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Local realities, global discourses and decolonising the curriculum in a post-92 UK context: Academic voices on enacting decolonial curriculum change

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Abstract

This study explored how lecturers in a post-92 UK university conceptualise and enact decolonial curriculum principles within their teaching and programme design. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with academic staff across multiple disciplines, the research adopts a qualitative, phenomenologically informed approach to examine the interplay between conceptual understandings, structural constraints, professional identities, and pedagogical strategies. Thematic analysis revealed five interconnected themes: diverse and contested definitions of decolonisation; structural and practical constraints; the shaping influence of social identities; strategies for moving beyond tokenism and the role of institutional support in enabling sustainable change. Findings highlight both the opportunities and tensions inherent in translating global decolonial discourses, such as those emerging from South Africa, Australia and Latin America, into the specific context of a UK post-92 university, where widening participation agendas intersect with resource and regulatory pressures. The study contributes to curriculum studies by extending understandings of curriculum enactment in politically charged contexts and emphasising that meaningful decolonial reform requires alignment between institutional commitment, professional development and the structural conditions of academic work. It concluded by arguing that decolonising the curriculum is

an ongoing process of epistemic transformation that must be embedded in institutional structures, cultures and everyday pedagogical practice.

KEYWORDS
curriculum enactment, curriculum reform, decolonising the curriculum, higher education

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, calls to decolonise the curriculum have intensified across global higher education systems, challenging dominant knowledge hierarchies and advocating for more inclusive, pluralistic, and socially just educational practices. This movement has gained particular urgency in the context of historically Eurocentric curriculum structures that marginalise non-Western epistemologies and reproduce colonial legacies (Mbembe, 2016; Patel, 2016; Smith, 2021). By locating this study within these wider international conversations, the paper moves beyond a solely UK-centred framing to consider how global discourses of decolonisation are translated and transformed within a specific institutional setting. While these debates are often situated within broader discussions of equity, diversity and inclusion, decolonisation as a curricular endeavour demands deeper engagement with questions of knowledge production, disciplinary power, and the purpose of education itself (Stein et al., 2020).

This article explores how university lecturers at a post-92 institution in the United Kingdom perceive and engage with the process of decolonising curriculum. For clarity, 'post-92 university' refers to institutions granted university status under the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. These institutions are often characterised by widening participation agendas, vocational and applied learning orientations, diverse student cohorts and comparatively limited resources (Scott, 1995). While distinctively British in policy origin, these characteristics resonate with higher education institutions internationally that face similar tensions between equity, access and market imperatives. Specifically, it focuses on how educators understand the concept of decolonisation, the institutional and pedagogical barriers they encounter and the curriculum practices they enact or aspire to in response. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, the study contributes to growing literature that situates curriculum as an active site of contestation, identity and meaning-making (Pinar, 2019; Young & Muller, 2010).

Although the decolonisation of curriculum has gained momentum in higher education policy and practice—often triggered by student-led activism such as #RhodesMustFall and #WhyIsMyCurriculumWhite—there remains limited empirical research into how academic staff interpret and operationalise decolonial principles in their curriculum planning and teaching (Arday et al., 2021; Moghli & Kadiwal, 2023). Much of the existing literature either centres on institutional statements or focuses on broad theoretical debates, often overlooking the lived and situated experiences of lecturers working within constrained policy environments, professional standards and disciplinary traditions. Here, curriculum is understood not as a static or universal body of knowledge but as dynamic, contingent and always subject to revision. Pinar's (2019) concept of *currere*, drawn from the Latin 'to run,' frames curriculum as a process of becoming—fluid, contextual and 'operative' rather than fixed. This framing is particularly relevant to decolonial debates, which seek not only to diversify knowledge but to transform the epistemic foundations upon which curricula are built (Apple, 2012; Biesta, 2010).

The significance of this study lies in its focus on a post-92 university context, where widening participation, vocational education and applied disciplines intersect with demands for curricular reform. These institutions often serve highly diverse student populations and are under increased pressure to demonstrate responsiveness to both social justice imperatives and labour market demands (Bathmaker, 2021; Shilliam, 2021). The tension between these forces (e.g., social justice, disciplinary integrity, professional regulation and institutional accountability) shapes how decolonisation is understood and enacted by staff.

By examining how curriculum is conceptualised and reimagined in this setting, the article addresses wider curricular questions central to the field: *Whose knowledge is legitimised through curriculum design? How are power and positionality embedded in curricular decisions? What are the possibilities and limits of curricular change within hierarchical and regulated systems?* In addressing these questions, the article contributes to a growing strand of research that foregrounds the politics of knowledge and curriculum-making in higher education, while also offering practical insights for educators seeking to engage in this complex and ongoing work. While curriculum enactment (Priestley et al., 2015) provides a useful lens for understanding how lecturers translate intent into practice, it is insufficient on its own to capture the epistemic stakes of decolonisation. To strengthen the theoretical framing, this paper adopts a triangulated approach that brings together three strands: Pinar's (2019) concept of *currere* as curriculum-in-process, Mignolo's (2011) notion of *epistemic disobedience* as refusal of Eurocentric universality and Priestley et al. (2015) ecological model of teacher agency. Together, these perspectives situate lecturers' work not only as enactment of curriculum policy, but as epistemic acts that resist, adapt and reimagine knowledge traditions within the constraints of institutional structures.

