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Decolonising and diversifying the Library through student partnerships

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ABSTRACT


This case study looks at the work to develop initiatives to diversify Warwick University Library's collections, spaces and services, carried out in conjunction with our key student partners, Warwick's Library Associates. It explores the origins of the voluntary Library Associates scheme, with an emphasis on working in true partnership with students, to deliver library improvements in line with their priorities and those of their peers. It examines the process of co-creating interventions to aid diversifying and demonstrates the role of the students as drivers for the initiatives. It discusses the ongoing work to be done to meaningfully diversify the Library and involves the student voice in the reporting of the project.

KEYWORDS

decolonising;
student partnerships;
co-creation

Introduction

The importance of incorporating the student voice in higher education teaching, learning and decision-making is widely acknowledged (Cook-Sather et al., 2017). While definitions and models of student voice may vary, there is general agreement that allowing students a genuine say in their education has the potential to be transformative (Healey & Healey, 2019). Since 2016, Warwick University Library has been running a student partnership initiative, the Library Associates scheme, designed to encourage meaningful collaboration between the Library and undergraduate students. The scheme was inspired by similar initiatives at other UK Higher Education libraries, notably the Exeter University Library Champions scheme, where they had observed an improvement in their NSS scores as

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a result of the programme (Gale, 2013, p. 39). The Warwick scheme started by primarily working with students as representatives, to gain feedback from their peers and to suggest potential solutions to the issues raised. It soon aimed to go further, working in partnership with the Associates and allowing them the time and space to drive forward resolutions to identified issues as well as reporting them. It is this role of the Associates as partners, not just as a communication channel between the Library and the student body, that Warwick has remained most keen to foster.

The approach contrasts with how feedback had more traditionally been gathered, through library-related questions in surveys, such as the NSS and Warwick's internal student survey, which allow for no discussion of the issues faced and no opportunity for students to directly influence change in response. There have been a variety of additional approaches to gathering feedback, including Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs), but we recognized a need to create an ongoing relationship with the student body and to allow proper conversations about issues and a joint approach to deciding how best to resolve them.

The scheme aligns with the University of Warwick's Education Strategy (University of Warwick, 2018), which prioritizes "reciprocal engagement between staff and students", where "student representation is embedded" in governance and communication. It also fits with the aims articulated in the Library's Strategic Framework (University of Warwick Library, 2016), to "support the whole student to succeed" and to "be an essential partner in teaching and learning". The value to be gained from working with students as true partners is evident (Blake et al., 2020) and this approach has remained key at Warwick.

Student voice

Over the last 20 years there has been an increased desire to include student voice in higher education governance, teaching and feedback. This has been fueled by the belief that not only do learners have "unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling" but that their insights should shape their education (Cook-Sather, 2006, pp. 359-360). Importantly, it has been recognized that increasing student voice and student partnership in higher education has the potential to measurably improve student satisfaction, demonstrated in the outcomes of surveys such as the NSS (Healey & Healey, 2019, p. 6).

Notions of student partnership and engagement have not been as widely explored in the library literature, as observed by Schlak (2018, p. 135). Although there have been other similar case studies (e.g. Milton & Meade, 2018, p. 347), they have generally not linked their practice to the wider research on student voice. In these examples student engagement is largely

defined as a behavioral model in relation to when and how students use library services or resources. We, along with the recent case study by Blake et al. (2020) take a broader view of student voice and engagement, and in this paper, we follow Canning's definition of student voice as encompassing everything from "the feedback students give universities through formal and informal structures, staff-student partnerships, through to campaigning and protest" (Canning, 2017, p. 520).

Student voice is commonly seen as a means to change university and institutional approaches in a number of areas. However, this has not been unproblematic. The collection of student opinion through surveys, such as the NSS, has tended to appropriate rather than empower student voice, functioning as a box-ticking exercise or affirmation of institutional goals rather than a mechanism for meaningful change or dialogue (Lygo-Baker et al., 2019, p. 5). Equally, the quantitative format of feedback favored by HE governance encourages students to "limit their voices to the legitimate options available", with choices readily prescribed to benefit the institution rather than the students (Freeman, 2014, p. 39).

