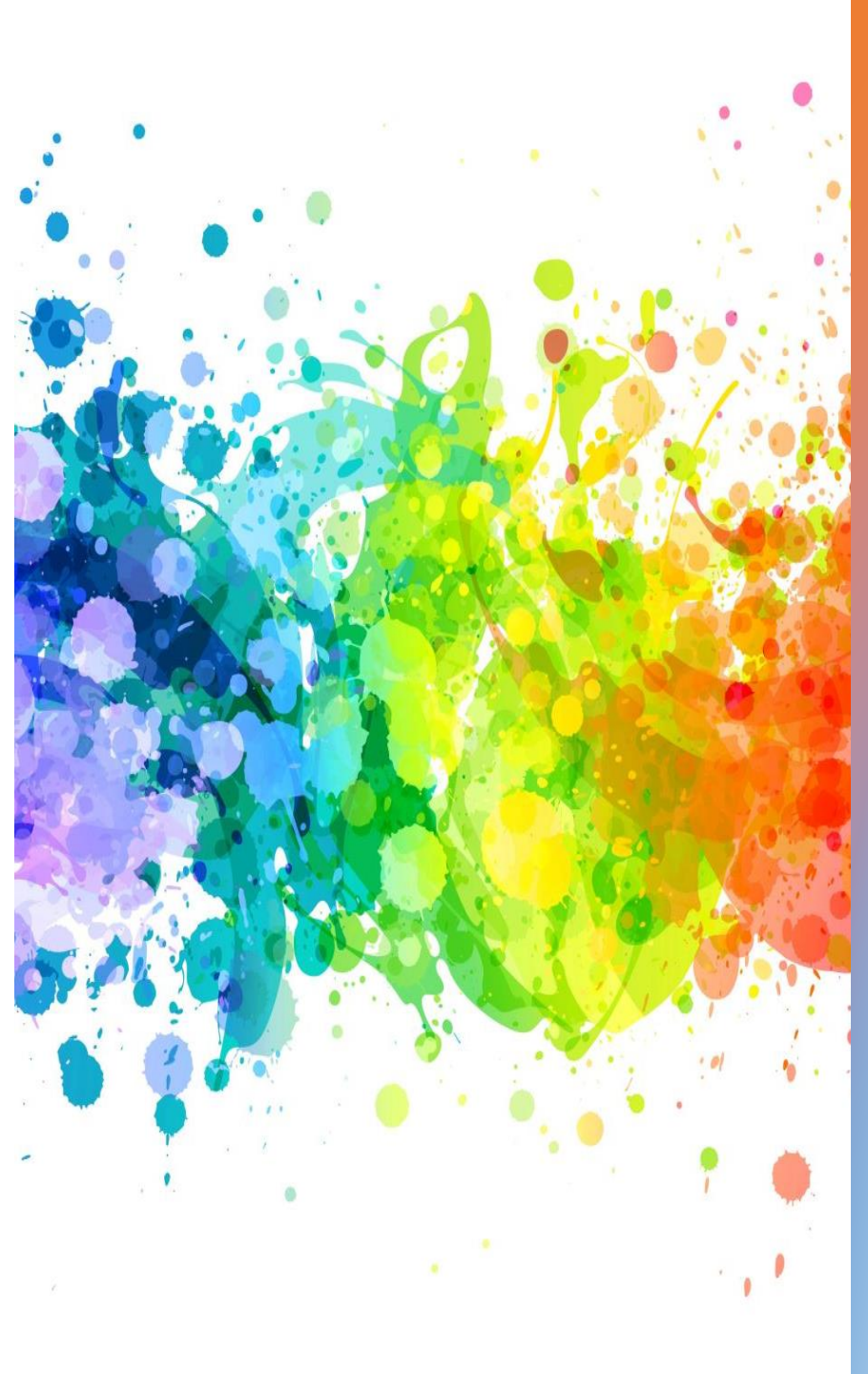# Decolonising an Education Department – Early Stages

The Ups and Downs: Experiences from the University of York

NERUPI Conference – Beyond Decolonisation: Transforming University Culture and Curriculum
May 21, 2024

NERUPI *Network*
Evaluating & Researching University
Participation Interventions

Constantino Dumangane Jr
Senior Lecturer, Teaching & Research
Programme Director, MA in Social Justice & Education
Department of Education , University of York
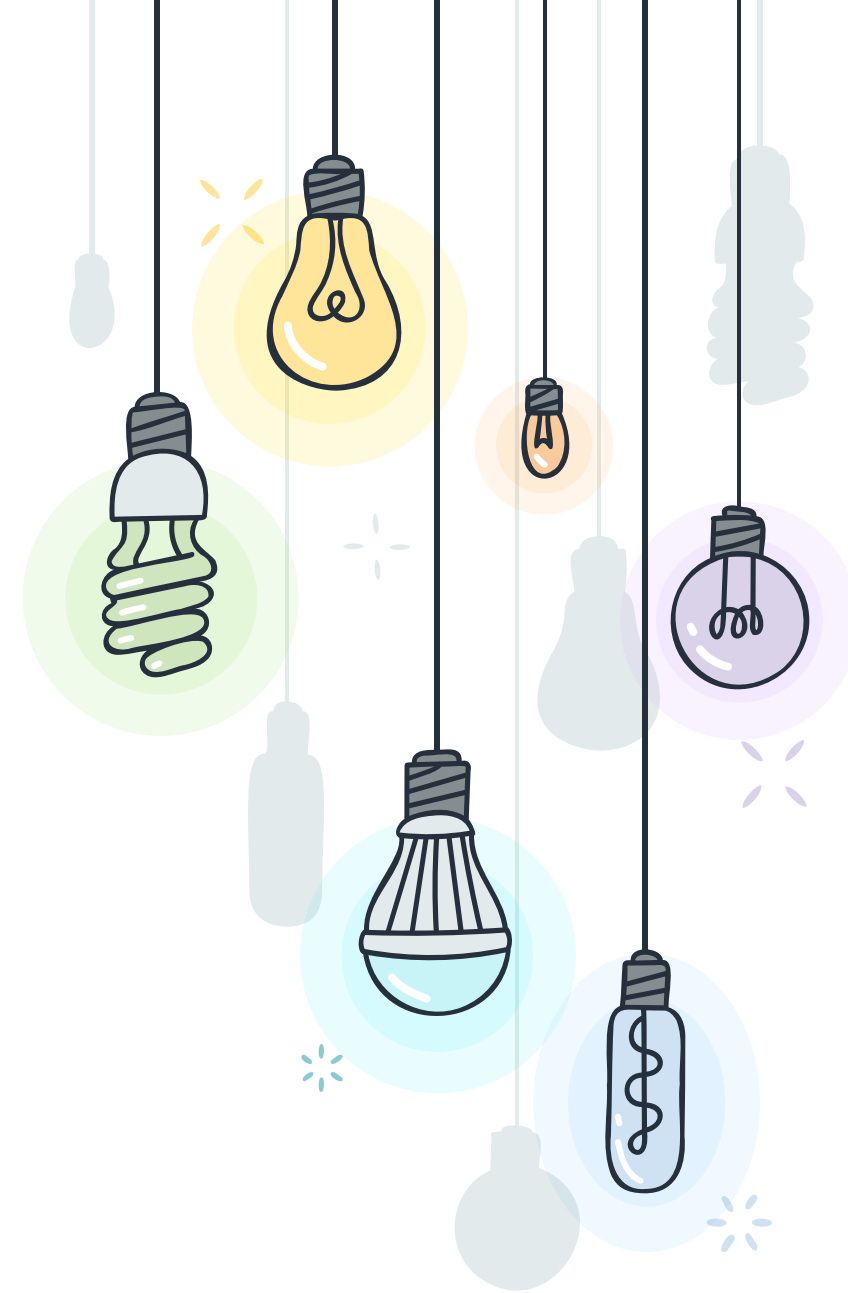
UNIVERSITY *of York*

What is decolonisation?