To illustrate the scope of this study, Figure 1 presents a conceptual map highlighting how lecturers' *conceptual understandings* of decolonisation intersect with *structural constraints* and *professional identities* to shape their *pedagogical strategies*. This model underscores

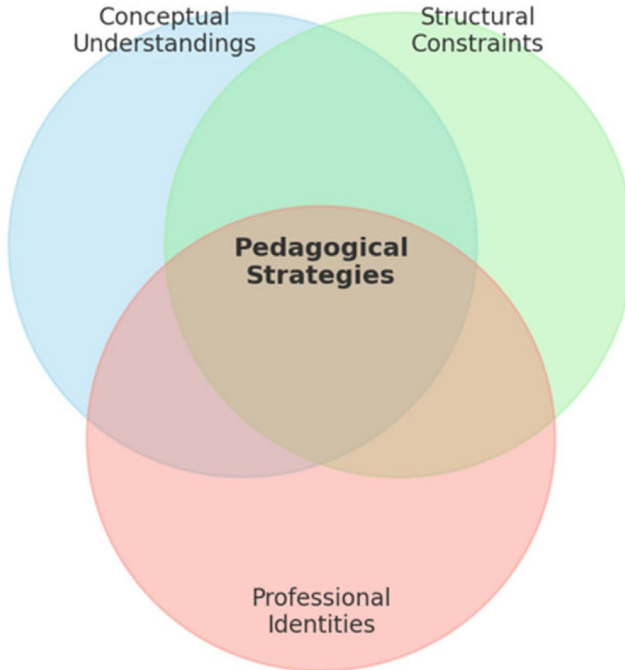

FIGURE 1 Interplay of factors shaping decolonial curriculum enactment.

curriculum-making as a process shaped by both structural and agentic forces, situated within global discourses and enacted in local contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The movement to decolonise the curriculum has become a central concern in education policy, theory and practice, particularly in higher education contexts globally. At its core, decolonisation in curriculum refers to the interrogation and dismantling of knowledge hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric epistemologies while marginalising or erasing other ways of knowing (Mbembe, 2016; Smith, 2021). It is not merely about the inclusion of diverse voices or cultural content, but a more radical project of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2011), structural redress and knowledge reconstitution. This requires an understanding of curriculum as dynamic and contingent, rather than static, with content and canons constantly subject to renewal, revision, or at times stagnation (Pinar, 2019; Biesta, 2010).

This section reviews key strands in the literature on curriculum theory, decoloniality and educational change, and highlights conceptual tensions that continue to shape the field. It also considers how these debates manifest within the policy-practice tensions of higher education in the UK and beyond. A comparative perspective is essential here: while the present study is located in a post-92 UK university, the issues it raises resonate with global higher education contexts facing similar tensions between access, epistemic justice and institutional constraint.

Curriculum as a site of power and social regulation

Curriculum is never neutral. It is a social, political and cultural artefact, shaped by dominant ideologies, disciplinary norms and state power (Apple, 2018; Pinar, 2019). Early theorists such as Tyler (1949) and Taba (1962) established instrumental models of curriculum design, emphasising objectives-based planning, sequencing of content and standardised assessment. These models were often linear, universalist and decontextualised, premised on a rationalist view of knowledge transmission.

However, as critical theorists have long argued, such models conceal the ideological nature of curricular decisions on who decides what is worth knowing, and in whose interest (Freire, 1970). The ‘hidden curriculum’ (Apple, 2018) and ‘official knowledge’ (Apple, 2014) frameworks reveal how curricula reflect and reproduce dominant social values, often serving the interests of elite groups by legitimising certain knowledge as universal or superior. This framing positions curriculum as historically contingent: what is considered canonical or ‘classic’ knowledge today may not hold the same status tomorrow, highlighting the need for regular refreshing and, at times, accelerated transformation in response to societal change.

Decolonial critiques build upon and extend this legacy by shifting attention to the global historical processes such as colonialism, slavery, empire that have shaped what is considered legitimate knowledge within the academy (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 2000, 2007). As Smith (2021) notes, the university remains a colonial project in both its structure and its epistemic architecture, privileging Western rationalism, abstraction and individualism while relegating relational, spiritual, oral and embodied knowledges to the margins.

Theorising decoloniality in curriculum

A major conceptual tension in the literature is the distinction between *inclusion* and *decolonisation*. While some literature equates decolonising the curriculum with diversifying reading lists or increasing representation (e.g., adding non-Western authors or case studies), this instrumental approach has been critiqued as superficial or 'additive' (Ahmed, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Such approaches risk reducing decolonisation to a form of multiculturalism or equality/equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work, thereby avoiding the more uncomfortable tasks of confronting historical violence, institutional complicity and epistemological dominance.

Tuck and Yang's (2012) seminal article *Decolonization is not a Metaphor* warns against conflating decolonisation with general social justice efforts, arguing that true decolonisation involves unsettling settler colonialism and returning land, resources and power. While this framing emerges from Indigenous and settler colonial contexts, its broader epistemological implications are significant: decolonisation must challenge not only who is represented in the curriculum, but what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is constructed.

This shift from inclusion to *epistemic disobedience* (Mignolo, 2011) requires a profound rethinking of curriculum design. Andreotti et al. (2021) extend on the call for an ecology of knowledges by proposing a 'hospicing' approach, that is letting go of dominant paradigms that no longer serve social and ecological justice and making space for alternatives. These interventions reinforce the necessity of curricular transformation as an ongoing, relational process rather than a one-off reform, underscoring the dialogical and temporal dimensions of decolonial curriculum-making.

Curriculum theory and the challenge of pluriversality

Curriculum theorists have attempted to reconceptualise curriculum as lived, relational and historically situated. Pinar's (2019) concept of *currere* repositions curriculum as a reflexive and autobiographical experience, emphasising the subjective and temporal nature of educational encounters. Here, *currere* also serves as a metaphor for movement and becoming: curriculum as 'running,' 'flowing,' and 'operative' rather than fixed, as a framing that aligns closely with decolonial critiques seeking to resist universalist and static curricula. This underlines curriculum as a dynamic entity that may at times be refreshed and reconfigured rapidly, while in other cases it remains static for extended periods (Schwab, 1978). For students, curriculum documents may appear fixed, 'sculpted in marble,' yet in practice, curriculum is contingent, revisable and historically situated. Recognising this temporality is central to decolonial work, which rejects universalist claims and insists that what counts as knowledge must be continually re-examined in relation to context and power (Apple, 2012; Biesta, 2010).

Young and Muller (2010) distinguish between 'powerful knowledge' and 'knowledge of the powerful,' arguing for a curriculum that equips all students with access to disciplinary knowledge without reproducing elite social reproduction. This distinction opens space for a curriculum that is critical, disciplinary and able to challenge dominant ideologies while still valuing rigorous, coherent knowledge structures. However, decolonial theorists caution that 'disciplinary boundaries' themselves are colonial constructs and must be scrutinised accordingly (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Shilliam, 2021).

