

Reading Lists, Decolonization and Student Success Project Report

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Elly Cope and Jane Saunders also provided significant contributions to the information and concepts behind and within this report.

1. Introduction: Reading Lists and Decolonizing Academia

As part of the University of Leeds' Decolonizing Frameworks and Access and Student Success programme, this 6-week research project was undertaken with support from Metadata and Discovery to obtain a general understanding of current reading lists at the University. This is intended as a starting point for a longer project. However, information and data will be used to make initial recommendations to tutors and staff.

I wanted to carry out the placement as decolonizing the University's reading lists is extremely important. Firstly, as a black woman, I have had the first-hand experience of not seeing myself reflected in the reading lists. It has meant that academic work has appeared inaccessible for me, despite my enthusiasm for studies and my academic achievements. I was also aware of my visceral excitement when I saw sources from people of colour used in my modules. Such visibility empowered me to imagine a career in academia, and I was enthusiastic to be a part of giving this experience to others who experienced university as a racial 'other'.

I also wanted to undertake this placement to be a part of overcoming the limiting effects of narrow resources. As a History student, I have often found that mainstream narratives of events were altered, often quite radically, when I looked beyond traditional sources. These limitations are not restricted to history but across disciplines where valuable research and narratives are excluded from our reading lists.

I was excited to lay the groundwork at the beginning of a longer project which aimed to engage with academia beyond dominant narratives and voices as part of a wider movement amongst institutions to decolonize British academia.

1.1 Decolonization and Reading Lists

To overcome the harmful legacies of colonialism the decolonization of academia must involve an understanding that for many years higher education was influenced by colonial epistemology. The lingering colonial influence has left enduring biases and omissions, which have resulted in a European monopoly within academia. Current knowledge distribution and ideas surrounding intellectual authority need to be challenged on an institutional level. Decolonization requires the rethinking and reconstruction of established hierarchies and the interrogation of our assumptions within academia to broaden our intellectual engagement.

The decolonization of academia is not limited to reading lists and the objective is to move beyond them. Yet as reading lists are an obvious place for colonial legacy to manifest through the longstanding exclusions of scholarship from particular demographics. Reading lists dictate what material students engage with, influencing what is considered an intellectual authority, thus they are an important place to challenge the western monopoly on knowledge. Because of this reading lists are also an advantageous place to include the alternative narratives which challenge institutional hierarchies.

1.2 Objectives

This project aims to enrich student's engagement with resources by contextualizing the researchers and their environments, to engage with academia beyond the dominant narratives in a process of

decolonization, and to be a part of a wider movement within the University to close awarding gaps by thinking about how current reading lists could limit students.

1.3 Literature on Decolonization within British Academia

As the project is also part of a national movement amongst academics and institutions to decolonize British academia many universities and scholars have released projects, and reports with decolonization as their objective. Below are key projects and pieces which guided this project.

- London School of Economics investigated reading list authors and their positionality. Their report highlighted institutional bias and concluded by calling for a broad remodelling of academic structures and a reevaluation of incentive frameworks.¹
 - Their method of data collection, and display, and their conclusions inspired those that are in the report.
- Imperial College London run workshops that examine reading lists and their potential role within academic decolonization. They also have developed a programme to analyse the geographical distribution of authors on reading lists and the socio-economic status of their country in attempts to engage with the positionality of the resource creators.²
 - Their workshop is referenced as an example of best practice, and the University of Leeds hopes to launch a programme similar to their app in the future with this project as its foundation.
- The University of the Arts London has produced a toolkit that contained recommendations for tutors and students on how they can decolonize their reading lists and university experience.³
 - This toolkit guided the recommendations in the concluding part of this report.
- The 2019 article from K. Schucan Bird and Lesley Pitman 'How Diverse is Your Reading List? Exploring Issues of Representation and Decolonisation in the UK', explored the concept of decolonization in relation to reading lists and offered that Universities reading lists have an important role in the decolonization of education.⁴
 - The arguments made in this article were formative to the developing ideas in this report on the importance of reading lists in decolonization.

¹ London School of Economics, 'How diverse is your reading list? (Probably not very...)' <<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2019/03/12/how-diverse-is-your-reading-list-probably-not-very/>> [accessed 30 August 2021].

² Imperial College London 'Examining geographic bias in our curriculum' <<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/staff/educational-development/workshops/focus-on/geographic-bias/>> [accessed 30 August 2021]. Anna McKie 'How decolonised is my curriculum? There's an app for that ' <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/how-decolonised-my-curriculum-theres-app>> [accessed 30 August 2021].

