



Decolonising the Business School Curriculum

A British Academy of
Management Guide

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Decolonising the Business School Curriculum

The aim of this guide is to provide questions, answers and suggestions for academics teaching across all subjects within business school curricula. We hope this guide becomes a useful resource for business and management educators to facilitate their reflection and review of existing modules and programmes and as they introduce new ones taught in business schools in the UK and internationally.

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01 Key points and basic principles

This guide introduces the ideas behind decolonising the curriculum (DtC) and supports academics who may be unsure where to start decolonising their own teaching practice. Underpinning this guide is the understanding that the DtC effort will be ongoing. We offer the guide with the aim to help programme directors and, in particular, module leaders as (1) they update the content of their existing programmes and the modules they teach, and (2) as they consider and develop new programme curricula and modules.

Launching and embedding DtC initiatives must be done strategically at the school level. Therefore, in preparing this guide, we focus on business schools to be a force for good. It is therefore necessary to pursue approaches to pedagogy and to teach content directly aimed at rebalancing some of the historically sedimented inequalities that are the persistent legacy of the colonial past.

This guide offers suggestions in a nonjudgmental way. Whilst educators in some subject areas have been more likely than others to undertake DtC work over the past few years, DtC is relevant across the entire educational system of business schools, and DtC will continue to matter to students and staff. With this in mind, the guide provides advice to help educators reflect on where they are in their education practice at this moment and what they can do from here.

The guide acknowledges that DtC can be addressed in many ways in terms of politics, epistemology and discipline. Our focus is on introducing the key issues, offering suggestions for practitioners and providing further resources for the British Academy of Management (BAM) community to engage constructively with the DtC agenda from a variety of viewpoints. BAM is the leading scholarly association for business and management researchers and educators in the UK. Our membership comprises around 55 nationalities and over 40 per cent of our members are based outside the UK. BAM has built strong collaborations with other national scholarly associations over the last ten years, including ANZAM (Australia & New Zealand), IAM (Ireland), SIMA (Italy), ACEDE (Spain) and IFSAM (International Federation of Scholarly Associations of Management).

This guide is an invitation to further discussions and reflections on matters such as business school educators' own positionalities, their familiarity with and situatedness within particular colonial histories, and the implications these have for how we all understand and approach DtC.

02 Why DtC is important

The debate around decolonising the curriculum has often been perceived as driven by the humanities, yet important developments in relation to decolonising the business school curriculum have taken place in business school contexts as represented, for instance, by the work of the Decolonizing Alliance, the BARC Collective, and other DtC-related initiatives which have been taking place in business schools inside and outside of the UK. So, why is DtC important for business schools?

Two key reasons underlie the significance of DtC in the context of business and management education:

1

Students enrolled in programmes at business and management schools are a large proportion of all students in higher education. Currently, business schools educate nearly 20 per cent of all students in UK higher education (HE) (and nearly 25 per cent of postgraduate students).¹ Likewise, staff employed by business schools are a significant proportion of all university staff. Many students and staff come to the UK from other countries, including the so-called Global South; therefore, DtC efforts are designed to improve the education offerings in UK HE. If we are serious about decolonising the knowledge taught at universities, business schools in the UK must be central to the DtC debate and work, and embrace the diversity of students and staff.

2

Business schools in the UK and beyond have increasingly moved towards understanding their purpose as primarily oriented towards building a sustainable society, and as being a positive force for human flourishing in the world. Among other things, this implies the need to acknowledge the inequalities associated with the way businesses and other types of organisations—as well as societies—have developed historically, including the ongoing impact of the colonial past. This acknowledgement must now be reflected in business school curricula.

