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Case Report

Decolonising a business school in context: from theory to practice

Authored by:

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‘This case report is a pleasure to read. The report brings together personal reflections of the project members and insights gained from the academic literature and other sources to provide practical advice for all those interested in undertaking Decolonising the Curriculum (DtC) work in business schools. It will certainly become a valuable resource for educators, researchers and leadership teams.’

Professor Martyna Śliwa, Professor of Management and Organisation, University of Bath School of Management; and Co-Editor-in-Chief of Management Learning

‘This report provides vital reflexive insight into some of the deep-rooted complexities and challenges in expediting decolonising business education. It identifies the need for us to adopt principled space to engage in honest dialogue and consider the structural consequences of colonialism and their links to present day issues in business education. An important and valuable contribution to the emergent decolonising business education discourse, it reminds us of the need to confront and understand the colonial legacies of our universities, and that whilst business education is a tool of neo-colonial power, our business schools have the capacity to be important spaces of resistance. This fills me with hope!’

Dr Iwi Ugiagbe-Green, Reader and Education Innovation Scholar, Manchester Metropolitan University Business School

‘This report is a powerful and practical contribution to the growing movement to decolonise business education. The team at Birmingham Business School have approached this work with creativity and a strong commitment to cultural change, centring conversations, collaboration, and critical reflection at every stage. Their insights offer valuable guidance for institutions seeking to move beyond performative statements and towards meaningful transformation. This is essential reading for anyone serious about embedding equity, diversity, and belonging into the fabric of business education.’

Dr Kenisha Linton-Williams, Associate Professor of Management, University of Greenwich Business School

‘A timely and inspiring collection of diverse experiences and initiatives comprising decolonial work in business management schools. This report highlights the urgent need to act for a radical transformation towards a liberated and anti-colonial university for all.’

Dr Sadhvi Dar, Reader in Interdisciplinary Management and Organisation Studies, School of Business & Management, Queen Mary University of London

‘This compelling case report not only sets out the challenges to decolonisation in the contemporary UK business school, but also eloquently articulates how a determined approach of widespread engagement and dialogue - within and beyond the school - can generate the momentum needed to create real and lasting change.’

Professor Nick Wilton, Dean, Oxford Brookes Business School

‘This report not only provides a comprehensive overview that others can learn from, but also inspires us to engage and pursue the decolonisation project, a key challenge for all business schools today.’

Professor Catherine Cassell, Executive Dean, Durham University Business School

‘In a world where trust and loyalty are in flux, this work illustrates how educators, students, and their communities can learn how to see things from others’ perspectives, reveal lost truths and come together for positive growth.’

Cindy Godwin, Global Dignity, Chair of Global Board Operating Committee & UK Country Chair

For Vicky Wallace, who was a strong advocate for justice

Introduction: What does it mean to decolonise?

Colonialism and its legacies are racial, spatial, material and epistemic. To decolonise requires these various manifestations to be identified, confronted and dismantled. Decolonisation is not about the integration of more diverse groupings into established systems and structures, it is about changing these systems and structures and the way things are done. To embrace decolonisation as a business school and as responsible educators, researchers and community partners, requires us to acknowledge our own experiences and to challenge orthodoxy and established ways of thinking and doing. This means conducting research, educating students and working together in ways that consider the history, boundaries and limitations of the knowledge we create, while also making space for the full spectrum of philosophies, theories, knowledge systems, experiences and practices within all that we do. It also requires us to question the power relations and inequalities that are (albeit unintentionally) (re)produced in day-to-day processes. It is important to recognise that making such changes, may be uncomfortable, for ourselves and others.

We are not the first to think about the presence and impact of colonial legacies in the Higher Education sector or in business schools in the UK and worldwide. We have learned a huge amount from the work of others, who have shared their own thoughts and experiences across various academic disciplines including business studies. We are grateful to them all. This report contains our reflections and experiences following our own work to decolonise a business school in the UK and aims to contribute to the practices of decolonising *in situ*. Our approach is based on a set of principles that we have developed to guide us over the last 3 years. This Sage-published case report is an opportunity to share our approach in the hope that it might be helpful to others as they engage with this important work in their own contexts.

The context of UK business schools and Birmingham Business School

Although business schools have been slower than other sectors to recognise the importance of decolonisation, the calls for business schools to act has recently become more urgent with a growing number of initiatives in learned societies, academic groups or networks and/or special issues (Decolonising Alliance, 2017; BARC, 2017; Jammulamadaka et al., 2021). This has most notably been embodied in the UK by the renaming of Bayes Business School (formerly Cass) in London and decolonisation events that ETHOS, their Centre for Responsible Enterprise, undertook in the early 2020s (Banerjee, Rodriguez and Dar, 2020; ETHOS, 2021).

The Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS), a leading membership organisation supporting the sector in the UK, recently highlighted that 20 UK business schools reported having a strategy around decolonisation and/or diversification of their programmes (Everett, Carden and Linton-Williams, 2023). Similarly, the British Academy of Management (BAM) identified the increased importance of decolonisation and social equity as strategic priorities for British business schools (BAM, 2021). This is particularly pertinent as they recruit and educate high numbers of international students. According to BAM (2021), 39% of students at UK institutions are from overseas, with 31% coming from countries outside the EU. In addition, between 10% and 25% of home students are from Asian, black, mixed and 'other' minority backgrounds with higher proportions on undergraduate programmes. This diversity is also reflected amongst staff in business schools, with 38% classified as international and 25% from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups (BAM, 2021). The experiences and perspectives of this diverse population need to be reflected in the way UK business schools work.

However, some scholars have drawn attention to the invidious position of business schools in relation to decolonisation, arguing that they are an engine that disseminates and reproduces colonised systems of knowledge and practice (Banerjee, 2021; Abdallah, 2024). More directly, an article entitled 'The business school is racist: Act up!' by scholars in the UK and Australia (Dar et al., 2021) calls for more reflexivity and

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accountability to address racism and associated neo-colonial practices that support the promotion and (re)reproduction of white supremacist ideology and racist power structures in business schools.

These calls come alongside other grand challenges that have led to commitments across the sector towards advancing environmental and social sustainability and the public good (CABS, 2021). Birmingham Business School (BBS) in the UK is one such institution. The school's mission is to be a responsible business school and decolonisation is seen as integral to this mission. In this context, the aim of the BBS decolonisation project was to explore what decolonisation meant and what it may look like in practice in our specific context.

Who we are

Undertaking moral reflexive practice has been crucial as we engage in this project. This is consistent with the practice of decolonial scholars with regards to positionality (Allen and Girei, 2024). As such, the question that has served to guide our approach to this work is 'What can I do from where I am?'. We will return to this point later in the report but for now it is important that we state our own positions and why we came to this work.

Caroline Chapain: Caroline is a white female academic born of French nationality. She conducted her PhD research in Mexico and has since studied and worked in Canada and the UK. This cross-cultural experience has influenced her work, and she has progressively shifted her interests towards the practice of responsible management and equity, diversity and belonging in business schools.

Anita Lateano: Anita identifies as mixed race with heritage that spans both Asia and Latin America. With a professional background within the environmental and charity sector she returned to academia with a desire to reflect on the role of INGOs in the perpetuation of colonial narratives and to critically understand climate and environmental injustices.

Rweyemamu Ndibalema: Rweyemamu is a black African male academic from Tanzania. Decolonising business education coincides with his passion to foster an academic environment where every person is not disadvantaged by the dark colonial legacy but instead encounters the best conditions and opportunity to reach their full potential.

Emma Surman: Emma is a white British female academic whose work straddles issues of sustainability, ethics and care in marketing and consumption. She teaches and thinks about what responsibility entails in the context of a business school, in part informed by a period spent as Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) champion for BBS.

Part 1: Setting our key objective – A cultural change encompassing the whole of the business school

The structural and systemic nature of colonialism means that decolonising cannot be a side act or an 'add on'. To decolonise a business school requires a fundamental and comprehensive approach across all organisational levels and activities. This is evident from the literature and was reflected at the initial workshop that we held in BBS in 2021 in response to the calls for anti-racism from the Black Lives Matter protests.

Key messages emerging from the workshop were that:

- Decolonisation is not something that can be implemented overnight, it requires a long-term cultural change.
- A holistic approach is needed. Decolonisation is NOT something that only applies to the curriculum, it needs to apply to everything that the school does (research, teaching, external relations) as well as the way it works and operates.

This is why from the outset, to avoid the project becoming an exercise in ticking boxes, the project's central objective was broad and ambitious:

> *To recognise colonisation within BBS programmes, teaching, research and the way the school operates and to find effective ways to dismantle it, enabling a decolonised reimagining of our business school curriculum and research and related activities.*

Four sub-objectives were also created to guide our approach:

- To develop a series of activities to build on and expand student and staff knowledge of what colonisation means in context and how it manifests in the business school environment and to discuss and agree what it would mean to have a decolonised business school at the University of Birmingham.
- To assess current activities and practices in the school, and encourage and enable reflexive practices amongst both staff and students.
- To support the development and implementation of new decolonised practices across teaching, research and other school activities – this will be done in a co-creative and collaborative way building on existing research and literature.
- To make sure the project is informed by decolonisation scholarship and to conduct research into our decolonisation experience as well as the impact and effectiveness of the changes put in place and to showcase our learnings.

Setting expectations and a timeline for actions

It is important to recognise that decolonising is a journey that will not be achieved quickly or easily. It will necessitate sustained collaboration, discussion, learning, experimentation and self-reflection among all members of the school community, inevitably leading to disruptions in ways of thinking and doing. Although an initial time period of 3 years was allocated to the project, this was a period in which we would begin rather than complete the journey. Figure 1 summarises the way the project was conceived over this 3 year period, moving from research to implementation and to evaluation/consolidation.

