Decolonising Your Course Toolkit – Humanities and Social Sciences Courses

This toolkit has been created in consultation with The Black Curriculum and is presented with thanks for their expertise.

This toolkit is designed to guide you through decolonising your Scholars Programme course.

There are many reasons we might seek to decolonise our curricula. The first and most pressing for many is the moral and ethical imperative to share the perspectives and provide room for the voices of those who have been silenced and sidelined. There is also an intellectual imperative – as scholars we make claims often about how our work fills gaps in our understanding, questions the status quo, and provides new understandings of old problems. Pedagogically, there is also an imperative to provide material to students that they can relate to and connect with – it is often said that 'if you can see it, you can be it'. On the Scholars Programme, we want to inspire the students to imagine any future for themselves, regardless of background, and part of this should be presenting them with courses where they can see themselves represented positively.

Decolonisation is something that has sometimes been misunderstood in the news media as being about removing White authors and adding token Black figures into courses. This is not the aim of **decolonising,** which is the process of seeking out and eradicating assumptions based on colonial values or habits and instead providing thorough and accurate context and a more comprehensive perspective on topics and issues. It is also different from **diversifying**, which is a more simple process of adding to the curriculum to include more perspectives, focussing particularly on those of underrepresented backgrounds. **Decolonising** goes deeper, into the assumptions we make and the approaches we take.

The **decolonisation** of curricula is an ongoing process rather than a simple goal. As scholarship, cultural and political understanding of the process of colonisation evolves, so will understanding of what it means to design, teach and revise material to provide rigorous and thoroughly decolonised courses to our students. We appreciate that this process may be new for you, as it is for many of us, and so we have provided this toolkit to help you work through getting started on the process.

If you do one thing…

If you do one thing, ensure you understand the historical and cultural context of your research. Do you have a critical understanding of the historical context of the key concepts/research in your course? Do you know how **colonialism** may have affected both scholarly and popular understanding of identities (national, individual, racial, community, and more), collections in museums and works of art, and which pieces of literature or culture are considered 'canonical'?

The rest of this toolkit includes some big questions to ask of your course, some practical tips, information on further reading/resources and a glossary. We have also included an appendix with some further reading.

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How to decolonise: key approaches and terminology

The core of decolonising is **recognising the positionality** of the material you are using, identifying it, and viewing it with a critical eye. We must consider the **intersectional** nature of the identity of an individual or group, and examine with care the way that identity is constructed, interpreted and lived.

In order to decolonise, we must recognise the ongoing **coloniality** of the academy and of our educational system. We must recognise that colonialism is ongoing. If we are to take **decoloniality** as our **praxis**, then we must constantly seek to identify and acknowledge the intersecting forms of power exerted by **coloniality** and actively work to centre a variety of forms of knowledge and multiple ways of being in the world.

Decoloniality is a **praxis** (defined below) that we hope will enable you to produce courses that you can be confident reflect the plurality of the field and the voices within it, enriching the curriculum, whilst dismantling the ways in which contributions from some individuals, communities and societies may have been made invisible due to bias and prejudice. It is also an **ethical** lens which we hope to use to inform professional standards of best practice in teaching and academia.

Key terms	
Positionality	Your positionality is the social and political context that creates your identity in terms of race, class, gender, sex, and ability status. Positionality also describes how your identity influences, and potentially biases, your understanding of and outlook on the world.
Intersectionality	The interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, and the ways in which these categorisations create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.
Coloniality	Emerging from theories of decoloniality, coloniality is the assertion that colonisation has not ended, but is instead reified through systems of power such as the political economy, the production of knowledge, and a hierarchy of cultural systems – all of which are known as the 'colonial matrix of power'.
Decoloniality	A method of praxis that seeks to continually undo the various interlocking themes of coloniality by acknowledging coloniality's intersecting forms of power, and resisting them by putting into practice actions that constantly center the plurality of knowledge, and the multiples ways of being in the world.
Praxis	The process of putting a theory into practice, then reflecting on that theory in practice. This is an on-going developmental process to ensure theoretical aims align with what we actually do in teaching spaces.
Episteme	Implicit 'rules of formation' which govern what constitutes legitimate forms of knowledge for a particular cultural period.
Racialisation	The ways in which society imposes identities of 'race' onto those that are ethnically minoritised.
Ethics	The moral principles that govern a person's behaviour and actions.