The notion of *pluriversality*—the recognition that many worlds and knowledge systems exist—is increasingly central to curriculum decolonisation efforts (Escobar, 2020). Rather than replacing Western knowledge with a different canon, decolonial curriculum work invites an ongoing dialogue between epistemologies, pedagogies and worldviews. This involves

not simply teaching about 'the other,' but rethinking the very questions we ask, the texts we assign, and the assumptions we bring to teaching. This framing emphasises that curriculum must be seen as an evolving conversation among knowledges, rather than as a fixed repository of truths.

Global comparative insights from decolonial movements

Globally, diverse decolonial movements offer insight into how curricular transformation is being theorised and enacted. In South Africa, student-led campaigns such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall catalysed national debates about the colonial architecture of universities and the Eurocentricity of curricula (Heleta, 2016; Le Grange, 2016). These movements exposed the disconnect between symbolic gestures of inclusion and the ongoing reproduction of epistemic violence through assessment, language policy and teaching practices.

In Latin America, decolonial thought has been shaped by long-standing Indigenous resistance to coloniality. The work of scholars like Quijano (2000, 2007), Grosfoguel (2013) and Mignolo (2011) has influenced pedagogical reform initiatives that centre Indigenous, Afrodiasporic and popular knowledges in formal and informal learning spaces.

In Australia and Canada, efforts to indigenise the curriculum have drawn attention to the limitations of institutional frameworks in supporting deep change. Universities may commit to reconciliation and representation while continuing to marginalise Indigenous pedagogies, scholars and ontologies (Nakata, 2007; Stein et al., 2020). These examples reinforce the need to move beyond cosmetic change towards structural transformation, reflexivity and reparation.

What unites these contexts is the recognition that decolonial curriculum reform is not only pedagogical but also political, confronting universities with their complicity in coloniality while pressing for epistemic plurality. For institutions operating under resource and market pressures—including many globally, not only in the UK—this work is particularly complex and contested.

Despite these variations, a common thread is the difficulty of enacting epistemic change within hierarchical institutions built upon colonial logics. As Moghli and Kadiwal (2023) caution, the surge in decolonial discourse must be met with critical engagement, not institutional co-option. This includes resisting the depoliticisation of decolonial language and recognising the slow, uncomfortable and collective work required to make curriculum responsive to historical injustice and present-day plurality.

UK higher education and the post-92 context

In the UK, curriculum decolonisation has gained prominence, particularly in post-2015 debates following the *Why Is My Curriculum White?* campaign. Universities have responded with varying degrees of sincerity and success which include producing toolkits, strategic plans and curriculum reviews (Bhambra et al., 2018). However, much of this work remains fragmented and uneven, often reliant on the individual efforts of academic staff working without institutional support (Arday et al., 2021; Bhopal, 2018).

Post-92 universities are uniquely positioned within these debates. With strong commitments to widening participation, vocational education and community engagement, they serve some of the most diverse student populations in the country. Yet they also face intense pressures to meet regulatory, employability and quality assurance standards. Here exist constraints that shape what counts as legitimate curriculum knowledge and how change is operationalised (Bathmaker, 2021).

Curriculum innovation in these settings must therefore navigate tensions between compliance and transformation. The risk of 'tick-box' approaches to decolonisation is particularly acute in institutional cultures driven by metrics, audits and risk aversion. Yet the post-92 context also offers fertile ground for critical praxis, particularly through interdisciplinary programmes, applied learning and partnerships with marginalised communities. These dynamics position post-92 universities not only as constrained by structural limits but also as potential laboratories for innovative, dialogical and socially responsive curriculum reform. This may highlight insights that resonate with similar institutions globally.

Despite the growing volume of scholarship on decolonisation, there remains a significant gap in empirical research on how academic staff interpret and engage with this work in their curriculum practices. Much of the existing literature is either theoretical, student-centred, or policy-focused. While valuable, this leaves unexplored the experiences, understandings, dilemmas and enactments of decoloniality of academic staff.

Curriculum-making is a situated and interpretive act, shaped not only by policy but by educators' identities, beliefs, disciplinary norms and institutional affordances (Priestley et al., 2015). Understanding how staff conceptualise decolonisation and translate it into pedagogical choices is therefore essential for developing meaningful and sustainable curricular reform.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how lecturers at a post-92 UK university engage with decolonial principles in curriculum design. By focusing on their experiences, it seeks to foreground the complexities, contradictions and possibilities that characterise decolonial curriculum work in practice.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design informed by an interpretivist paradigm, underpinned by descriptive phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 2014). Phenomenology was chosen for its capacity to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of university lecturers engaged in curriculum design within the context of decolonisation. The approach aligns closely with the study's central aim: to understand how lecturers conceptualise, negotiate and enact decolonial principles in their professional practice. In privileging participants' own descriptions and interpretations, phenomenology offers a means of capturing the complexity, nuance and embeddedness of their curricular work in wider institutional, social and historical contexts. It is also congruent with the decolonial imperative to recognise and value multiple epistemologies and experiences, resisting the universalising tendencies that have historically characterised much educational research (Chilisa, 2020; Smith, 2021). By situating the research in phenomenology, the study positions curriculum as lived and dynamic, aligning with the notion of *currere* (Pinar, 2019) as a process of becoming, rather than as a fixed body of content.