³ 'Decolonising Reading Lists' <https://www.arts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0021/201936/Decolonising-reading-lists-PDF-703KB.pdf> [accessed 03 September 2021].

⁴ K. Schucan Bird and Lesley Pitman 'How Diverse is Your Reading List? Exploring Issues of Representation and Decolonisation in the UK', *Higher Education*, 79, 903–920 (2020).

1.4 Definitions

Decolonization: Challenging and moving beyond colonial legacies. Within the context of education, this includes challenging the origins of taught knowledge, and assumptions, and engaging with undervalued voices.⁵

Reading Lists: A list of required and recommended reading material collated by the module leader/tutor for the module that they coordinate and run.

Student Success: The University of Leeds' strategy and approach to ensuring students from all backgrounds can experience an enriching and successful experience at Leeds.⁶

Positionality: The stance or position of the researcher in relation to the social and political contexts that create identity in terms of race, gender, class, ability status and sexuality. It describes how your identity influences, and potentially biases the research process, and the ways in which knowledge is constructed and acted upon.⁷

Awarding Gap: The difference in the proportions of demographics students being awarded top degree classifications in comparison to their peers. In this report, the 'BAME awarding gap' is most relevant and addresses the discrepancies between BAME students and their white peers.

2. Methodology

2.1 Phase One

To obtain a general depiction of reading lists, undergraduate reading lists were selected from across the following faculties: Arts, Humanities, and Cultures; Social Sciences; Medicine and Health; Engineering and Physical Science; and Business. Using data from Acquisitions and Reading Lists the modules were selected from those that had been updated within the last two years.

The following information was to be collected:

- Types of resources on the reading lists.
- Percentage of each type of resource found on the lists.
- Percentage of each type published in the last two years.
- Percentage of each type available in digital/online format.
- Percentage of core texts.
- Percentage of texts to purchase.
- Information about layouts/direction/signposting on the reading list.

⁵ University of Leeds, 'Decolonising' < <https://studenteddev.leeds.ac.uk/developing-practice/decolonising/> >[accessed 03 September 2021].

⁶ University of Leeds, 'ACCESS AND STUDENT SUCCESS STRATEGY' < https://ses.leeds.ac.uk/info/22252/access_and_student_success/1250/access_and_student_success_strategy >[accessed 03 September 2021].

⁷ <https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/encyclopedia-of-action-research/n254.xml>.

The same data was to be collected for the postgraduate courses in the following faculties: Arts, Humanities and Cultures; Business; Medicine and Health.

Sources of Data

The reading lists for this project were collected randomly to remove bias. Each undergraduate school was assigned a random number.

Using a random number generator, the following schools within the assigned faculties were selected: School of Mechanical Engineering; School of English; School of Healthcare; School of Life Long-Learning Centre; and School of Business.

The same approach was used to select the Post-Graduate reading lists. The following postgraduate Schools were selected: School of Performance and Cultural Industries; School of Business; and School of Health

After the initial return of the data and consultation with the project supervisors randomly selected School of Politics and International Studies, School of Biology and School of Sociology reading lists were added, alongside an additional School of Business reading list.

2.2 Phase Two

Using findings and the resources types identified in Phase One possible sources of data were researched to enhance citations to provide the following information on the creator and their resource:

- Academic affiliation/where they work.
- Place of birth.
- Where the resource was published/created.
- Language of publication.
- What information could be found from a typical search engine.⁸

The following was also recorded:

- Name of data source.
- URL where the data source can be found.
- What information the data source can provide in relation to the creator or the resource.
- Whether there was a cost associated with using the data source.
- Whether the data source used an API.

The following data sources were given as initial suggestions for data sources to use for research:

- SCOPUS
- Web of Science

⁸ Google was used.

- ORCID
- ISNI
- VIAF
- Library of Congress
- IMDB

3.Observations/Findings

3.1 Phase One

Totals				
Resources	Book	Journal Article	Website	Academic Paper
Number	352	243	12	1
%	54.00%	37.30%	1.90%	0.20%
Number Online	143	211	12	1
% Online	40.60%	86.60%	100.00%	100.00%
Published in last 2 years	15	2	12	0
%	4.30%	0.80%	100.00%	0.00%
To Purchase				
%				
Core	19	6	0	0
%	5%	3%	0%	0%

Report	Online Course/Work	Working Paper	Blog Post	Newspaper Article	Total
29	1	6	4	4	652
4.40%	0.20%	1.00%	0.60%	0.60%	
29	1	6	4	4	411
100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	63.00%
3	0	0	0	1	33
10.70%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.30%	5.10%
0	0	0	0	1	26
0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%

Fig. 1. Table displaying totalled results from Phase One.