Questions to consider

Question	Example
What does it mean for a text to be canonical? Have 'canonical texts' marginalised other accounts in accordance with geographical and temporal spaces? Take the above questions into consideration whilst developing resources.	Factors such as sex, gender, race, class, ability, and geographies all contribute to the ways in which 'canonical work' is produced. In the context of Anthropology, Margaret Mead, Levi Strauss, and Frans Boas, are all considered to be core canonical scholars in the field of Anthropology. However, lesser-known scholars such as Zora Neale Hurston, Sylvia Winter, and St Claire Drake made equally important contributions to the field of Anthropology and Social theory with little recognition. When problematising a canon keep these questions in mind: What is the orientation of a canon? Who is it for? And thus, who decides its value?
What is the positionality of the author you are using, and how does this inform their own ideological frameworks in regard to coloniality?	Be aware of the positionality of the scholars that you are choosing to use. This will allow you to critique and understand their position in relation to their theory. If you include this in your lesson plan, you can then engage the students in a discussion about the wider contextual factors that may have influenced this scholar. For example, David Hume expressed racist beliefs about white supremacy in some footnotes of his work. While Hume would not need to be removed from any given course, students must be provided with the contextual elements that influenced his thinking, such as the cultural and political landscape in which he was writing, as well as being offered a firm critique of his work.

Are the lives and cultural heritage of the students you may teach represented? If not, how can you honour the multiple narratives existing within your classroom?	In Geography, people can sometimes assume that maps are objective or unbiased, but we should make sure to keep a critical eye when using and interpreting them. Can we ask ourselves: who was this map made for? What has been included and what has been left off? Why might that be? What choices have map makers made in flattening a sphere? How does this impact how land masses are represented or ideas about where power lies in the world? Consider the map's relation to power and institutionally-recognised knowledge, and anything we know about the positionality of the cartographer. What other narratives are there running parallel to the cartographers? How do the oral histories of marginalised communities map out a geographical location differently to that of a physical map? Why is the physical map valued differently?
How has the relationship between colonisation and modernity informed our understanding of 'progress'? Could ideas of progress be plural?	Discussion of 'progress' often assumes that development is linear and creates positive change. When we talk about 'progress' or 'modernity', those ideas are intimately linked with the colonial apparatus. The scholar Anibal Quijano is one of several who have critiqued the idea of progress, arguing that 'progress' not *objective*, but rather is a *subjective* phenomenon that privileges 'modern' nations. Can we take a more critical eye to the idea of 'progress'? How should we measure it? For example, via economic growth or via sustainability? For example, Aborigine communities prior to colonisation maintained a sustainable way of living for 60,000 years; whereas since British Imperialism (and subsequently 'development') began, large proportions of the earth's inhabitants and natural resources have been depleted to the point of almost irreversible damage. Who is more 'progressive' when we consider all the implications of so-called progress?
How are stereotypes constructed, disseminated, and lived?	If you are reading a text or image-based source that includes stereotypical narratives or imagery, use this opportunity to discuss how stereotypes are constructed, shared, and lived. Stereotypes may have some relation to real experiences. For example, derogatory iconography depicting self-emancipated African-Americans eating watermelon is an example of this. Watermelons post-civil war were a staple crop of many African Americans. Their relationship with the land and the cultivation of this