The research took place at a post-92 UK university with a strong widening participation agenda and a diverse student population, from May 2024 to July 2024. Such institutions, often characterised by a significant proportion of first-generation students and a focus on vocational and professionally accredited programmes, face distinctive challenges and opportunities in engaging with curriculum reform. They are frequently positioned at the forefront of inclusive education initiatives while simultaneously operating under the constraints of external regulation, league table positioning and performance metrics (Bathmaker, 2021). These conditions shape both the possibilities for and the limitations of implementing decolonial change, making this a particularly relevant setting for exploring staff experiences of curriculum-making. Although 'post-92' is a UK-specific designation, these features resonate

with many global institutions facing similar pressures, thereby enhancing the wider relevance of the study.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to ensure that those involved could provide rich, detailed accounts grounded in direct experience. Inclusion criteria required a minimum of one year's teaching at the institution, ensuring that participants had sufficient familiarity with the university's curriculum processes and student demographics. They were also required to have direct involvement in programme or module design, revision, or leadership and to have engaged with, or expressed an interest in, inclusive or decolonial pedagogical work. The final sample comprised nine academic staff drawn from a range of faculties and schools. Participants ranged from salaried academic tutors to professors, enabling the study to capture variation in disciplinary background, seniority and professional experience. While the sample size was relatively small, it was appropriate to the phenomenological aim of producing depth and richness of description rather than statistical generalisation (Smith et al., 2021). To provide greater transparency, the total corpus comprised 38,000 words of transcribed interview data. Table 1 has been expanded to include information on discipline, gender and ethnicity to give a clearer sense of the participant profile.

All nine participants in this study identified as white, which reflects the demographic profile of the academic workforce within the institution rather than a selective exclusion of racially minoritised staff. According to Advance HE (2024), only 19% of academic staff in the UK identify as Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic, with representation declining sharply at senior levels. Within the faculties sampled for this study (*Education, Health Sciences and Social Sciences*) staffing is overwhelmingly white, resulting in a limited pool of colleagues with direct curriculum design responsibilities. While the sample therefore accurately reflects the institutional context, it also carries epistemic limitations. Decolonial curriculum work is often led, informed, or challenged by staff from racially marginalised groups; consequently, the perspectives captured here represent how decolonisation is understood and enacted primarily by those occupying positions of structural racial privilege. This demographic reality is treated not as a methodological flaw to be concealed, but as critical data that illuminates the conditions under which decolonial discourse is

TABLE 1 List of participants, role and faculty within the university.

Participant code	Role	Faculty	Gender	Ethnicity
Participant 1	Professor	Health Sciences and Wellbeing	M	White
Participant 2	Senior Lecturer	Education, Society and Creative Industries	F	White
Participant 3	Senior Lecturer	Education, Society and Creative Industries	F	White
Participant 4	Senior Lecturer	Education, Society and Creative Industries	F	White
Participant 5	Senior Lecturer	Health Sciences and Wellbeing	F	White
Participant 6	Lecturer	Education, Society and Creative Industries	F	White
Participant 7	Salaried Academic Tutor	Education, Society and Creative Industries	F	White
Participant 8	Senior Lecturer	Health Sciences and Wellbeing	M	White
Participant 9	Senior Lecturer	Education, Society and Creative Industries	F	White

being interpreted, operationalised and sometimes constrained within predominantly white academic environments.

Data generation was undertaken through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its capacity to combine comparability across cases with the flexibility to pursue themes that emerged in situ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). An interview guide was developed following a review of literature on decolonial curriculum theory (Bhambra et al., 2018; Mbembe, 2016) and inclusive pedagogy. The questions were designed to elicit participants' understandings of 'decolonising the curriculum,' to explore the influence of their social and professional identities on teaching, learning and assessment practices, and to examine the barriers and enablers they had encountered in implementing decolonial curriculum change. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min, conducted either in person or via secure video conferencing according to participant preference. Although nine interviews do not constitute statistical saturation, the sample reached what Braun and Clarke (2019) term 'thematic sufficiency'—enough data to identify recurring patterns while still capturing divergent and contradictory perspectives. This positioning acknowledges the exploratory nature of the study.

Data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), guided by phenomenological principles. Analysis began with immersion in the data, involving repeated readings of transcripts to gain a holistic sense of each participant's narrative. Initial coding was conducted inductively to identify significant features of the data in relation to the research questions. These codes were then grouped into provisional themes, which were refined through iterative review to ensure clarity, distinctiveness and coherence. For transparency, this process can be represented as a pathway: (1) initial codes (e.g., 'reading lists,' 'student pushback'), (2) intermediate categories (e.g., 'structural barriers,' 'identity tensions') and (3) final themes (five overarching themes). This process is illustrated in Figure 2. This process included revisiting transcripts to verify that the developing thematic framework remained grounded in participants' accounts. The final interpretive stage linked themes to relevant literature and theoretical frameworks in decolonial curriculum studies, moving beyond mere description towards critical engagement with the implications of participants' experiences. The adoption of a reflexive thematic approach was particularly appropriate given the study's concern with both semantic (explicit) meanings and latent (underlying) patterns, and its acknowledgement of the researcher's active role in meaning-making (Vagle, 2018).

Given the political and contested nature of decolonial research, the study incorporated a strong reflexive dimension.

Given the political and contested nature of decolonial research, the study incorporated a strong reflexive dimension throughout. The researcher's own position—as a lecturer from a global ethnic majority background in higher education, with professional experience in curriculum design and a commitment to equity-focused educational reform—conferred both insider understanding and potential bias. This reflexivity extended beyond academic positioning to include embodied aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity and professional background. Such self-location was essential to ensure parity with participants, whose own social identities were foregrounded as shaping their interpretations of decolonisation.

While the study adopts a reflexive stance throughout, it is also important to explicitly locate the researcher within the intersecting dynamics of race, class and institutional privilege. The author identifies as a British-South Asian academic working within a post-92 university that positions itself as inclusive yet remains shaped by Eurocentric epistemic legacies. As others have argued, researcher reflexivity in decolonial work must move beyond methodological transparency to involve *epistemic accountability* (Bhambra et al., 2018; Chilisa, 2020; Shahjahan et al., 2021). This entails critically examining how one's social location mediates not only data interpretation but also what is rendered sayable or unsayable within institutional and disciplinary boundaries.

