

## Decolonising the reading lists of Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies

Rawan Bin Shiha<sup>1,2 a</sup>, Eric Atwell<sup>1, b</sup> and Noorhan Abbas<sup>1, c</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Computing, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup>Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

<sup>a,1</sup> [ml19rbs@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:ml19rbs@leeds.ac.uk), <sup>a,2</sup> [rmbinshiha@imamu.edu.sa](mailto:rmbinshiha@imamu.edu.sa), <sup>b</sup> [e.s.atwell@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:e.s.atwell@leeds.ac.uk), <sup>c</sup> [n.h.abbas@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:n.h.abbas@leeds.ac.uk)

### Abstract

Bias in education can be presented in various forms, not all of which are directly identifiable. Thus, before addressing bias, it must first be determined. In the case of university reading lists, assessing the diversity of authors is the first step towards debiasing education. The purpose of this study is to examine and compare diversity of author ethnicity in the two universities' reading list. Moreover, this work investigates the claim that "Western authors dominate the university curricula". The analysis of reading lists of Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Leeds shows evidence of ethnicity bias – supporting the claim. In this study, we present an initial analysis of undergoing PhD research. Several questions remain to be answered regarding the students' and lecturers' perspectives on reading lists and their understanding of diversity and decolonising the curriculum, which will be investigated in future research.

**Keywords:** Reading lists, Diversity, Decolonising the curriculum, Islamic studies, Inclusion.

### 1. Introduction

In the history of university education, starting from the 1990s, the calling for diversity and inclusivity in the curriculum has started by demanding change in gender inequality (Higginbotham, 1990; Carter, 1995). According to Morgan and Houghton (2011), an inclusive curriculum can be defined as "one where all students' entitlement to access and participate in a course is anticipated and taken into account".

The growing body of international students in British universities was the initial drive toward the direction of inclusive and diverse curriculum (Hubble and Bolton, 2021). However, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students in the UK feel inadequately represented and that their historical narratives are overlooked from conventional discourse (Abou El Magd, 2016; Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020). Investigating diversity in education is a continuing concern within the universities in the UK. Students' campaigns, such as "Why is My Curriculum White?" (National Union of Students, 2019) and #LiberateMyDegree (Bhambra et al., 2018), are challenging the domination of "Eurocentric curricula" and the "male-centric structure" in education and are calling for "Decolonising the Curriculum".

The appearance of the phrases "Decolonising the University" and "Decolonising the Curriculum" started in 2011 after the international conference on "Decolonising our Universities", which was held in Penang, Malaysia (Charles, 2019). Keele University (2018) defines decolonising the curriculum as "creating spaces and resources for a dialogue among all members of the university on how to imagine and envision all cultures and knowledge systems in the curriculum, and with respect to what is being taught and how it frames the world".

Previous research (Schucan Bird and Pitman, 2020; Phull et al., 2019), found that white, Eurocentric/Western and male authors dominate the textbooks at British universities. If the students are not provided with diverse reading lists and are told to read only books written by a Western authors, this could bias their learning. According to Charles (2019), students began to demand change in the curriculum through the student unions in different UK universities, including the University of Cambridge; the University of Oxford; Goldsmith University; Keele University; the University of Kent; the University of Leeds; the University of London and more.

Decolonising the curriculum can be approached in several ways. Schucan Bird and Pitman (2020) argue that the diversity of the university reading lists plays a significant role in decolonising the universities, since students see the reading list as a crucial learning tool that gives them access to the 'key' literature in each discipline (Stokes and Martin, 2008; Siddall, 2016; Siddall and Rose, 2014; Brewerton, 2014). In the case of university reading lists, we believe that assessing the diversity of authors does not always accurately predict the various conceptual viewpoints in the curriculum. However, it is the first step towards decolonising education and creating an inclusive curriculum.

To investigate the theory that British universities' curricula are dominated by "Eurocentric/Western authors", we examine the authorship of a reading list at a leading UK research university. We assess the diversity (i.e., gender and ethnicity) of the authors in the "Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies" reading lists at the University of Leeds. Further, we compare it to the reading list of Islamic studies at a leading institution in the Islamic-Arab world, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Saudi Arabia.

## **2. Related Work**

Schucan Bird and Pitman (2020) investigated two reading lists from a British university's modules in science and social science. They focused on the authors' gender, ethnicity and geographical/institutional affiliation. Their findings showed an equal number of female and male authors in the social science reading list. However, most authors, 70%, of the science reading list were male. For the authors' ethnicity in both reading lists, the majority were classified as white, whereas 7% were not white. The geographical/institutional affiliation showed that 90% of the authors from the science reading list and 99% of the social science reading list were from European, Australian or North American universities. Their study's findings support the allegations that white, male, and Eurocentric authors dominate the university reading lists in the UK setting.