	crop allowed them to become fully independent, engage in economic trade, and have a consistent supply of food within their own control. Therefore, the watermelon was taken as a symbol of resistance and self-determination. However, this symbol of freedom was quickly inverted and used in a derogatory fashion by popular media in an attempt reify the inhumanity of African Americans, and thus advocate in favour of a return to plantation society. It is important to unpack the intention and meaning of stereotypes, such as this one, and how they are lived, in order to understand, critique and reject them. Also, be aware of, and ready to point out, representations that are stereotypes that pupils may not be aware of as stereotypes.
Given that academic research often marginalises, centres or fictionalises certain voices, how can students see themselves reflected positively in the context of your research?	Include a diverse body of researchers to create your course and to underpin activities with pupils. Consider resources outside of academia that still hold relevance within your subject area. For example, when discussing politics and history, look at genres of music such as Hip-hop, Calypso, Poetry and Dub, which all contain political commentaries, alongside more traditional sources such as government documents or political speeches. It is important for students to recognise that communities that may not have access to academic research still enact research, and theorise on that research, with the means that they have. Discuss the contributing factors to why voices certain voices within research have been marginalised historically and explore how this can be challenged.

Practical Tips

These are a list of things you can do as practical strategies to decolonise your handbook. Not all will be applicable, but we suggest selecting at least two to try for yourself.

Task	What could you do?
Check that you have included a variety of voices	If your course provides multiple research articles or opinion pieces, does this include a variety of voices, not just those who are traditionally represented? If you are including "characters" within your handbook such as a list of names taking part in an activity, is this inclusive of different genders and cultures? If you are using works of culture, do these represent a variety of viewpoints?
Provide pupils with some context of how we got to where we are now with this research	Make sure that throughout your handbook you are actively identifying the positionality of the figures and sources that you are using and contextualising their meaning as deeply as you can. Add "Debates" sections where pupils can find out more about the controversies or challenges within the field, and can see different perspectives from within and outside of academia.
If your course provides historical context, check the positionality of the account and relate this to an intersectional understanding of the research topic and its relationship to coloniality.	Think about the ways in which you may approach material that privileges particular colonial perspectives. How can you engage students in dialogue about this and cultivate critical discussions? Be sure to provide students with material that engages in parallel narratives to that which you are using in your session, and in doing so apply value to multiple types of sources (i.e. oral histories, material culture etc and not just 'academic research').
Use the homework tasks to broaden pupils' understanding of the historical or cultural debates in the discipline	Are there any controversies or examples from within your discipline that you could encourage the students to engage with? For example, the popularly understood narrative of English history often begins with the people often referred to as 'Anglo-Saxons' who are considered the 'real' English, when early England underwent a complex process of many episodes of conquest and displacement, and those people who called themselves (and were called) 'English' were not exclusively the people we identify in hindsight as 'Anglo-Saxons'. Often discussions around England begin with the 'Anglo-Saxons', however very little attention is given to indigenous communities such as the Welsh, Cornish, Scottish, and Irish to explore shifting positionalities. This is the same in Wales, Ireland and Scotland. It

	is important for students to understand this so that they have a firm awareness of the nation in which they live. Understanding the complexities of historical English identity can also help pupils gain a deeper understanding of present-day debates and have a firm and critical awareness of the nation in which they live. Complexities like these should be centred throughout your course. There is no single narrative that cannot be challenged, but a constant process of investigation, revision and scholarly conversation.

Glossary

Word	Definition	In a sentence
Colonialism	the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically.	**Colonialism** has led to indigenous people to become minorities where they were once the majority, for example, the First Nation people of Canada, or the Maori of New Zealand.
Neo-colonialism	the use of economic, political, cultural, or other pressures to control or influence other countries, especially former dependencies.	Instead of direct military control, **neo-colonialism** relies on conditional aid and cultural pressures to control countries that previously were colonised. For example, this includes financial organisations that offer loans or economic aid that are conditional on the recipient countries implementing practices and steps that may harm their economies.
Imperialism	a policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonisation, use of military force, or other means.	Often, colonialism and **imperialism** are used synonymously, but more accurately, **imperialism** is the practice of ruling informed by the theory of colonialism.
Decolonisation	the action or process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent.	**Decolonisation** refers to the withdrawal of imperialism from colonised countries. In addition, the definition has expanded to include 'freeing of minds from colonial ideology'.
Eurocentric	focusing on European culture or history to the exclusion of a wider view of the world; implicitly regarding European culture as pre-eminent.	The history of mathematics is often told in a **Eurocentric** way, focusing on the works of, often white, European males.
Eugenics	is a movement aimed at improving the genetic composition of the human race. Eugenicists, in history, advocated selective breeding to achieve these goals.	**Eugenics** was popular in the early 1900s and was used as reasoning for many horrific atrocities that occurred. Including Hitler's belief in creating a superior race, and mass sterilisations that took place.