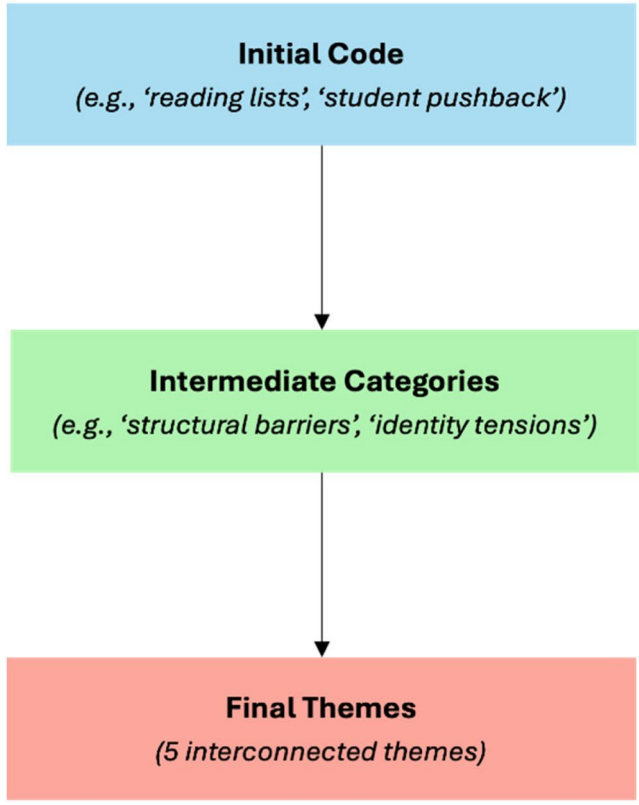

FIGURE 2 Coding pathway from initial codes to final themes.

Equally, the predominance of white participants in this study which can be reflective of the wider demographic composition of the academic workforce in UK higher education (Advance HE, 2024) requires careful reflexive consideration. As Leonardo (2009) and Matias (2016) emphasise, whiteness is not a neutral standpoint but an epistemic location that shapes how decolonisation is imagined, discussed and enacted. Thus, while participants' reflections offer valuable insight into how those in positions of structural privilege engage with decoloniality, the analysis also acknowledges the limitations and potential biases that accompany such positionalities. This tension is treated not as a flaw but as *data in itself*, illuminating the ways in which decolonial discourses are refracted through the logics of whiteness, meritocracy and institutional compliance.

To ensure the analysis remained both critical and credible, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal documenting the evolution of interpretations, moments of discomfort and points of epistemic tension. Peer debriefing with colleagues was employed to interrogate analytical decisions and to surface blind spots, while deliberate efforts were made to identify disconfirming evidence within the dataset to avoid over-simplifying participant perspectives. These strategies were not merely procedural, but part of a broader commitment to decolonial ethics. It meant also that recognising that research is itself a site of power and that reflexivity must involve both personal accountability and collective responsibility for the knowledge produced.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the host institution and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2024). Participants received detailed information sheets outlining the study's aims, methods and intended dissemination, and provided written informed consent prior to participation. Pseudonyms were used throughout, and

any identifying details were removed from transcripts and publications to protect anonymity. Participation was entirely voluntary, with individuals free to withdraw at any stage without consequence. All digital data was stored on password-protected servers in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

While the study is limited to a single institutional context, the intention was not to generalise statistically but to generate *transferable* insights through rich, situated description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is acknowledged that the self-selecting nature of the sample may have resulted in an overrepresentation of lecturers already sympathetic to decolonial principles, potentially underrepresenting more sceptical or resistant perspectives. The homogeneity of the participant group, comprising predominantly white faculty, reflects broader structural inequities in UK academia (Advance HE, 2024). This limits the interpretive range of perspectives but simultaneously provides critical insight into how decolonial discourses are enacted from within dominant positionalities. Nevertheless, the findings begin to provide a valuable lens through which to understand the complexities, contradictions and possibilities of decolonial curriculum-making in higher education and can inform both scholarship and practice in the field. Moreover, the deliberate length and transparency of this methodological account is itself a methodological stance: an act of epistemological disobedience (Mignolo, 2011) that resists the compression of qualitative research accounts into minimal description, instead valuing depth, reflexivity and disclosure as integral to decolonial inquiry. In the context of decolonial research, this reflexive positioning is not simply a matter of methodological transparency but constitutes a form of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2011). By explicitly situating the researcher's race, class and professional identity alongside participants' positionalities, the study resists the ‘view from nowhere’ that has historically underpinned Eurocentric research traditions (Chilisa, 2020).

ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis identified five interrelated themes that illuminate how lecturers in a post-92 UK university understand and enact curriculum decolonisation: (1) *diverse and contested definitions*, (2) *structural and practical constraints*, (3) *the shaping influence of social identities*, (4) *strategies for moving beyond tokenism* and (5) *the pivotal role of institutional support and professional development*. These themes were developed through an iterative process that moved from 102 initial codes to 21 provisional categories and finally to five overarching themes, ensuring analytic transparency and grounding in participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Each theme is presented below with illustrative extracts and positioned in relation to existing scholarship.

Analytically, the predominantly white composition of the sample is itself revealing. The ways participants conceptualised decolonisation—often through inclusion, diversification, or curricular enhancement—mirror critiques that whiteness can domesticate or soften radical decolonial agendas (Ahmed, 2012; Mignolo, 2011). The data therefore begins to illuminate how decoloniality becomes translated through epistemic standpoints shaped by racial privilege, institutional compliance and professional security. Rather than treating this as a methodological deficiency, the analysis reads these patterns as important evidence of how decolonisation enters mainstream academic discourse within UK post-92 institutions.

Diverse and contested definitions of decolonisation

Participants' understandings of ‘decolonising the curriculum’ varied widely, reflecting the broader conceptual ambiguity noted in the literature (Le Grange, 2016; Moghli &

Kadiwal, 2023). For some, decolonisation was seen as fundamentally about disrupting Eurocentric epistemologies and 'restoring marginalised histories and perspectives' (P1), particularly in disciplines such as history and literature where colonial narratives are deeply embedded. This interpretation aligns with Mbembe's (2016) call for epistemic reform through critical interrogation of disciplinary canons.

Others adopted a broader social justice framing, linking decolonisation to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) agendas. 'I see it as everything from diversifying reading lists to thinking about whose voices are in the room and who gets to speak' (P7). This position echoes what Ahmed (2012) critiques as the 'institutionalisation' of diversity work, where structural transformation risks being reduced to symbolic gestures. It also resonates with Tuck and Yang's (2012) caution that decolonisation should not be collapsed into metaphorical projects that avoid confronting historical and ongoing colonial power relations.