Decolonisation is the complex and multifaceted process of confronting and undoing the structural, institutional and epistemological legacies of colonialism. Decolonisation seeks to reverse the impact that colonisation has had on minoritised groups. These legacies create a society that is built on White supremacy and Eurocentrism. Decolonisation is a matter of social justice and truth. It is important for universities to acknowledge their hand in coloniality and for them to take responsibility for redressing various forms of disadvantage associated with Western dominance (colonialism) and racism. Decolonisation is also about recognising the knowledge of indigenous peoples as well as acknowledging, valuing, incorporating and putting on an equal footing Global South knowledge contributions with education in the Global North.
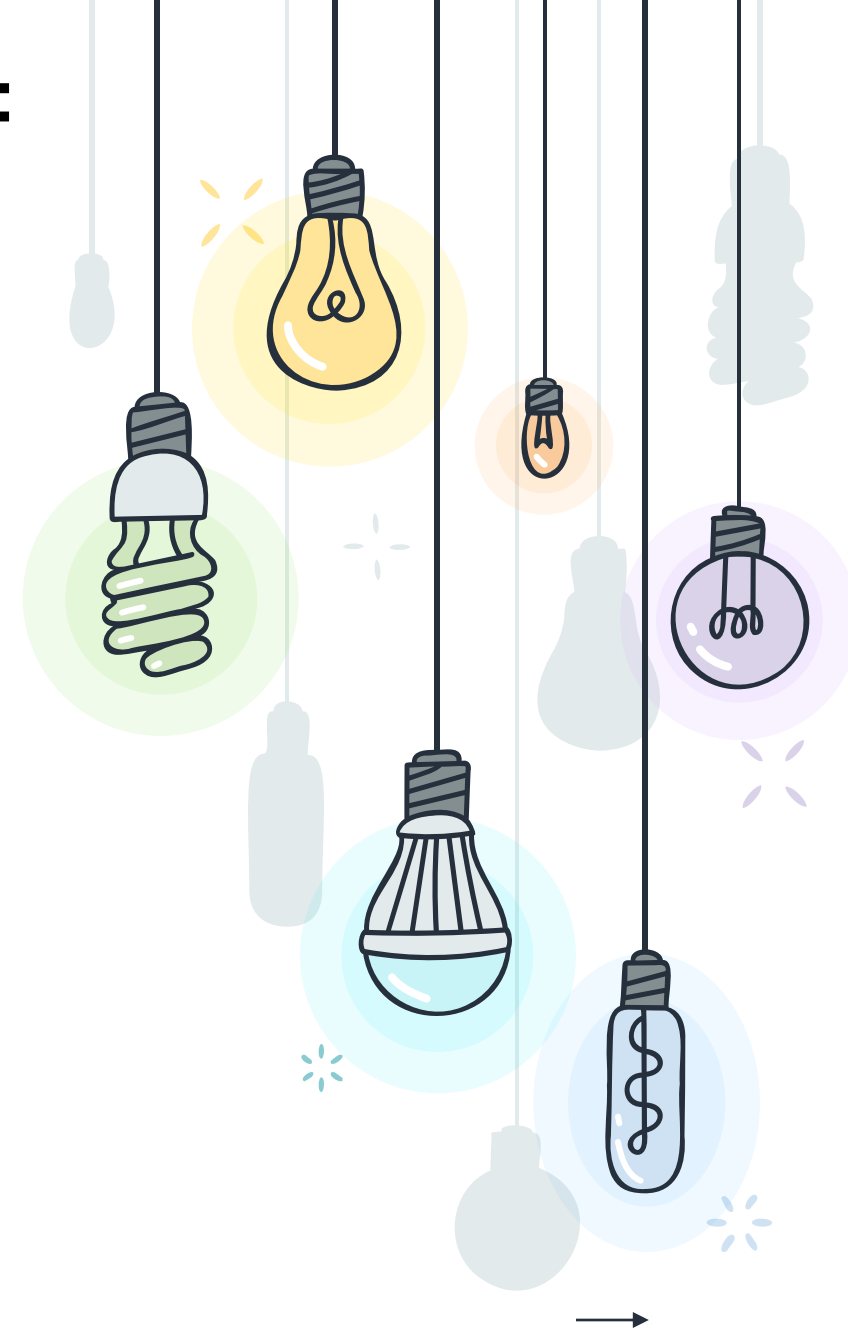
What is DEC?

DEC is a group of **students** and **staff** who act together to decolonise teaching and learning in the Department of Education. Students and staff work as a collaborative voice for change and transformation. One of the core focuses of DEC work is **student-related: co-production/co-creation of the curriculum --as well as other cultural and ethnic concerns.**

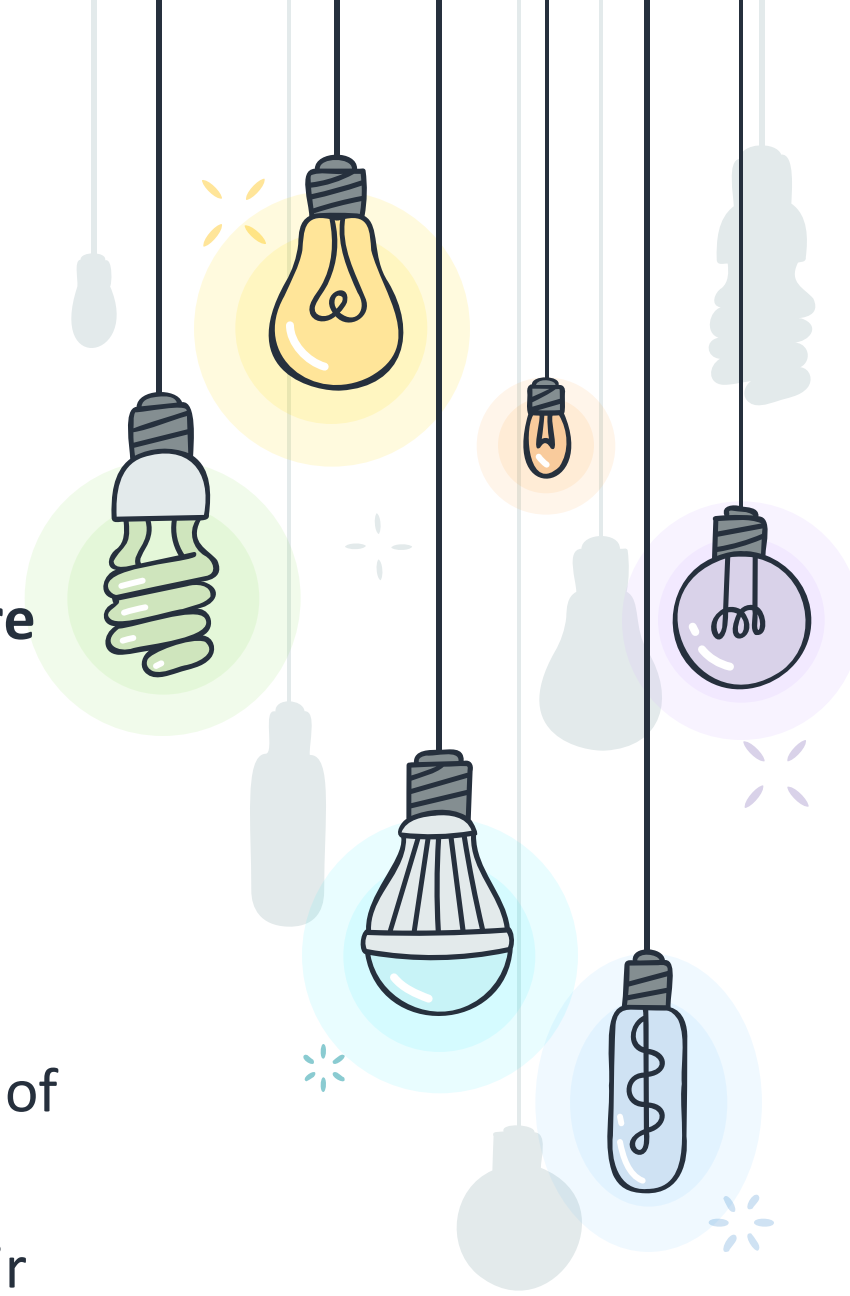# Decolonising Education Collective (DEC): The Students' Perspective