More recently, Atwell (2022) examined a reading list with 47 items of a module under the Quran and Hadith at Leeds University. This study classified the authors' names in the reading list into Arab or Western. Atwell (2022) found that 12 of the authors in the reading list were classified as "Arab name" and 33 as "Western name", which suggests a bias toward Western in the content of the reading list.

Our method (explained in detail in section 3) is based on Schucan Bird and Pitman's (2020) research. However, we only focus on the author's gender and ethnicity without geographical/institutional affiliation.

### 3. Experiments

To investigate the theory that British universities' curricula are dominated by Eurocentric/Western authors, we start examining the authorship of a reading list at a leading UK research university. Additionally, we compare the reading list with another list from a different university outside the UK that specialises in the domain we selected.

Our goal is to examine the diversity of authors on the reading list of the department of Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Leeds. Further, we compare it to the reading list of Islamic studies at a leading institution in the Islamic-Arab world, Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University in Saudi Arabia.

#### 3.1 Datasets

##### 3.1.1 AIMESRL Dataset

The Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies Reading List (AIMESRL) at the University of Leeds, UK. We created the AIMESRL dataset by extracting the reading lists of three modules. The dataset includes 212 items categorised as articles, books, reviews, websites, newspaper articles or documents.

To examine the diversity of the reading list we needed information about the gender and the ethnicity of each author. However, the university only provided information about the type of each reading list item, title, author name, publisher and place of publication. Therefore, the author's gender and ethnicity were identified manually using the information on the web. We searched the web using each author name and we collected the information about their gender and ethnicity from websites such as online profiles (e.g., LinkedIn). We classified the authors' genders into male, female or unclear based on the names, pronouns, or pictures we found online then we categorised the ethnicity. We have six categories, Asian, North American, European, African, Middle Eastern (i.e., authors who are either Asian or African and under the Middle East region) or unclear in case there was no information found. Figure.1 (below) shows a snippet of the final dataset.

Type	Title	Author	Gender	Ethnicity	Publisher	Place of Publication
Book	The vision of Islam	Sachiko Murata	Female	Asia	Tauris	London
Book	The Arabs and Arabia on the eve of Islam	Francis Edward Peters	Male	North American	Ashgate	Brookfield, Vt
Book	Introduction to Islamic civilisation	Roger Mervyn Savory	Male	Europe	Cambridge University Press	Cambridge
Article	Accountability in Journalism	Sawant, P. B.	Male	Asia	Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc	Philadelphia
Book	Islam : a very short introduction	Malise Ruthven	Male	Europe	Oxford University Press	Oxford
Book	Hadith & its literary style	Khalid Mehmood Shaikh	Male	Asia	Adam Publishers & Distributors	New Delhi
Book	Islamic law : from historical foundations to contemporary practice	Mawil Izzi Dien	Male	Middle East	Edinburgh University Press	Edinburgh
Book	The Oxford history of Islam	John Louis Esposito	Male	North American	Oxford University Press	New York, N.Y
Book	Islamic calligraphy	Sheila S. Blair	Female	North American	Edinburgh University Press	Edinburgh
Book	Muslims and crusaders : Christianity's wars in the Middle East, 1095-1382, from the Islamic sources	Christie, Niall	Male	Unclear	Routledge	Abingdon, Oxon ;
Article	Mecca's Food Supplies and Muhammad's Boycott	Donner, Fred McGraw	Male	North American	E. J. Brill	London

Figure.1: A snippet of AIMESRL dataset

##### 3.1.2 QSIERL Dataset

The Quran sciences and Islamic education at Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Saudi Arabia. The QSIERL dataset includes only 73 items, which is surprising as we extracted the reading lists of twenty-seven modules to create this dataset. However, this may be due to some lecturers preferring to provide the readings to students directly in lectures instead of uploading them to the university library system. The university library system provided the title and the author's name of each reading list item. We gathered information about the gender

and ethnicity of the authors using the same method we applied to the AIMESRL dataset, moreover we collected information about the languages available for each reading list item. Figure.2 (below) shows part of QSIERL dataset.