Defining an approach

We have already declared the focus on positionality in our work. Also central was the recognition that decolonising needs to take into account the lived experiences of the people and the context within which it is taking place (Jammulamadaka et al., 2021; Maringe, 2023).

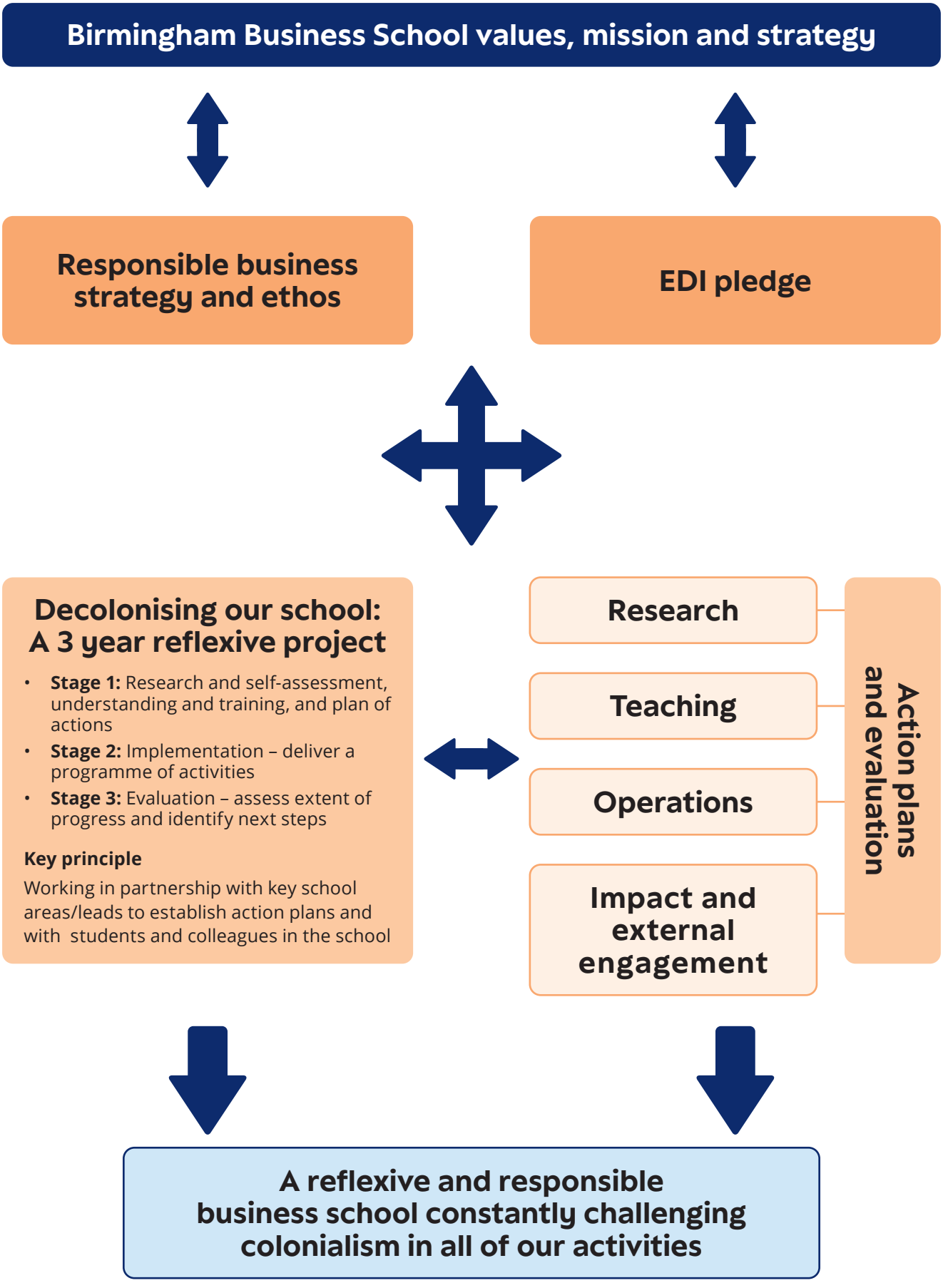

Figure 1 BBS decolonisation project: a long-term cultural change

The way we approached this in our practice can be summarised by the following 5 Cs.[1]

1. Conversations

Experience of decolonisation initiatives shows that decolonising can encounter resistance and backlash (Shain et al., 2021; Maringe, 2023) as it challenges the status-quo for staff and students and the principles of the neo-liberal university (Holmwood, 2018). Making space for *conversations* was an important part of this project. In fact, making decolonisation part of normal conversations in the school was a significant achievement. We approached this in the following ways:

- **Conversations with the literature.** Much work has been done on decolonisation in other disciplines and contexts, with an increasing number of contributions within business studies. Building on and learning from these contributions was a crucial first step in the development of our project.
- **Conversations with people across the school.** Speaking to and having the support of people across the school was vital. This included academic and professional services colleagues and students as well as the Dean, Senior Management Team and the School Advisory Board.
- **Making time for conversations.** Making time for in-depth conversations with staff and students within the school through interviews, interactive workshops and events provided a deeper understanding of how colonial legacies may manifest in their personal and professional lives. For example, we identified that academic colleagues take a range of positions (from support to opposition) with regards to decolonisation; we needed to take these positions into account in this work.
- **Creating diverse spaces for conversations.** Organising regular activities such as workshops, seminars and project presentations in addition to online and media resources provided diverse opportunities and spaces for people to discuss decolonisation with respect to their specific academic disciplines and/or types of work (education, research, operations).
- **Creating conversation starters.** The creative approach used in the project (see pages 19 and 25) led to the production of artifacts and other creative outputs, that were used to raise the profile of the project, to provide a visual presence in the school and to encourage decolonisation to be part of everyday conversations.

2. Dis(Comfort)

Decolonisation can be a risky, uncomfortable and unsettling journey. To create a supportive and safer space, we worked with a charitable organisation specialising in workplace equality to establish a set of ground rules for the decolonisation work to proceed. These rules were shared with participants with the aim of creating the conditions and space to have open and potentially difficult conversations.

The rules we established are listed below:

- Everyone and all views are welcome, but our principles and agreements must be respected.
- This is a learning space; we will all make mistakes and that is ok.
- This is a confidential space.
- A safe, supportive environment where decolonisation and issues of coloniality can be discussed is crucial.
- We are here to challenge ourselves, and we mustn't be afraid of asking questions.
- This is embodied learning, it's important to recognise our emotions, and be respectful of them.
- We welcome humility and curiosity; this is about talking, but also about listening and hearing.
- This is not something that can be imposed but must be debated, collaborated on and co-created.
- The project needs to be inclusive, allowing everyone within the school to be involved in its evolution.
- Take responsibility for what you say and the impact it may have.
- Take agency in your own learning journey. We're in this together, but what could you, we all, do differently?
- This work may be uncomfortable, but it is hopeful.
- This is an ongoing journey, not a finite process and shouldn't be treated as a tick box exercise but more a life-long commitment to continue reimagining and relearning.

1 We are grateful to Professor Sally Everett, who encouraged us to think about structuring our approach in this way.

3. Context

Colonisation and colonial history have taken various shapes and forms across the world. The work discussed here is situated within a British business school. As such, it is located within the British colonial history and its legacies. This may express itself in the following:

- the way academia is conceived;
- the types of relationships and colonial pasts Britain holds with countries across the globe;
- the ways in which the sector is financed and governed;
- the connections that individual universities and places have with this colonial history and how they may have benefited and still benefit from it;
- the ways historical relationships and events are reflected in contemporary society and British business schools.

There is no doubt that these legacies have influenced BBS given its location and context. For example, as we developed our project, we came across research from our colleagues in the Department of History that has started to explore the entangled histories of education and empire at the University of Birmingham. This is why our first seminar looked at how we could understand and account for colonial histories within the University environment. Later on, we also worked in partnership with the local Black Heritage Walks Network to facilitate connections with Birmingham's hidden colonial history (see page 26). Colleagues with a particular interest in business history later launched a seminar series around the theme of business history through the looking glass of (de)colonisation.

It was important to capture these colonial legacies as part of understanding the lived experiences of both staff and students. Activities to explore our history were complemented by action research activities that we conducted in the first year of the project. The aim of these was to understand and map the meanings of decolonisation to the school within our local and wider institutional context. Our research showed that various colleagues across the school come from former or current Commonwealth countries and have been educated in English and within the British academic system in their own countries; this has naturally impacted their understandings of and approach to decolonisation. Many of our students have similar experiences. It was also helpful to connect with other decolonisation initiatives within our university and within and beyond Britain to reflect on the similarities or specificities of our local and national contexts.

4. Creativity and co-creation

A range of creative methods were used throughout the project to engage staff and students with decolonisation. This approach stems from the recognition that arts and creative methods can help engage people in a decolonial manner in fostering other ways of knowing and interacting (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Seppälä, Sarantou and Miettinen, 2021; Spanellis et al., 2024). This creative approach was developed by establishing collaborations with local or regional artistic organisations such as: a theatre company, a network offering historical walking tours and an art gallery. Reflections and feedback from participants demonstrated that this approach was extremely valuable as it:

- Provided a more accessible and authentic route for faculty and students to engage with the topic of decolonisation by enabling each individual to engage in their own way.
- Provided a way for participants to access and discuss their emotions and life experiences should they wish to do so.
- Helped disrupt existing ways of doing things, breaking down barriers and allowing for new understandings and ways of interacting to emerge collectively and in an empowering manner.
- Enabled learning and synergies through collaborations with organisations with different ways of knowing, learning and doing and that had also engaged with decolonisation in their respective activities and sectors.