Our ethos//what is decolonisation

Students don't leave their culture or ethnicity at the classroom door, even though the education system may demand them to do so. It is for this reason that an active, **collective**, and inclusive effort is needed to decolonise and diversify the education system - making it a **brave and safe space** for all involved. That's where DEC becomes involved!
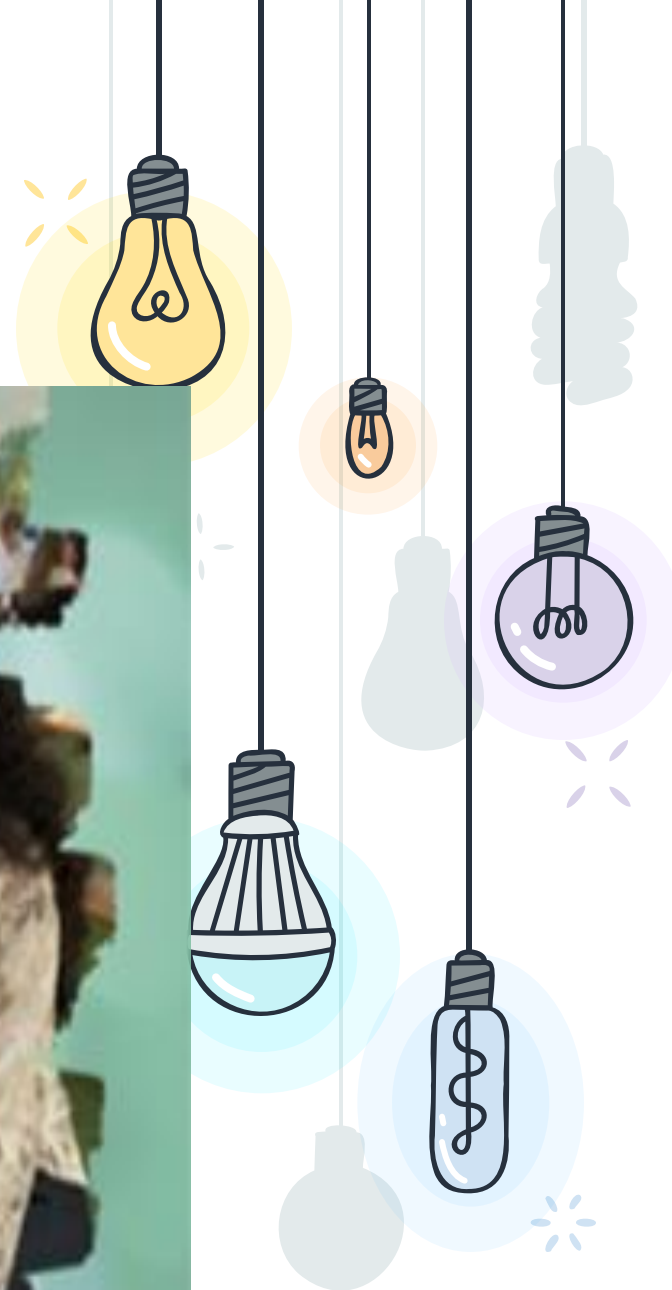
Why was there a need

- Need for the uncovering of embedded colonial structures that have held power in Universities.

- Students (and some staff) recognised the need to **decentre Eurocentric values** systems and dismantle the stream of Eurocentric knowledge production

- Recognised need for **student voice and activism** in the process == > Leads to meaningful involvement and action

- Meaningful student involvement happens when the roles of students are actively re-aligned from passive recipients of educational knowledge to active partners throughout their educational process

Who are DEC?
DEC Core Student -Staff Members Past and Present:
We are a small, but passionate and productive group!

Lucy Hemingway, a DEC student's perspective on Decolonisation work

'Decolonising the Curriculum' is somewhat of a buzzword at the moment. But this is no quick fix. In fact, decolonising the university is a pretty extensive task. It requires a radical overhaul of the ways in which we produce knowledge. For an institution like the University of York, this means critical reflection on what is taught, where knowledge comes from and which voices are championed. So where are these conversations taking place? Education here at York is taking action through the form of the Decolonising Education Collective.

Examples of DEC student input into curriculum decolonisation:
Co-construction of knowledge

Critical questions

We understand that there may be some psychologists/educationalists/ sociologists etc who need to be taught or who have research which is crucial to courses but we still need to acknowledge the racial bias that may have influenced some of these pieces of research. Engaging students in critical thinking and asking questions that go beyond the standard strengths and limitations allows for more thought provoking discussions and better understanding of the system as well as how big pieces of research may influence policy and practice. Examples of questions/ topics to discuss with students include;

- Who was the researcher, what was their experience in relation to this issue/area?
- Why were they interested?
- How does this affect policy?
- Who creates policies?
- Who benefits from these policies and practices?
- Could the findings be off putting for certain groups?
- Are we excluding certain groups? What's the problem with this?
- Why is it a problem that only a western sample has been used? How does this affect our attitudes in education now?

| 23 | UCL | Undergraduate | Education | There are quite a few so i'll give a brief summary | The worlds of UCL module (FIRST year-optional) ; This module will look at the history of education through UCL's own institutions, with historical context to explain the evolution of the education system students will critically examine the connection between British education and empire asking what impact the legacies have today. a general introduction to the history of univeristies and schooling in the UK whilst working on practical skills too. Policy and politics in Ed (Second year- compulsory) detailed analysis of education policy and the underlying political trends behind how governments around the world have chosen to organise education. It covers major debates within education policy-making and considers the numerous ways in which politicians have sought to change education systems through policy. This involves an examination of different policy areas and their relationship to the social and economic context of the time, using sociological approaches. Educating minorities, migrants and refugees (second year - optional), this just looks at things like the right to education, different national educational systems, opportunities for migrants minorities and refugees etc. | First Year / second year | Optional / compulsory | This whole course just seems like it has some really good core modules and optional modules, they cover issues in a lot of depth and consider the past as well as how those theories and practices infiltrate into our current system. I know that Eyseneck studied there and he's a prominent name in Intelligence psychology but he held racist views and has been stripped of his titles etc. I think UCL does inform their students of that and whilst they can't change history they can teach it in a way which acknowledges the past and how those racial ideas and beliefs may have affected theories - theories we still use today. UCL attract a third of all education students nationally and so to see them making such a huge effort makes them even more attractive when looking for PG courses, knowing they've accepted their history and are working towards changing makes it feel like a more welcoming place for BAME students and staff likely too. |