¹ Chartered Association of Business Schools. (2023). Student enrolments in business & management studies 2021/22: Our latest report. <https://charteredabs.org/policy/research/student-enrolments-in-business-management-studies-2021-22-our-latest-report>



03 Who is the guide for?

This guide is for everyone who teaches in and leads business schools. Decolonising the curriculum is a process rather than an end point to be achieved. Some amongst us have already been thinking about it, changing what we teach and how we teach it; others are still considering how (or even whether) to embark on this process. This guide is conceived as an entry point into the wider discussions around decolonising the curriculum for business scholars. Decolonising business school curricula is not a straightforward issue but requires discussion within and across subjects and organisations as well as the creation of resources for alternative forms of knowledge and pedagogy. Regardless of where people are in their careers or their academic disciplines, engagement in DtC requires a reconsideration of the types and sources of knowledge that we produce as researchers and that we teach to students.

04 DtC as part of BAM's Equality, Diversity, Inclusivity and Respect agenda

Central to BAM's strategic framework and all its activities are the values of equality, diversity, inclusivity and respect (EDIR). We consider implementing the DtC agenda as integral to EDIR within educational practices. Whilst not conflating EDIR and DtC, we consider decolonisation of the business school curriculum as an important broader effort to make business schools—as well as societies—more inclusive and equitable.

As we discuss below, the process of decolonising the business school curricula begins by recognising a range of historically sedimented inequalities and inequities. Indeed, whilst the origins of universities vary, funding for some universities was originally connected to businesses and wealthy donors, often dating to activities in the British Empire and in some cases even to the slave trade. These can be discerned in education, and in particular in the business school curriculum, as well as in the world of businesses and in other organisational contexts. Likewise, our pedagogical process is often rooted in the pedagogic norms and approaches developed in Global North countries, with little deliberate attention given to the diversity of norms and approaches through which our students were socialised and with which they are likely to be familiar and comfortable. As such, DtC work, both in relation to the content of the curriculum and the pedagogical process, contributes to creating a more inclusive and equitable learning and teaching environment.

At the same time, DtC has the potential to contribute to greater inclusivity and equity for society at large. The DtC agenda encourages business and management educators to teach students in an inclusive manner that develops their management knowledge in a way that is conscious of the impact of the colonial past on current global socioeconomic inequalities. DtC also aims to engage with and reconcile multiple forms of knowledge and to be respectful of the diverse contexts, organisations, and management ideas and practices observed globally. As such, implementing the DtC agenda in our business school education supports our students in becoming more inclusive managers, aware of the complexities and inequities that continue to characterise businesses and other organisations across the world, and prepared to work towards redressing past injustices both in business and in society.

05 How to start decolonising the curriculum

It is important that we be specific about what we mean by decolonising and how this can be done. We at BAM have been investigating decolonising the business school curriculum for several years and now is the time to discuss how to do so in our practice. This can take many forms, and the debate around decolonising the curriculum is by no means monolithic. This guide is focused on the emerging DtC practices affecting the curricula and the practical implications on how we teach our subjects and our students in business schools. The need for decolonising the business school curricula goes hand in hand with developing critical thinking in the students. This includes, for instance, supporting students in questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about how we think and how we know what we know, carefully considering how knowledge is produced. More so, it also encourages students' self-reflexivity and self-awareness of their own roles in creating academic and professional knowledge, both when they are part of the formal education system and throughout their careers.

In the following, we offer some practical tips to get started. It can be helpful to think about both "how" we teach and "what" we teach.



A **Meaning of decolonisation**

Consider how decolonising your curriculum will mean different things in different contexts: the location where you teach (e.g. in the UK or abroad), the students you teach (e.g. students from Africa and China will have different perceptions regarding colonialism from students in Aotearoa-New Zealand) and the discipline you teach.

B **Knowledge production**

We suggest starting from the assumption that our ways of thinking are inadvertently biased, but in different ways. We have been trained to think—and teach—in ways that reflect certain ways of producing knowledge, and these may be reflective of ‘colonial’ biases. For example, many business theories and models were developed in US business schools, and scholars have discussed whether this reflects business practices in other parts of the world.