The returned data showed that the most recurrent resource is Books making up 54% of the resources on the reading lists, followed by Journal Articles making up 38%. Such 'traditional' resources make up 92% of the reading lists.

While the initial creators of the project had thought there may be sources such as Music, Film and Images, none were included in the reading lists that data was collected from.

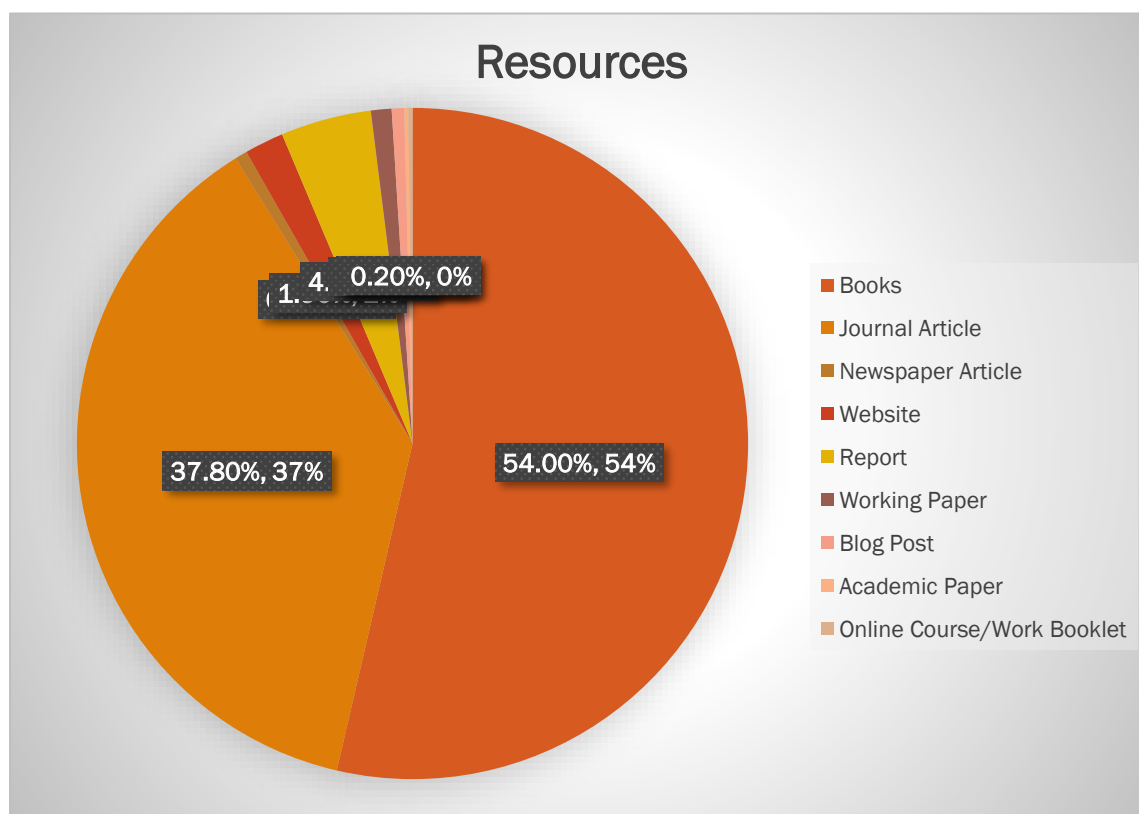


Fig. 2. Chart to show the types and percentages of resources on selected reading lists.

From the initial findings that the majority of the sources are Books or Journal Articles, it was inferred that most of the authors would be affiliated with a university or have access to financial resources from their governments for example, due to the cost associated with producing them. Such resource creators would need access to a publisher, they may need to be part of a peer-reviewing process and may need the finances to support themselves while they create their resource. Research that has been presented at academic conferences and has had subsequent feedback often has increased chances of being published in Journals. However, attendance requires resources, often including transport, visas, and accommodation which also require a certain degree of finances.

Possible limitations of the composition of the reading lists include the likely exclusion of authors without such resources. Additionally, the dominance of the traditional sources could pose a problem to students who have difficulty engaging with those types of sources, such as students with Specific Learning Difficulties.