Type	Title	Author	Gender	Ethnicity	Available in English
Book	The Miracle Of The Quran	al-baqalani	male	Middle East	yes
Book	The great news	Muhammad Abdullah Draz	male	Asia	yes
Book	The Miracle of the Noble Qur'an according to Ibn al-Qayyim	Hasan al-Awfi	male	Middle East	yes
Book	The Great Miracle	Muhammad Abu Zahra	male	Middle East	yes
Book	Tafsir Al Tabari: Jami Al Bayan An Ta'Wil Aayi al Qur'an	al-Tabari	male	Middle East	yes
Book	Al-Jami' Al-Quran by Al-Qurtubi	Al-Qurtubi	male	Middle East	yes
Book	Easy Tajweed (King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Noble Qur'an).	unclear	unclear	unclear	no
Book	Al-Jazari Introduction and Explanation (The Court Minutes)	Zakaria Al-Ansari	male	Middle East	no
Book	The goal of the disciple	Attia Nasr	male	Middle East	no
Book	Hedayat Al-Qari	Abdul Rahman Al-Marsafi	male	Middle East	no
Book	Introduction to Tajweed	Ibn Al-Jazari	male	Middle East	yes
Book	The proof in the recitation of the Qur'an	Muhammad al-Sadiq Qamhawi	male	Middle East	no
Book	The useful summary in the science of tajweed	Muhammad Mabad	male	Middle East	no
Book	Al-Wafi in Sharh Al-Shatbiya	Abdel-Fattah Al-Qadi	male	Middle East	no
Book	Al-Masbah Al-Maer broadcasts Tafsir Ibn Katheer Al-ResonanceAl-Masbah Al-Mare broadcasts Tafsir Ibn Kathir	Safi al-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri	male	Asia	yes

Figure.2: A snippet of QSIERL dataset

### 3.2 Findings

Figure.3 (below) presents the authors' demographics of the AIMESRL, displaying a high percentage of unclear information related to ethnicity and gender as it is challenging to identify them from unreliable online data.

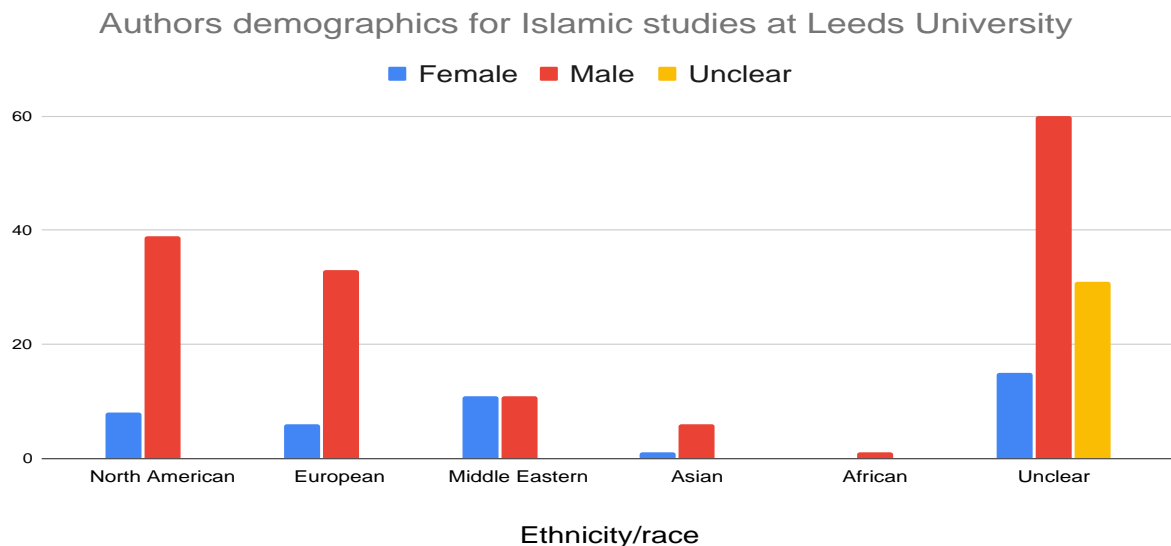


Figure.3: Authors demographics of the AIMESRL

Unlike AIMESRL, we managed to identify most of the authors' gender and ethnicity of QSIERL. Figure.4 (below) shows the authors' demographics of the QSIERL.