C **Case study teaching**

If you teach with cases, think about which countries, industries and people are the focus of those cases. Are they predominantly US- or European-focused? If so, does this reflect the background of the students you teach?

D **Pedagogic approach**

DtC efforts involve reflecting on and modifying the ways we relate to students in the pedagogic process. Do you practise dialogical and relational approaches to teaching? Do you prefer to lecture? How do you ensure that you listen to and learn from your students?

E **External speakers**

If you invite external speakers to give guest lectures on your module or programme, what criteria do you use in selecting the speakers? Do you make sure that you are inviting a diversity of guest lecturers, including ethnic and racial diversity? Do the speakers have knowledge and experience to share with students that go beyond the commonly discussed firms, industries and countries that dominate the textbooks?

F **Reading lists**

Review your reading lists to consider who the authors are, where they are from and their backgrounds. Do they include only the most influential academics in the field? Teaching students to think critically can be enhanced by purposefully juxtaposing orthodox approaches with alternative views and omissions. For example, in international business, culture is taught as part of the subject, but language is not, even though language differences are as important in international practice, and both are closely related in practice. Do your reading lists contain mostly (or only) sources published in English? English might not be the first language for the majority of the students, and perhaps not even for yourself or faculty members of your department. Reviewing the required texts is a step towards recognising the coloniality of knowledge.

G **Disciplinary knowledge**

When you teach, do you include content that tells the students a little more ‘about’ the discipline you teach? This would involve, for example, not only conveying concepts but also highlighting by whom, where and in which contexts they were developed. Help students to understand the historical, geographical and sociocultural backgrounds of the theories, concepts and models they are learning. This will allow them to see these as contingent and subject to change, not as abstract or general. For each discipline, know something about its historical background and help students put the discipline’s key theories and concepts into context.

06 Business school subjects and DtC

Business schools teach a wide variety of subjects, and the scope and process for decolonisation will vary amongst subjects. As the DtC agenda develops, some disciplines and their resources will develop faster than in other disciplines. We encourage business school educators and researchers in all disciplines to use this guide to think about the possibilities for decolonising the curriculum and to identify barriers in your decolonising efforts. One barrier may be an understanding that some subjects are presented as purely 'technical' and in a way designed to develop students' vocational skills and competences. That is, there may be the idea that decolonisation does not apply when teaching 'techniques' and vocational training. Even when the main emphasis in a given module is on technical and/or vocational knowledge, the decolonisation agenda invites us to include reflections on the origins of this knowledge and insights from subject-relevant research conducted through postcolonialism and decoloniality lenses.

In the following, we broadly differentiate between subject-based teaching and technical/vocational training.

Accounting, Economics, Finance, Organisational Psychology.

These are subjects that predominantly focus on teaching vocational and technical knowledge and theories and procedures.

Reflective questions to consider for revising the curriculum:

- a. How and when were theories and models developed, and what were the key concerns intended to address at the time?
- b. Is the current context similar to those concerns; if not, is it still relevant in some way?
- c. For examples of engaging in the decolonisation debate, look at resources from the Economics Observatory.³

Entrepreneurship, Human Resource Management, International Business, Marketing, Operations Management, Strategy

These are action-oriented subjects geared towards applied knowledge or models for problems solving.

Reflective questions to consider for revising the curriculum:

- a. What are the underpinning theories and technical knowledge that inform this teaching?
- b. Are there decolonisation-related debates taking place within the discipline? If so, how might you bring these debates into your curriculum? Consider that models and frameworks are often derived from Western contexts.
- c. Does your selection of case studies overwhelmingly feature US and European companies and businesspeople?
- d. Can issues of culture and intercultural communications be expanded into a discussion of what constitutes responsible management in an international and increasingly multipolar world?

³ Birdi, A., and Guizzo, D. (2021). 'What does it mean to decolonise the economics curriculum?' *Economics Observatory*. <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/what-does-it-mean-to-decolonise-the-economics-curriculum>.