Harvard style referencing is used to cite the resources on many of the reading lists. These citations mean that the information presented to reading list users generally includes the First initial and Surname of the authors, the Place and Year of Publication, and the Publisher.

The author's positionality, such as location could be roughly ascertained from the surname by guessing where the surname is derived from. However, from this information it is difficult to fully identify the positionality of the author, as gender, where the author is from, and where/if they are affiliated with a university is difficult to grasp.

Some of the resources are highlighted as core readings, but as with the other resources the First initial and Surname of the authors, the Place and Year of Publication, and the Publisher is often the only information provided therefore demographics within the core readings are difficult to discern without further research.

Only 5.10% of resources were published in the last two years which could suggest that few of them are the most up to date. However, it is difficult to discern if the COVID-19 pandemic has had any effect on these statistics and potentially interrupted new publications or new texts.

Over half of the resources (63%) were available online. This could have been influenced by the encouragement which module leaders experienced to choose eBooks and online resources when updating their reading lists for the 2020/2021 academic year.

As the last two years university experience was heavily made up of online learning, it can be assumed that the online resources are the resources that students most frequently used due to ease of access, and limitations on going to libraries on campus for a large portion of the academic year.

From these findings it was decided that Online Books would be examined for Phase Two, as Books were the most frequent resource, and it is probable that those there were online were the most highly engaged with.

3.2 Phase Two

3.2.1 Online Books

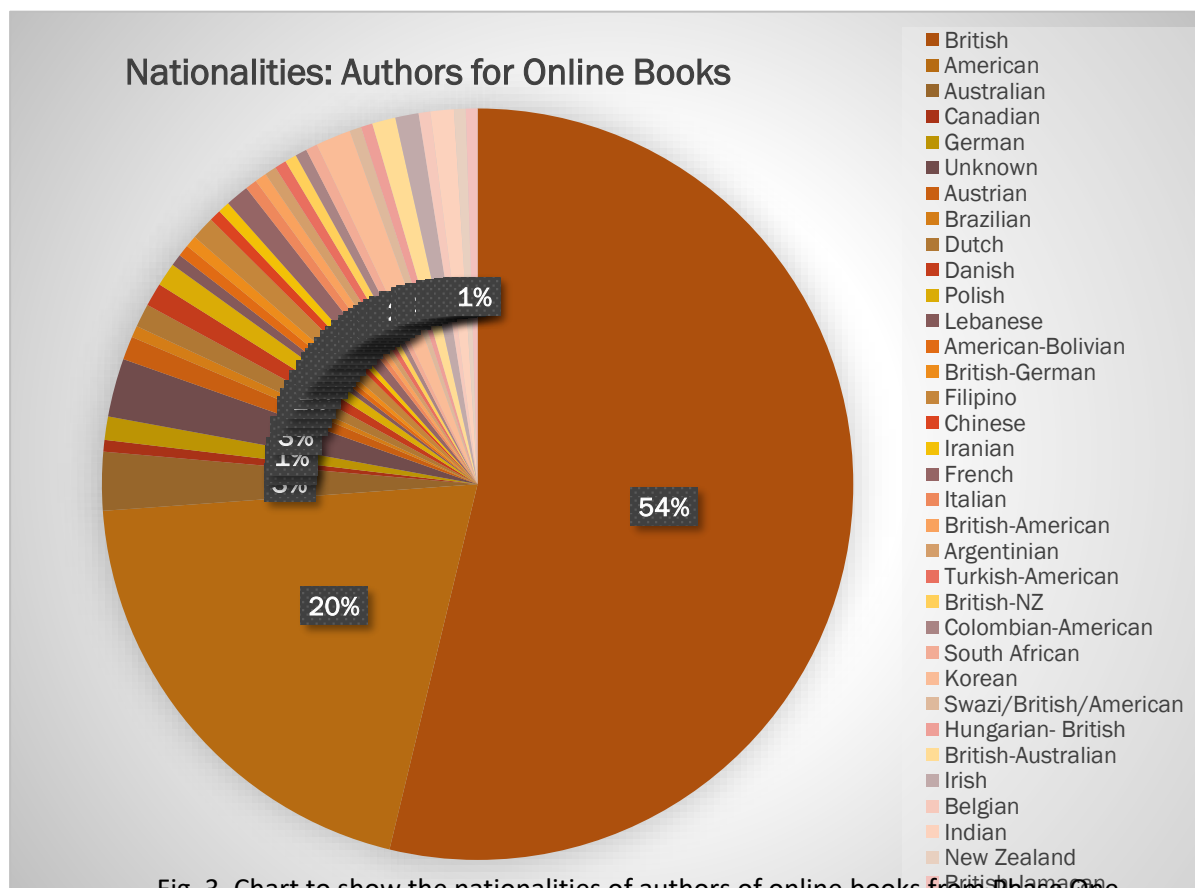


Fig. 3. Chart to show the nationalities of authors of online books from Phase One

Of the suggested data sources VIAF was the most useful. ORCID and ISNI were also fairly useful, while IMDB was not used at all. Wikipedia also proved useful as often authors would update their pages so it frequently had the most current information.

