

# Why is EDG trying to motivate the Department to decolonise its undergraduate curriculum?

Members of the Board of Studies will have seen an e-mail recently telling them that the Department's Equality & Diversity Group (EDG) is continuing to conduct work towards decolonising our curriculum. This work is being done in collaboration with the University's Inclusive Learning and Teaching Group, as part of efforts towards "Liberating and Diversifying the Curriculum".

The Department is at an early stage in beginning to understand what 'decolonising the curriculum' means for chemists. In a broader sense, decolonisation involves identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge those systems. For an academic department, it's important for us at the outset to understand that decolonisation isn't just about the inclusion of academic work of non-white cultures in our course work. Decolonisation should provide a focus for us to think more generally about how we teach and assess, including processes such as timetabling and exceptional circumstances, and should allow for the possibility of a culture shift that provides a space for different views and ways of studying.

So why are we doing this? Firstly, it's important to say that one of the reasons we are doing this is because our students have asked us to. This has come through strongly from the student members of EDG, as well as our staff-student committee. Secondly, there is a growing body of evidence that reflects the fact that not all students are having equivalent educational experiences. Nationally, there is a 16.1% gap between the number of high-quality degrees (1<sup>st</sup> or 2:1) awarded to white UK-domiciled students compared to Black and Minority Ethnic UK-domiciled students.<sup>1</sup> This attainment gap is acknowledged to be present at the University of York. 42% of black students say that the curriculum does not reflect issues of diversity, equality and discrimination. One in ten trans students never feel comfortable to speak up in class and almost one in four women do not feel comfortable to do so. Our undergraduate courses should not disadvantage any student because of their background or characteristics. All of our students should have equal opportunities to thrive in our Department.

UUK published a report in 2019 on closing the attainment gap.<sup>2</sup> The report makes a strong case that campuses need to become "racially diverse and inclusive environments" if Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students are to succeed academically. BAME students surveyed as part of the review reported that they do not feel a "sense of belonging" at university. The report made clear that decolonisation should apply as much to science subjects as it does to the arts and humanities. Baroness Amos who led the UUK review said "Scientists come from all over the world, they don't just come from the UK, the United States and other countries in Europe. It is really just about broadening our perspectives."

Decolonising our curriculum provides a starting point for us to address racial inequalities, and improve the experience for all of our students. If you are interested in contributing, we have a working group composed of staff and students who are developing an action plan for the Department (e-mail: [caroline.dessent@york.ac.uk](mailto:caroline.dessent@york.ac.uk)).

- 1: <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/liber8-education/liberate-the-curriculum> (accessed 19/06/20)
- 2: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/Universities-acting-to-close-BAME-student-attainment-gap.aspx> (accessed 19/06/20)