Current DEC Students – Josh Maughan and Zarina Choudhari-Stewart: an Introductions Video
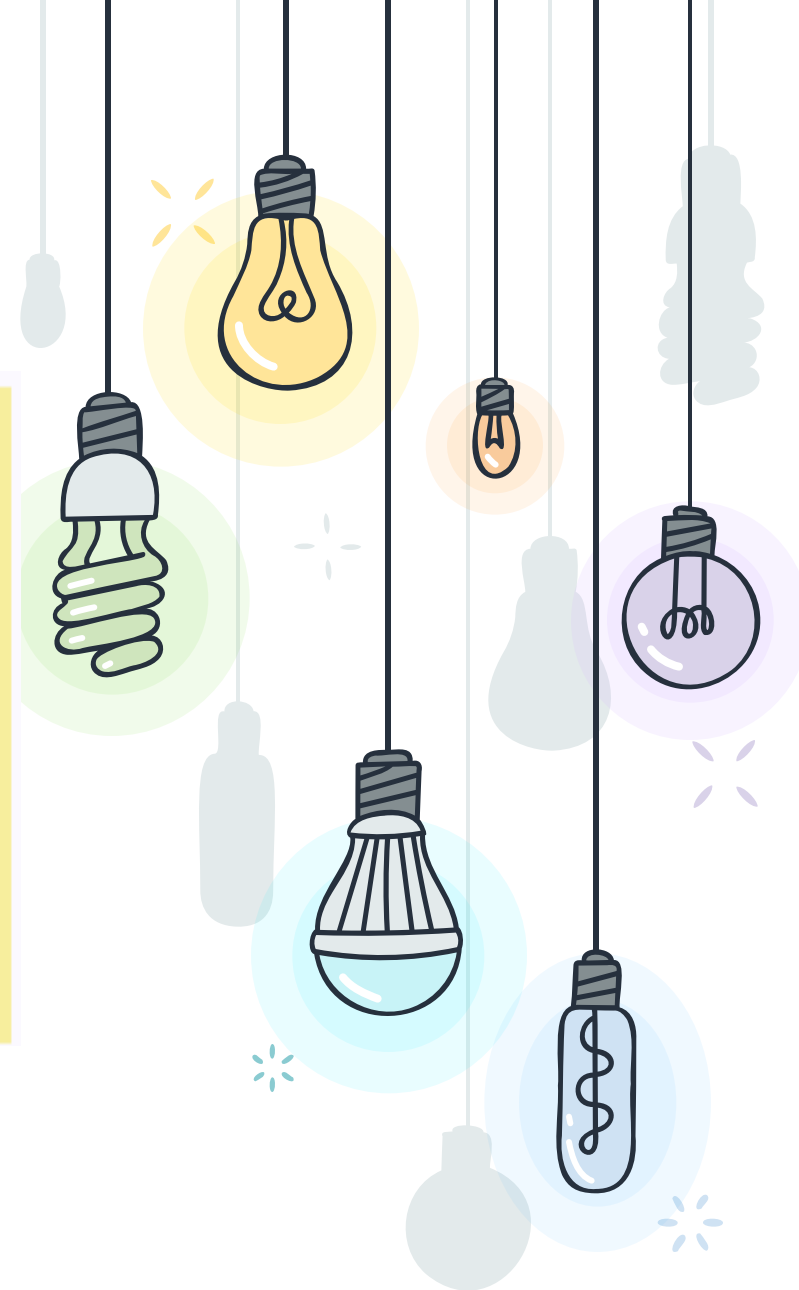
Zarina

- Sitting with and understanding difference
- Feeling empowered to grow and question your own perspective
- Utilising creative means for access and engagement
- Widening participation, curiosity and community

Josh

- Realising this is a collective conversation. The importance of knowing when to speak and when to listen. Providing platforms through my privilege.
- Wellbeing, trauma and creativity

✛ **DEC.mp4 (first 3 minutes only)**
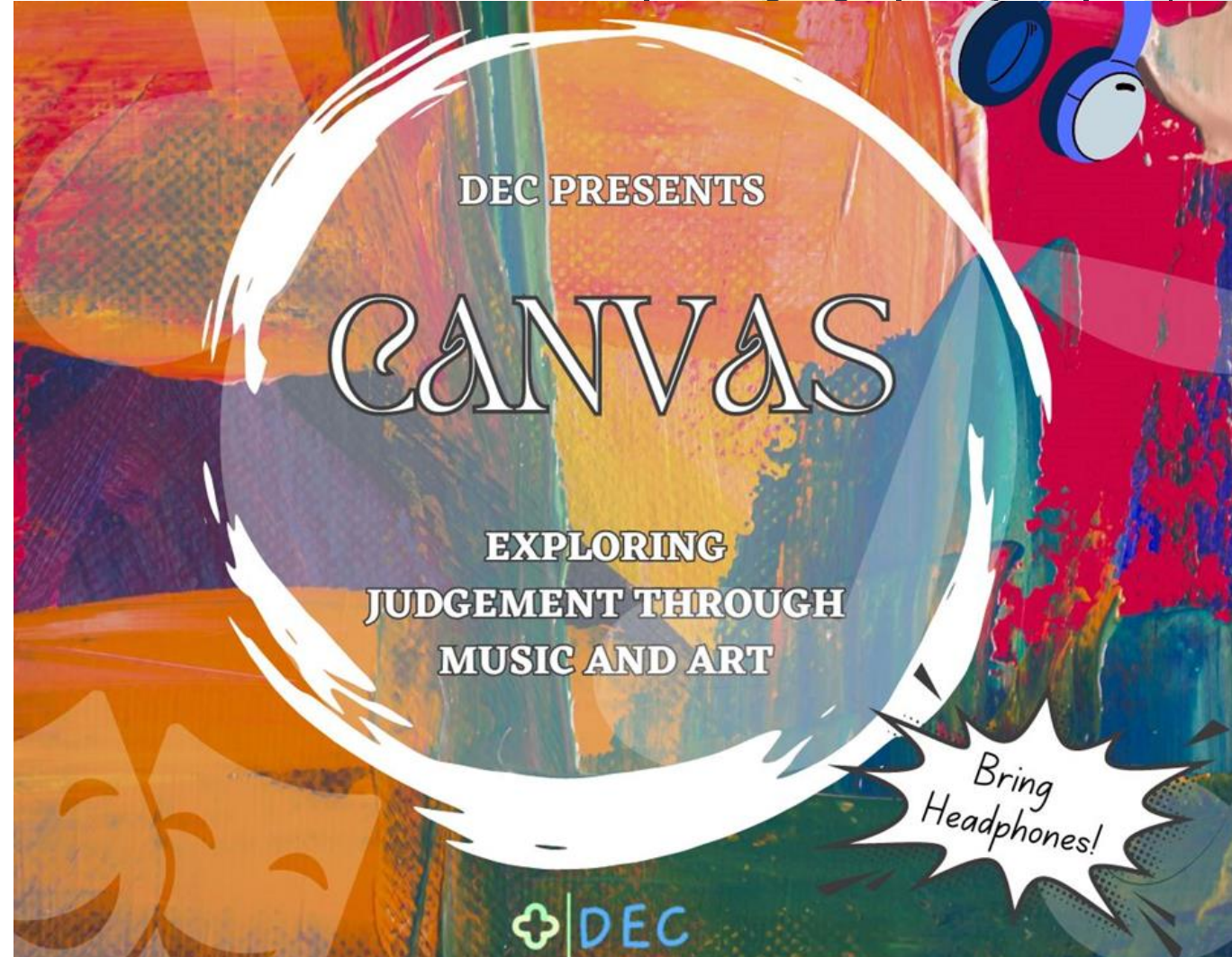
WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO US?