Appendix I – Different Perspectives

Here are some examples of what a decolonised course might say.

Eurocentric and Colonised:	Decolonised Narrative:
The Vikings were a Scandinavian people who were very successful navigators, pillagers and, eventually, settlers. They had a strong warrior culture and were very dominant during the early medieval period.	The Vikings were a very diverse group of people, with diverse religious beliefs. Current research indicates that some Vikings practised Islam. Vikings were defined by what they did (travelling by sea and raiding and settling in new countries) rather than by ethnicity. They sometimes integrated with and sometimes displaced indigenous communities in the places they travelled to. Vikings were not all white, and we have good reason to believe that women took part in the travelling and fighting as well as being an important part of settling and integrating in new countries.
Planned activity before decolonising:	**Revised and Decolonised Version:**
Read the excerpt from "Devil in a White City" and consider the following questions: 1. How is the World Fair described? 2. Why do you think someone would want to attend? 3. What can the Midway Plaisance tell us about global race relations in the US in 1893? NB: The excerpt describes the Midway Plaisance as "designed to provide an education about alien cultures" and as "a great pleasure garden" and as "an exotic realm of unusual sights sounds and scents [with] authentic villages from far off lands"	If the aim of the tutorial is to interrogate race relations in the US at this time, then the prompts as stated would remain. However, a decolonised version would include some explicit interrogation of the terms used in the excerpts, as well as looking for the historical global connections that produced such an event. The 'World Fair' took place 50 years after the 'Great Exhibition'. A decolonial exploration of these events might look at the relationship between them both, and ask: how they are linked to the past and present phenomena of coloniality? The US is a colonial settlement in itself, and so might we argue that the 'World Fair' was an another extension and display of colonial power? What is the relationship of the USA to British Imperialism? You might also explore why the use of "exotic" is a problematic term today or explicitly engage with how exotic isn't just a synonym for different, but is wrapped up in assumptions about power, "other" and

	creates a civilised v. uncivilised paradigm. What language in the excerpt lets readers know that Midway Plaisance is "othered"? N.b. these are suggestions for various ways you might apply decoloniality to this tutorial – you would not necessarily need to apply all at once.
Eurocentric and Colonised:	Decolonised Narrative:
Not only do we have a long history of democratic decision making, our type of democracy – the parliamentary democracy – has been exported, enforced and adopted by many countries in the world.	Democratic rule has been developed in many different ways according to the cultural and social norms of given societies across the globe. During the Era of British imperialism, parliamentary democratic rule, a form of Western Democracy, was exported and enforced on colonial subjects for the purpose of exploitation and domination. For this reason, European systems of governance can be found across the globe, in continents such as Africa and America, despite their independence from Britain.