5. Co-producers

Decolonisation work can be challenging and take an emotional toll, especially when implemented across an organisation (Doharty, Madriaga and Joseph-Salisbury, 2021). It can generate backlash, and it is very difficult to conceive of an end point as it requires continuous rethinking and re-imagining on the part of the people

involved. The project at BBS emerged from, and has been run with, a small team of people and with the support of the Deans and School's management team. Resources in terms of time and budget were allocated to the team for a period of 3 years. However, if the project was to develop from the bottom-up as the team intended, it was clear that participation was needed from across the organisation. This was achieved by:

- Creating a seedcorn fund to encourage and support colleagues to explore their own decolonisation work across research, education and operations, in addition to the activities run by the project team.
- Hosting project events to identify academic and professional services staff that were already doing work in this area or had ideas they wanted to try out. These people became allies of the project and key advocates.
- Providing opportunities and platforms for colleagues to share lived experiences and their own work.
- Opening conversations and developing collaborations with students. This was achieved through working with the school's Equity, Diversity and Belonging (EDB) student ambassadors, funding student internships to work on the project, or identifying projects that students wanted to work on and supporting them in taking the lead on these.

Developing in this organic way has enabled colleagues working in specific disciplines or operational areas to develop their own individual understandings and journeys towards decolonisation, leading to an increased engagement and support for decolonisation across the school. As the project developed, the number of allies increased which in turn added momentum. We refer to these allies as *co-producers.*

The ultimate objective for this work is that it becomes sufficiently embedded within the school so that every colleague and/or student feels empowered to take action. This will enable the principles and ethos of the project to live in the day-to-day activities and practice of those within the school, without necessitating the prolonged existence of our project team. We have been clear that it is a school project, not our project. This is a key element in terms of our own positionality as members of the project team and for the sustainability and 'success' of the project.

We also considered it important to extend our network of co-producers outside of the school and received insights and feedback from key actors around the decolonisation agenda in the UK. We have benefited hugely from the knowledge and experience they have shared with us and our 'insights' in this publication come from external as well as internal co-producers.

Figure 2 Professor Sally Everett contributing at one of the project's events. We have actively sought to learn from those outside the school, inviting them to share their experiences and critique our approach

Insight 1: The quest to decolonise business schools in context

Donna Ladkin, Professor of Inclusive Leadership, Birmingham Business School

All one has to do is consider the varying fates of Cecil Rhodes' statue at the University of Cape Town in South Africa and a similar statue at Oriel College at Oxford in the UK to understand that 'decolonising' means different things in different contexts.[1] National histories, civic priorities and what populations will put up with, all weigh-in to influence how the term is understood as well as the actions taken to achieve it.

As an academic who has worked both in the UK and the USA, the difference in how these two cultures engage with the term has been (in my experience) stark. With its history of slavery, the construct of race holds more currency in the USA. Business schools acting in this arena focus on issues of justice, understanding the effects of systemic racism and how greater levels of racial diversity within organisations can be achieved. The UK's imperialist past means decolonisation has more traction. The constructs of 'racial justice' and 'decolonisation' do intersect and often re-enforce one another. But they are underpinned by different histories, cultural sensitivities and aspirations. Reflecting on these differences leads me to the focus of this brief piece: the importance of language in the quest to decolonise.

A key realisation I have made when navigating this space is that those I interact with might aspire to similar goals but use different language, and others might use similar language but seek different goals. British business school academics use the term 'decolonise' to mean everything from 'let's include more diverse voices in the curriculum' to 'let's stop teaching in Singapore and Dubai'. Spending time to dig deeper into what people actually mean when they use the term is essential to working in this space.

A second reflection about the language of decolonisation is the way colonising/decolonising sets up a binary relationship which is (paradoxically) indicative of colonising logics themselves.[2] In my own work I am increasingly committed to 'challenging colonising logics' rather than 'decolonising'. This reframing helps me be clearer about what I think I'm doing when engaging in this arena: attempting to disrupt a moment/practice/way of thinking as it arises, rather than gallantly overturning the megalith of European conquest in one fell swoop. It feels a much humbler, and doable aspiration.

In line with this thought, although I have purposefully used 'quest' in the title of this piece I must admit to doing so ironically. I would encourage those attached to this agenda to go easy on the questing. It is an activity imbued with heroics, discovery and righteous intent (i.e. resonant with coloniality). Perhaps 'tiptoeing around' or 'stumbling towards' would be more fitting orientations towards decolonising, given the range of personal, historic and political contexts it touches.

1 In South Africa the statue was removed after a month of students' protest in 2015. The statue remains standing at Oriel college, although a 'contextualising plaque' has been placed below it.

2 See Collyer, F., Connell, R., Maia, J. and Morrell, R. (2019) *Knowledge and Global Power: Making new sciences in the South* (Monash University Publishing) for their explication of 'colonizing logics'. These include extractionism, the creation of abject others (with binary thinking as symptomatic of that) and determinism.

Part 2: Decolonising research culture

As a community of researchers, we need to think about the research conducted within the business school and the knowledge that is created and subsequently shared. This includes the topics we choose to investigate, the methodologies by which we carry out those investigations and the research culture of which we all form a part. In doing so, we tackle the various ways colonial legacies can manifest themselves in academia and the lives of people working within it, what Monzó and SooHoo (2014: 149) call 'epistemological racism':

> *the structural exclusion (often unconscious) of racialized and other nondominant voices in institutional decision making, including in funds allocation, evaluation criteria, academic programs and curriculum, pedagogical approaches, and the valuation of certain topics and methods of research over others.*

Our starting point in looking at the research culture was to undertake a piece of research to uncover the epistemic and material consequences of colonialism as experienced by academic colleagues within the specific **context** of our school. These **conversations** enabled us to speak to people across a range of positions and roles, disciplines, ethnic backgrounds, countries of origin and career stages. We asked about their careers, identities and the meaning of decolonisation for them and their work. This was a way to engage colleagues reflexively around this topic in a safer space, and in itself constituted important conversational and contextual elements of our work.

These **conversations** unearthed a range of positions with regards to decolonisation (support, ambivalence and opposition) that could be explained by various intersecting elements of personal and professional identities. This diversity of positions needs to be considered when engaging in any decolonising work in business schools. The **conversations** with our participants also echoed the notion of epistemological racism described by Monzó and SooHoo (2014) and confirmed the need for action both within individual organisations but also more widely within academia and our associated professional bodies. While some colleagues challenged the need for a decolonisation project in academia, others emphasised the dominance of Western theories and approaches in the way knowledge is produced and reproduced. In addition, many colleagues shared experiences of discriminatory practices that render academia a difficult place to be and to progress within. Many of these discriminatory practices reveal a systemic racism at the level of the profession that led to Dar et al.'s (2021) call for action.

We responded to these findings by seeking to co-produce a research agenda and environment with colleagues. We created and supported the development of various platforms for engagement within and across disciplines to cater for colleagues' diversity of positions and research pathways, enabling a pluralist approach to decolonisation (Gopal, 2021). In addition, recognising the high level of interdependencies between organisational and professional research practices and cultures, we looked at creating decolonising spaces within the school while also aiming to connect to and influence practices within relevant professional bodies.

More specifically, our approach has encompassed the following actions:

- An **online Canvas[1] resource** that introduces colleagues to the overall decolonisation debate and literature both in academia and in business schools. This contains distinct sections including history and the legacy of colonisation, decolonising the university, decolonising the business school, decolonising the curriculum and decolonising research. This facility has also served to build a contextual resource to share information about the project, including research, events and examples of practices developed by colleagues in the school.
- A **series of events and seminars** with internal and external speakers from across a wide range of disciplines (business, geography, history, biosciences, arts, law, etc) and research contexts (UK, Europe, Canada, South Africa, Asia) to share conceptual understandings and research practices around decolonisation.
- **Encouraging and supporting disciplinary or cross-disciplinary groups** within the school to explore decolonisation on their own terms through sponsoring workshops, seminars or seedcorn funded projects. Examples include a research project investigating modern slavery, a workshop exploring decolonisation

1 An internal web-based learning platform.

within the discipline of Strategy and International Business, workshops exploring how to decolonise Economics, and a decolonisation book club.

- Work with the **School Deputy Dean, School Director of Research and EDB lead** to explore ways to support colleagues who aspire to develop their research topics and methods around decolonisation as well as addressing issues around career development.
- **Identifying academic allies** within the school who have roles on editorial boards of academic journals or key roles in the profession to support wider actions (e.g. the British Academy of Management Guide to Decolonising the Business School Curriculum).
- **Working with colleagues across the university** i.e. Library Services to organise a workshop on citation justice and contribute to the decolonisation of resources in the Library. We have also joined forces and held **conversations** with other schools and departments to support decolonisation across Social Sciences departments at the University of Birmingham.
- **Presenting school project research outputs at conferences** (e.g. PRME[1], CABS[2], EGOS[3], BAM[4], SAMS[5]) to engage and connect with the wider profession around decolonisation.
- **Using various dissemination outlets** to share the work we are doing such as academic articles, blogs, podcasts and this Sage-published report.

