work requires.

The findings also show that epistemic hierarchies are not only embedded in what is taught, but also in the teaching team’s assumptions that shape how teaching and learning are imagined. This becomes clear in one staff respondent’s claim that international students come to the UK for Western teaching, learning and

assessment methods, which should not be altered through decolonisation or internationalisation efforts. Such a view positions UK pedagogic practices as inherently desirable and globally transferable, while leaving little room to question whose knowledge, contexts and futures they serve.

By contrast, students' reflections point to a more complex need - not simply to access UK-based academic frameworks, but to connect these with the realities that they will return to and work within. As one focus group participant explained, students often go back to their own countries to conduct research or teach; therefore, courses that engage more directly with their lived contexts would better support their future problem-solving and work capabilities.

A further contributing factor for staff not engaging in decolonising initiatives may be the lack of clear institutional guidance on decolonisation. This was reflected in the survey responses, where some respondents indicated uncertainty about 'what a decolonised course should look like.' Thus, despite growing discourse around decolonising curricula, staff may lack the practical frameworks, resources or support needed to translate these principles into teaching practice. Without clearer guidance, decolonisation risks remaining an abstract aspiration rather than a structured pedagogical process embedded within course design, assessment and everyday classroom practice.

Importantly, the student focus group also suggested that epistemic hierarchies are reproduced through how knowledge is discussed and validated in the classroom. For instance, some students described positive experiences in which they felt able to share their own perspectives, particularly when lecturers explicitly invited them to connect theoretical concepts with their personal, cultural or educational contexts. Such experiences helped them 'better understand the knowledge points' (S9) reinforcing that participatory and context-sensitive pedagogical practices can support students in making meaning from course content.

However, these opportunities were not experienced consistently. Other students reported difficulties participating in seminars, particularly when discussions assumed familiarity with Western theoretical traditions or when lecturers did not actively encourage contributions from students with different educational backgrounds (S1). Some students also reported feeling ignored in class because they were not especially vocal. They pointed out that classroom silence was sometimes interpreted as a lack of engagement or confidence, rather than as a possible response to exclusionary pedagogical norms. As a result, certain forms of prior knowledge, speech and participation were privileged over others. In such situations, classroom

silence can function as a marker of epistemic exclusion, revealing how students may be positioned at the margins of classroom knowledge production when their experiences and intellectual traditions are not actively recognised or legitimised (Ali, 2025).

The effect of this pattern is a potential narrowing of perspectives and may reinforce existing academic hierarchies, implicitly signalling that Western modes of inquiry are more legitimate or academically valuable, which can constrain critical engagement and inclusivity within the course. It should be noted that both students and staff do not wish to replace Western knowledge or frameworks entirely, but rather to situate them alongside a wider range of perspectives, histories and epistemologies to better situate student learning. The findings suggest a desire for a more balanced and critically reflective curriculum, in which Western-oriented approaches are taught alongside other ways of knowing.

This call for balance is clearly reflected in staff responses. 99% of staff respondents agreed that pedagogical practices and course content should incorporate more diverse perspectives and voices, including collaborative and group-based learning approaches and case studies from non-Western contexts, in order to support a more decolonised learning environment.

### **Practical steps**

The survey and focus group data suggest that students and staff are aware that epistemic hierarchies are reproduced through course content, assessment structures, classroom participation norms and assumptions about what counts as valid knowledge. Decolonising the course therefore requires a more systematic reconfiguration of curriculum design, pedagogical practice and institutional support.

A starting point is for teaching teams to engage in sustained critical reflection on how theories, methods and case studies are introduced and framed. This includes examining whether Western paradigms are presented as foundational, universal or methodologically superior – even subconsciously, and whether alternative epistemologies are introduced at all. Course review should therefore consider not only whether diverse perspectives are present, but also whether they are integrated in ways that challenge rather than reproduce existing hierarchies of knowledge.