Appendix II – Worked Example – History

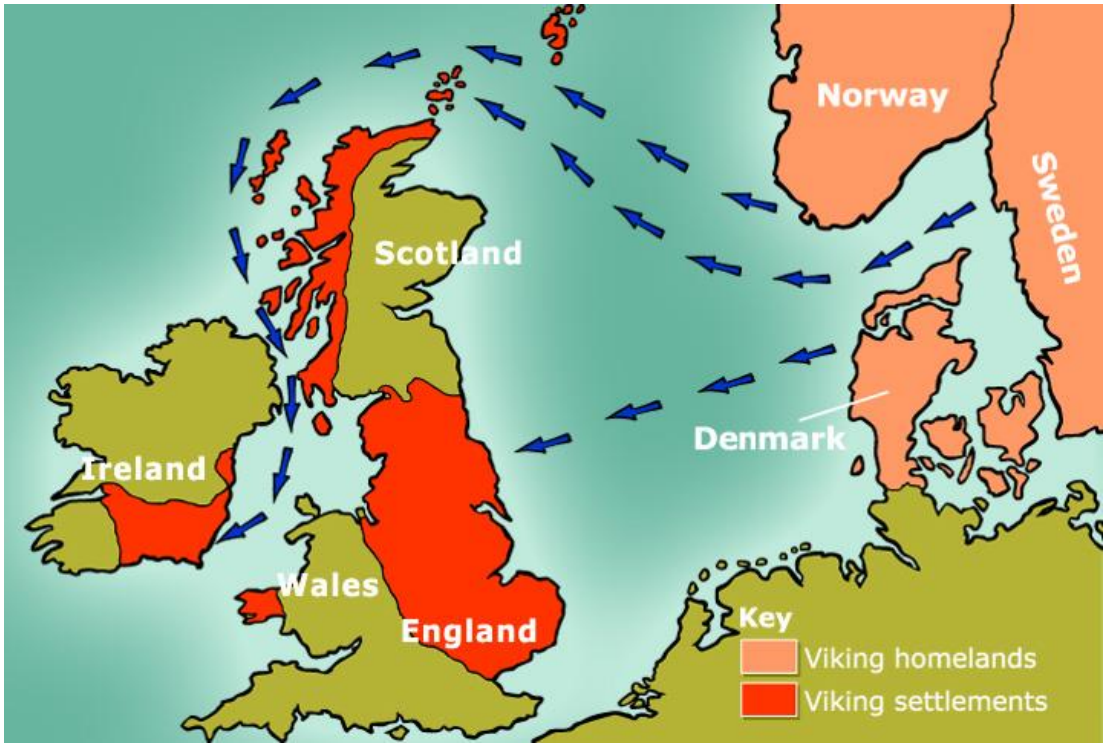
Activity: Who were the Vikings? (Original)

Take a minute with the person next to you and write down three things you know about Vikings – don't worry if you can't think of that many!

1. ……

2. ……

3. ……



The **Vikings** came from the part of Europe we now call **Scandinavia** – Norway, Sweden and Denmark. The Vikings invaded and settled in large parts of Britain.

Some people thought of the Vikings as pagan (non-Christian) savages and did not like them. But the Vikings weren't just pillagers (thieves taking valuable items) they were also settlers, looking for peaceful places to live with good farming land.