The returned data from Phase Two presented in the above chart shows that the reading lists are 71% composed of authors that are either UK (54%) or US (20%) nationals, and that 86% of the authors are nationals of the Global North, while 9% are from the Global South, with 5% unknown.

Although the place of birth was initially suggested the data did not exist from many of the authors. Information about nationality was available for most authors, therefore it would be used instead.

The data reports that the reading lists heavily favour the US and UK for publishing. 0.8% were published outside of the global north, while the majority of authors published their resources in the US (20%) and UK (77%).

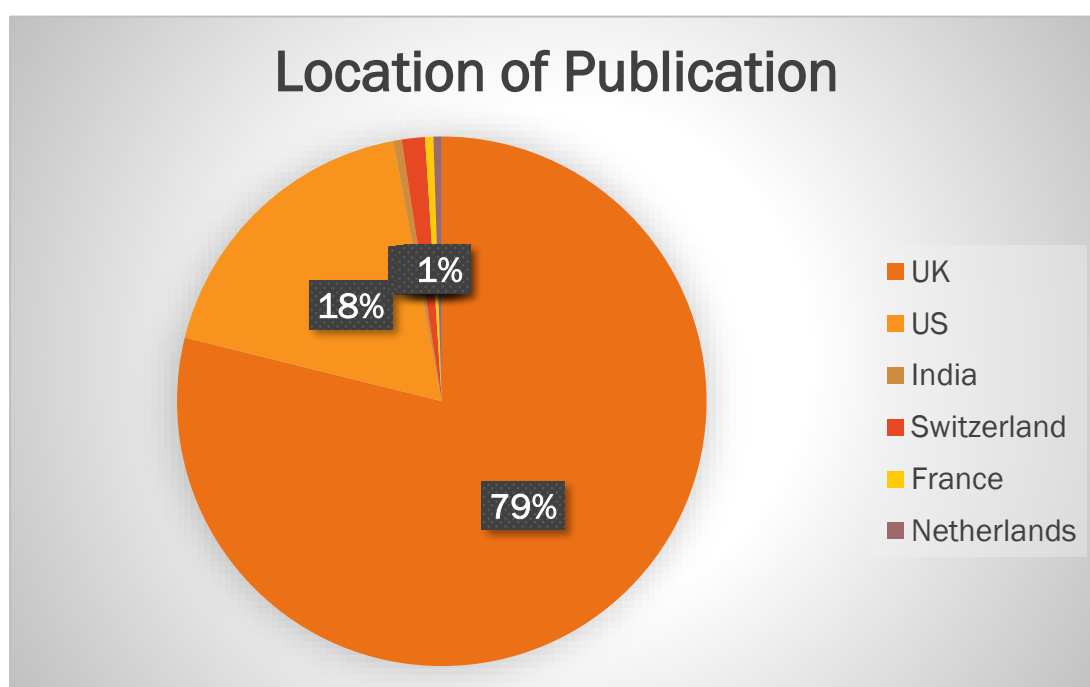


Fig. 4. Chart to show where the resources were published.

Research into the language of the publication of the resources on the reading lists reports that 99.2% of the resources were published in English, while 0.8% were translations, initially printed in another language than subsequently translated into English. Data also showed that of the resources from authors who are not nationals from English speaking/English majority-speaking countries still first published their resource in English. Some did go on to publish their resource into various languages including the official language of their country.