Second, practical action should move beyond numerical diversity in reading lists. Teaching teams should review whether texts from different intellectual traditions are positioned as core materials, used to shape key debates, and placed in dialogue with one another throughout the course, rather than confined to a single 'non-Western' week or treated as supplementary material. Each curriculum revision

should specify the teaching and learning rationale, as well as the anticipated benefit for students. This would respond directly to student concerns about the dominance of Western theory, while also aligning with staff support for incorporating diverse perspectives.

The selection of guest contributors should also be reviewed. Contributors should be chosen not only for their academic expertise or position, but also for the diversity of perspectives, knowledge traditions and lived experiences they bring to the course. This is important because both student and staff survey responses indicated that the academics and scholars taught and interviewed for the course were perceived as reflecting a predominantly Western-oriented approach. Broadening the range of contributors would help ensure that students encounter multiple forms of intellectual authority and are not left with a narrow understanding of who is recognised as a legitimate knowledge producer.

Across seminar groups, inclusive participation should be intentionally designed rather than assumed. Focus group data showed that some students valued opportunities to connect theory with personal experience, as this helped them to better understand course concepts. However, other students reported difficulty participating when seminars assumed familiarity with Western theoretical traditions or when lecturers did not actively encourage contributions from students with different educational backgrounds. Participation should not be equated solely with spontaneous verbal contribution and silence in the classroom should not be seen as lack of interest or ability.

However, implementing these changes requires institutional recognition of the time, labour and uncertainty involved in decolonising pedagogy. Staff survey responses showed that many staff had not engaged with decolonising initiatives, while some were unsure what a decolonised course should look like. Universities should therefore provide clearer policy guidance, practical examples and dedicated workload hours for lecturers to undertake decolonising curriculum development. This could include time for reviewing and redesigning course materials, participating in training or communities of practice, and collaborating with colleagues to embed inclusive pedagogies across programmes. Without such structural support, decolonising work risks remaining uneven, abstract and dependent on individual initiative rather than becoming a sustained part of course design and teaching practice.

## 4.2 Transforming Assessment and Feedback Practices

The second major theme to emerge from student responses was assessment. In the survey, 80% of students reported that they were fully satisfied with the two written assignments for the course. However, during the focus group discussion, students indicated that they preferred written assignments partly because they were easier to complete with the support of AI tools.

When probed further many students shared that they found the assessment tasks as epistemologically prescriptive, with one student describing the essay-based assignments just as formulaic as the ones they are expected to write in China. Students also emphasised that assessment criteria themselves reproduce hierarchies of knowledge by privileging Western modes of argumentation and critique, such as an emphasis on Western critical thinking skills.

From a decolonial perspective, assessment functions as a technology of governance that disciplines students into specific modes of reasoning, argumentation, and textual production (Andreotti et al., 2015). Students' critiques of rigid essay structures and Western definitions of critical thinking resonate with research demonstrating that 'critical thinking' is culturally situated rather than universally defined (Turner, 2006; Ku & Ho, 2010). The requirement to conform to Western academic norms in order to achieve legitimacy reinforces what Stein (2017) identifies as epistemic dominance within higher education, where alternative intellectual traditions are rendered unintelligible or academically inferior.

When discussing assignments in the IESR course, a student observed that IESR 'assignments required students to fully conform to Western knowledge to get the grades you want' (S6), thereby extending epistemic concern to assessment practices. Focus group data suggest that some students perceive academic success as dependent on their ability to adopt dominant theoretical frameworks, writing conventions, or modes of argumentation. This raises important questions about whether assessment tasks allow students to engage critically with multiple knowledge traditions, or whether they unintentionally reward conformity to a narrow set of epistemic norms. For decolonising a research course, this is significant because assessment is one of the key mechanisms through which ideas of rigour, legitimacy, and academic authority are reinforced.