One criticism of earlier approaches to the gathering of student voice is the assumption that it is possible to identify a homogenous student "voice", with unified opinions and experiences. This singularity perpetuates a tendency to take the loudest voices as the most representative and ignores the fact that many voices remain unheard (Lygo-Baker et al., 2019, p. 7; Canning, 2017, p. 520). One approach to broadening the range of voices consulted and improving the authenticity of interactions with students has been to engage students as partners, change-agents and co-creators (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Bovill et al., 2011; Healey et al., 2015). Here, the role of the student moves from consultant and data point to active change-maker, going beyond merely representing peers and taking a leading role in effecting change (Sutherland et al., 2019, p. 39). True engagement has therefore been argued to stem from allowing students control over how the results of interactions are implemented and developed (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 363).

The Library Associates scheme has drawn inspiration from this partnership literature. One of its core aims is to work with students as true partners and not just consultants. The scheme seeks to engage students in "authentic" participation, informed by the higher rungs of Bovill and Bulley's ladder of student engagement in curriculum design (Bovill & Bulley, 2011, p. 180). The scheme also draws on a belief, at the heart of the partnership literature, that student voice work is fundamentally transformational for both staff and students. Students can "learn to be better learners" (Cook-Sather, 2010, p. 17), while staff may transform their practices through a better understanding of student need (Seale, 2016, p. 224). The most important feature of this definition is the move from merely

listening. It recognizes the fact that, “students are experts in the experience of being students” and that this expertise should be taken seriously (Healey & Healey, 2019, p. 9). It emphasizes the need to give students the opportunity to explore the areas that they, and not the institution, believe to be significant, to recommend solutions and to take an active role in bringing about change (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011, p. 4; Blake et al., 2020). Healey, Flint and Harrison propose a conceptual model (Healey et al., 2014, p. 25), exploring the different ways in which students can be partners in learning, expounding a definition of partnership later clarified as “a process by which engagement is developed through the practice of student-staff collaboration” (Healey & Healey, 2019, p. 5). The aim of partnership, therefore, is not merely about the outcomes but rather about the process of creating effective staff and student relationships, communities and opportunities for change (Blake et al., 2020).

It is this model of reciprocal learning, based on trust and genuine partnership, which has influenced the Library Associates scheme and our attempts to create a dialogue for change and student agency. In doing so the scheme aligns with Warwick’s commitment to “encouraging an honest and open dialogue” between staff and students (University of Warwick, 2019) and moves to a model of open collaboration, discussion and insight. The engagement of our students also provided the spark for a collaboration on diversifying, to find a method of creating better representation within our collections.

Decolonizing libraries

The movement to ‘Decolonize the curriculum’ originated in student activism, for example in the Rhodes Must Fall campaign at University of Cape Town in 2015 and the ‘Why is My Curriculum So White?’ campaign at UCL in 2016 (Bhambra, 2014).

In addition to those movements, the calls for a more inclusive curriculum came in response to an increase in the diversity of the student population and increasing the internationalization of the student body (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2020, p. 904). The urgency of the work has been acknowledged in response to the widening awarding gap for a “good” first or upper second-class degree between BAME students and their white peers (Equality Challenge Unit & Higher Education Academy, 2017).

After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, many Higher Education Institutions released statements in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, embarked on antiracist pedagogy and made moves to address this awarding gap. Librarians’ thoughts turned to collections and spaces, leading to discussions within academic libraries and among academic librarians as to what “decolonising the curriculum” would mean for resource and space

provision and for information literacy teaching. At Warwick, we, like many other information professionals, considered the colonial structure we work within and its legacy. The key question, posed by Crilly and Everitt, was whether work to diversify the Library was even possible “within those structures and constraints, or [was] coloniality so embedded as to be immutable? (2021, p. XXii). Ultimately, the call for change came from our own student representatives, providing a clear signal that this issue required attention and an invitation to make our library initiatives student-centred.