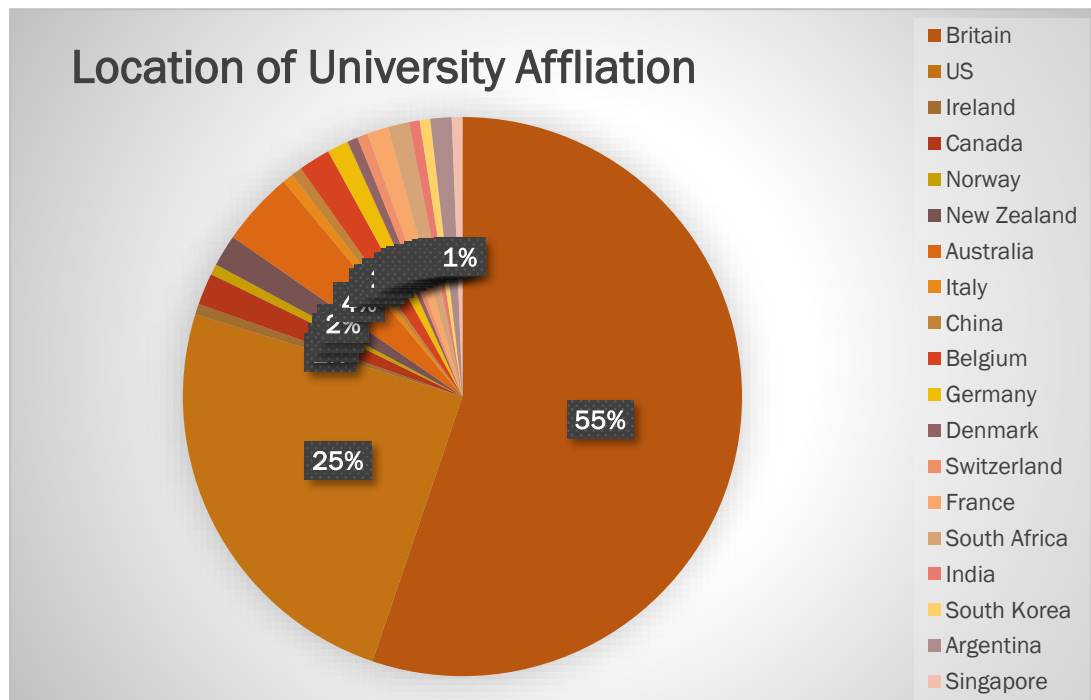


Fig. 5 Chart to show the locations of the universities with which the authors are affiliated.

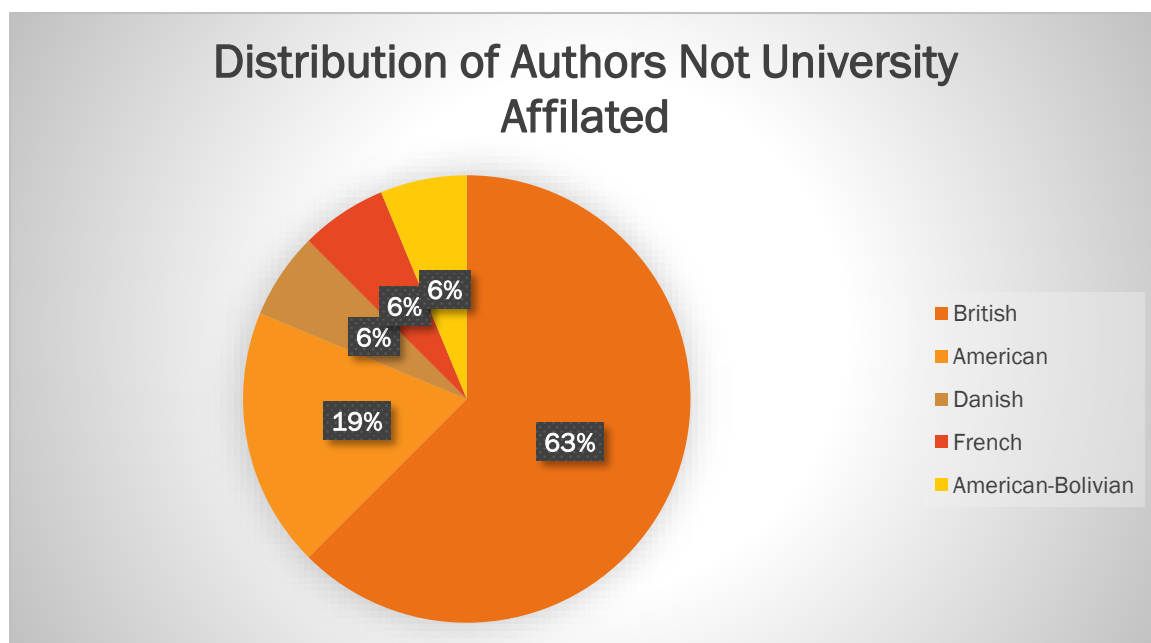


Fig. 6. Chart to show the location of the workplace of the authors who were not affiliated with at University

Data collected on where the authors work mainly consisted of their university affiliation, due to the mechanisms of becoming a published academic largely requiring university affiliation. 91% of the authors are university affiliated. 4% of authors are affiliated with universities in the Global South, while 93% were affiliated with universities in the Global North, with 3% unknown. The majority were affiliated with universities within the UK (55%) or the US (25%). Of the authors who were not university affiliated the majority still worked within the UK (63%) or US (19%).

