

2021: Decolonising Geography Fieldtrips

Luke Randhawa (Decolonisation Intern), Dr Helen Mackay, and Dr Andrew Dwyer (Staff leads).

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Introduction

Over the Summer of 2021, research was conducted in the Geography Department to understand how decolonisation thinking and practice could be applied to the range of fieldtrips that the Department undertakes annually (both BA and BSc). This work focused on both domestic and international fieldtrips, with the aim of providing an evaluation of best practice and providing guidance for further possible decolonisation of the Department's fieldtrips. This project adopted a working, but by no means complete, understanding of 'decolonisation' that seeks to re-situate marginalised forms of knowledge, address colonial forms of power, and identify how these processes make themselves present today.

The research was funded as part of a broader recognition of the importance of decolonisation at Durham University, following a statement from Durham Students' Union on '[Decolonising the Curriculum](#)' (2020). Within the Department of Geography, there have already been steps towards decolonisation, through changes made to the Level 1 Academic Advisory module. Fieldtrips form a core element of the learning experience as well as training for students of geography. They often involve travel to places unfamiliar to students as well as to places and with people that often experience compounded forms of marginalisation, environmental change, and other forms of oppression. As Geography at Durham is a global course, fieldtrips take place across 4 continents, meaning that it is imperative to assess fieldtrips alongside the Department's commitment to decolonisation that this guide contributes to.

Our research investigated several fieldtrip modules that include both domestic and international destinations and span both BA and BSc degree programmes. These modules included the Scandinavian Arctic, Nepal, Jerusalem, Chicago, Bristol/Liverpool/Glasgow, and the Isle of Skye. Each of these locations exhibit different histories and relationship, some with greater densities of enduring colonialism. Through decolonising thinking and practice, there is an opportunity to evaluate and encourage a greater appreciation of the complex historical and contemporary processes that have influenced the places we visit and welcome us, as well as assessing how there are opportunities to improve current fieldtrip provision. This best practice guide is the beginning of this process and is not therefore intended to offer a step-by-step tick-box exercise of how to 'do' decolonisation. Instead, it intended to be used as part of a broader process and reflection of its importance and how decolonisation may be applied in different and appropriate ways according to fieldtrip logistics, learning outcomes, and the context of each place and its communities.

Methods

The decolonisation intern, along with the staff leads, co-created the research, and reviewed the 19 identified fieldtrips in the department to ensure a split across BA and BSc fieldtrips to domestic and international locations. Our review included 'integrated' fieldtrips, those incorporated as one component of broader module outcomes, those which are designed as 'standalone' fieldtrip modules as well as those which are primarily for student-led research. In order to appropriately allocate time, six fieldtrips were selected to capture the variety of fieldtrips on offer. The broad research framework included the reviewing of materials on the (now depreciated) platform DUO (Durham University Online) and semi-structured interviews with module convenors¹.

Fieldtrip materials were reviewed, primarily using information from available module handbooks and guides. This review aimed to collect information on key taught components of the fieldtrips and how, if any, of these taught components aligned with themes of decolonisation. This module review provided essential background information in advance of semi-structured interviews conducted with module convenors (see sample interview sheet in

¹ This research was given research ethics clearance by the Department of Geography Research Ethics Committee (GEOG-2021-07-19T09_36_59-hphk44).

the appendix) by the decolonisation intern. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most in-person fieldtrips were cancelled or were held virtually. All interviews conducted were therefore based on fieldtrips that occurred in the academic year 2018/2019. Each interview was audio recorded with an automated transcript produced through Microsoft Teams. Each transcript was coded to allow for a comprehensive analysis of themes.

As part of the research design, a student survey and student interviews were intended to complement the interviews with module convenors. However, there was limited take up on the survey. This is most likely due to the limited number of current students who have been on a fieldtrip outside the UK², owing to Covid-19 cancellations. Yet, through the contribution of module convenors, we believe that we have enough information to be able to draw together some themes and offer some reflections on forms of best practice as they might be applied to fieldtrips.