Our first step was to look around the institution for examples of best practice in the area of decolonizing and diversifying. At the University of Warwick, the wider decolonizing campaign has been led by the Students Union (SU) and various academic departments have approached decolonizing in a variety of ways. There are pockets of excellent work at Warwick, but for the purposes of brevity we will detail the work of Warwick Medical School (WMS). WMS and the SU have spearheaded the work at Warwick, supporting the “Decolonise the curriculum project”, with the first iteration of a report coming from the 2018/19 year. The report defines decolonization as the process of ‘ending the domination of Western epistemological traditions, histories and figures’, and ‘beginning the process of incorporating global perspectives, theories and philosophies in the avenue of education and research’ (Akojie & Seth, 2019). It goes on to discuss how students felt about the curriculum and the resources listed to support learning and wider reading, viewed through a decolonizing lens. The report detailed a range of findings such as lack of diversity in examples used in teaching, specifically citing the area of dermatology. The findings concurred with the voices reported within the broader literature which detailed how students from different ethnic backgrounds did not feel a sense of “belonging” (Akojie & Seth, 2019, p.1) on their course or to an institution.

Alongside this the English and Comparative Literature department has worked closely with students to offer ways to decolonize their teaching and their readings lists. Several of our Library Associate volunteers were part of this project and reflected on the significance of the learning opportunities it provided. It is difficult to measure the impact of reading list decolonization and the outcome and impact of schemes is scant in the literature, detailing only initiatives and not the outcome or impact. Local student demographics and departmental foci vary across the sector, and attempting to reflect these in reading lists can be problematic (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2020, p. 905).

Library Associates and student-led diversifying

The University of Warwick Library has taken a student-centred approach from the outset, in efforts to diversify the Library and its collections. Our

Library Associates and wider student groups have been instrumental in designing and developing our diversifying projects, centering student engagement, student experience and the student voice at the heart of diversifying at Warwick.

The first collaboration began during the 2019-20 iteration of the Library Associates scheme, when a group of four social science undergraduates signaled an interest in coauthoring a reading list, exploring what decolonizing meant to them. Despite settling on using the title “decolonising” for their list, they were clear that they wanted to incorporate broader aspects of anti-racism and allyship and to explore possible intersectionalities with sexuality and class. Their motivation for creating the list was to create an introduction to the topic for fellow students who may not have come across the term “decolonising” before, to introduce them to the thinking behind the drive to decolonize their education.

All the subsections of the list contained a mixture of books, journal articles, web resources and content from that current year’s Black History month campaign. In addition to this they incorporated, with permission, works featured in the Warwick Law School’s Black History Month exhibit publication. This project was put together in 2019 by Dr Sharifah Sekalala, an Associate Professor at Warwick Law School, in collaboration with other Law School colleagues, to review nonacademic materials which influenced their thinking about race. The publication itself comprised material selected by staff members, with their own commentary on the text they had selected.

The works included in the full list curated by the Library Associates came mainly from a Black British perspective, and also featured some seminal works such as Fanon (1986) and Hooks (1994). As the Associates were passionate about highlighting intersectionalities, they created subsections on gender; queerness and race; race and place and injustice. This list was promoted on the Library’s social media channels and can still be accessed by our Talis Aspire pages. However, the statistics provided by the reading list software indicate that the list has not been widely accessed. Schucan Bird and Pitman (2020) discuss the need for more research into staff and student views of what decolonized reading lists look like and the impact they can have on both the awarding gap and students’ feeling of being represented in their studies (p. 916).

To progress work at the University of Warwick Library, we looked for other ways to engage students in diversifying the Library and its collections. We wanted to broaden the scope of our work, building upon Gyebi-Ababio’s assertion that “the work goes beyond updating and adding to reading lists and looks to dismantle and reimagine the library as a space where people are liberated, challenged and are supported in this journey” (2021, p.6). Collection development budgets are varied across the sector,

and the need to focus resource on acquisition for texts prescribed on reading lists may limit the ability of some libraries to support the work of liberating library collections. Wilson (2020, p. 226) states that the stranglehold of the top five academic publishers and the prevalence of “value for money” big deals often means that smaller publishers and publishers from the global majority materials can be excluded. Their content is much less likely to be included in bundles of larger “popular” academic journals, with more Eurocentric subject areas. Without a robust collections development policy, which foregrounds a diversifying perspective, an anchoring bias can occur (Wilson, 2020, p. 228).