THE SPACE

- JUDGEMENT FREE
- A BRAVE SPACE?
- THE ABILITY TO SIT WITH OPPOSING VIEWS
- INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE

THE DNYAMIC

- NO HIERACHIES
- NO CORRECT OPINIONS
- CONVERSATION NOT A LECTURE
- MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL LEARNING

Current DEC Students: Sahana Arun Kumar

DEC PRESENTS

CANVAS

EXPLORING JUDGEMENT THROUGH MUSIC AND ART

Bring Headphones!

DEC

DEC's Acommplishments time line

Lockdown, 2020

The Decolonising Education Collective (DEC) is founded in the Education Department at the University Of York

Term Time, 2020

DEC Reading Group begins as a safe space for participants to explore inclusive and diverse texts.

Term Time, 2020

DEC launches Liberation Reps in the department. These are student volunteers who represent marginalised students such as BAME and International students.

Term Time, 2021

DEC leads teaching and learning workshops in the department of education at vital staff training

Term Time, 2021

DEC begins action groups and discussion groups bringing staff and students in the department to discuss pertinent issues surrounding decolonising and create tangible action plans to combat such issues

Summer, 2021

DEC launches its first internship employing students in the department to work over the summer on decolonising specific strands of the curriculum

Summer, 2022

DEC hosts another internship employing students to work on decolonising the curriculum, looking towards semesterisation and modularisation.

October, 2022

DEC represents the Education Department at the first Social Sciences Faculty Forum.

October, 2022

DEC is nominated at the UoY Inclusive Impact Awards for the Inclusive Education Award. DE among over 10 other nominees.

November, 2022

DEC wins the Inclusive Education Award.

Term Time, 2022

DEC campaigns for and gets approval on changes to Module Feedback Forms. Education department forms now have a question relating to decolonising to ensure this is a focus of our curriculum.

Term Time, 2023

DEC launches their first podcast - Sweet Life on DEC

Term Time, 2023

DEC launches their first podcast - Sweet Life on DEC

Summer, 2023

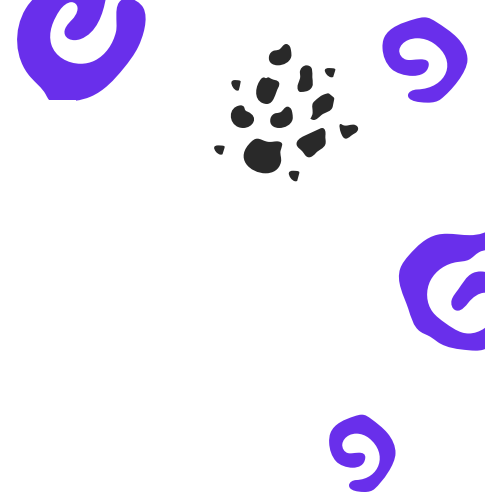DEC hosts its third annual internship & launches its website!

... to today

...to **you**.

Some of DEC's accomplishments

- Produced reflective learning case studies.
- Delivered a series of Teaching and Learning workshops to ED & Soc. Departments
- Designed and delivered year 1 project (STEP1) to all ED students – which is now a compulsory UG induction programme
- Provided volunteer training for DEC coaches who facilitated STEP1
- **Secured paid** Summer Student Internships - report on current curriculum practices (**more about this on this on next slide**)
- Introduced changes to the module feedback form – Decolonisation curriculum reflection question (**important!)**
- Contributed to the redesign of the BA Education programme and the design of the MSc Environmental Sustainability Education and Communication programme
- Participated in University wide event – Staff Race Equality Forum
- Promoted DEC at Open Days and to incoming students at welcome events
- Delivered lectures on Student Voice & Activism in UG & MAT Modules (Josh & Zarina)
- Developed podcasts on decolonial issues important to York Students
- Created an interactive workshop for reflection and action - CANVAS (Sahana - lead)

Summer Internships

July 2021

6-week paid internship focusing on how the Department of Education at the University of York could start the process of decolonising. This included reviewing degrees offered, taught content, reading lists, learning/module outcomes and pedagogy. A catalogue of good examples was provided as a framework to base changes off. This ended up being a 50,000-word report.

July 2022

6- week paid summer internships which centered around reverse mentoring staff in Department of Education on decolonial practice.

July 2023

6- week paid summer internships for students to do further work on decolonising the curriculum in preparation for semesterisation. Additionally, the interns worked with the **inclusive learning team** – focusing their efforts on understanding how the relationship between student-staff partnerships can benefit decolonisation efforts through the implementation of DEC's work as BEST Practice exemplars for Education and other departments to adopt.
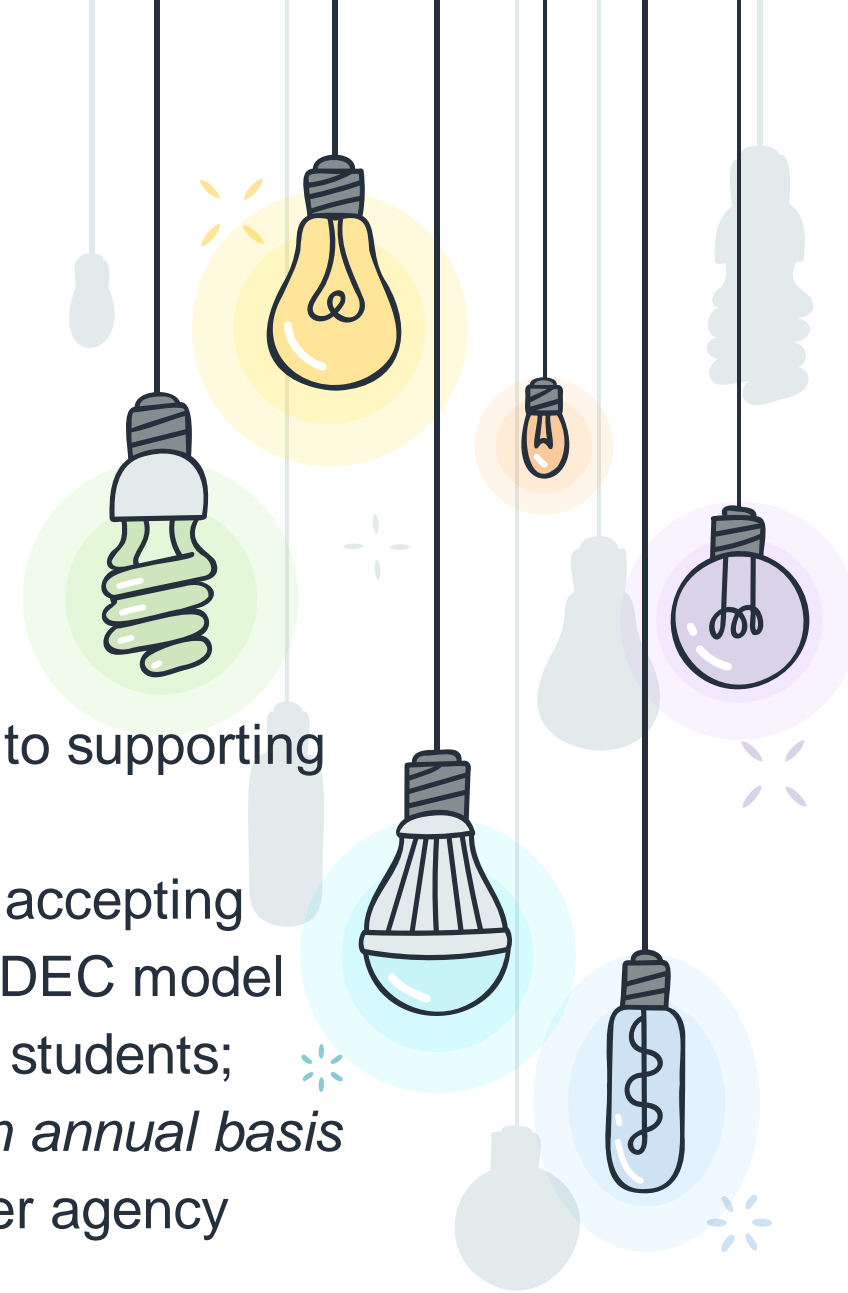
Nominations and Award