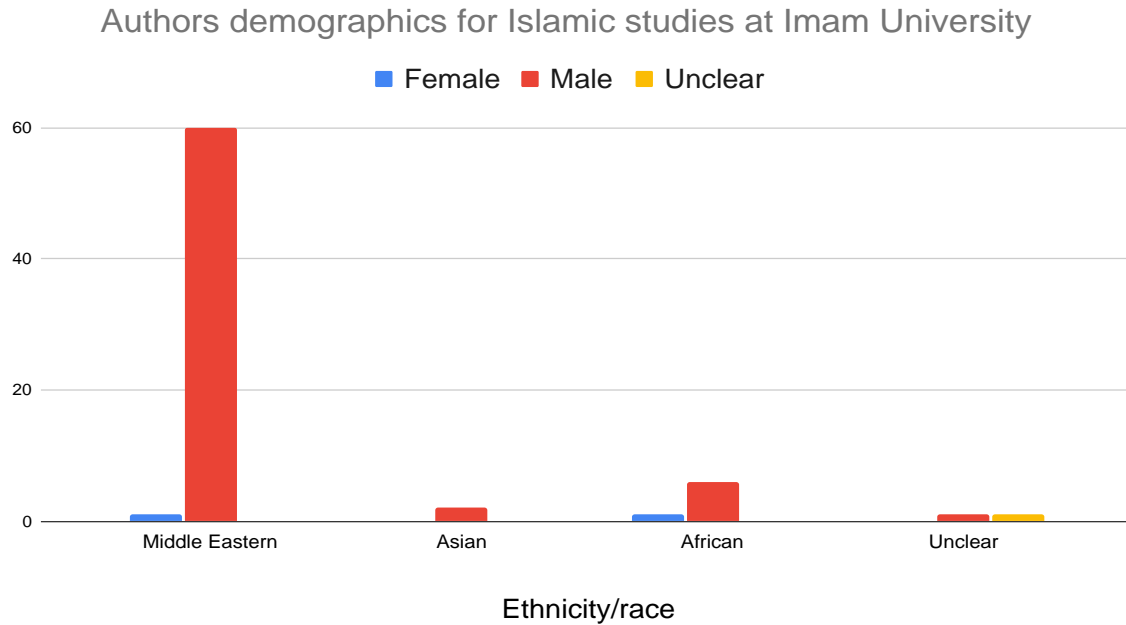


Figure.4: Authors demographics of the QSIERL

### 3.2.1 Ethnicity and Gender

#### AIMESRL dataset

One hundred and six ethnicities were unclear; (50%) therefore, we have excluded them from the analysis, leaving one hundred and six with known ethnicities to explore. According to Figure 3, 44.34% of the authors were North American, 36.79% European, 11.32% Middle Eastern, 6.6% Asian and 0.94% African.

Thirty-one genders were unidentifiable. Accordingly, we excluded them, leaving us with one hundred and eight identified genders. According to Figure 3, unequal numbers of male and female authors were present. The majority of the reading list's authors, 82.87% were male, while 17.13% were female. Further, 48% of the male authors are North American or European.

#### QSIERL Dataset

For the QSIERL dataset, 84.72% of the authors were Middle Eastern, 9.72% African and 2.78% Asian. The absence of ethnicities, such as North America or Europe is due to all reading items in the list being in Arabic. Some items are available in English (translated), though were primarily written in Arabic. For the gender in this dataset 95.83% were male, and 2.78% were female.

### 3.2.2 AIMESRL and QSIERL Compared

Before comparing the datasets, we want to explain the point of the comparison, which is identifying the differences in the authors' demographics, focusing mainly on the ethnicities for the selected domain (i.e., Arabic and Islamic studies). Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University is considered one of the leading *institutions* in Arabic and Islamic studies in the Arab world; therefore, we selected their reading list to build the QSIERL dataset.

From the findings in the AIMESRL dataset, the two major ethnicities of authors are either North American or European. While in the QSIERL dataset (i.e., domain-focused dataset), the majority were Middle Eastern, followed by African. In contrast to QSIERL, AIMESRL has

fewer Middle Eastern (6.6%) or African authors (0.94%). On the other hand, unlike AIMESRL, QSIERL does not include any authors who are either North American or European. As mentioned previously, this may be attributed to all reading list items in this dataset being written in Arabic and by Arabic-speaking authors. Both QSIERL and AIMESRL datasets have a small number of Asian authors.

In the analysis of the QSIERL dataset, we computed the number of reading list items available in English. We found that twenty-five were translated into English, while forty-seven were only available in Arabic. We searched the AIMESRL dataset for the reading list items that were available in English from the QSIERL dataset – yielding no matches. The comparison showed that there are differences between the datasets in terms of the ethnicities of the authors. It is interesting to note that the datasets did not share any reading list items.

### **3.2.3 Discussion**

The domination of Western authors is evident (with few exclusions) in the reading lists of Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Leeds. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies in this area such as the study by Schucan Bird and Pitman (2020).