The Phase Two study of Online Book data shows that the reading lists are dominated by Anglo-American authors, books, and publishers. Additionally, the majority of the authors are University affiliated, and affiliated with Universities within Anglo-America. Amongst authors who were not university affiliated authors from Britain and the USA were also the dominant demographic

The fact that the University of Leeds is an English speaking institution can offer one explanation for the dominance of authors from, and publications from regions that are English speaking, namely the USA and Britain. However, there are many more countries that are anglophone, officially speak English or have majority English speaking populations. Around 75 countries either have English as the official language *de jure* or *de facto*.⁹ From this, it could be inferred that issues such as wealth, access to education, and racial bias could be used to explain the data.

From the data, one can also infer that large demographics could be excluded *de facto* from being included in our reading lists, the languages that they have access to, and their location and the location of their job, as certain demographics are favoured.

3.2.2 Input from the Acquisitions and Reading List team

This data was presented to the Acquisitions and Reading List team who offered the following explanations and feedback:

- The university operates under a copyright Licence which requires the digitalized resources to have a particular licence, however only 16 countries have this specific licence.¹⁰
 - This could contribute to the high concentration of online books from the US and UK.
- Expected 'standards' of scholarship often requires an author to be peer reviewed.
 - This could contribute to the high concentration of online books and journal articles as they pass through many approval processes often from other scholars, whereas sources such as blogs and images do not need to pass approval processes to be published.
- Authors/academics specifically search out anglophone countries /universities/publishers for wider reach

3.2.3 Input from the Metadata and Discovery team

This data was also presented to the Metadata and Discovery team who offered the following feedback

⁹ Wikipedia, 'List of countries and territories where English is an official language' <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_and_territories_where_English_is_an_official_language> [accessed 01 September 2021].

¹⁰ Copyright Licensing Agency 'International Territories' <<https://www.cla.co.uk/international/territories>> [accessed 28 August 2021].

- While 'Open Access'¹¹ could be encouraged to overcome restrictions around the digitalization of reading lists (e.g. copyright licences), it is not cost neutral. Therefore, it is mainly limited to countries that can afford it. Additionally, countries such as China have been relatively resistant to greater moves towards open access.
 - Movements towards Open Access in many ways reinforces colonial legacies as wealthy European countries are advantaged in disseminating knowledge to others.
- While students can go beyond the reading lists and are often encouraged to do so due to the absence of subject librarians the resources are limited to those that tutors or module leaders request for their reading lists.¹²

3.2.4 Blogs

As a 'non-traditional' resource the same process was used to examine blogs.¹³

50% of the authors are university affiliated and are affiliated with universities in the Global North and in UK, and 100% of the resources are published in English.

While blogs have the potential to be written by larger demographics than books, as relatively very little resources and abilities are required to produce them, half of those selected to be on reading lists are from the same social categories as with traditional resources. This implies that tutors could be leaning into traditional methods of knowledge distribution despite their use of 'non-traditional' resources. From this, it is possible to make inferences about what makes resources valid and authoritative to module leaders.

3.2.5 Input from Acquisitions and Reading List team

This data was presented to the Acquisitions and Reading List team who offered the following explanations and feedback:

- For a resource to be put on the reading lists, a stable link is needed. This could mean that tutors may be less inclined to include resources such as blogs and images and other non-traditional sources, which may not have the same expected permanence as resources such as an online book or journal article.

3.2.6 Working Papers

¹¹ Open access A publication is defined as 'open access' when there are no financial, legal or technical barriers to accessing it - that is to say when anyone can read, download, copy, distribute, print, search for and search within the information, or use it in education or in any other way within the legal agreements. Source: Open Access.nl 'What is Open Access?' < <https://www.openaccess.nl/en/what-is-open-access>>[accessed 02 September 2021].

¹² From experience as a student and from conferring with members of the library team the resources listed on the reading lists and in the library do not always include everything that students are given as resources, occasionally additional materials such as scans sometimes can be included.

¹³ Although these were examined there were taken from very small group samples therefore the data in this report may not be representative.