Challenges/obstacles sometimes overcome, yet some persist

- Resources
- Funding / financial red tape
- Power dynamics and need for Ally-ship
- Manpower
- Need for dedicated 'work time allocation' for staff dedicated to supporting DEC students.
- Revolving door or students: DEC staff need to be open and accepting
- of the different turns that decolonisation make take under a DEC model with regards to what decolonisation issues are important to students; *how issues are identified and acted upon may change on an annual basis*
- Recognising the need for change without threatening lecturer agency
- Buy in from senior staff and programme directors
- The future (?)

Using the case studies

Read the case studies in advance of the session. Make notes on the questions that are there, and add your own questions about the case.

We suggest that we use the case analysis worksheet produced by Gorski & Pothini (2013). The worksheet suggests the following steps when using case studies for social justice.

- Identify the problem(s) presented by the case.
- Take stock of varying perspectives.
- Consider possible challenges and opportunities.
- Imagine equitable outcomes.
- Discuss short, medium and long term responses.
- Create a plan of action.

Gorski, P.C. & Pothnini, S. (2013). Case studies on diversity and social justice education. London: Routledge.

UNIVERSITY of York

Decolonising Education Collective

Case Studies

These case studies have been inspired by student experiences. We offer them for reflection, discussion and action planning as part of efforts to decolonise our programmes and practices.
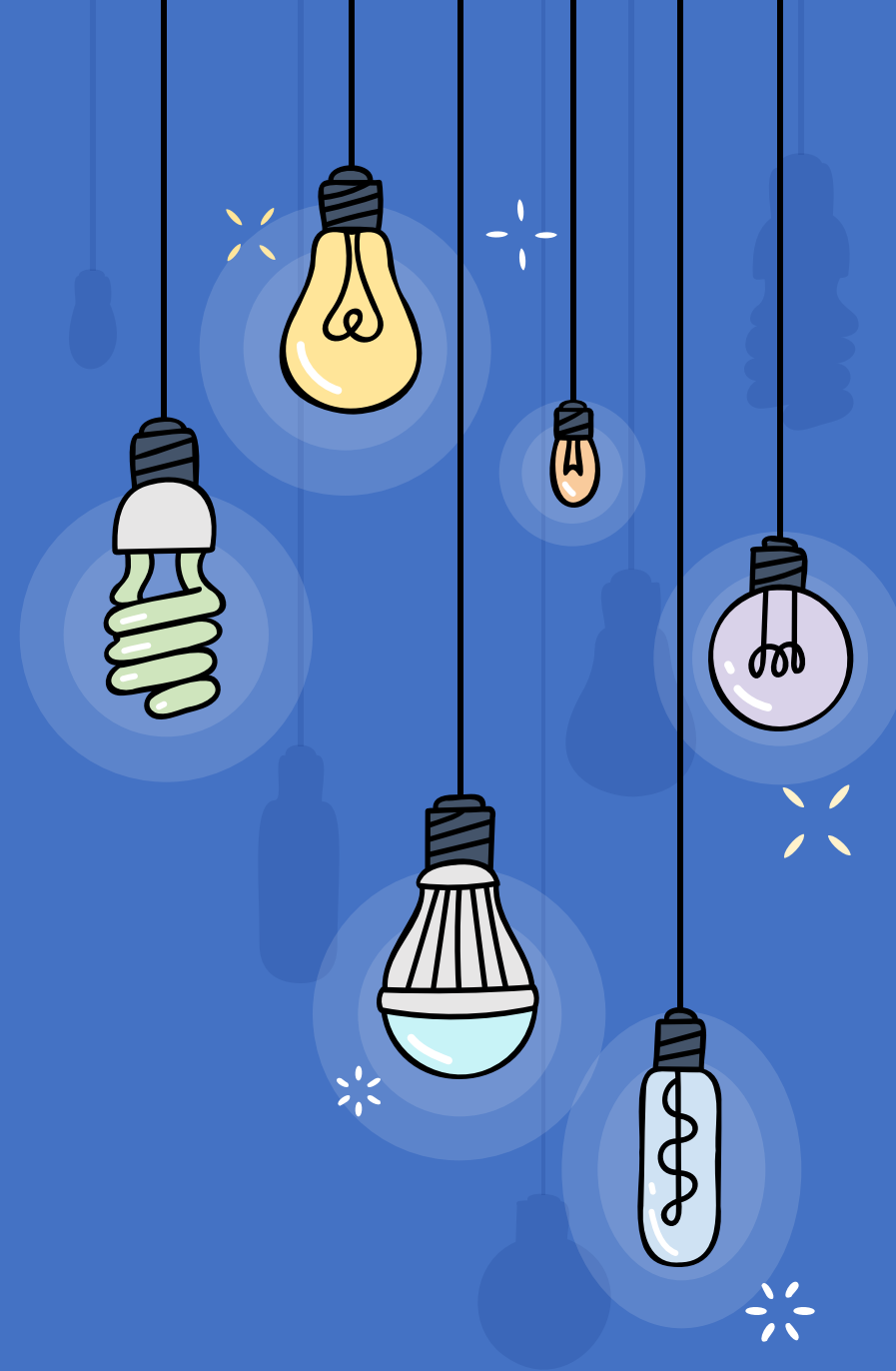
Written by:
Priscilla Adjei-Twum, Vicky J. Chang, Daniel Memarpour Hobbi, Kemi Obayan and Zara Sharif
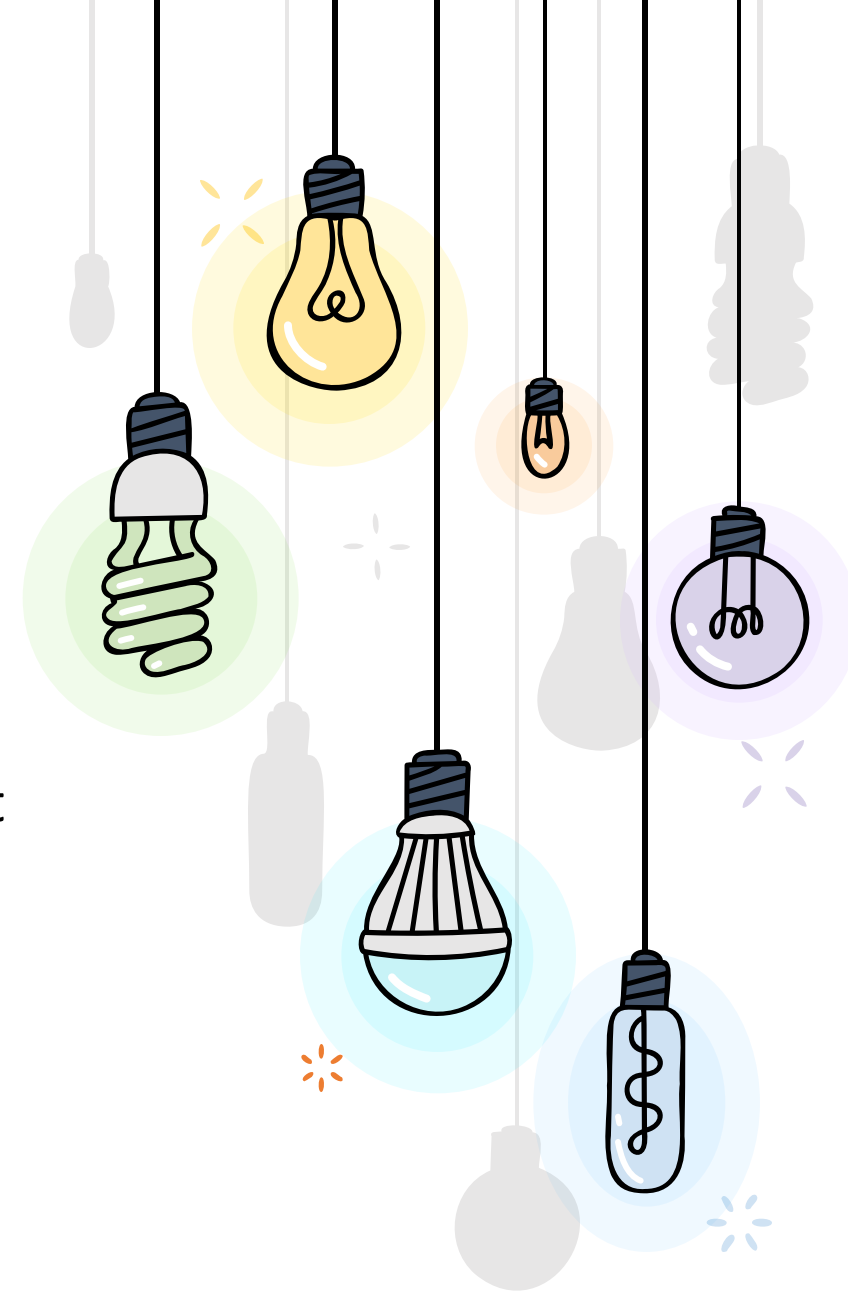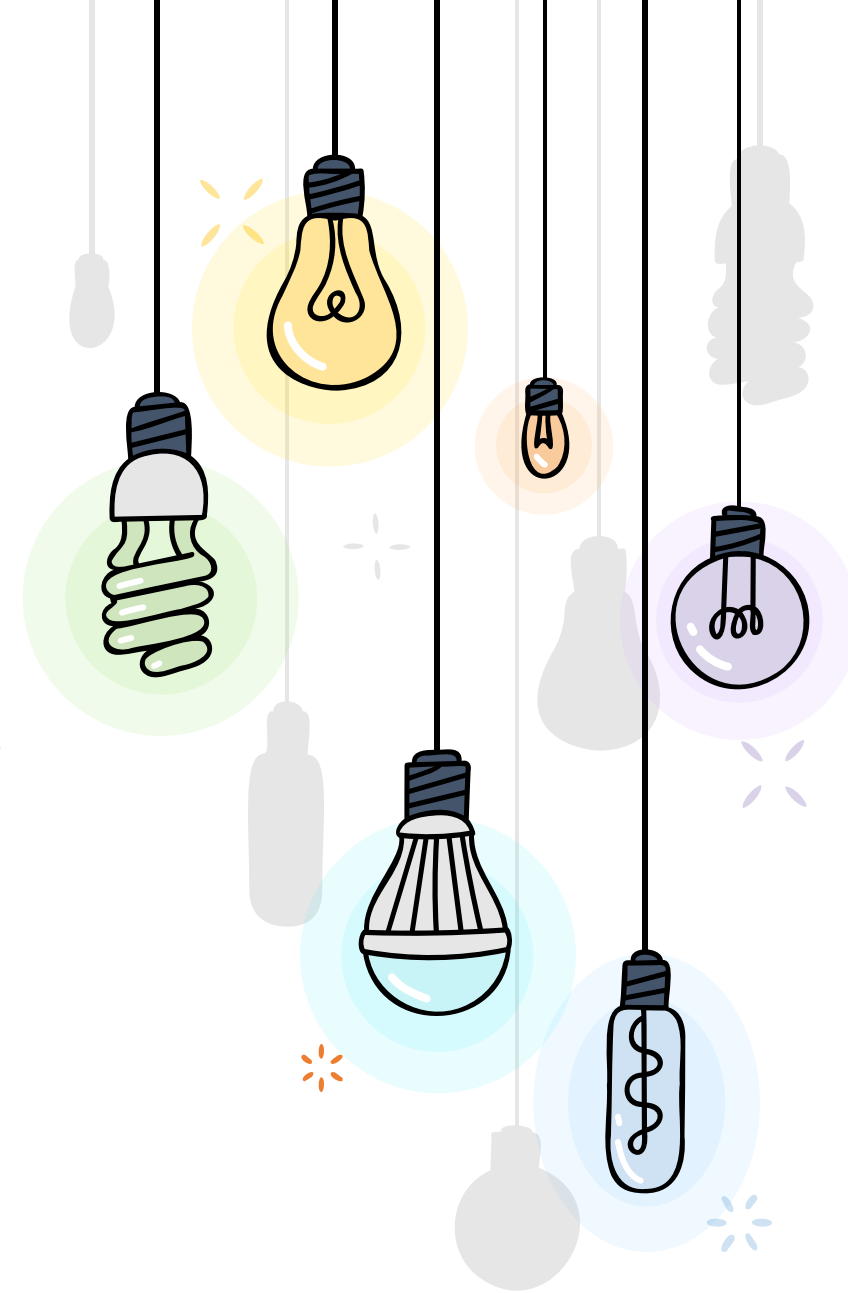
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Case Study 4