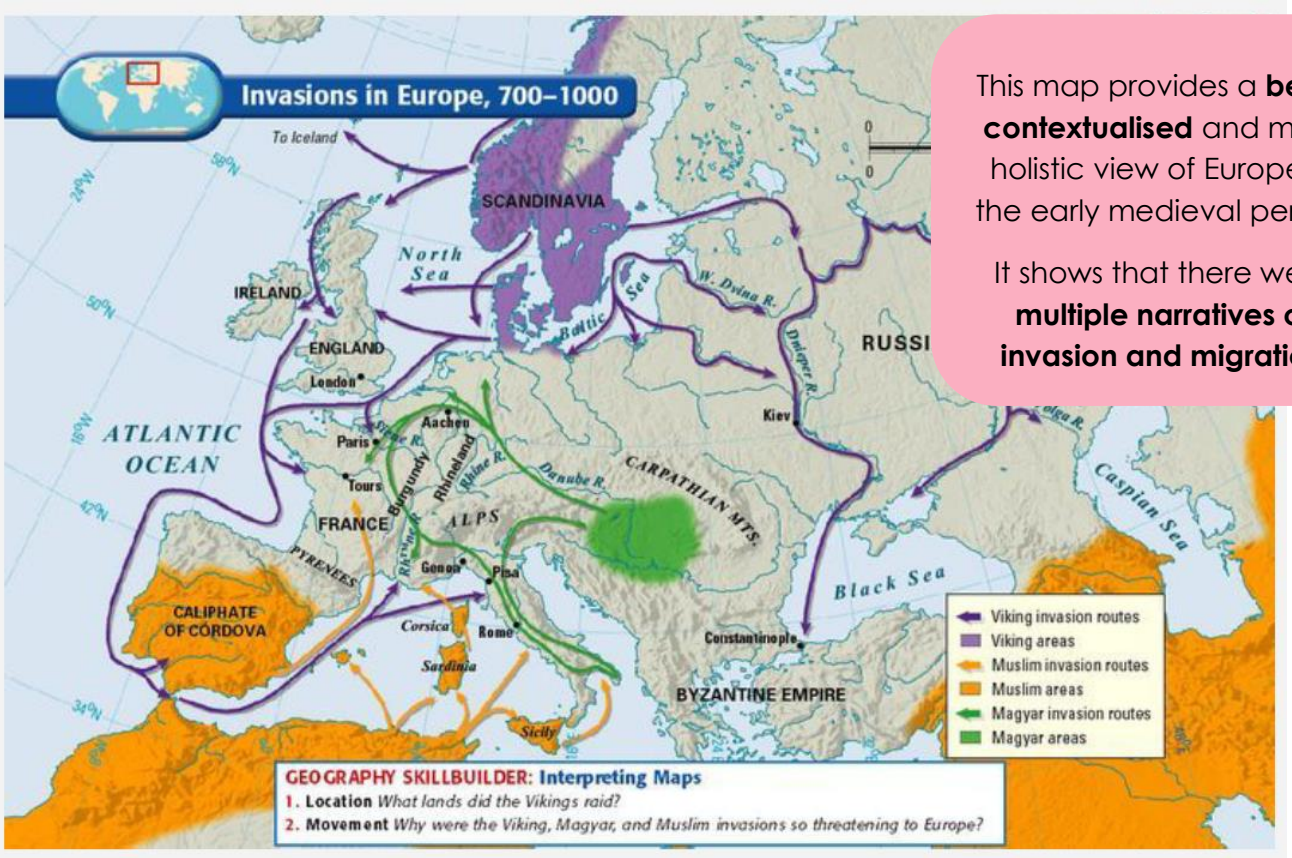
Activity: Who were the Vikings? (Decolonised)

Take a minute with the person next to you and write down three things you know about Vikings – don't worry if you can't think of that many!

1. ……

2. ……

3. ……



This map provides a **better contextualised** and more holistic view of Europe in the early medieval period.

It shows that there were **multiple narratives of invasion and migration**

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As you will see from this map, the Vikings were not the only group invading and settling during this period, and Viking and Muslim communities interacted significantly in this period. There is even some evidence that some Vikings became practicing Muslims.

We shouldn't imagine European history as separate from global history, but should always keep in mind that history is complex and made up of many interweaving narratives.

Appendix III – Worked Example – Economics

Activity (Original): Introduction to Vertical Integration

Imagine that you are looking to grow your company that builds houses. You have **£5 million** to spend to grow your business. From the list below select all the things that you would buy and be prepared to explain your reasoning for your choices:

Merge with a competing building company that services 50% of the area your company will work in (£4million)	Land in a forest for timber plus equipment to turn trees into lumber (£1million)	A cement truck company which owns access to the trucks and a quarry (£2million)
A recruitment company which specialises in hiring tradespeople such as electricians, plumbers, plasterers, etc. (£1 million)	Purchase of a small business that sells only flats in the area your company will work in (£1million)	A real estate agent business with their own advertising staff (£2million)

Why did you choose to spend your money this way?