At Warwick we are fortunate to have a dedicated collection development budget, as well as reading list-driven acquisition. This has allowed us to expand our collection development and try to mitigate against individual biases from those with the ability to purchase resources. Libraries have never been neutral repositories of knowledge (Sadler & Bourg, 2015). Academic libraries “reflect the values and structures of their parent institution, and library collections have often developed according to those values” (Wilson, 2020, p. 227). Our move to involve students in collection development work at Warwick was an intentional step away from the danger of historic and inherited biases and an attempt to increase the “plurality and diversity of voices” (Wilson, 2020, p. 239) involved in selecting materials for the Library’s collections.

Diversifying collection development

The University of Warwick’s “More Books” scheme was established in January 2018, and has been one of the key, lasting service changes instigated by students in the Library Associates scheme. The scheme was a response to student comments in the National Students Survey (NSS), which frequently stated that the Library had “insufficient texts” or needed “more books”. The survey responses rarely contained information about which books students felt were missing, or even which topics were insufficiently represented, which made the feedback impossible to act upon in a meaningful way. In response the Library Associates suggested a campaign which would allow students to tell us directly which books they required to assist them in their studies.

During the first iteration of the “More Books” scheme, the Library spent £9,397, buying 190 titles. 41 of these titles were further copies of key texts from reading lists, while the rest were recently published books, interdisciplinary texts or materials to support student research. 112 requests came from the undergraduate community and the rest were from postgraduates. The scheme has continued to run annually, for the last five academic years, sometimes with a specific, dedicated focus. For example, in the

early months of the pandemic in 2020, we ran a “More Books: E-books” iteration, with a focus on sourcing electronic copies of key texts, to help students while the physical library was closed.

In the academic year 2021/22 the Library Associates requested to re-focus the “More Books Scheme” with a diversifying focal point, using student recommendations to broaden and enrich the University’s collections, and to encourage students to recommend books from under-represented voices. This approach has also been used at Goldsmith’s *via* their “Liberate our Library” campaign, and at Derby University *via* an online suggestions form.

The Library Associates collaborated with the Library’s in-house marketing officer on the wording and images which would feature on the promotional materials and there was some debate on terminology. Most of the students felt that “decolonizing” focused the scheme too specifically on race-related issues, while “liberating” sounded too confrontational and combative. In the end “diversifying” was selected as being the most inclusive and egalitarian of the terms. In January of 2022 the “More Books: Your Books-: Diversifying our collections” scheme ran for 3 wk and resulted in over 60 titles being purchased including titles such as “Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization” and “Representation Matters”. The popularity of the diversifying More Books scheme has allowed the Library’s Academic Services team to make a case for a dedicated ringfenced funding for resources which support diversifying, and suggestions can be made by staff or students. The fund is replenished annually; is sizeable and dedicated to purchases which support the diversifying work done across the University of Warwick. Over 480 titles have been purchased from the fund since its inception, with these titles recommended by Library staff, academic staff and the wider student body. This has allowed us to work to go a small way to balance some of the inequalities in our collection. By opening our purchasing and book selection to a wider circle of individuals it is hoped that we can remove any potential implicit bias and Eurocentric focus which could be present within existing collection development policies in a higher education library (Wilson, 2020, p. 227). It takes a first step toward counterbalancing the reading list-driven purchasing models, discounts and “Big Deals” from publishers with few global majority authors or researchers using decolonized methods. As Schomberg and Grace highlight, in order to reflect the diversity of the student population, academic libraries need to move away from purely reading-list-driven purchasing, and acquire resources which “maybe outside of explicit classroom needs” (Schomberg & Grace, 2005, p. 125).

However, merely purchasing a broader and more representative set of titles is only one step toward diversifying the Library. The next priority is to develop an effective strategy to make the items purchased by the fund more visible to our community. We are in the process of creating a series

of LibGuides to showcase key acquisitions in the area of indigenous research methods and Global South resources across all disciplines and pedagogy of the Global South. This work has been done in collaboration with the Global South Initiative student group as part of a larger, funded project.