1 Principles for Responsible Management Education

2 Chartered Association of Business Schools

3 European Group for Organizational Studies

4 British Academy of Management

5 Society for the Advancement of Management Studies

Insight 2: Decolonising research culture

Bobby Banerjee, Professor of Sustainability, Bayes Business School

What does it mean to decolonise research culture in business schools? Here I want to distinguish between decolonial scholarship in management which has been growing in recent years. For instance, scholars working in critical management studies have drawn on insights from postcolonial studies to show how colonial discourses inform our understanding of a range of management theories: from images and representations of 'African' leadership in organization studies (Nkomo, 2011)[1]; corporate social responsibility and stakeholder theory (Banerjee, 2000)[2]; ecological sustainability (Banerjee, 2003)[3]; institutional entrepreneurship (Khan, Munir and Willmott, 2007)[4]; identity regulation practices (Boussebaa, Sinha and Gabriel, 2014)[5]; globalisation and internationalisation (Banerjee and Linstead, 2001[6]; Boussebaa, Morgan and Sturdy, 2012[7]); hybridisation processes and contestations in multinational-subsidiary relations (Dar, 2014[8]; Mir, Banerjee and Mir, 2008[9]); and international business and management (Faria, Ibarra-Colado and Guedes, 2010[10]; Fougère and Moulettes, 2011[11]; Westwood, 2006[12]).

Decolonising research culture on the other hand is a transformative process that involves rethinking and reimagining collective practices, values, norms and assumptions that shape how research is conducted, shared and valued in an institution. In particular, it challenges colonial structures, Eurocentric assumptions, and power imbalances in academic spaces, while prioritising diverse perspectives and epistemologies.

This can be attempted in a variety of ways:

1. The first step would be to recognise Eurocentrism as the basis of creating knowledge in management and organization studies and identify the limitations of universalising this knowledge resulting in marginalising local knowledges and practices. Decolonising involves understanding how colonial histories have shaped global business practices, labour markets, supply chains and economic institutions and identifying ways to address these imbalances.
2. Encourage research that incorporates non-Western frameworks such as Indigenous, African, Asian and Latin American perspectives on management and organization studies.
3. Broaden the scope of management research and encourage a more critical approach to business and society research by including issues such as sustainability, climate justice, inequality, modern slavery, gender and racial justice.
4. Encourage the adoption of decolonial methodologies and community based participatory research and ensuring that research serves the needs of all communities, especially those that have been marginalised by colonial legacies.
5. Decolonise academic publishing by challenging dominant publishing practices and the dominance of major Western publishers. Broaden the criteria of what constitutes 'high-quality' research by prioritising decolonial scholarship.
6. Demonstrate institutional commitment to decolonising research culture by involving university leadership, internal and external funding bodies in the decolonisation process.
7. Create and maintain spaces for students and staff to discuss issues related to decolonisation and power.

1 Nkomo, S. M. (2011) 'A postcolonial and anti-colonial reading of "African" leadership and management in organization studies: Tensions, contradictions and possibilities', *Organization*, 18(3): 365–86.

2 Banerjee, S. B. (2000) 'Whose land is it anyway? National interest, indigenous stakeholders and colonial discourses: The case of the Jabiluka uranium mine', *Organization & Environment*, 13(1): 3–38.

3 Banerjee, S. B. (2003) 'Who sustains whose development? Sustainable development and the reinvention of nature', *Organization Studies*, 24(1): 143–80.

4 Khan, F., Munir, K. and Willmott, H. (2007) 'A dark side of institutional entrepreneurship: Soccer balls, child labour and postcolonial impoverishment', *Organization Studies*, 28(7): 1055–77.

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7 Boussebaa, M., Morgan, G. and Sturdy, A. (2012) 'Constructing global firms? National, transnational and neocolonial effects in international management consultancies', *Organization Studies*, 33(4): 465–86.

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11 Fougère, M. and Moulettes, A. (2011) 'Disclaimers, dichotomies and disappearances in international business textbooks: A postcolonial deconstruction', *Management Learning*, 43(1): 5–24.

12 Westwood, R. (2006) 'International business and management studies as an Orientalist discourse: A postcolonial critique', *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 2(2): 91–113.

Part 3: Decolonising business education

The Rhodes Must Fall student movement that developed at the University of Oxford following a similar protest in Cape Town, South Africa, has had echoes in other UK universities too. These movements called upon UK university leaders and academics to revisit and explicitly address the lack of representation of non-white cultures in the knowledge that they share and to combat racial discrimination in the university environment.

Across disciplines and geographical contexts, ways to decolonise the curriculum have broadly followed four principles (Shahjahan et al., 2022: 86):

1. Regularly critiquing and probing the positionality of knowledge in educational spaces.
2. Constructing an inclusive curriculum beyond dominant knowledge systems.
3. Fostering relational teaching and learning.
4. Connecting higher education institutions, community, and decolonial socio-political movements inside/outside of higher education.

These principles have been reflected in the business education literature addressing decolonisation, coalescing around two broad challenges: 1) examining and rethinking existing content in terms of *what*/*who* is included or excluded; and 2) disrupting teaching practices in terms of *how* staff and students relate to each other in the learning/teaching process and the extent to which other actors are included. We integrated these challenges (what/who and how) into our approach and our collaborations with staff, students and external partners in order to decolonise education in our school.

Developing a flexible framework to support colleagues in developing their decolonial practice building on their personal and professional identities

As mentioned in the previous sections, **conversations** with academic colleagues highlighted a variety of positions and understandings with regards to decolonisation based on their personal and professional identities. Despite these differences, many concurred that education (compared to research) was an area where they felt they would have more freedom to put decolonisation into practice. Some colleagues had prior interest in this topic and had already started exploring ways to decolonise their teaching practices. Others recognised the need for decolonisation but were unsure how to proceed and made requests for guidance and resources. Many colleagues also pointed out that time, workload and resources were barriers for them to engage. We responded by adopting an approach that was not prescriptive but would allow colleagues to create their own decolonising practice building on their personal and professional identities. We created and offered a range of activities and resources for colleagues to foster self and peer-to-peer developmental learning.

In addition to resources shared via our Canvas platform (see page 13), activities included:

- **Annual seminar series** offering colleagues the opportunity to learn from external speakers both from within and outside the business disciplines and for internal colleagues to share their practices and experiences.
- As part of our **seedcorn funding**, colleagues could also foster particular practices for decolonising the curriculum, for example, looking at students' assessment, or exploring how to decolonise specific subjects such as economics or accounting. Other colleagues considered how to decolonise the curriculum in our campus in Dubai or how to bring history and issues related to colonisation into the curriculum.
- **A workshop run by the project team** to help colleagues explore positionality and practice. The workshop participants were asked to make a creative representation depicting what decolonisation meant to them and how they were approaching this in their teaching. The focus was to examine how each of us can embed decolonisation into our teaching in a bespoke way, building on our understandings and our personal and professional positionality.

- **Project team developing their own practice and collaborating with external actors to be inspired and inspire others.** For example, we developed a collaboration with the Barber Institute of Fine Arts to use arts to engage students with the topic of decolonisation on two of our modules.[1] This was in line with our principle of using **creative** methodologies to decolonise our practice. Our teaching approach and associated research can be found on the PRME website.

Pulling all this together, we developed a bespoke and flexible framework to offer guidance to colleagues. This framework builds on the literature to suggest a range of actions that can be used to decolonise the curriculum (Figure 3), in addition to offering steps for implementation (Figure 4). It offers suggestions to colleagues but importantly emphasises that decolonising our curricula requires developing new understandings and practices that need to be tried out, reflected upon, developed and adapted over time and should be better conceived as a journey rather than an end point.

