

Decolonising the curriculum for first year business studies undergraduates

BM 101: The critical, creative citizen of inter-connected planet Earth

Overview for participants in the workshop

Each interest group on the 28th January has been asked to produce in advance a draft syllabus for discussion. There are two broad approaches so far: (a) an actual syllabus, (b) an existing syllabus, annotated for changes needed for decolonisation.

I have proposed an interest group for the First Year Undergraduate curriculum, and so feel responsible for producing an initial draft syllabus (Module “BM101”). This takes a third way, a new syllabus, but including relevant components which already are known to work well with first year business students. It is only a rough and imperfect first draft (very little on objectives, learning outcomes, assessment, reading lists etc). The proposed syllabus is for a year 1, semester 1 module (11 weeks) but in 2020 we ran elements of this within a one week intensive induction, fully online.

The key assumption behind this draft is that the learners will come from diverse conventional secondary education systems, and they will mostly be unfamiliar with the concept of decolonisation. In our own case, more than two thirds of students are from a wide range of overseas countries.

It is also assumed that the business school involved will NOT be expecting any single module to carry the whole weight of decolonisation effort, but all curricula and modules will be re-designed to some extent. What this module is specifically expected to do is to support the transition from a secondary school to the workplace via the university. That means explicitly addressing core shortcomings in the 20th century business school curriculum, and locating the enhancements as part of a wider journey towards 21st century qualities, not only in management but also in as an active citizen to promote international goals on human rights, sustainability, equity and justice.

There are two components attached.

1. A note for the teaching team, explaining the background behind the design
2. The actual draft syllabus

This draft has been contributed to by colleagues around the world; we hope to help build up a global community of interest around this theme, after the conference, to help consolidate and develop innovation in the first year undergraduate experience.

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Background notes for teaching team: Module BM101

1. Context

Business Schools were first created to meet the needs of the 19th century industrial revolutions. This emphasised, in particular, the “one right way” of Scientific Management. They then evolved after 1945 to focus on the needs of an increasingly global and relatively stable free-market business world. Their very success in meeting past needs, albeit for just one segment of global social and economic activity, has reduced their ability and will to adapt to meet the very different context of a post-industrial world, where social and indeed existential concerns have to be weighed alongside the economic.

The 21st century business school can no longer afford to assume there is just “one right way”, nor that there a primarily short-term economic perspective can be assumed to dominate planning for global equity and survival.

Business schools should aim to be at the forefront, not just of one new normal, but to develop multiple perspectives, all of which are based on core values of equity, democracy, sustainability plus rationality interwoven with intuition and wisdom.

This is a broadening in perspective for the school, and for students, for faculty and professional staff, and indeed for alumni and the wider community. It means adding to and amending the curriculum, and innovating in ways of delivering the curriculum. It means updating core values and expectations about relationships and behaviours. There needs to be a synchronisation between the good practices that the school preaches, and those it actually puts into practice with its learners and workforce.

We particularly want to develop an ultra-clear message for when any of our stakeholders encounter the new approach for the first time – the “first encounter”. There may be one message but there need to be multiple ways of communicating it. This may need 15 seconds (a billboard or tweet), 30 seconds (TV commercial); 15 minutes (TED talk) etc., up to a whole semester (or year long) module.

We have focussed here on the first year undergraduate curriculum, but with the intention to develop materials which can be adapted for any of the levels of education needed to manage and lead in groups, organisations and nations. It will itself need multiple instances of first encounter:

- Advertising material for courses etc; brochures and web site.
- Start of programme induction
- Start of each module

All schools of a university need to contribute to developing management and leadership qualities within the professional areas they are supporting; a business school needs therefore also to collaborate with other faculties to support them in moving towards their new normal, and in turn to be more open to absorb innovations and approaches, both from across the university, and outside it.

It is vital that case studies, examples and e.g. visiting speakers all reflect values around global and local diversity, inclusion, equality and justice. But decolonising the curriculum cannot be limited to incremental change without challenge to the century or more of accumulated academic emphasis on euro-centric assumptions and mindsets. All core courses need to incorporate critical thinking about key unchallenged assumptions. And a module such as that being discussed here is foundational and fundamental to underpinning that whole challenge.

A new type of first year undergraduate core course is needed which can serve as a flywheel, not just of curricular change, but also of forging a wider shift in the whole moral, research and education direction of higher education. It needs to take a perspective that is concerned with:

- Sustainability and survival
- Systemic thinking
- Humanistic thinking and respect
- Valuing parallel forms of knowing and expression, particularly challenging dominant world-views that have fuelled many current societal challenges, and which act as obstacles to their long-term resolution
- Being and remaining an effective citizen: valuing the critical and creative individual contributing as a local and global citizen, across diverse national and regional cultures and governances.

We need an equivalent of the Bauhaus integrated first year, including one module like this which both introduces, sums up and operationalises all the key values. It needs actively to promote the transition from often traditional high school systems to becoming a citizen of a planet whose inter-connectedness has become widely challenged and even denied.

It is vital to challenge every component of the limited-perspective, discipline-based 20th century university and business school. But bottom-up change to every individual syllabus needs to be fuelled by a wider and more holistic perspective and proposing such a core course serves as a vehicle to address the bigger picture in a relatively practical way.

This syllabus is far from unique; it overlaps with initiatives such as Otto Scharmer's ([Embody Equity, 2019](#)).