Findings

Following the thematic analysis of the interviews, two overarching themes emerged:

Sustainability of the fieldtrip

The presence of Durham students in particular places arose across several interviews. This, depending on context, presents both positive outcomes, such as local employment and relationships that have been established over many years, and negative outcomes, such as potential 'poverty tourism'. On the latter, the Durham Geography undergraduate population remains primarily white British and is relatively socially and economically privileged. When visiting marginalised and minority areas, this can be perceived as potentially exploitative. This presence also can become material in clothing, for instance, which in certain contexts is deemed to be inappropriate.

Fieldtrips commonly make a conscious effort, whether through formal teaching or informal practices, to address some of the concerns around the presence of Durham students. In all module handbooks, especially those that went to politically sensitive areas, there is already reference to appropriate and respectful practice. One interviewee described some of the issues they faced as 'arbitrary' – something that cannot be avoided on the day and are considered to rise from student naivety. It may be that this will never be wholly resolved, as much as the experience, and value, of fieldtrips is partly about encountering situations which may be new to students. However, one interviewee did note how in the past accommodation had been linked to enduring colonial activity. Ever since, a conscious effort has been made to avoid such sites when planning accommodation, with justification given on the reasons behind where they now stay prior to the fieldtrip.

Fieldtrips likewise often develop on pre-existing relationships with people, organisations, and charities. These resources are often used while on fieldtrips. Formal decolonisation teaching may have the consequence of steering students towards projects on these teachings, which in turn may place additional stress on these local resources (and more so marginalised communities and individuals). For example, more students than before may be inspired to do a project regarding indigenous rights. As a result, a single, poorly funded, charity may become overwhelmed with requests for interviews or discussions.

Pedagogy and the Content Taught

Due to the various learning outcomes across fieldtrips and across BA and BSc programmes, decolonisation was understood to emerge at different points across the module and should be implemented differently. All interviewees agreed that students are becoming more aware of issues surrounding decolonisation and they are often engaging with these more frequently on fieldtrips (especially in human geography). This is shown by many students, often without encouragement, who choose to cover projects that engage with issues that are covered by

² When our research was conducted, only current Level 3 BSc students attended an in-person fieldtrip to Portugal during their Level 1 *Introduction to Geographical Research* module in January 2020.

‘decolonisation’ – even if they do not explicitly realise this (e.g., around issues of race, environmental degradation, and so on).

Some interviews raised concerns over how to balance forms of formal decolonisation teaching and learning with students who may not immediately understand how this may apply to the module aims, especially with reference to BSc, as well as the time to develop such resources by staff. All interviewees agreed that time constraints meant that the content taught on the fieldtrip was already finely tuned and appropriate, that adding any more content may lengthen the fieldtrip and in turn, make it more expensive (possibly marginalising some students). It is, however, noted that many modules have already engage with many social issues and practices, such as: traditional knowledge forms, the development industry and ‘neo-colonialism,’ as well as geopolitical issues. These may already address many of the concerns around decolonisation.

Some students may not be well equipped to navigate issues of decolonisation when engaging with local people, due to a lack of formal training and experience in discussions, which could have adverse effects on local communities, such as perpetuating enduring forms of personal and collective trauma. One interviewee gave an example of students conducting projects on crime and the role of racial justice. Students often do not have the background knowledge, or research skills, to delicately approach the subject when interviewing local people on such an issue.

These issues surrounding the content taught and the challenges of implementing decolonisation do not suggest formal decolonisation teachings should not be included. Instead, many interviewees were in favour of implementing decolonisation teachings, however not necessarily whilst on the fieldtrip itself. This may be part of a broader embedding of decolonisation around fieldtrip modules in pre- and post- trip activities or learning materials and across the entire degree programme.

Future Considerations for Decolonising Geography Fieldtrips

There is already strong evidence of good practice across the department and different fieldtrips. Thus, in this section, we aim to summarise both the insights from the interviews – as we summarised above as covering both its sustainability and on pedagogy to present some indicative best practice that has emerged during this research. In each of the sections below we provide some recommendations for discussion.