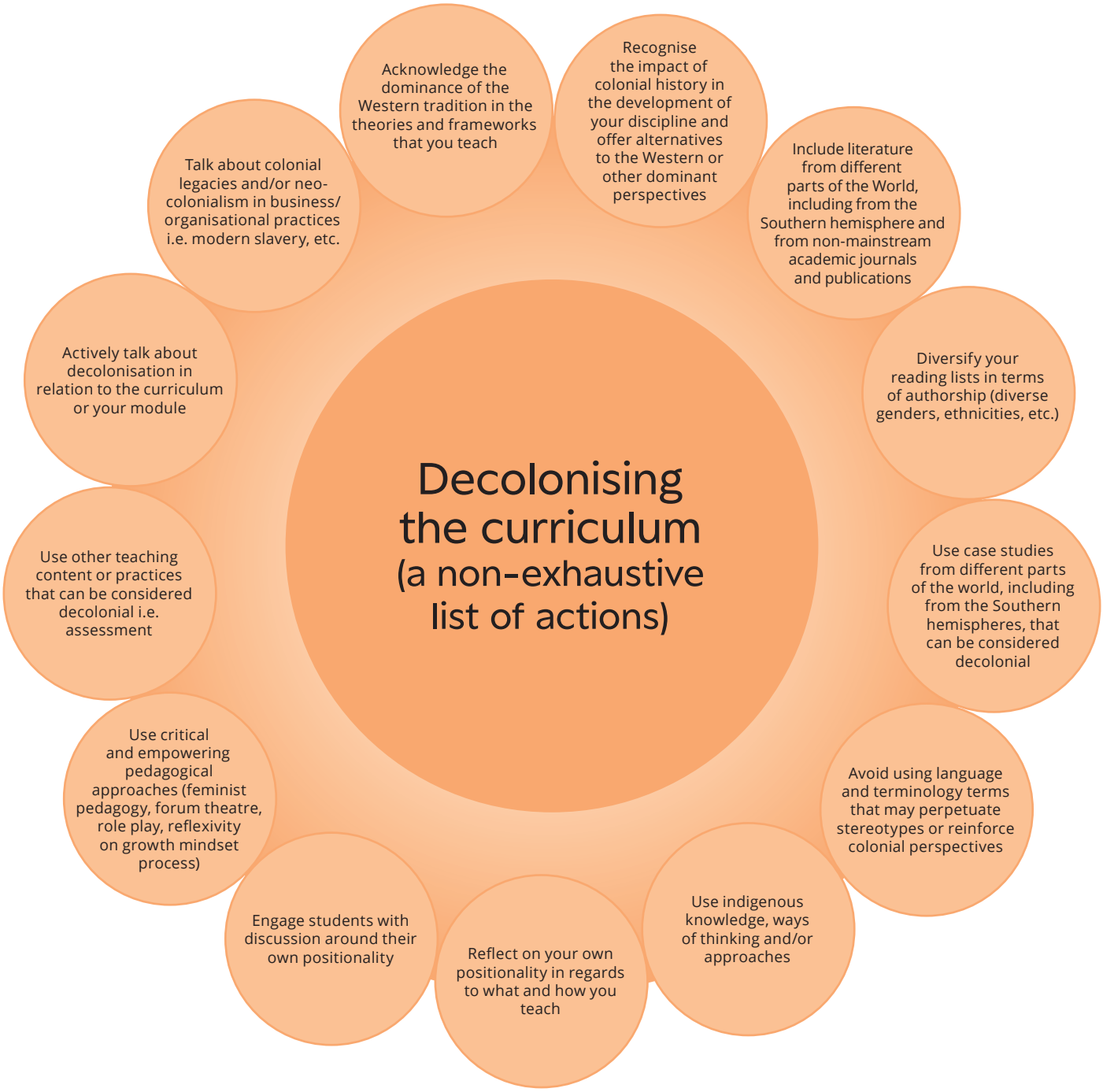

Figure 3 A non-exhaustive list of actions to decolonising the curriculum

1 The project was part funded by the UK PRME Seed-corn Fund for Innovative Teaching.

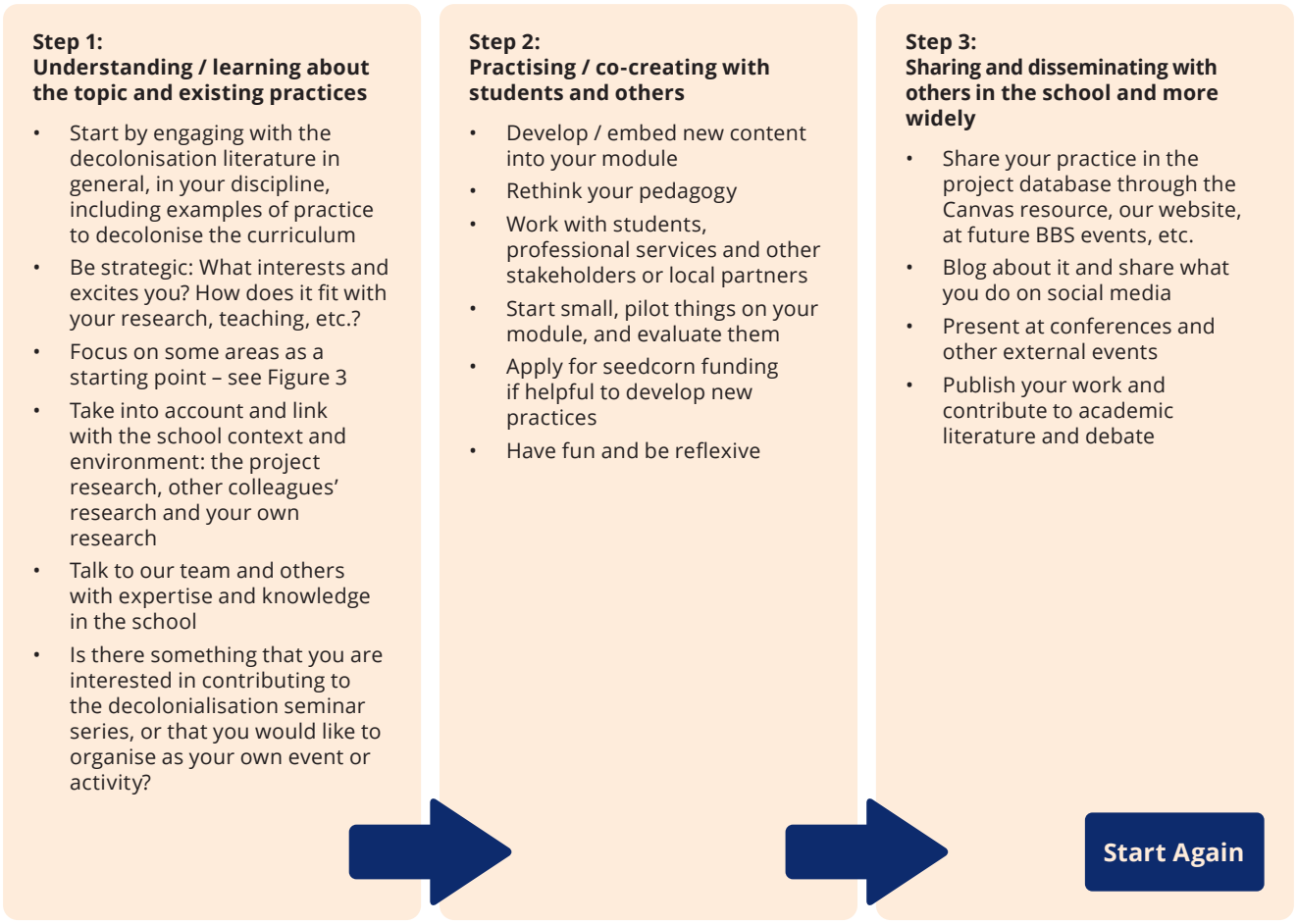

Figure 4 Steps to develop decolonising practices in the curriculum at BBS

A non-exhaustive school survey conducted mid-way through the project indicated that at least 30 colleagues had engaged with the call to decolonise their curriculum. The majority of actions revolved around using case studies and literature from across the world, diversifying their resource lists, acknowledging the dominance and boundaries of Western ways of knowing, and reflecting on their positionality in regard to what and how they teach. It also included encouraging students to reflect on their own positionality, identifying colonial legacies in the curriculum and considering the use of language. Many of these colleagues wanted to continue developing their decolonial practice by using critical and empowering pedagogies as well as bringing indigenous ways of knowing and approaches into their curriculum.

Co-creating with and amplifying students' voices in context

Alongside supporting colleagues to make changes, an important area of work for the project was to engage with students, taking their views and experiences into account and identifying ways to **co-create** decolonisation work with them within the particular context of our school. Being conscious of the traditional power relationships between staff and students, we decided to use creative approaches to engage in **conversations** with students at undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD levels. We developed these **creative** approaches in collaboration with external partners. For example, we ran workshops with a theatre company, New Vic Borderlines, using cultural animation (Kelemen, Surman and Dikomitis, 2018) to foster reflection and discussion about decolonisation, and created a short film as well as an exhibition hosted within the school to provide opportunities to share and hear students' views (see Figure 5). These activities have been instrumental in creating safer spaces where students could share their experiences and perspectives. Doing so not only provided opportunities for students to articulate their views but, by using non-traditional relational and embodied approaches, it also empowered them to take an active role in the decolonisation process after the workshops.

The **conversations** at these workshops raised issues around experiences of segregation and separation amongst groups of students and between students and staff. In the short film titled 'Decolonising the

Figure 5 Using cultural animation techniques in student workshops with New Vic Borderlines

Business School: A Student's Perspective', students questioned why certain voices dominate the teaching landscape and why the curriculum often excludes diverse perspectives. In addition, they highlighted a lack of diversity and representation in the classroom. Through the film students urge a shift away from Eurocentric narratives towards a more global and inclusive approach. This film was showcased at several school events, including the third Birmingham Business School (BBS) Education Conference in 2023, where it sparked meaningful discussions among attendees.

A further avenue for action has been to find ways to work in partnership with student representatives (**co-producers**). This has resulted in outputs such as producing a podcast series on decolonisation, a project exploring safe and inclusive spaces within the school, and a review and evaluation of how to decolonise specific modules.

As our school has a campus and education partnership outside of the UK, an important aspect of the project was to explore what decolonisation meant in these non-UK contexts. For example, colleagues on our Dubai campus ran workshops with students and other education partners to explore students' views and reflections on what decolonising education in Dubai could mean.

Balancing a bottom-up approach with embedding decolonisation of the curriculum within the formal processes and structure of the school

An important challenge for the project has been how to develop an organic and bottom-up approach to the decolonisation of our curriculum, while also embedding it within the school's structure and processes. The challenge was how to ensure the sustainability and longevity of the work without becoming a tick-box exercise. Here our work focused on collaborations with colleagues working in Education and EDB roles

Figure 6 Showing the film at the BBS Education Conference sparked meaningful discussions among attendees

within the school. An away day with these colleagues discussed strategies for embedding decolonising into the school's educational practices and EDB initiatives and provided an agreed list of actions that could then be brought forward in formal education and EDB committees. Another key activity included contributing to programme redesign meetings and workshops for our new MBA and Business Management programmes. In these meetings, we discussed how to embed decolonisation principles into existing and redesigned programmes, through both core and optional modules and extra-curriculum activities. However, this approach to incorporating decolonisation principles through formal channels of operation and communication has been challenging. Colleagues already engage in various quality assurance processes, and decolonisation can appear as an additional demand on their time and resources. It is also dependent on the willingness of particular staff to embrace decolonisation as an important activity and act as champions, advocating for the work.

Insight 3: Decolonising assessment in business schools

Sally Everett, Professor of Business Education, King's Business School

In this report, the Birmingham decolonisation project team ask us to all reflect on the question: 'What can I do from where I am?' As part of this call to action, it is also imperative to consider what we can do to decolonise assessment given that 'students can, with difficulty, escape from the effects of poor teaching, they cannot (by definition if they want to graduate) escape the effects of poor assessment' (Boud, 1995: 35)[1].