There are two models of business strategy to maximize profits:

- **Horizontal Integration:** one company takes over another that operates in the same level in an industry (i.e. Walt Disney purchasing 21st Century Fox, with both making movies and television programmes). This allows companies to expand in size and to new markets, increase their product offerings and reduce competition.
- **Vertical Integration:** a company streamlines its operations by taking direct ownership of different stages in the production process (i.e. Ikea's purchase of forests in Romania to build their furniture). This allows companies to pay less in external costs to create their products and give companies easier access to a range of consumers.

In the boxes above put an H next those which are an example of horizontal integration and a V next to those that are an example of vertical integration.

Discuss with your partner:

What was your aim in making these decisions? Think about what you wanted your company to achieve.

Which model do you think is most effective to help you achieve these aims? Why?

When we think about the way that businesses in countries like the UK and the US operate, and what they prioritise, we often think about **profit**. This is because they, broadly speaking, follow an economic philosophy known as **capitalism.**

Capitalism is 'an economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state' (Definition from Oxford Languages).

Working with a partner, compare and contrast how vertically integrated businesses and horizontally integrated businesses can use these models to maximize their profit. Brainstorm some of the pros and cons of each model

	Pros	Cons
Vertical Integration		
Horizontal Integration		

It is important to note that the UK does not have a purely capitalist system and the government does intervene in ways that limit company's profits.

Discussion: If a company has developed a successful business model, under what circumstances could/should government step in and require changes? Why would these circumstances demand intervention?

Activity (Decolonised) – Introduction to Vertical Integration

Imagine that you are looking to grow your company that builds houses. You have **£5 million** to spend to grow your business. From the list below select all the things that you would buy and be prepared to explain your reasoning for your choices:

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Discussion

There are two models of business strategy to maximize profits:

- **Horizontal Integration:** one company takes over another that operates in the same level in an industry (i.e. Walt Disney purchasing 21st Century Fox, with both making movies and television programmes). This allows companies to expand in size and to new markets, increase their product offerings and reduce competition.
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In the boxes above put an H next those which are an example of horizontal integration and a V next to those that are an example of vertical integration.

Discuss with your partner:

Why did you choose to spend your money this way?

What were your aims when making these choices?

Did you consider anything other than **profit** such as:

- Employee wellbeing?
- Sustainability?
- Effect on the local community?

When we think about the way that businesses in countries like the UK and the US operate, and what they prioritise, we often think about **profit**. This is because they, broadly speaking, follow an economic philosophy known as **capitalism.**

Capitalism is 'an economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state' (Definition from Oxford Languages).

People who are **pro-capitalism** praise it for offering **consumer choice**, meaning that if many products are on offer on the market, they should all compete for our interest and to offer us the best price, so that we can have plenty of free choice and get the best deal. They believe that it offers the most benefit to the most people, allowing anyone who can make a profit to succeed and generating wealth for people who invest in the market.

People who are **anti-capitalism** criticise it for being individualistic, for making the rich richer and the poor poorer and allowing big businesses to build up **monopolies**, meaning they control the markets, make all the profits and only offer an illusion of choice. For example, how Amazon.com has driven many independent booksellers out of business.

Capitalism has a close link with **colonialism.** When the **British Empire** was expanding, it exploited the natural and human resources of the places it invaded for profit, often without consideration for the sustainability of its actions or the needs of the local community.

Now: revisit the table above thinking about sustainability **and** community **rather than** profit **and with a partner complete the table below** with some suggestions about what other things you might be able to spend your £5million investment on.

What would make the company most profitable?	What would make it most sustainable?	What would benefit the local community?

Our ideas of **economic success** in the UK rest on cultural, institutional and social assumptions about **success** that don't hold true across the world. There are many societies, particularly in the Global South, that engage in more community-based barter-and-trade activities outside of a formal, capitalist economy.

Below write what conditions a business would have to meet for you, personally, to consider it 'successful'

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Appendix IV - Further Reading/Resources

Please note, this further reading is less about practical strategies and more a list of resources to get you thinking about what decolonising your course might mean for your own area of expertise by engaging with the questions raised in the works below.