The variation in interpretation highlights a significant tension: whether decolonisation is framed as a curricular add-on or as a profound epistemic and ontological shift. Similar contestations have been documented in South African contexts following #RhodesMustFall (Heleta, 2016), and in Canadian universities where 'Indigenisation' has sometimes been conflated with symbolic inclusion (Stein et al., 2020). The range of interpretations in this study underscores the need for greater conceptual clarity in institutional discourse. Without shared definitions, curriculum-making risks fragmentation, with some staff viewing decolonisation as central to disciplinary renewal and others regarding it as peripheral or synonymous with general inclusion.

Structural and practical constraints

Participants consistently identified structural barriers that hindered their ability to implement meaningful decolonial changes. These included rigid programme specifications, particularly in professionally regulated disciplines such as pharmacy and social work, where curriculum content and assessment structures are tightly prescribed by external accrediting bodies. P5 noted, 'We're locked into what the accrediting body says we must teach. There's no room for adding perspectives that don't align with that'. Such constraints mirror Heleta's (2016) observation that professional regulation can reinforce colonial knowledge hierarchies by privileging particular epistemologies as 'industry standards'.

Time and workload pressures were also widely cited. The extensive labour involved in sourcing, evaluating and embedding non-Western perspectives was often in competition with other institutional demands. P2 remarked, 'I want to do the reading, redesign modules, rethink assessments, but between teaching, marking and admin, it's just impossible'. This reflects Luckett's (2016) finding that the labour of curriculum transformation is often under-recognised and under-resourced, particularly in institutions with high teaching loads.

Additionally, participants described a climate of risk aversion, where challenging dominant narratives could be perceived as politically contentious. P6 described hesitancy in raising issues around whiteness and privilege in predominantly white cohorts, fearing 'pushback from students who feel accused rather than invited into the conversation'. These dynamics speak to the emotional and political labour of decolonial teaching (Matias, 2016) and the need for institutional cultures that legitimise and protect critical pedagogical work. This is not unique to the UK context: in Australia, Nakata (2007) similarly describes the 'cultural interface' as a fraught site where Indigenous knowledges are negotiated within rigid university structures.

The shaping influence of social identities

Participants' social identities, encompassing race, ethnicity, gender, professional background and disciplinary positioning, emerged as significant in shaping both their approaches to curriculum design and their perceived legitimacy in addressing decolonisation. P6, described drawing on their own lived experiences to frame a module on social inequality, noting that 'students see that I'm not just teaching theory; I've lived some of these realities'. This reflexivity aligns with Hooks' (Hooks, 1994) and Freire's (1970) calls for an engaged pedagogy grounded in authenticity and dialogue.

Conversely, several white participants expressed uncertainty about their authority to lead decolonial initiatives. P2 explained, 'I'm aware of my privilege, and I don't want to speak over others, but that sometimes leads to stopping myself. I don't know if it's my place to lead this work'. Such hesitancy reflects Leonardo's (2009) discussion of the 'white ally' paradox in anti-racist education, where fear of making mistakes can inhibit meaningful engagement.

Disciplinary identity also shaped perspectives. While lecturers in humanities and social sciences often saw decolonisation as integral to their subject matter, some in STEM fields regarded it as less relevant. P9 observed, 'It's harder to see how colonial history connects to what we teach, though I'm starting to see it in case studies and histories of technology'. This mirrors Patel's (2016) and Shilliam's (2021) observations that STEM fields are often assumed to be 'neutral,' yet their histories and applications are deeply entangled with colonial power and global inequality. It supports ideas that disciplinary traditions strongly influence perceptions of decolonisation's scope and applicability.

Moving beyond tokenism

Across disciplines, participants expressed a strong desire to avoid superficial or symbolic gestures. Tokenistic approaches—such as adding a single non-Western reading without altering the underlying epistemological framework—were viewed as inadequate and even counterproductive. P1 warned that 'students can tell when it's just a box-ticking exercise,' calling for deeper engagement with the structures and logics of knowledge production.

Some participants described concrete strategies for more meaningful change. P3 for example, redesigned a mathematics module to include the history of algebra in Islamic civilisation, thereby challenging the assumption that mathematics is culturally neutral. This aligns with Patel's (2016) argument that decolonising curriculum involves challenging the myth of disciplinary universality and recognising the cultural specificity of all knowledge.

Others adopted critical pedagogy approaches, encouraging students to interrogate the historical and geopolitical contexts of their disciplines. P6 described structuring a social policy course to progress from local issues of inequality to global power dynamics, 'so students see the connections between colonial histories and contemporary social structures'. Such approaches reflect Giroux's (2020) advocacy for curricula that cultivate critical consciousness and connect learning to struggles for social justice. This also resonates with Latin American pedagogical traditions of *popular education* (Freire, 1970) and Escobar's (2020) notion of pluriversality, which emphasise dialogue across multiple epistemic traditions.

The role of institutional support and professional development

A final, cross-cutting theme was the centrality of institutional commitment to enabling decolonial curriculum reform. While participants valued grassroots efforts, they emphasised that sustainable change requires systemic support in the form of policy frameworks, resource

allocation and protected time for staff to engage in curriculum review. P8 argued that 'without institutional buy-in, it stays as pockets of good practice that disappear when staff leave'.

Professional development emerged as both a need and a gap. Several participants called for workshops and communities of practice to build collective understanding of decolonisation and to share examples of curriculum innovation. However, there was also caution that such initiatives must go beyond 'tick-box' training. As P4 noted, 'It can't just be a lunchtime session on diversifying your reading list. It has to get into the uncomfortable questions about power and knowledge'.

These findings echo Dei's (2017) emphasis on ongoing professional learning as a critical enabler of inclusive and decolonial pedagogy, while also underscoring Mbembe's (2016) warning that without a structural shift in institutional culture, decolonisation risks being reduced to a passing trend. Comparable international research reinforces this point: Stein and de Oliveira Andreotti (2016) caution that global universities often appropriate decolonial discourse as branding while leaving epistemic hierarchies intact.