07 Working with students

Business schools, especially in the UK, are often the largest school or faculty within their university, often with the correspondingly highest number of students and staff. Business schools are highly international, and a lot of business school students come from countries that are former colonies. They bring with them, to varying degrees, knowledge of the history of their countries and rich perspectives and insights, all of which are invaluable for the DtC agenda. In addition, many students want to be actively involved in activities connected to decolonising the curriculum. Business school curricula often assume that students prefer to find work in private enterprises. However, other forms of organisations may be equally relevant and even preferred by students, including family businesses, cooperative enterprises and nongovernmental organisations.

Here are practical ways to leverage this difference in perspective.

A Classroom activity

As with any aspect of teaching co-creation, ask students at the beginning of the teaching term or/and at the beginning of lectures what emphasis they would like to see taught and which topics are of interest to them. You can then incorporate these into your content. This is inclusive pedagogic practice: enquiring about students' insights and interests to find out about their goals for classroom learning. This does not necessarily mean that students will directly ask about including decolonisation-related content. However, they may suggest adding examples and case studies which address the management practices and geographical contexts of their home countries.

B Curriculum review

All degree programmes undergo periodic reviews, and it is important to include students as stakeholders on review teams and to address the topic of decolonisation of the curriculum as part of the review process.

C Module review

Similarly, we suggest including students in discussions on DtC as part of annual module reviews.

D Including students in the process

Invite students' reflections on the curriculum and actively seek their participation in review activities. At a school level, this may be best considered by programme teams and consultative student–staff committees and groups. For example, the University of Bristol Decolonising Toolkit provides materials for a student survey.⁴

E DtC student interns

Universities and business schools might allocate funding to employ students as DtC interns. Durham University, for instance, has funded DtC student interns for each Faculty and Department. Through this initiative, students have gained valuable work experience and both developed knowledge about DtC and influenced DtC practices.

⁴ University of Bristol toolkit: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/bilt/our-work-and-who-we-are/themes/decolonising-the-curriculum/>



Some critics have highlighted that it might not be possible to 'decolonise' knowledge

08 Criticisms of DtC

The DtC agenda has been considered to be much needed by many HE stakeholders, and officially embraced by universities in the UK and by learned societies and scholarly associations such as the British Academy of Management. Even so, it has not been free from criticisms. In promoting this agenda, it is important to recognise and respect these criticisms, which is crucial for developing an understanding of the diversity of views towards DtC and for opening a dialogue between the proponents and opponents of DtC efforts. Indeed, one criticism put forward has been that universities' commitment to decolonising curricula has not been subject to critical scrutiny, either prior to or after launching DtC initiatives. In offering this guide, we are open to different views in relation to the suggestions included here, and our aim is to make a practical contribution to DtC work in business schools in the spirit of openness to debate and contestation.

Another critical view of the DtC agenda is that the need for decolonisation of the curriculum might exist in relation to some of the subjects taught, but it is not applicable to all subjects, such as those related to technical knowledge. The view underpinning this guide is that DtC work is relevant for both 'technical' and 'nontechnical' knowledge; that is, in order to contribute to fulfilling the important societal mission and role of business schools, no subject taught should approach knowledge as purely 'technical'. At the same time, we call for adopting a perspective on implementing the DtC agenda that does not seek a 'one-size-fits-all' solution. We support educators' and students' DtC work in a way that is most appropriate in a given subject area.

Some critics have highlighted that it might not be possible to 'decolonise' knowledge; that is, it is a naive and flawed agenda because it implies there is a kind of 'pure' Indigenous knowledge waiting to be revealed through decolonisation. Over the centuries, ways of knowing developed in the Global North and Global South that have mutually influenced each other, and there is no 'pure' knowledge to be found through decolonising the curriculum. However, the objective of this guide is not to encourage a search for a so-called 'pure' decolonised management knowledge and education practice but to suggest becoming reflexive and explicit about theoretical perspectives and management practices that are relevant in different contexts and meaningful to people in these contexts.