Articles – Short Reads

Advance HE: Decolonisation of the Curriculum – a Conversation

Dr Katherine Haxton, Senior Lecturer in Chemistry at Keele University, Dr Neil Williams, Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Faculty of Science Engineering and Computing at Kingston University, Dr Caroline Garaway Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at University College London and Anne Kimunguyi who is studying history, also at UCL discuss the hows and whys of decolonising the curriculum.

How Diverse is your History Curriculum?

A resource for primary-school teachers with a clear, simple checklist for sense-checking your History curriculum for colonial assumptions.

Kingston University London: Inclusive Curriculum Framework

A practical guide to make sure curricula are inclusive.

Wonkhe: How not to Decolonise your Curriculum

Following on from the Sewell Report, this blog post draws attention to and guides against some of the common pitfalls of decolonising efforts.

Longer reads

SOAS Decolonising Learning and Teaching Toolkit

A thorough and practical resource developed by SOAS for its staff that guides through how you might decolonise a university module.

HEPI Debate Paper 23 - Mia Liyanage: Miseducation: decolonising curricula, culture and pedagogy in UK universities

A long but very useful discussion of some of the issues surrounding the decolonisation of the curriculum, including some recommendations.

Books

***The Brutish Museums,* Professor Dan Hicks**
Published in 2021, this book focuses, as a case study, on the Benin Bronzes. Taken from the palace of the King of Benin City, Nigeria, the Bronzes have been in the British Museum since 1897, despite repeated requests from the Oba people to have them returned. This book looks more widely at the colonial history of museums and the debate around objects like these, held in This book holds the rare distinction of having been recommended on twitter by M.C. Hammer.

***Natives*, Akala**
A 2019 British book by the rapper Akala. Part memoir, the book provides race and class analysis of a variety of historical eras, in addition to contemporary British society. This book is a modern take of colonialism and how this continues to impact modern Britain. In particular, there is a theme throughout of colonialism and 'British racism' in an education context. This is an accessible and important read to fully appreciate the extent of how colonialism continues impacts society today.

***Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Caroline Criado-Perez**
An account of the data-gap in society in terms of gender and the far reaching implications. While this is not focused on colonisation or race, the implications of excluding half the population in data-modelling and decision making shows how important representation and decolonisation as a theory are to everything including medicine, safety regulations and transport. However, this book approaches this issue in a binary way and has been widely criticised for excluding non-binary and trans people and being biologically inaccurate in it's description of X and Y chromosomes, this is worth keeping in mind when you read this book.

Disclaimer: Not an exhaustive list! Please share any Decolonising books and resources you have that you think would be helpful to tutors.

Videos

Chimamanda Adichie – The danger of a single story (18 mins)

'Decolonising Education: The challenge of Whiteness' (1h 39mins)

Podcasts

We Need to Talk About the British Empire - Hosted by Afua Hirsch, (author of Brit(ish)) podcast discusses how the legacy of the British Empire continues to shape our lives, and sense of collective identity today.

In Search of Black History with Bonnie Greer - Bonnie Greer uncovers the lives of people of African descent that don't fit with the accepted history of Western Civilisation we've traditionally been taught.

Other resources

Twitter:

@CurriculumBlack
@DecoloniseSOAS
@DecoloniseUoM
@DecoloniseQMUL
Decolonise Contraception @DecoloniseContr
Decolonise EDUCATION @DecoloniseUKC
Decolonise not diversify! @decoloniseveryt
Decolonial Subversions @_decolonise
White Spaces Project @SpacesWhite

Websites:

- https://theblackcurriculum.com/
- https://decolonisestem.home.blog/
- *Decolonial Subversions* is a newly established open access, multilingual, peer-reviewed publishing platform committed to the decentring of western epistemology www.decolonialsubversions.org

Future Learn Short Courses:

Decolonising Education: From Theory to Practice – 4 weeks, 3 hours

Teaching Black British History: A Teacher Training Guide – 3 weeks, 3 hours