It was Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2015)[2] who find traditional assessments uphold colonial legacies and directly hinder the development of more equitable and inclusive educational systems, characterising historical and contemporary contours of the 'unearned advantages' of being white. Such provocations echo Sternberg and Grigorenko (2004)[3] who noted assessments function as a form of cultural capital, and Leonardo and Broderick (2011)[4] suggest the measures of 'smartness' we use are often linked with the privileges of 'whiteness' and (often) opaque assessment criteria. It is perhaps little wonder that assessment practices have been criticised as being a 'pedagogical tool of exclusion' (Lopes and Stará, 2023)[5] and that privilege can marginalise knowledge and devalue skills from non-Western traditions (McArthur, 2022)[6].

It is undeniably the case that many business schools continue to use traditional assessment methods that perpetuate systemic inequalities, often focusing on students' deficits such as penalising students for language skills and expression in essays or the skills of writing under pressure in exams, rather than engaging with processes that foster deep critical reflection, co-creation and creativity. If we continue to operate deficit-focused assessment practices, we will continue to perpetuate inequalities and increase the attainment gaps that characterise our award and progression data. Instead, adopting a decolonised approach to assessment has the potential to transform systems of evaluation into tools for empowerment.

Despite resistance, concern and fear about what a reimagined assessment portfolio might look like in business schools, examples that consider decolonised approaches are emerging. Methods include portfolio assessments where students compile work over a term and engage in a deeper personal reflection of decolonial business and critical perspectives. Reflective journals also provide opportunities for similar continuous, evolving learning documentation; in addition to co-creation projects and community-based initiatives where students are encouraged to critically engage with current business challenges that centre diverse perspectives and lived experiences (perhaps an exploration of indigenous business practices from the global south or an examination of the legacies of colonialism in economic systems). Educators may also wish to consider the production of artistic and visual outputs such as digital storytelling and videos, running community initiatives and events, or encourage personal reflections on cultural immersive experiences in different work settings.

Decolonising assessment is also a call to re-evaluate the use of 'marks', grades and didactic feedback methods. Such a radical reimagining may include processes of 'non-assessment' or 'ungrading' where students participate in collaborative, developmental assessment models (Nieminen, 2022)[1] – removing traditional grading structures to facilitate a more supportive, low-stakes assessment experience. By embracing a process of decolonising assessment feedback, we move to conceptualising feedback as dialogue and shift beyond traditional evaluative approaches

which adopt more inclusive language, recognise diverse forms of knowledge and create space for students' personal insights.

When setting assessment tasks, it may be helpful to ask: Does my assessment design acknowledge various knowledge forms? Do my materials avoid colonial narratives? Are sources diverse and representative? Does it effectively measure its intended learning outcomes? Have I avoided language or terms that might be unfamiliar to students from non-Western backgrounds? Are my examples and context provided in the questions free from negative stereotypes or colonial perspectives on society?

Ultimately, a transformative approach to decolonised assessment seeks to empower rather than disempower students. To fundamentally reimagine assessment as a collaborative, empowering process, we need to be prepared to embark on a continuous, reflexive and challenging journey. It demands that we challenge entrenched power structures, value diverse knowledge systems, and create more inclusive, compassionate educational environments that truly recognise the complex, multifaceted nature of assessment and knowledge production in our business schools and universities.

1 Boud, D. (1995) 'Assessment and learning: Contradictory or complementary?' In P. Knight (Ed) *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education*. London: Kogan.

2 Mountford-Zimdars, A., Sabri, D., Moore, J., Sanders, J. and Jones, S. (2015) *Causes of Differences in Student Outcomes*. Higher Education Funding Council for England.

3 Sternberg, R. J. and Grigorenko, E. L. (2004) 'Successful intelligence in the classroom', *Theory Into Practice*, 43(4): 274–80.

4 Leonardo, Z. and Broderick, A. (2011) 'Smartness as property: A critical exploration of intersections between whiteness and disability studies', *Teachers College Record*, 113(10): 2206–32.

5 Lopes, J. C. and Stará, J. (2023) 'Reflective portfolios as decolonial pedagogical practices', *Educar em Revista*, 38, e85774.

6 McArthur, J. (2022) 'Critical theory in a decolonial age', *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 54(10): 1681–92.

7 Nieminen, J. H. (2022) 'Assessment for inclusion: Rethinking inclusive assessment in higher education', *Teaching in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.2021395

Part 4: Decolonising the running of the business school and the way we work

Students and academics are two important groups within business schools, but they are not the only ones. Central to the ongoing functioning of these organisations are professional services colleagues, the 'large community of university staff who perform administrative, student services, financial, technical and numerous other roles critical to organisational operations' (Veles, Graham and Ovaska, 2023: 128). If we are to address colonisation and its legacies within the business school environment, we must turn our attention to how we operate as organisations in addition to how we educate our students and conduct our research. Indeed, this is paramount if we are to address the underlying structural and systemic presence of colonialism.

Business schools have examined their operations in terms of diversity, with many pledging their commitments to EDB or seeking accreditation via such schemes as Athena Swan or the Race Equality Charter. There has, however, been limited considerations as to what it means or how a business school can decolonise the way it operates. How can we, in the words of Dar et al. (2021), 'act up' in order to dismantle racism and neocolonial practices within the business school as a whole?

As part of our holistic approach to the decolonisation work at BBS, working with professional services colleagues was an essential part of the project from the outset. Unlike our work in the areas of education and research however, there was little prior work from which we could draw to inform and guide our activities in this area. This lack of existing work and literature led us to look outside the school, as well as the Higher Education sector, for inspiration and guidance. This became an opportunity to connect with our external partners on the emerging debate as to how organisations and businesses can approach decolonising their activities (Twumasi, Horne and Rodriguez, 2020).

Learning from other organisations

In turning our attention to other organisations, we built on existing relationships with external partners as well as developing new ones. In doing so, we were interested to know whether and how they were responding to similar concerns.

- **Engaging with our School Advisory Board.** At the outset of the project, with the support of our Dean, we presented our project ideas and plans to our advisory board, comprising a group of high-level executives who advise on the school's strategic objectives. The purpose was two-fold, to obtain advice about how to proceed and to gain their commitment to and validation of the work. One member of the board, Dujon Smith, subsequently became a close ally and co-producer for the project (see Insight 4).
- **Engaging in conversations with external partners** with the help of the school's Corporate Relations Manager acting as a **co-producer**. For example, Mark Lomas, leader of a wider cultural change programme at Lloyds of London, was invited to deliver one of our annual Advisory Board lectures. As part of his work, Mark is guiding Lloyds in exploring how they can acknowledge their historical ties to British colonialism and slavery. A follow-up visit to Lloyds to experience their decolonial work on site showed us how colonial histories can be embedded within buildings themselves. This inspired us to rethink the role that physical space can play in representing diversity, encouraging conversations and promoting decolonisation across the organisation. We also organised a dedicated event on 'Working in partnership and decolonising beyond the business school' that brought together representatives from public and private organisations to discuss ways to tackle structural issues around representations both in terms of day-to-day practices and physical spaces.

Learning from this external engagement, we worked on raising the profile of decolonisation both in the day-to-day operational practices of the school but also in the physical spaces. To support the latter, we have encouraged the creation of artefacts and creative outputs from our events that can be showcased across the school in displays and other events. For example, visual minutes documenting the project as it happened (Figure 7) are now displayed within the school permanently.

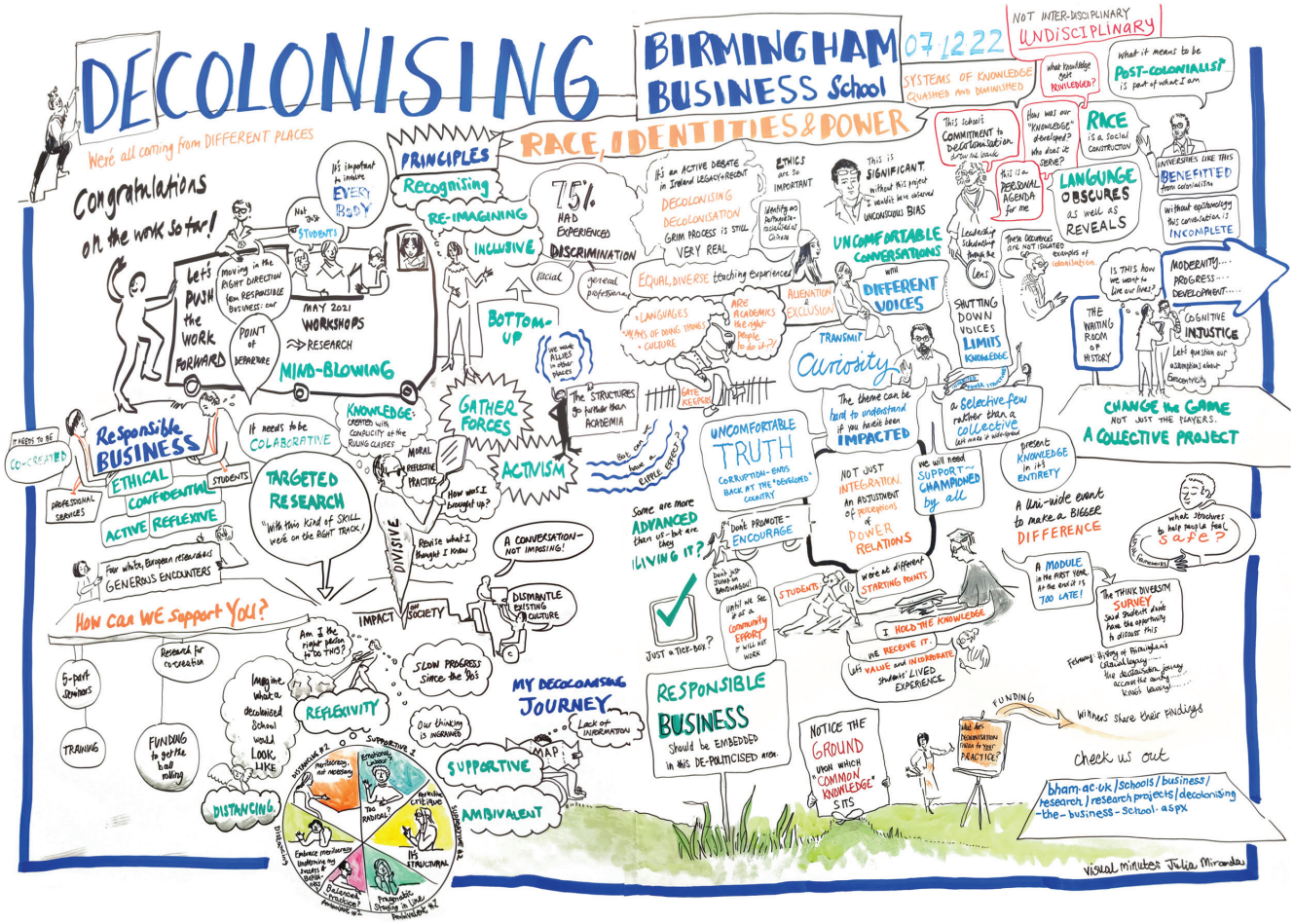

Figure 7 Visual minutes, created by artist Julia Miranda, were produced as part of the decolonisation project and are now displayed within the business school