Taken together, these themes reveal a complex interplay between individual agency, disciplinary traditions and institutional structures in shaping how decolonisation is understood and enacted in curriculum-making. The findings extend existing literature by illustrating how these dynamics manifest in a post-92 UK university context, where widening participation agendas intersect with professional regulation and resource constraints. They also highlight the importance of reflexivity, both at the individual and institutional level, in navigating the tensions between conceptual clarity, political commitment and practical feasibility.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate how lecturers in a post-92 UK university navigate the complex and often contested terrain of decolonial curriculum design. This discussion situates these findings within broader debates in curriculum studies and decolonial scholarship, drawing comparisons with global experiences and highlighting distinctive features of the UK context. It also reflects on the implications for theory, policy and practice. In particular, the section foregrounds curriculum enactment not as a neutral process but as a site of epistemic struggle, where global decolonial discourses intersect with local institutional realities.

Decolonisation as conceptually ambiguous but politically charged

The variation in participants' understandings of 'decolonising the curriculum' mirrors the conceptual multiplicity documented globally. In South Africa, for example, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements catalysed national conversations that positioned decolonisation as a radical epistemic project, challenging Eurocentric canons, restructuring institutional cultures and centring African knowledges (Heleta, 2016; Le Grange, 2016). Similarly, in Australian higher education, decolonisation often involves embedding Indigenous perspectives across disciplines while engaging critically with settler-colonial histories (Fredericks, 2013; Nakata, 2007). In Latin America, there is a call for *epistemologies of the South* to reframe decolonisation as part of a pluriversal knowledge project, rejecting the singularity of Western modernity (Mignolo, 2011).

By contrast, participants in this study frequently conflated decolonisation with broader diversity and inclusion agendas. While this inclusivity-oriented framing may reflect the institutional discourse within UK higher education (Bhambra et al., 2018), it risks diluting the political and historical specificity of decolonisation (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This slippage from structural transformation to symbolic diversification echoes Apple's (2012) concern that

curriculum reform can be co-opted by managerial logics, reducing it to technocratic adjustments rather than substantive epistemic change. The findings therefore highlight a tension between decolonisation as a radical political project and its institutional domestication into 'EDI-lite' initiatives. At first glance, stating that decolonisation must be embedded in institutional cultures and everyday practices may appear self-evident. However, this point bears emphasis because institutional leaders often frame decolonisation as a 'magic recipe' to enhance student recruitment or branding (Shay, 2016). In post-92 universities, where market pressures are acute, there is a danger that decolonisation is instrumentalised as a marketing device rather than as a commitment to epistemic justice. Explicitly naming this risk is therefore part of resisting its managerial co-option.

The influence of social and professional identities on lecturers' confidence and authority to enact decolonisation resonates with global literature on positionality in higher education (Leonardo, 2009; Matias, 2016). In both the South African and Australian contexts, the voices of academics from historically marginalised groups have been central to decolonial movements, though often at personal and professional cost (Chilisa, 2020; Fredericks, 2013). Participants in this study highlighted similar dynamics: staff of colour often drew on lived experience to inform their pedagogy, while some white colleagues experienced uncertainty about their legitimacy to lead decolonial initiatives. This underscores the importance of reflexivity, not only for participants but also for the researcher. As noted earlier, the author's own positionality must be situated alongside those of participants to avoid reproducing hierarchies of voice in research accounts.

The predominance of white voices in the study raises a critical question about who gets to speak for decolonisation and from what epistemic standpoint. While participants demonstrated commitment to diversifying curricula and interrogating their own assumptions, their positionality inevitably shaped both the framing and limits of these engagements. As Applebaum (2016) and Leonardo (2009) argue, white educators' engagement with decoloniality must involve not only intellectual critique but also *reflexive discomfort*—an awareness of complicity in the very structures one seeks to transform. In this sense, reflexivity becomes an *ethical practice* rather than a rhetorical gesture: it entails confronting privilege, centring marginalised knowledges and recognising that the labour of decolonisation cannot rest primarily with those historically excluded.

Within this context, the insights of white lecturers offer a unique and valuable but partial perspective—one that reveals how decolonisation is understood, misinterpreted, or re-appropriated within dominant institutional cultures. These findings align with global scholarship cautioning that decolonisation can be domesticated by the logics of whiteness and managerial reform (Ahmed, 2012; Luckett, 2016). Recognising this limitation is not to dismiss such voices, but to position them as part of the ongoing negotiation of epistemic transformation within higher education.

From a curriculum theory perspective, these findings foreground the role of *curriculum enactment*—the process by which policy and intent are mediated through the identities, beliefs and practices of educators (Priestley et al., 2015). In a decolonial frame, enactment is not merely a matter of implementing prescribed content but involves navigating the politics of voice, authority and representation in knowledge-making spaces. This extends enactment theory by showing how epistemic justice becomes a critical dimension of teachers' decision-making in curriculum design.

The curriculum as a site of structural constraint and professional agency

The tension between lecturers' agency and the structural constraints they faced is consistent with curriculum theory's long-standing recognition of curriculum as a site

of negotiation (Pinar, 2019; Priestley et al., 2015). In this study, professional regulation, workload intensification and institutional risk aversion all constrained the scope for change. These barriers echo findings from South African universities where accreditation requirements in fields such as medicine and engineering have limited the integration of Indigenous or local knowledges (Luckett, 2016), and from Australian contexts where compliance with external standards can override culturally responsive pedagogies (Asmar & Page, 2017).

However, the post-92 UK context adds a distinctive dimension. These institutions' widening participation missions and highly diverse student cohorts create both an impetus and a challenge for decolonial work. On the one hand, student diversity can fuel demand for curricula that reflect a multiplicity of perspectives; on the other, high teaching loads, limited research time and resource constraints restrict staff capacity to engage in deep curriculum redesign. This duality foregrounds Biesta's (2010) argument that educational change requires not only pedagogical commitment but also structural conditions that allow for sustained, critical work. Importantly, this echoes global research suggesting that unless institutional structures (i.e., time, resources, recognition) are aligned, decolonisation remains precarious and reliant on individual labour (Stein et al., 2020).

