Decolonizing the Informatics Curriculum

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Context

- The tragic George Floyd incident from 2020 has increased existing university concerns about the issue of race equality

- Response: **Race equality and Anti-racism action plan**

- Expectation that all schools form a working group on *decolonizing their curriculum*

Race Equality and Anti-Racist Action Plan

Race Equality and Anti-Racist Sub-Committee (REAR)

The Race Equality and Anti-Racist Sub-Committee (REAR) is a thematic committee of the University Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Committee (EDIC).

The University of Edinburgh will take action against racism in its various forms (personal, cultural and institutional). We do not wish to be complicit through silence and inaction. We wish to establish an ethos and culture that promotes inclusion, respect and dignity and has a zero-tolerance approach to any form of discrimination.

Terms of Reference

The aim of this group is to ensure and promote activity across the University to end systemic racism and the inclusion of BME staff and students. The group will recommend actions (evidence based) which the EDI Committee can take up to the University Executive. It will also oversee the Race Equality and Anti-Racist Action Plan.

The work of the group has also been informed by the Thematic Review of Student Support for Black and Minority Ethnic Students, the EDMARC Report 2018/19 sections on Ethnicity, points raised from student and staff petitions as a result of the events related to Black Lives Matter and the Equality and Human Rights Commission Report (2019) on Tackling racial harassment.

UoE Race Equality and Anti-Racist (REAR) Action Plan for 2020/21:

Race Equality and Anti-Racist Action Plan (609.13 KB PDF)

Colonialism and decolonization

- ***Colonialism*** is about *domination* and *control*:
  - Traditionally, controlling other people/territories
  - Mostly associated with political control and white European male dominance
  - Nowadays also other forms e.g. digital colonialism
- ***Decolonization is the undoing of colonialism***
  - Strongly related to ***EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion)***: fair treatment and opportunity for all; not treating somebody less favourably because of protected characteristics (age, gender, disability, race, religion, etc.)

Decolonizing the curriculum

- *"creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on **how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum, and with respect to what is being taught and how it frames the world**.*" (Open University, "The Innovating Pedagogy" 2019)

- *"prompts us to consider everything we study from new perspectives. It draws attention to how often the only world view presented to learners is male, white, and European. **This isn't simply about removing some content from the curriculum and replacing it with new content – it's about considering multiple perspectives and making space to think carefully about what we value**. Decolonizing learning helps us to recognize, understand, and challenge the ways in which our world is shaped by colonialism. It also prompts us to examine our professional practices. It is an approach that includes indigenous knowledge and ways of learning, enabling students to explore themselves and their values and to define success on their own terms"* (Keele University, "Keele Manifesto for Decolonising the Curriculum", 2019)

The beginnings in Informatics

- First, we formed the **Decolonizing the Curriculum Working Group**:
  - Members: Prof. Jane Hillston, Drs. Kobi Gal, Nadin Kokcian, Vijay Nagarajan, me
- In our first meeting:
  - Sense that there is little to do as Informatics is a post-colonial discipline (traditional view)

  BUT… **even in Informatics there may be a tendency to**:

  - **Use terminology which may feel offensive to some groups** (e.g. master-slave, blacklist/whitelist, black/white box), for which alternatives have been proposed by e.g. ACM
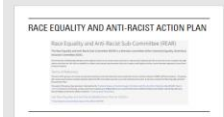 - **Not emphasise notable contributions by "others"** (women, underrepresented minorities)

Organising workshops

- Informatics very heterogenous -> how to facilitate discussion?

- Institutes have members working on related topics and sharing a common language; we decided to hold one workshop in each institute

- Preparation:

  - Introductory video

  - Some associated resources including an overview of decolonization (Elizabeth Charles)

Outcomes sought

- Creating discussion between course organisers around:
  - *What decolonization means for their institute*
  - *What decolonization means for them*
  - *Actions that they could take for their course(s):*
    - *In terms of design*
    - *In terms of delivery*
- Introducing requirement for them to then submit **form with proposed updates to their courses** to us for checking and submission to BoS

The workshops

Soliciting actions

- After finishing workshops, we sent the form to all course organisers
- Open-ended questions to help with introspection:

• **Decolonizing content**: *Have you considered whether there is any [terminology]() used in the course that can be offensive or exclusionary? Are you highlighting the influential work of underrepresented pioneers? Are the examples and case-studies considered in the course diverse? (…) Have you considered whether the examples discussed use [stereotypes]()?*

• **Decolonizing delivery**: Are you establishing a level playing field? Are you considering how accessible the content delivered online is? Are you considering Active Learning techniques? Have you considered revising your introductory sequence to make it more inclusive and real?

Summary proposed actions for decolonizing content

- Paying attention to terminology and avoiding predominantly Western names

- Avoiding stereotypes in examples

- Explicitly discussing ethical issues (e.g. societal consequences of employing data analysis) and laws from different parts of the world

- Using inclusive examples and case studies (e.g. in theory-based courses, examples from Persia, China and India; discussing varied languages in CogSci tutorials)

- Highlighting the work of underrepresented pioneers, choosing female authors, making the identification of forgotten pioneers part of assignment.

Summary proposed actions for decolonizing delivery

- Combatting the 'hidden curriculum' with a purpose/task/criteria approach

- Celebrating diversity

- Ensuring a level playing field: accessible material, simple language, not penalising spelling/grammar (DONE: updated in CMS), subtitles, detailed lecture notes, multiple representation means and modes of interaction

- Employing active learning methods to understand status of students

- Incorporating student-led activities: group discussions and assignments.

Mainstreaming decolonization in Informatics

- BoS approved proposed decolonization plan in February 2021
- Courses for which we have not received (revised) forms are being chased
- Forms will be soon requested for courses which are starting in 2021-22
- Course proposal BoS forms will include decolonization questions:

(1) What actions are you taking towards making your course content inclusive? Please be as specific as possible. If you are not taking any action, please justify.

(2) What actions are you taking towards making your course delivery inclusive? Please be as specific as possible. If you are not taking any action, please justify.

Thank you! Questions?