Figure 8 A summer exhibition held in the atrium of BBS served to share stories and raise the profile of student experiences

Figure 9 A summer exhibition held in the atrium of BBS served to share stories and raise the profile of student experiences

A summer exhibition held in the central atrium of BBS showcased activities conducted as part of the student workshops (Figures 8 and 9) and served to share stories and raise the profile of student experiences. Moreover, we initiated and supported a project for and led by students exploring how they feel about the space within the business school and providing the opportunity to redesign it in a way that feels more representative and enhances their sense of belonging. Rethinking our day-to-day operational practices also involved **conversations** with and working in partnership (**co-creating**) with professional services colleagues. The next section discusses our approach to this.

Working together with professional services (PS) staff

Although decolonisation events were open to all in the school, the majority of staff that attended were academics. **Conversations** with PS colleagues who did attend, revealed that they were struggling to see how the project applied to them. Many could see the relevance to the curriculum and our education practices, and the positive impact decolonising might have on students. However, for PS staff who don't have day-to-day interaction with students, what decolonisation meant in terms of their working lives and roles remained unclear. These **conversations** fed into enhancing our understanding of the **context** of the school and the different parts within it and provided a starting point for this aspect of our work.

To widen participation among PS staff we looked to do the following:

- Develop activities specifically for PS colleagues designed to make the topic accessible and relevant.
- Encourage attendance through personal invites, drop-in sessions and speaking 1:1 with staff to reiterate that they were invited and welcome regardless of ethnicity, seniority or position within the school.
- Create activities that were informative, enjoyable and community focused, not overly academic, and did not assume prior knowledge.

An example of this approach is evident in a workshop that we held for PS colleagues, focusing on the space of BBS. The aim was to reflect on what we know and see and what we overlook, and how spaces might be

experienced in different ways according to who you are. It comprised of a walking tour (Figure 10) of the local neighbourhood around the university, followed by a cultural animation workshop run in conjunction with New Vic Borderlines. The workshop took the thinking that was shared during the walk and applied it specifically to the business school.

Figure 10 A walking tour formed part of a workshop developed specifically for professional services colleagues

Key issues emerging from our conversations with PS colleagues

Our conversations with PS colleagues identified the following key issues in the context of the school:

- **Who is the university for?** Birmingham is part of a group of universities in the UK known as 'red brick', a term used to designate civic universities created in the nineteenth century. Despite their civic principles, our work with PS staff showed that this accolade was not always viewed positively within neighbouring communities, who made links between red bricks and high walls which permitted some to enter and kept others out. Overall, it was felt that this emitted a sense of elitism rather than openness and inclusion.
- **Having an equal voice.** Although working for the same institution and the same academic endeavour, PS staff do not always experience the same privileged position as their academic counterparts, for example in being able to criticise, challenge or argue for alternatives.

- **Being valued.** There was an overall feeling that the knowledge and experiences of professional services are undervalued compared to those of academic colleagues, a distinction which manifests in the structure and processes through which the school and university operate.
- **Barriers and silos.** In addition to the divide between academics and PS staff, divisions also emerged between different elements of the PS workforce, with many not knowing each other or the roles undertaken by other teams.
- **Lack of community feeling.** It was felt that the barriers and silos led to a lack of community feeling.

Outcomes from our work with PS colleagues

1. The issues listed above were shared with the PS leadership of the school and formed the basis on which to rethink the annual PS staff 'Away Day'. This led to community building activity delivered in partnership with the decolonisation project team and New Vic Borderlines (Figure 11).
2. To address the barriers that exist between academics and PS staff, we partnered with PS staff to share the activities undertaken at the workshops and away day, with academic colleagues as part of school-wide events.
3. We have taken this partnership further by making joint (PS and academic staff) presentations at external conferences talking to the wider Higher Education sector. One of the most recent members of the BBS decolonisation project team is a PS colleague whose role is to lead on project activities aiming to create a greater integration between PS and academic colleagues.
4. We are looking to organise an away day bringing together PS colleagues with academics, to further break down barriers.

Figure 11 A community building workshop delivered in collaboration with New Vic Borderlines for PS colleagues

Key actions to work with PS colleagues and external partners as part of a decolonisation project

- Explore the meaning and experience of the university and the business school to non-academic staff, as well as local organisations and neighbourhood communities.
- Explore ways in which you can build links (**co-producers**) internally as well as with external groups to learn from others doing similar work and to find new or **creative** ways to develop **conversations**, for example by working with the arts and cultural sector.
- Consider how to bring decolonisation work to the fore and what it means both in day-to-day operations as well as physical spaces.
- Consider how business schools can meaningfully open their doors to all while still retain a reputation for being centres of innovation and excellence.

Insight 4: The importance of decolonising business schools for industry and innovation

Dujon Smith, Accenture Black Founders Development Programme

Decolonising business schools is a crucial step toward addressing deeply ingrained structural issues and reshaping the assumptions that often go unnoticed within educational and industry frameworks. This process goes beyond the traditional lens of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) or Equality, Diversity and Belonging (EDB) to interrogate the very foundations of how knowledge is constructed, disseminated and applied. By recognising and dismantling these hidden biases, we can lay the groundwork for a more equitable and sustainable future, not only within academia but also across global industries.

Business schools are uniquely positioned to question their own roles and responsibilities in this rapidly evolving world. They must reimagine their purpose in the global marketplace and within their own communities of students and staff. Institutions like Birmingham Business School have the opportunity to lead this transformation by embedding decolonisation into their culture, curriculum and broader narrative. This means interrogating which voices are amplified, what perspectives are included, and how these choices shape the long-term relevance and impact of business education.

In today's interconnected world, innovation thrives on diverse perspectives and inclusive frameworks. Curricula that integrate a wide range of cultural contexts, histories and economic viewpoints better equip students to address real-world challenges with empathy, creativity and strategic insight. For instance, Accenture's Founders Development Program, which I lead, demonstrates how inclusive perspectives fuel meaningful innovation. Founders from underrepresented backgrounds bring unique approaches and experiences that directly challenge conventional norms, enabling breakthrough solutions for a diverse global audience. Similarly, when business schools embed these perspectives into their programs, they prepare graduates to become leaders who can navigate and shape a complex, multicultural world.

Representation in business education plays a vital role in how students see themselves and the confidence they bring to spaces where they have traditionally been marginalised. Embedding decolonisation into the curriculum and institutional values is not just about fairness; it's about fostering the critical thinking and adaptability needed for the future. As I highlighted in the Decolonial Dialogues podcast, this approach creates a cycle of positive change: graduates enter the workforce ready to challenge entrenched systems and build solutions that reflect and respect the diversity of the global market.

Decolonising business schools is not merely about creating space for all voices; it is about setting a new standard for how industries engage with communities, approach innovation and create value. Institutions like Birmingham Business School must weave these principles into their culture and teaching to remain relevant, forward-thinking and impactful. By doing so, they can inspire a generation of leaders equipped to tackle the challenges of a global, interconnected economy with wisdom, equity and inclusivity at their core.

This is a collective effort that extends beyond academia to the industries and communities these institutions serve. As we support projects like this one, the hope is to see business schools worldwide embrace decolonisation as a guiding principle, ensuring that tomorrow's leaders understand and leverage the power of diversity to drive enduring progress.

Conclusion: Key learnings and possible next steps

This report constitutes one stop as we continue to progress on our decolonising journey. Presenting it in this format may give the impression that our journey was easily planned and executed. However, while our intention and initial direction of travel was clear, putting decolonisation into practice has been challenging. Donna Ladkin's observation in Insight 1 that we might 'stumble' towards decolonisation, is applicable to our experience, as we have worked to think about what decolonisation means for us and our school. Establishing a set of principles as we developed our project has helped us to overcome some of these challenges and to move forward in a manner that felt consistent with ourselves, our **context** and what we understand decolonial work to be about and involve (**conversations**).

We have found our decolonising work to be at times uncomfortable (**discomfort**), albeit joyful as well. As pointed out by Sally Everett in Insight 3, this means embarking on a continuous reflexive and challenging journey to foster a transformative approach to education. Adding to this, Bobby Banerjee emphasises in Insight 2 that it is also about rethinking and reimagining collective practices, values, norms and assumptions that shape how research is conducted, shared and valued in an institution. In essence, this is hopeful work. However, challenging existing practices and structures to promote rethinking and reimagining requires emotional labour that needs to be accounted for, especially as the work does not have a clear endpoint and requires us to 'stay with it' (Akhtar, 2023: 9). Finding help and solace in others (**co-producers**) around us and in the approach of scholars working in the area has helped us as a team to stay with it.