Business schools need to address an enterprise like this in partnerships across all higher education disciplines. They need to engage with past, current and future learners. This needs to be one component explicitly contributing to equality, diversity, inclusion and justice in education and society. A school that cannot practice what it preaches, lacks any ongoing authority to remain preaching.

How is this connected to decolonisation?

Decolonisation is the most profound challenge to the Eurocentric university system of the last two hundred years. The decolonisation process goes much wider than the syllabus or even higher education. It involves acknowledging major deficits in societies worldwide. It means working to remove those deficits, not only in education. In higher education, it involves changing priorities, practices, mindsets and rewards. It involves significant change in how universities address staff, students and their wider communities.

Radical change often can only be brought about by some kind of revolution. It can also involve periods of time where there is an incremental process, which is cumulatively sufficient to achieve radical change. Anyone considering syllabus change even for 2022 is already running short of time. Incoming students may be basing school choice on pre-decolonisation presentation of the business school, and unprepared for decolonisation by their high school education.

That is one of the reasons for introducing decolonisation as a central and integral part of re-imagining the university for the 21st century and beyond. Decolonisation cannot stand alone from other initiatives of criticality. This particular syllabus sets out to challenge the status quo in many ways, including but not limited to, power structures, knowledge production, educational methods, relationships within and beyond the university, and reparations.

Module BM101: The critical, creative citizen of inter-connected planet Earth

SYLLABUS (11 weeks)

Undergraduate Business Studies Degree Year 1, Term 1, Core Course

Coursework:

Reflective Journal

Weekly challenges (individual and/or group)

Integrating presentation published in week 10

Weekly low-stakes or purely formative self-assessment activities

1. Critical-Creative-Citizen

This is most likely your first “first encounter” with twenty-first century leadership themes. We locate this approach as directly addressing the knowledge and leadership crises that are major obstacles to diversity, equality, inclusivity, justice (DEIJ) in the workplace and society, as well as to resolving existential global and local crises. It addresses and challenges the Euro-centrism of the first century of business schools, dominated by the history and thought patterns of Western nations.

2. Global Concerns 1

UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Develop a game to help teenagers learn about the SDG

[Created at Business School, City University of London, 2020, by Clive Holtham, Sylvia Malo and Martin Rich for fully online teams]

3. I, the Manager

Self, identity, metaphor

Journey

Reflective practice

[Created at Business School, City University of London, 2010-20, by Angela Dove]

4. Democracy in society and in enterprises

Human rights (UN, UNESCO, Council of Europe)

Democracy in politics, in enterprises, in families and in societies

Education for Democratic Citizenship

Council of Europe Framework

5. Global Concerns 2

Complex problem solving under uncertainty and conflicting objectives/distrust

This needs to introduce moral dilemmas, including the tendency of businesses and governments to make token gestures towards responsible management, EDI, sustainability, etc (as in greenwash in the context of environmental matters) rather than embedding responsible and ethical approaches.

[Online Roleplay Simulation of a type widely used in International Politics]

6. Who decides what is management knowledge 1?

Harvard Business School reading –

- (a) what is missing from this article (and why)?
- (b) Draft a missing history of management

We particularly want to encourage you to bring in missing pieces of the picture that are relevant to your own background.

[This activity is derived from one developed by Emily Nordmann, lecturer in Psychology at the University of Glasgow]

7. The missing history of management knowledge 2?

Intensive summary of the missing history of management from hunter-gatherer to the digital era

Institution-specific examples if possible (historic funding and discrimination, current workforce and student complaints). Sketch out a map of how policies and practices aimed at equality deliberately and accidentally end up sustaining inequity.

8. Active Listening

Dreher, T. 2009, 'Eavesdropping with permission: the politics of listening for safer speaking spaces', *Borderlands E - Journal: new spaces in the humanities*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 1-21.

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/489/>

"I suggest that 'eavesdropping with permission' may in some cases contribute to the negotiation of safer speaking spaces. In contrast to 'dialogue' aimed at empathy or understanding, 'eavesdropping with permission' involves the possibility of shifting risk and redistributing discomfort in order to unsettle the privileges of a centralized speaking position."

{What is ideally needed here is a new **business school case study of the Grenfell Tower disaster**, which was an institutionalised failure of listening, including

- (a) Deliberate exclusion of resident concerns and warnings: a deadly failure to listen
- (b) Illegal or morally compromised acts by Westminster Council, the Housing Management Operation, Contractors and suppliers, accentuated by national austerity policies
- (c) Procedural design flaws, even in the public inquiry process

[Ideally a group of business schools would share out the work on this, collaborating in particular with tenants organisations]]

9. Learning by Wandering Around: Interrogating the physical world for everyday colonisation

Promotes key leadership qualities rather than teaching leadership theory

Dealing at first hand with the ambiguous, uncertain, risky physical world

Perceiving critically

Conversation

Storytelling

[This dérive method developed at Business School, City University of London since 2005. Version refined for undergraduates by Clive Holtham and Martin Rich won prize for “Most Innovative Pedagogy” at the MOBTS International Conference, 2018 (Maynooth, Ireland)]

10. Thinking in systems, not in silos

VUCA and Chaos

Systems thinking approaches

Scharmer Theory U and related ([Embody Equity, 2019](#); Social Presencing Theatre ([Srivastava, 2019](#)))

David Snowden’s Cynefin framework

Worked example. In our own case, with a highly regarded Food Policy group in Health Sciences, we have drawn from their research around the theme of food systems.

11. Conclusion – exhibition – celebration