In addition, the Academic Services and Data Services teams at the Library have begun a collaborative project to examine the use of subject and collection headings in our catalogue. This deep dive project will culminate in the formal adoption of the Cataloguing Code of Ethics. We hope that the impact of such initiatives will be meaningful and long lasting, though realistically it will require wider institutional buy-in and will take time due to the size of the collections. The challenge becomes even greater for large, Russell group research libraries (Grover, 1999, p. 58).

Representing students in collections and spaces

We worked closely with the most recent cohort of Library Associates, to create opportunities for them to highlight themes and voices that were meaningful to them, both through displays from our existing collection and with additional purchases. In January 2023, we supported an Associate to create a display representing their Sephardic heritage, displaying works from our collections by and about members of that community. This exhibition received wide positive feedback from staff and student body alike,

The partnership evolved from purely exploring collections to focusing on the Library as a safe space. As Wilson (2020, p. 7) suggests “The work of decolonising the library is both about the exchange of knowledge and about the physical spaces in which they can feel safe and supported in the transformation and revelation that brings.” During the 2021/22 iteration of the Library Associate scheme, we were approached by a student who wanted to put together a series of events to showcase LatinX history month. It would be a collaboration between the Library, the initiating Library Associate and wider members of the Warwick Latin America Society (one of Warwick’s many Student Union societies). The Library’s contribution would be allocating funding for the development of collections from authors from Latin America or of LatinX heritage, in both English and Spanish, whilst also providing space and materials for events and planned arts and crafts activities. There is a strong tradition of Latin American research at Warwick, dating back almost to the University’s founding in 1965, with a strong community of scholars here today focusing on the region. The Latin America at Warwick Network or LAWN was formed in 2018 and the network focuses on both the Latin American mainland and the Hispanic Caribbean. The network seeks to develop a community of scholars at Warwick with interests in Latin America and to promote and raise awareness of research and scholarship from that region.

We have also found that supporting students by providing space is a simple way of enabling and encouraging grass roots student initiatives, even if collection development funds are restricted. Our newly created “Breathing Space” was booked as the venue for the LatinX event in October 2022. The “Breathing Space” was part of a four-million-pound wider refurbishment of the Library’s spaces and aimed to provide somewhere for students to relax and take a break from their academic studies. The space also houses a newly formed, but fast-growing leisure reading collection.

The engagement with a student society, facilitated by one of our Library Associates, was a very positive one. When we talk about engaging the student community, it is easy to overlook the possibilities that are available if university libraries join forces with university societies. Simply by allowing students to own the Library space, and the opportunity to be creative in the way they engage the student community, one student organizer observed that, “our Library transformed into a physical representation of just one of the many communities present at the university.”

The collaboration required commitment and organization from the Library and the student society, with regular communication over the summer, jointly devising and purchasing a list of texts which showcased regional authors who were not previously represented in our collections. The Associates appreciated the significance of dedicated collection development funds for diversifying an academic library, noting that the support of the Library in buying texts and materials reflects a genuine willingness to invest in innovating their collections.

Though many of the printed book orders arrived in time for the event there were some titles which were held up and some which we were not able not purchase at all. Sourcing foreign language materials on a fixed timescale, even the generous three-month timeframe we were working to here, has proved to be to be an issue and one of the more frustrating impediments to diversifying collections.

Working at a Russell Group university, there are many obstacles to adding new independent retailers as trusted or preferred suppliers, meaning that they can only be used for occasional, ad hoc orders. In our experience this often contributes to delays in sourcing small press and Languages other than English (LOTE) resources, so that timeframes need to be considered very carefully when embarking on a time-sensitive project. There was much interest in the event generated by the student society’s social media campaign, and it attracted interest from students in the building on the day itself. The event received an extremely positive response, from students taking pictures of the authors on the information board, to helping paint the map, to reading some of the works displayed on the tables around the room. However, it was the smiles we saw on student faces as

they saw themselves portrayed, and the questions we received from those curious about the event that truly expressed how important events like this are. One student commented on “*the joy I felt when I saw myself, amongst others, represented within the literature in our library*”.