We are conscious that our approach and learnings have been influenced by who we are and how we understand and have been able to develop our work within our local and national **context**. This report has enabled us to share our approach with the recognition that it is *one* example of putting theory into practice when decolonising a business school in context. With this limitation in mind, we offer our learnings in the hope that they can serve others who want to pursue such work in their own contexts.

Key lessons learned and suggestions to others

a. Identify why you want to do this work and how it connects with your personal and professional identity (your positionality). Remember to check in with yourself as the work progresses.

b. Understand the **context**: explore what decolonisation means for your institution, the local and national contexts, and your discipline.

c. Be flexible: use existing frameworks and experiences but be prepared to adapt them to suit the **context** of your own institution.

d. Frame this within a longer-term cultural change: decolonising takes time, and any meaningful change will need to be achieved collectively incorporating all that we do.

e. Involve all stakeholders including academics, students, professional services staff and external partners in **conversations** to bring all understandings, experiences and perspectives into focus.

f. Foster open dialogues: create a range of platforms for **conversations** and **co-creation** and be open to diverse views and starting points.

g. Explore decolonial methods to allow people to engage in a way that is meaningful to them, consider methodologies to enable you to do this.

h. Work with allies to develop **co-producers** and empower others to make sustainable and authentic changes.

i. Integrate decolonising work into existing agendas where relevant: aligning with broader institutional priorities such as EDB or environmental and social sustainability.

j. Find ways to make the work visible and accessible in a variety of formats.

k. Undertake research and reflect along the way to learn, adjust and understand progress with regards to the work and how you and others feel about it.

l. Acknowledge that decolonising work can be uncomfortable and create ways of engaging for you and others that will help in working through the **discomfort**.

m. Find hope and joy in the work by doing things that you love and by recognising and celebrating progress.

n. Create space to care for yourself to balance the emotional toll that this work is likely to create.

o. Connect with others (**co-producers**) who are doing this work to share, exchange, learn, reflect and find (and give) encouragement and support.

p. Consider that decolonising work is a way to think deeply about what we do and how we do it with the hope of changing things for the better. Borrowing from Shaun Ruggunan (2016), we can consider that decolonising business schools is a labour of love for our work and our disciplines and see this as a unique opportunity to reimagine our curriculum, our research and academic systems and practices in a more responsible way.

Next steps

As we end this report, we take stock of the work done within the BBS decolonisation project. We have definitely made progress towards our objective. More colleagues have engaged with decolonising their practices and the project is considered an important part of what our school does. However, there is still a lot of work to be done, and questions can be raised about the long-term sustainability of decolonising single organisations. The racial, spatial, material and epistemic legacies of colonialism persist and continue to affect people's lives in our school, university and society. While much can be done by individuals and within business schools, real change will only be fully possible if change takes place across our profession as this issue pervades all aspects of knowledge production in academia (Barros and Alcadipani, 2023). As highlighted by Dujon Smith in Insight 4, this is a critical role for business schools in terms of how they can contribute to wider changes in business practices and in our societies. In Insight 5 doctoral student Mukuka Kasonde encourages every one of us to discover the generative potential of postcolonial discomfort.

Insight 5: The decolonial possibilities of postcolonial discomfort

Mukuka Kasonde, PhD Candidate, University of Huddersfield

I have engaged with the topic of decolonisation from the position of an international student from a former British colony who is racialised as black African within the UK Higher Education context. Early in my doctoral journey, I was asked (I paraphrase), 'Who are you to come into this country and tell them what to do?'. The question made me uncomfortable, and it was one that I regularly reflected on while exploring what it might mean to decolonise a UK business school. Questions of identity can reveal how we understand decolonisation and our attitudes towards it as its centrality in my research participants' experiences show.

Reflecting on why this question caused me so much unease, I thought about the effect that it might have. If taken as instruments to measure one's suitability to engage in decolonial work, they can narrow, defer or shut down efforts to decolonise through the ways in which they exclude or excuse. In my case, the question made me feel excluded from conversations on decolonisation in the UK but also meant that I had to deliberately carve out a space for my scholarship while making sense of the postcolonial discomfort[1] that can come from the ways our institutions are structured and operate.

Calls for the decolonisation of Higher Education institutions must involve understanding our position within global knowledge systems and anyone who engages with the theory and practice of decolonisation will be confronted with questions about their identity. My hope is that the discomfort that comes out of that questioning creates opportunities to challenge the uncritical centring of identity and reinforce the importance for decolonisation to be a collective endeavour.

When working towards decolonisation, identities are important, but we need to be careful not to fall back into patterns of thinking that uphold ideas of suitability or unsuitability for knowledge creation and action that are rooted in coloniality.[2] We need to think about the ways that we position ourselves and others which may lead to their exclusion or excuse them from acting. Post-colonial identities, that is, the sense of selves we are confronted with when we address the legacies of colonisation, are myriad and complex. But it is this diversity and complexity that are needed to uncover and confront the legacies of colonisation that persist in our institutions.

Therefore, I find a fundamental aspect of decoloniality to be holding multiple and often contradictory things together. My experiences lead me to believe that decoloniality offers possibilities for positioning oneself in relation to histories and present-day realities, all while finding strategies and spaces that bring us closer to collective redress. Sitting with postcolonial discomfort can have generative effects, which is not to say that it is easy, nor a linear endeavour. It takes many forms and is always dependent on contextual factors which mean that in any situation one can only hope to do what's best with what they have.[3]

1 A term that refers to the unease that arises from being confronted with the inequalities present in our societies which are cast back and, in some cases, amplified within our institutions.

2 See Said, E. W. (1978) *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.

3 See Walsh, C. E. (2023) 'Beginnings'. In *Rising Up, Living On: Re-Existences, Sowings, and Decolonial Cracks* (pp. 1–12). Duke University Press.

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Additional resources on the BBS decolonisation project

https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/business/research/research-projects/decolonising-the-business-school
https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2024/decolonial-dialogues-a-new-mini-series-from-birmingham-business-schools-decolonisation-project
https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2023/perspectives-on-decolonising-the-business-school-from-students-and-professional-services

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About the authors

Caroline Chapain is Associate Professor in Management at Birmingham Business School. Born of French nationality, Caroline has studied, worked and lived in France (20 years), Canada (10 years) and the UK (20 years). In addition, she did her PhD in Mexico. This cross-cultural experience made her reflect on the notion of identities and cultural practices as well as issues related to the production of knowledge. While her career initially focused on questions related to creativity and economic development in North America and Europe, she has progressively shifted her interests towards the practice of responsible management and education and issues related to equity, diversity and belonging in business schools. She brings these personal and professional identities and perspectives to her understanding and practice of decolonising work.

Anita Lateano is a Research Fellow at Birmingham Business School. Born in Birmingham, UK, Anita identifies as mixed race with heritage that spans both Asia and Latin America. With a professional background within the environmental and charity sector which included work in South Africa and Tanzania, this led her back to academia, with a desire to reflect on those experiences, the role of INGOs in the perpetuation of colonial narratives, and to critically understand climate and environmental injustices. She joined BBS after gaining an MA in Social Anthropology from SOAS and this is Anita's first position within Higher Education, allowing her to hold an 'outsider' perspective within both the business school and academia. Alongside working on the Decolonisation Project, she is currently a PhD student at the University of Westminster.

Rweyemamu Ndibalema is an Associate Professor in Management at Birmingham Business School. Rweyemamu is from Tanzania, whose life experience spans from living, studying and working as an academic in different countries including Canada (lived), New Zealand (lived and studied), Tanzania (lived, studied and worked) United Kingdom (lived, studied and worked) and the United Arab Emirates (lived and worked). Rweyemamu holds a PhD in Management centred on work engagement among academics, it aimed to discover the environment/conditions that trigger positive people engagement enabling them to unleash their best selves. Decolonising Business education coincides with his passion of providing/fostering an environment in academia where every person despite their race (ethnicity) or gender is not disadvantaged by the dark colonial legacy but instead has the best conditions/opportunity to reach their full potential. He brings both in his personal and professional capacity his international lived, study and work experience in our reflective journey of decolonising business education in our business school.

Emma Surman is Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor of Marketing at Birmingham Business School. Emma's research and teaching falls broadly within the areas of consumer culture and the sociology of consumption. Recent projects have explored the links between the production and consumption of food including food swapping, communal eating, school gardens and community responses to food poverty. Emma has held grants from the EPRSC, ESRC and AHRC and has published in journals including *Sociology*, *Sociological Review* and the *Journal of Business Research*. Her teaching takes a critical approach to understanding the role of marketing in society and what responsibility entails in the context of a business school, in part informed by a period spent as PRME champion for BBS. She is one of the editors of *Responsible Marketing for Well-being and Society: A Research Companion*, published by Routledge.

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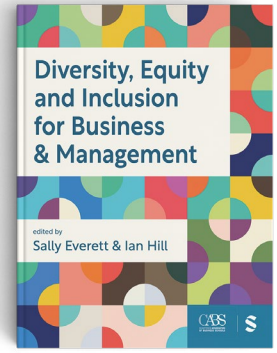

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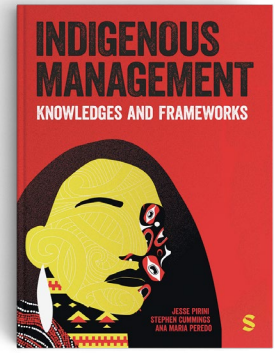

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