Another criticism of the DtC agenda refers to the idea that when business schools in the UK and in other Global North regions engage in decolonising their curricula and educational practices, they might be acting against the wishes of their students, including those who come from former colonies and who see Western-style education as a desired route towards developing their careers. This guide is underpinned by the wish to support business schools in serving both its students and their communities as well as broader society, but also to think beyond narrow notions of careerism and financial rewards for education.

09 Conclusion

DtC work is, undoubtedly, challenging but it is also highly rewarding. Decolonising the educational content and process will take time, dedication and at times courage, but there is a lot to be gained in terms of discovering new forms of knowledge and pedagogic engagement. This introductory guide has focused on suggesting some practical steps which we hope will be useful to members of the BAM community in their educational practice. In conclusion, we would like to stress the important role of business school leadership in promoting organisational structures and cultures that are supportive of the DtC agenda, that provide space and resources for its implementation, and for which DtC work is rewarded and celebrated.



Further resources

Free online resources:

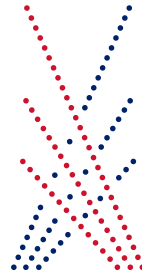
- BARC Collective, *Building the anti-racist classroom: Making the revolution irresistible*. <https://barcworkshop.org/barc-collective/>
- Bayes Business School, ETHOS seminars and events: <https://www.bayes.city.ac.uk/faculties-and-research/centres/cre/events>
- Decolonising Alliance: <https://decolonizingalliance.wordpress.com/>
- Dr Sally Everett's resource list: <https://docs.google.com/document/u/0/d/159YymBz11JLRZ58nelOCFgg5Tk47V6XjsHTeFoGwMP8/mobilebasic?pli=1>
- Durham University Business School's approach: https://assets.prod.unioncloud-internal.com/document/documents/105566/edf9ce5bd5b6a11f8ba64767aba736a6/Fifth_Report_DtC_DUBS_Toolkit.pdf
- SOAS, University of London, *Decolonising SOAS learning and teaching toolkit for programme and module convenors*: <https://blogs.soas.ac.uk/decolonisingsoas/files/2018/10/Decolonising-SOAS-Learning-and-Teaching-Toolkit-AB.pdf>
- University of Birmingham:
 - o *Decolonising a business school: Going beyond the curriculum*: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2023/decolonising-a-business-school-going-beyond-the-curriculum/>
 - o *Putting it simply: What is decolonisation?*: <https://blog.bham.ac.uk/socialsciencesbirmingham/2023/10/10/putting-it-simply-what-is-decolonisation/>
 - o *Decolonising the Business School: Introduction to our new podcast*: <https://soundcloud.com/unibirmingham/decolonising-the-business-school-trailer>
- Times Higher Education:
 - o *Decolonising the curriculum*: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/collections/decolonising-curriculum>
 - o *Decolonising the curriculum—how do I get started?*: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/decolonising-curriculum-how-do-i-get-started>
 - o *Is it possible to decolonise the business curriculum?*: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/it-possible-decolonise-business-curriculum>

Selected research on decolonising business education:

- Allen, S., and Girei, E. (2024). 'Developing decolonial reflexivity: Decolonizing management education by confronting white skin, white identities, and whiteness'. *Academy of Management & Education*, 23(2). <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2022.0387>
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- Dar, S., Liu, H., Martinez Dy, A., and Brewis, D. N. (2021). 'The business school is racist: Act Up!' *Organization*, 28(4), 675–706.
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- Woods, C., Dell, K., and Carroll, B. (2022). 'Decolonizing the business school'. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 21(1). <https://journals.aom.org/doi/full/10.5465/amle.2020.0366>

Courses on decolonising the curriculum in different subjects:

University of Bristol, *Decolonising education: From theory to practice*. <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/decolonising-education-from-theory-to-practice>



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