This trial project was delivered with a very small staff resource, limiting the amount of time that could be spent promoting and developing the idea. Since it served as a clear proof of concept, we have now developed an all-staff working group to support diversifying throughout the Library. This allows staff from across the Library Services (from Collections, Community Engagement and Academic Services) who are passionate about diversifying, to support events and projects, and to support each other in undertaking professional development and learning on decolonizing and diversifying.

As a student development opportunity, it also provided scope for enrichment and development. The Associate involved noted that,

“It shifted my notion that university was simply a place to study, and that by being proactive in my pursuits, I could do something that truly mattered to me, that will matter to the community, and that allows me to put my researching, organizing, amongst other skills into real-world practice.”

The value of the opportunity from a student perspective, moves beyond the impact of the project itself (often only experienced by the relatively small number of students who attend/take part), and demonstrates a real value in personal development for the student partner.

An ongoing mission

After the success of working with the Library Associates and LatinX society, other student partnerships have been sought and established, to enable the Library to center the student voice in its diversifying work. Working again with students from the Global South Initiative, the Library has undertaken a collection development exercise to expand its resources focusing on supporting knowledge production from non-Eurocentric countries. The collaboration came out of discussions between the Academic Support Librarian for Politics and International Studies and a group of PhD students from that department, who initially collaborated on a reading list.

In 2022/23, librarians in the Library’s Academic Services team successfully bid for funding from the Warwick International Higher Education Academy (WIHEA), for a project creating video resources to support indigenous research methods. The project purpose is to bring together the indigenous researchers at Warwick through a series of arts and cultural

events the creative output will be captured and form content for the forthcoming LibGuides. It is hoped that we can capture the lived experiences of student researchers using indigenous methods at Warwick and expose the wider community to methodologies and output from global majority scholars. This supports an active program to undertake a review of our research resources and to purchase with a global majority methods focus.

Conclusion

The task of diversifying a university library, with collections and services established over many decades and without diversity in mind, is a daunting one. As Blume and Roylance (2020, p. 2) discuss, “it is not only how materials are collected that matters, but what the library collects...working with BIPOC groups to collect materials in respectful methods”. The appetite among students for diversifying their education and the collections of their university library is evident, and it seems clear that the best way to tackle the process of diversifying our libraries is to work with students and allow them to take the lead. Libraries should be spearheading “inclusive practices” which give marginalized groups and the wider university community the ability to contribute to the development of collections (Blume & Roylance, 2020, p. 3).

Our initial explorations show that by involving students in enhancing their libraries, with more diverse resources, a collection policy dedicated to diversifying, and supported spaces for inclusive activities, we can enable more members of our community to feel represented and reflected in their library. Opportunities for student engagement and empowerment, through partnership schemes such as the Library Associates programme, allow students the space, autonomy and support to voice their priorities, and the confidence to know that library staff will act on them. Warwick values are integral to the work for and amongst our community, with respect and dignity at the heart of our work, and this model of partnership, allowing students control over the solutions to issues they identify (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 363), has proven fruitful in establishing close and productive relationships with student partners.

There remains a lot to be done and the task of reaching and representing our diverse range of student communities cannot be underestimated. There are significant challenges in effectively representing the pluralism of voices that comprise the student body, when the voices of confident and engaged students naturally prove dominant (Lygo-Baker et al., 2019, pp. 2-3). Equally, for the Library, this work cannot simply be about projects with fixed timescales and measurable impacts but about “learning and unlearning as well as activity” (Crilly & Everitt, 2022, p. XXII).

The work so far at Warwick shows some small-scale, initial steps one UK university library has taken at the start of its journey, prioritizing engaging a diverse range of students, foregrounding the voices of those from more marginalized sectors of the student population and empowering them to look for solutions to issues, rather than merely reporting them. One thing is clear: to achieve the full impact and value from our efforts to diversify, a library needs to do more than just listen to its students. It needs to find ways to involve them at every stage in its work, in order to represent them fully.

Disclosure statement

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