“We are all still learning”

A common theme across the interviews (and for those involved in the project) is the complex negotiation of definitions, terms, and potentials of what decolonisation could mean for fieldtrips and more broadly for the discipline of geography. We do not aim to provide a definition of decolonisation in this document but wish to keep this open according to the ever-changing process and aims of such a decolonial project. Ultimately, we are all still learning – and should continue to do so – from listening, reading, and working with various individuals and communities. Below we outline some

- **Introduce a ‘Resource Bank’:** Concerns were raised in some interviews of a lack of formal training for staff in decolonisation and the time that it may take to do the research to prepare materials for students. We propose that the creation of an accessible staff ‘resource bank’, which may be broader than fieldtrips, could act as a ‘one-stop’ resource for staff who may wish to include and share further thinking on decolonisation on their work, and as a resource for future fieldtrips.
- **We are not experts:** As is common across undergraduate teaching, we are often not experts in all subject areas. Thus, we recommend providing channels for an open, supportive dialogue on decolonisation teaching and connecting those less

experienced/confident with decolonising discussions with colleagues who can provide guidance.

- **Practicing and teaching decolonisation:** It will not always be necessary/appropriate to formally teach decolonisation to all students in all contexts (which may ultimately lead to duplication elsewhere in degree programmes). However, it is about how do we practice decolonisation – and there are many various forms this may express itself (examples are provided in the sections below).
- **An ongoing process:** Decolonisation cannot be seen as a one-time exercise but is a process. Therefore, we recommend that module decolonisation considerations are included as part of the module outline forms to encourage regular review.

Holistic approach to design

As much as decolonisation is a process involving many different perspectives and strategies, for fieldtrip design, its actualisation will vary significantly across different modules.

- **Contextualisation and appropriateness:** Each module will vary significantly in its application and practicing of decolonisation. This may mean for some modules, formal teaching either before or on the trip may be seen as a crucial component of properly attending to the content of modules (especially in some BA or integrated fieldtrips). However, elsewhere, this may be about providing greater information about the background of the area and communities, to rethinking how we may work with others (see below).
- **Student learning journey and outcomes:** In all of the contextualisation and identifying what is appropriate for each fieldtrip, it is imperative to understand how students may think about decolonisation. For example, formal decolonisation teaching beyond the current Level 1 module may not be necessary, or further formal teaching around a particular context may be required with case studies. However, the key question remains whether a student has enough exposure to be able to appreciate (and in some cases understanding the complexities and nuances of doing research on) decolonisation and how this may affect certain communities.
 - **Include discussions about inclusive assessment**

Working with others

Fieldtrips are always conducted with others, with varying different power relationships involved. Therefore, a key part of any decolonising approach is understanding how fieldtrips in geography can either help to address such power imbalances as much as seek to promote conventionally marginalised voices and knowledges.

- **Individuals and communities:** How we draw on 'local' expertise and knowledge is crucial, both to ensure a diversity of perspectives as well as the essential support they provide with the logistics of such trips. Things to think about include the labour of such work by individuals and communities, how they are remunerated, and the various pressures that fieldtrips may bring to an area. Some aspects could be alleviated by working more with local contacts, spending, and purchasing from local businesses, and ensuring there is a balance in how much we may ask of particular marginalised individuals and communities. All fieldtrips would benefit from regularly reviewing and updating these types of adopted approaches at the design and planning stages of module delivery.
- **(In)visibilities of students:** For some communities, the presence of large group of students from a certain socio-economic background, who are predominantly white, may require greater attentiveness to the environments we visit and ensuring that we appropriately address our presence in such places. However, this may also include

the (in)visibilities of students themselves, such as queer, disabled, and students of colour, who may embody intersecting forms of discrimination. Therefore, an appreciation of how we collectively feel and embody certain places is essential and to mitigate for any adverse consequences so far as possible as it does not severely impact upon pedagogical goals.

- **Other universities and the Royal Geographical Society with the British Institute of Geographers (RGS-IBG):** As much as Durham Geography can change the practices of its fieldtrips, there are often fieldtrips to similar locations at similar points in time among other UK Universities (and elsewhere). This could compound any adverse effects on certain places and raises the need to work across institutions and potentially through the RGS-IBG to establish greater dialogue according to the decolonisation agenda.

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