A key concern that emerged from the focus group was the limited flexibility of the assessment structure. Students noted that the assessment methods were 'not

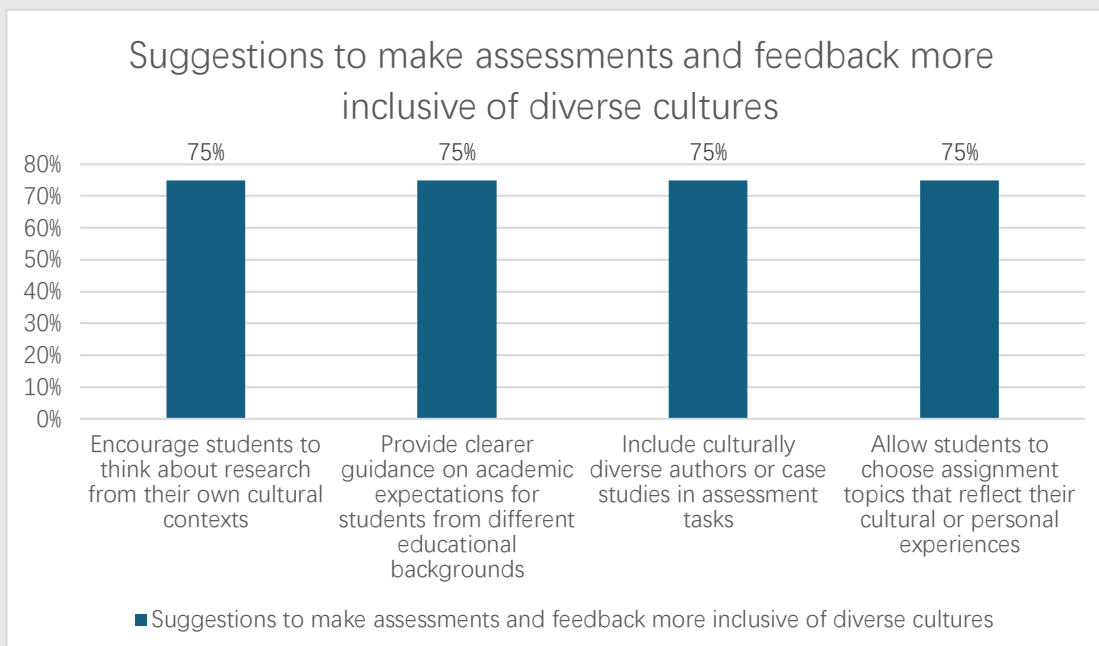
flexible enough' because they were all conducted as essays (S7) and argued that two academic essays could not be considered flexible or inclusive of different cultural frameworks (S14). These responses suggest that students perceive the current assessment model as supporting a narrow understanding of academic performance, privileging essay-based argumentation as the primary measure of academic knowledge and ability.

Students identified academic English writing as a significant source of pressure, noting that it is difficult to master the specific form of writing within one year. They shared that when assessment places heavy emphasis on academic style, grammar and fluency, students may feel pushed towards using AI tools to meet expected standards.

This concern aligns with Aldayel et al. (2026), who highlight the challenges associated with academic English writing for students working across linguistic and educational contexts. One student who claimed to have never used AI tools explained that writing academic essays in English created 'significant pressure' (S10) and suggested that a presentation-based assessment might reduce this burden while also supporting deeper understanding for students. Presentations would also complement students' learning in the *Seminars in Contemporary Issues* course.

Students also raised concerns about the subjectivity of essay-based marking. They argued that it is unfair to be penalised for grammatical errors when grammatical accuracy is not included in the intended learning outcomes and suggested that this can create pressure to use AI tools to meet expected standards.

However, staff survey findings point toward possible directions for reform. As shown in Figure 3, 75% staff respondents indicated that assessment could be made more inclusive by incorporating students' cultural contexts, providing clearer guidance, and diversifying authors, case studies, and topic choices that reflect students' cultural or personal experiences. The staff perspectives align with students' expectations, which suggests that there is both identification of the problem and willingness to reform for more inclusive assessment.