Working papers were selected as resources that are in progress, pre-published or not yet peer reviewed, as they may have more varied demographics in comparison to peer reviewed or published work.¹⁴

The data returned that 40% are US nationals, 20% are European, 30% are nationals from or associated with countries in the Global South, and 10% are unknown. 100% of the papers were published in English.

The data suggests that working papers are less likely to show a bias towards the US and UK, with a larger portion being from the Global South. However, they still display a bias towards the English language.

3. Concluding Remarks

This project has highlighted some of the biases within the composition of the reading lists at the University of Leeds, that could hinder their objective to move towards a learning environment that engages with a diverse range of academia beyond the dominant narratives. Due to the way that reading lists are cited the predisposition towards the native English-speaking US and UK nationals is not obvious. This could allow such bias to perpetuate undetected.

The project has also highlighted problematic ideas around academic standards. For example, the reliance on peer reviewing could be reevaluated. Such standards are not immune from preferences. For example, recent studies into the effects that the Covid-19 pandemic had on peer review submissions exposed a gender bias within the system.¹⁵

Strategy around academic publishing also reveals problematic bias within academia. PhD candidates are advised that publishing in English is the most tactical language for journal acceptance and reach. This naturally presents an added dimension of difficulty for PhD candidates who are not native speakers of that language.¹⁶

Multiple factors and bureaucratic barriers mean that the processes by which resources end up on our reading lists are not without bias. With the decolonization objective in mind many of these need to be challenged. While many factors and flaws are self-perpetuating institutional problems, and therefore cannot be solved without a restructuring of academic mechanisms, some of the issues could be eased by increased transparency and discussion of these flaws.

¹⁴ Although these were examined, they were taken from very small group samples therefore the data in this report may not be representative.

¹⁵ Alana K. Ribarovska, Mark R. Hutchinson, Quentin J. Pittman, Carmine Pariente, and Sarah J. Spencer 'Gender inequality in publishing during the COVID-19 pandemic', *Brain, Behavior, And Immunity*, 91, 1–3(2020).
Giuliana Viglione 'Are women publishing less during the pandemic? Here's what the data say', *Nature*, 581, 365-366 (2020).

¹⁶ Margaret Cargill and Sally Burgess, 'Introduction: Unpacking English for Research Publication Purposes [ERPP] and the intersecting roles of those who research, teach and edit it', in *Publishing and learning writing for publication in English: Perspectives of NNES PhD students in science*, ed by Margaret Cargill and Sally Burgess (South Australia: University of Adelaide Press, 2017).

4. Recommendations

4.1 When Constructing Reading Lists:

- **Archive weblinks to make them more stable.**
 - Examples for best practice can be seen in the British Library's 'UK Web Archive', and their 'Endangered Archives Programme' which retrieves sources that have been damaged or may be at risk of being lost and preserve them digitally.¹⁷
 - Methods such as screen-shooting can also be used to avoid instability surrounding the use of non-traditional resources.
- **Examine what your 'academic standards' are.**
 - Examples of questions to explore: How do they affect what and who is on the reading list? Do your standards require certain resources? Do they need to know a particular language? Is this standard more accessible in particular countries?
- **Develop initiatives to discuss with students why your selected sources are considered authoritative.**
 - Talk about why they were chosen for the reading list, over others. Are they the best in the field? Are they the most recent? Was their text the most logistically possible to add?

4.2 When Investigating Academic Biases with Students in the Classroom

- **Establish ways to better understand concepts of positionality regarding reading lists.**
 - Get students to think about how an author's context and environment influences their work, and whether this enhances their usefulness or could pose a potential limitation.
- **Inform students about the importance of a decolonized reading list.**
 - Relate this to discussions around 'academic standards', including yours for transparency.
 - Imperial College London's workshops could be used as examples of best practice.¹⁸
- **Hold discussions about citation**
 - Get students to think about how the required information such as publisher, and publication date does not accommodate the use of sources such as oral tradition which are frequently used in places in the Global South.
 - Advise students on how to use the codified referencing system for non-traditional sources.

¹⁷ British Library 'UK Web Archive' <<https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/uk-web-archive#>> [accessed 01 September 2021]. British Library 'Welcome to the Endangered Archives Programme' <<https://eap.bl.uk/>> [accessed 01 September 2021].

¹⁸ Imperial College London 'Examining geographic bias in our curriculum' <<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/staff/educational-development/workshops/focus-on/geographic-bias/>> [accessed 30 August 2021].

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[ficial_language](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_and_territories_where_English_is_an_official_language)> [accessed 01 September 2021]