Beyond tokenism: Epistemic transformation as the core

Participants' resistance to tokenistic gestures aligns with global critiques that warn against superficial curriculum diversification (Ahmed, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012). In South Africa, tokenism has been challenged through sustained, collective engagement with epistemic justice (Luckett, 2016), while in Australian contexts, Indigenous scholars have emphasised embedding perspectives across curricula rather than confining them to discrete, marginalised units (Nakata, 2007).

The examples from this study, such as integrating Islamic contributions to mathematics or connecting local inequalities to global colonial histories, reflect an emerging orientation towards epistemic transformation. This aligns with Young's (2007) concept of ‘powerful knowledge,’ which argues for broadening the curriculum to include diverse epistemologies without abandoning the rigour and depth required for disciplinary integrity. However, the examples also highlight the need for professional development and collaborative design processes to ensure such initiatives are sustained and embedded. This study therefore contributes to debates about whether decolonisation should be understood as replacing canons or as fostering epistemic dialogues across knowledge systems (Escobar, 2020; Shilliam, 2021).

By foregrounding the lived experiences of lecturers in a post-92 UK university, this study contributes to curriculum studies in three ways. First, it shows how global decolonial discourses are translated, sometimes diluted, sometimes innovatively adapted, in a specific UK institutional context. Second, it extends understandings of curriculum enactment by illustrating the interplay of identity, structural constraint and epistemic ambition in shaping decolonial initiatives. Third, it underscores the need for structural alignment between institutional commitments, professional development and workload allocation if decolonisation is to move beyond symbolic diversification towards genuine epistemic transformation. Finally, it contributes theoretically by suggesting that ‘curriculum enactment’ can be productively reframed as an epistemic act: one that is always situated within broader struggles over whose knowledge is valued and how knowledge becomes operative in particular times and places (Pinar, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how lecturers in a post-92 UK university understand, negotiate and enact decolonial curriculum principles in their teaching and programme design. The findings reveal a spectrum of interpretations, ranging from radical epistemic transformation to broader diversity and inclusion work, reflecting the conceptual ambiguity that characterises both UK and global debates on decolonisation. While this multiplicity can enable flexibility, it also risks diluting the political and historical specificity of decolonisation if not grounded in critical engagement with its origins and purposes. In this sense, decolonisation must be distinguished from general inclusivity initiatives, retaining its anchoring in histories of colonialism, resistance and epistemic violence (Chilisa, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

The analysis highlights the dynamic interplay between structural constraints and professional agency in curriculum-making. Professional regulation, resource limitations and institutional risk aversion present significant barriers, yet these coexist with examples of innovative pedagogical practice that embed diverse epistemologies in ways that extend beyond tokenism. The shaping influence of lecturers' identities underscores the importance of positionality in curriculum enactment, pointing to both opportunities for authenticity and the challenges of navigating perceived legitimacy in politically charged terrain. These findings reinforce the notion that curriculum is not static but, following Pinar's (2019) notion of *currere*, a process of becoming which is contested, situated and always unfinished.

These insights make three key contributions to curriculum studies. First, they show how global decolonial discourses are translated and sometimes transformed in the specific conditions of a UK post-92 university, where widening participation missions intersect with resource constraints. This local–global translation highlights how decolonisation is never simply 'imported' but always adapted within institutional cultures, echoing findings from South Africa (Le Grange, 2016) and Latin America. Second, they extend understandings of curriculum enactment by foregrounding the relational work of negotiating identity, disciplinary tradition and institutional frameworks. Third, they emphasise that sustainable decolonial curriculum reform requires structural alignment between institutional commitments, professional development and workload allocation without which decolonisation risks becoming a transient or symbolic exercise. Importantly, while post-92 universities face significant structural constraints, they also offer fertile ground for critical praxis. Their widening participation missions, interdisciplinary curricula and strong community partnerships create opportunities to experiment with applied and socially responsive forms of decolonial pedagogy. As Shilliam (2021) notes, marginal spaces within higher education often become the most generative sites of epistemic innovation, precisely because they operate outside elite traditions. Recognising the potential of post-92 institutions reframes them not only as constrained by neoliberal governance but also as key actors in advancing curriculum justice.

The study also offers practical implications for policy and practice. Institutions seeking to advance decolonial curriculum agendas should invest in long-term, well-resourced professional development that moves beyond surface-level diversification to address deeper epistemic questions. Policies should be accompanied by protected time for curriculum review and mechanisms to support staff in navigating the emotional and political complexities of this work. Institutional leadership must also be explicit in supporting critical pedagogies, recognising that decolonisation inevitably challenges entrenched hierarchies of knowledge and power. In practical terms, this requires moving away from 'tick-box' approaches towards embedding decolonial practice in institutional strategies, quality processes and reward structures (Stein et al., 2016).

Finally, this research points to several avenues for further investigation. Comparative studies across different types of UK institutions could illuminate how sectoral positioning shapes the enactment of decolonial agendas. Longitudinal research could trace how institutional

initiatives evolve over time and whether they lead to substantive shifts in curriculum content, pedagogy and student experience. Cross-national comparisons—particularly with contexts such as South Africa, Australia and Latin America—could further clarify how decolonial principles are adapted, resisted, or reinterpreted across different higher education systems. Further work might also explore the experiences of students, whose perspectives are critical in evaluating whether decolonial reforms achieve epistemic justice in practice. This study also highlights that the project of decolonisation is necessarily mediated through the positionalities of those who undertake it. When the labour of decolonial curriculum reform is primarily carried by white academics, reflexivity must become both ethical and political—acknowledging complicity while working collectively to re-centre marginalised epistemologies.

Decolonising the curriculum is not a fixed endpoint but an ongoing process of critical interrogation, institutional negotiation and collective imagination. By centring lecturers' voices within this process, this study underscores that curriculum reform is as much about the conditions that enable transformative practice as it is about the content of the curriculum itself. For decolonisation to move beyond rhetoric, it must be embedded in the structures, cultures and everyday practices of higher education. As such, the challenge is less about arriving at a definitive model of decolonial curriculum and more about sustaining an ongoing praxis of epistemic plurality, institutional accountability and reflexive pedagogy.

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This study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the University of Sunderland.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Informed consent to participate was both written and verbal.

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