**Figure 3 - Staff suggestions to make assessments and feedback more inclusive of diverse cultures.**

### Practical steps

Decolonising assessment should complement broader assessment reform and should begin with constructive alignment: the principle that assessment tasks, teaching activities, and intended learning outcomes are deliberately aligned so that students are assessed on what they have been taught and expected to learn.

Epistemic hierarchies are reproduced not only through what students are taught, but also through how knowledge is evaluated. Teaching teams should therefore consider whether assignments privilege particular forms of argument, citation, theory use or academic expression associated solely with Western traditions which are very difficult for international students to master in a year. Assessment design should allow students to draw on diverse methodological, cultural and linguistic resources without being disadvantaged for having worked within non-dominant knowledge traditions in the past.

Assessment criteria should be reviewed to recognise multiple forms of critical thinking, rather than only through linear thesis-driven argument. Curricula should also offer more flexible assessment formats, such as oral presentations, problem-based or project-based learning or debates so that students can draw on a wider range of intellectual traditions. Assessment rubrics should make their epistemic

assumptions explicit and open to critique, rather than presenting one model of academic reasoning as neutral or universal. Rubric for assessment should distinguish methodological reasoning and use of evidence, and conceptual quality from English language accuracy, unless language is itself an explicit learning outcome. Exemplars, moderation and opportunities for formative feedback should be built into the design to assist international students.

Decolonising assessment should also include assessment literacy work that makes academic expectations visible before students are graded. This is currently done in IESR and is very much appreciated by students. It could also involve discussing sample assignments, unpacking what is meant by 'critical analysis' or 'original argument,' and encouraging students to examine how marking criteria define valid reasoning, evidence and expression.

It should be noted that diversifying assessment does not automatically make it fair. Teaching teams should keep in mind that unfamiliar formats might create new barriers for students.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

The data do not support a simple opposition between 'Western' and 'non-Western' teaching. Students value some established practices, including seminars and collaborative discussion, while questioning the narrow framing of knowledge and the limited range of assessment conventions. The central issue is therefore not the origin of a method alone, but how it functions, whose participation it enables, and whether alternative intellectual resources are treated as equally capable of shaping core learning.

Staff survey findings further indicate that many staff members recognise similar issues, particularly the dominance of Western perspectives and the need for more inclusive pedagogical and assessment practices. However, 63% staff indicated that sustained decolonisation efforts need institutional support and structural guidance to translate awareness into action.

Decolonising curriculum requires continued attention to how authority is constructed, how academic standards are defined, how language and participation are interpreted, and how institutional resources shape what staff can change. Progress should be judged through evidence of student learning, belonging, transparency and epistemic plurality, while remaining alert to unintended consequences and

disagreement. This is a continuing process of inquiry, action and review rather than a claim that a curriculum can or has become definitively 'decolonised'.

### **Summary of The Practical Steps for Decolonising Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment**

1. Critically review curriculum design to avoid presenting Western paradigms as foundational and methodologically superior.
2. Use diverse perspectives to shape key debates throughout the course. Clearly explain the teaching rationale and student benefits behind curriculum changes.
3. Select course lecturers and contributors for their range of academic, cultural, intellectual and lived experiences so students encounter multiple forms of intellectual authority.
4. Create seminar structures that support students from different educational and cultural backgrounds. Avoid equating participation only with spontaneous verbal contribution. Allow students to connect theory with personal experience where appropriate.
5. Provide institutional support for decolonising pedagogy by recognising the time, labour and uncertainty involved in decolonising teaching. Offer clearer policy guidance, practical examples and staff training. Allocate dedicated workload hours for curriculum review and redesign.
6. Review whether assessment tasks privilege Western forms of argument, citation, theory use or academic expression. Review assessment criteria so they do not reward only linear, thesis-driven argument.
7. Recognise multiple forms of critical thinking.
8. Distinguish conceptual quality, methodological reasoning and use of evidence from English language accuracy.
9. Build assessment and feedback literacy into the course.
10. Recognise that unfamiliar assessment formats may create barriers.