This analysis shows the diversity in the gender and ethnicity of the authors. However, the categorization was based on assumptions drawn from the web. More importantly, the diversity in gender and ethnicity cannot capture the diversity in points of view. Therefore, detailed information about the authors' background, upbringing and social beliefs cannot be fully reflected based on their digital footprint. It is challenging to accurately assess the diversity of all authors without further, more extensive knowledge about each individual. While this is a good inception, many additional areas might also be worth examining.

Moreover, this is an ongoing project, as there are other aspects that you will consider in the case of Islamic and Arabic studies, such as the religion, and mother tongue of the author, place of study or university from which the author graduated, worked, lived in, or travelled to Arab or Muslim countries. Other aspects to be investigated for research in different areas could include the abstracts of the books which may contain some information about the author's viewpoints. In addition, information can be found in any of the authors' previous publications.

### **3. Conclusion**

Reading lists have a pivotal role in student education, they influence how knowledge is received and communicated. If the students are not provided with diverse reading lists, this could bias their learning. In this study, we examined the diversity in gender and ethnicity of the authors of the Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies reading lists at University of Leeds. This list was then compared against the reading list of Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University. The investigation of reading lists showed evidence for the claim that, with the exceptions of a few cases, Western, male and white authors dominate the university curricula.

However, it is still unclear how gender bias in reading lists impacts university students' quality of education. Do authors' affiliations influence the content of their work? Therefore, investigating the bias in the content of the learning materials is a crucial step we plan to work on in future research.

## References

- Abou El Magd, N. (2016). Why is my curriculum white? - Decolonising the academy. NUS Connect. <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/why-is-my-curriculum-white-decolonising-the-academy>. (accessed 30 November 2022).
- Atwell, E. (2022). Decolonizing reading lists for university teaching of Islamic studies. In: Proc BRAIS'2022.
- Bhambra, G.K., Gebrial, D. and Nişancioğlu, K. (2018). Decolonising the university. Pluto Press.
- Brewerton, G. (2014). Implications of student and lecturer qualitative views on reading lists: a case study at Loughborough University, UK. *New Review of Academic Librarianship*. 20(1), pp.78-90.
- Carter, P.A. (1995). Failing at Fairness: How America's Schools Cheat Girls. JSTOR.
- Charles, E. (2019). Decolonizing the curriculum. *Insights*. 32(1), p24.
- Heleta, S. (2016). Decolonisation of higher education: Dismantling epistemic violence and Eurocentrism in South Africa. *Transformation in Higher Education*. 1(1), pp.1-8.
- Higginbotham, E. (1990). Designing an inclusive curriculum: Bringing all women into the core. *Women's Studies Quarterly*. 18(1/2), pp.7-23.
- Hubble, S. and Bolton, P. (2021). International and EU students in higher education in the UK FAQs. House of Commons Library, (CBP 7976). <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7976#fullreport>. (accessed 30 November 2022).
- Keele University. (2018). KEELE'S MANIFESTO FOR DECOLONISING THE CURRICULUM. <https://www.keele.ac.uk/equalitydiversity/equalityframeworksandactivities/equalityawardsandreports/equalityawards/raceequalitycharter/keeledecolonisingthecurriculumnetwork/> (accessed 25 October 2022).
- Le Grange, L. (2016). Decolonising the university curriculum.
- Lockett, K. and Shay, S. (2017). Reframing the curriculum: a transformative approach.
- Morgan, H., and Houghton, A. M. (2011). Inclusive curriculum design in higher education: Considerations for effective practice across and within subject areas. The Higher Education Academy.
- National Union of Students, (2019, May). "Why is my curriculum white?", <http://www.dtmh.ucl.ac.uk/videos/curriculum-white/> (accessed 30 November 2022).
- Phull, K., Ciflikli, G. and Meibauer, G. (2019). Gender and bias in the International Relations curriculum: Insights from reading lists. *European Journal of International Relations*. 25(2), pp.383-407.
- Schucan Bird, K. and Pitman, L. (2020). How diverse is your reading list? Exploring issues of representation and decolonisation in the UK. *Higher Education*. 79(5), pp.903-920.
- Siddall, G. (2016). University academics' perceptions of reading list labels. *New library world*.
- Siddall, G. and Rose, H. (2014). Reading lists—time for a reality check? An investigation into the use of reading lists as a pedagogical tool to support the development of information skills amongst Foundation Degree students. *Library and Information Research*. 38(118), pp.52-73.
- Stokes, P. and Martin, L. (2008). Reading lists: a study of tutor and student perceptions, expectations and realities. *Studies in Higher Education*. 33(2), pp.113-125.