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*'For us, after completing the course, we still need to return to our own countries to develop academic research or even conduct classroom case studies. If the course could be more closely related to our lives and align with our actual situations, it would also enhance our problem-solving abilities.'*

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## 5. Further Development and How to Use this Toolkit

This toolkit can be used by an individual educator, a teaching team or a student-staff partnership. It is most effective when applied to a clearly defined curriculum question, supported by relevant evidence and connected to an agreed review process. Users should select a manageable area, such as one week of reading, one seminar pattern or one assessment, rather than attempting to transform the whole course at once.

The toolkit should be used as a developmental and accountable process, rather than as a one-off checklist. Curriculum reflection should distinguish between individual teaching practice and wider structural constraints, including workload, institutional guidance, assessment regulations and unequal access to decision-making power. This is important because staff uncertainty about what a decolonised course should look like suggests that individual willingness alone is insufficient without clearer institutional support. At the same time, reflection should remain critically focused on who has authority to define course content, assessment standards and legitimate forms of participation. As Ahmed (2012) argues, diversity work can become symbolic when institutions adopt the language of inclusion without changing the structures that reproduce exclusion. Consequently, decolonisation work should attend to the structures that shape knowledge, participation, and belonging, asking how they might be critically examined and transformed to reduce exclusion.

Based on this toolkit, following is the recommended cycle of decolonisation work:

- 1) establish the context and intended learning outcomes
- 2) gather curriculum, staff and student experience evidence
- 3) identify a specific concern and existing strength
- 4) agree a balanced change
- 5) pilot the change with appropriate support
- 6) collect feedback and outcome evidence
- 7) decide whether to retain, revise or discontinue the change. Ensure that decisions and rationales should be recorded to support continuity and accountability.

Decolonial curriculum work also involves uncertainty, disagreement and ethical tension. It should not assume that all students or staff will understand decolonisation in the same way, or that minoritised students should be responsible for explaining racism, coloniality or epistemic exclusion to others. This is particularly important given the focus group findings that some students perceive silence or limited participation not as disengagement, but as a response to pedagogical norms

that privileged particular forms of knowledge, speech and confidence. Users of the toolkit should therefore make space for dissent, recognise that no group holds a single or uncontested perspective, and avoid placing students in the position of speaking on behalf of a culture, region or community. This is supported by Tuck and Yang's (2012) warning that decolonisation should not be reduced to a metaphor for general inclusion. Facilitation plans should include routes for confidential feedback and support where discussion raises experiences of racism, exclusion or harm.

This toolkit is intended as a starting point rather than a complete solution. Users are encouraged to adapt, supplement, and recreate the toolkit's content in response to their specific teaching contexts, ensuring that it remains open, flexible, and contextually relevant. The toolkit will be reviewed frequently and updated in response to emerging scholarship, changing student demographics, course outcomes, and institutional policy. Future versions will ideally include a transparent account of the evidence base, and evaluation data showing which changes were implemented and with what effects. Any adaptation for other programmes should begin with local inquiry rather than direct transfer.

Finally, it is important to note that sustainable development of decolonisation efforts requires clearly named responsibilities, appropriate workload allocation, meaningful student partnership, leadership support, accessible professional learning, and an agreed timetable for review. Without these conditions, decolonising work risks becoming symbolic, fragmented, or reliant on unpaid labour and individual goodwill.

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*'The nature of the written assignment (in IESR) is somewhat like that of an eight-legged essay<sup>3</sup>. What's the difference between Western and Chinese assessment then?'*

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<sup>3</sup> The eight-legged essay was a standardised essay format for imperial examinations in China's Ming and Qing dynasties, later used metaphorically to describe rigid, formulaic writing lacking original thought.

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