Discussion

Case Study 4: Discussion

In an online class on factors affecting educational experiences, discussion about gender initially dominates. The class has an open discussion, multiple people unmute themselves, cameras are on. A few students mention how class can affect subject choice, though this discussion does not go quite as far. The lecturer notes that no one has spoken about how race may be used as a lens, and how it could affect achievement and subject choice. All the mics that were unmuted are now muted. All the students who had their camera on look away from the screen. They will not be contributing to this discussion.
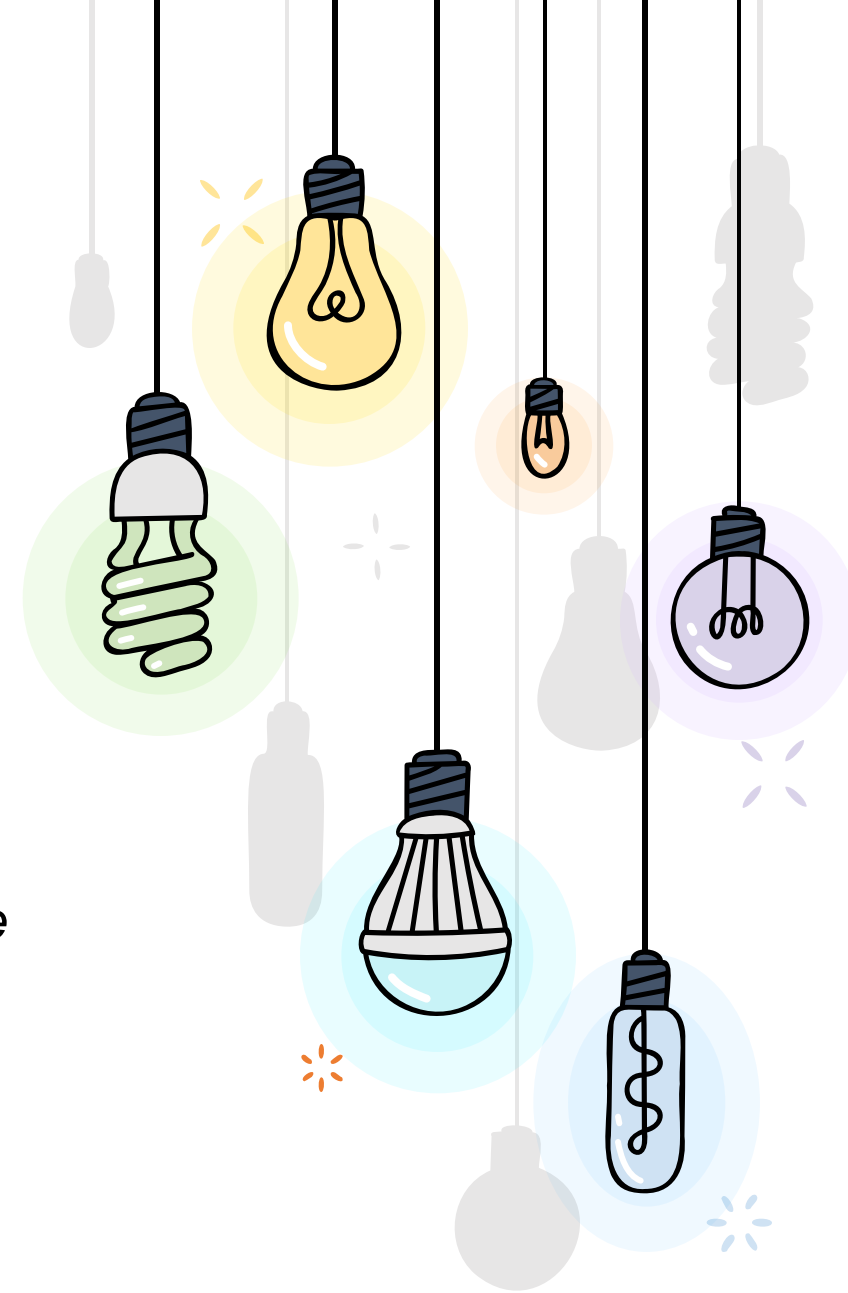
Case Study 4: Discussion (cont.)

There is one black girl in this seminar group, who had already done her fair share of contributing to class discussion. Normally, when race is brought up in seminars where she is often the only black student she'll look away, just as her classmates are, and let the lecturer either say something themselves or change the topics after a few awkward seconds of silence, but today she decides to say something.

Case Study 4: Discussion (cont.)

"*When I was in secondary school I always thought subconsciously that being a writer was something I just couldn't do. All of my English teachers were white, every book we ever read was written by white people and every character was always white. At the time I didn't even realize, and it wasn't until I got to Sixth Form and read one of my first books by a black author that I realised books could represent me and that I could be an author after all. There's so many subjects that I've never even dreamed of doing because I just assumed it wasn't available to me because*
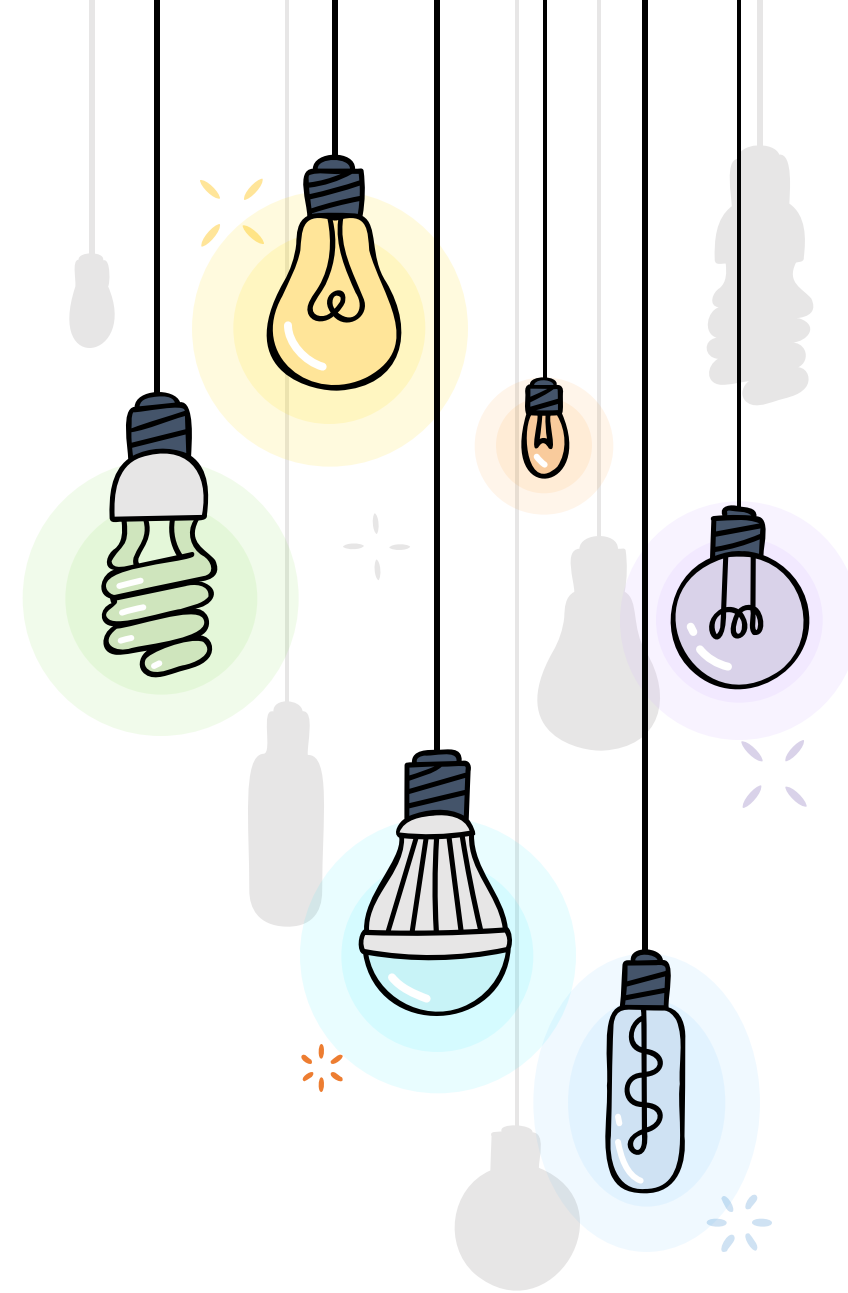
I never saw any black role models."

After speaking, her hands are shaking and she has to look away from the camera and take a deep breath and a long drink of water.

Case Study 4: Discussion (cont.)

She never normally shares how her race affected her in school, preferring to keep her stories to something more relatable that won't make her, and her white classmates uncomfortable. Today was one of the first times she has openly spoken about race in a seminar, having decided that she should be allowed to be just as honest about her experiences as any white student may be, even though it was incredibly scary.
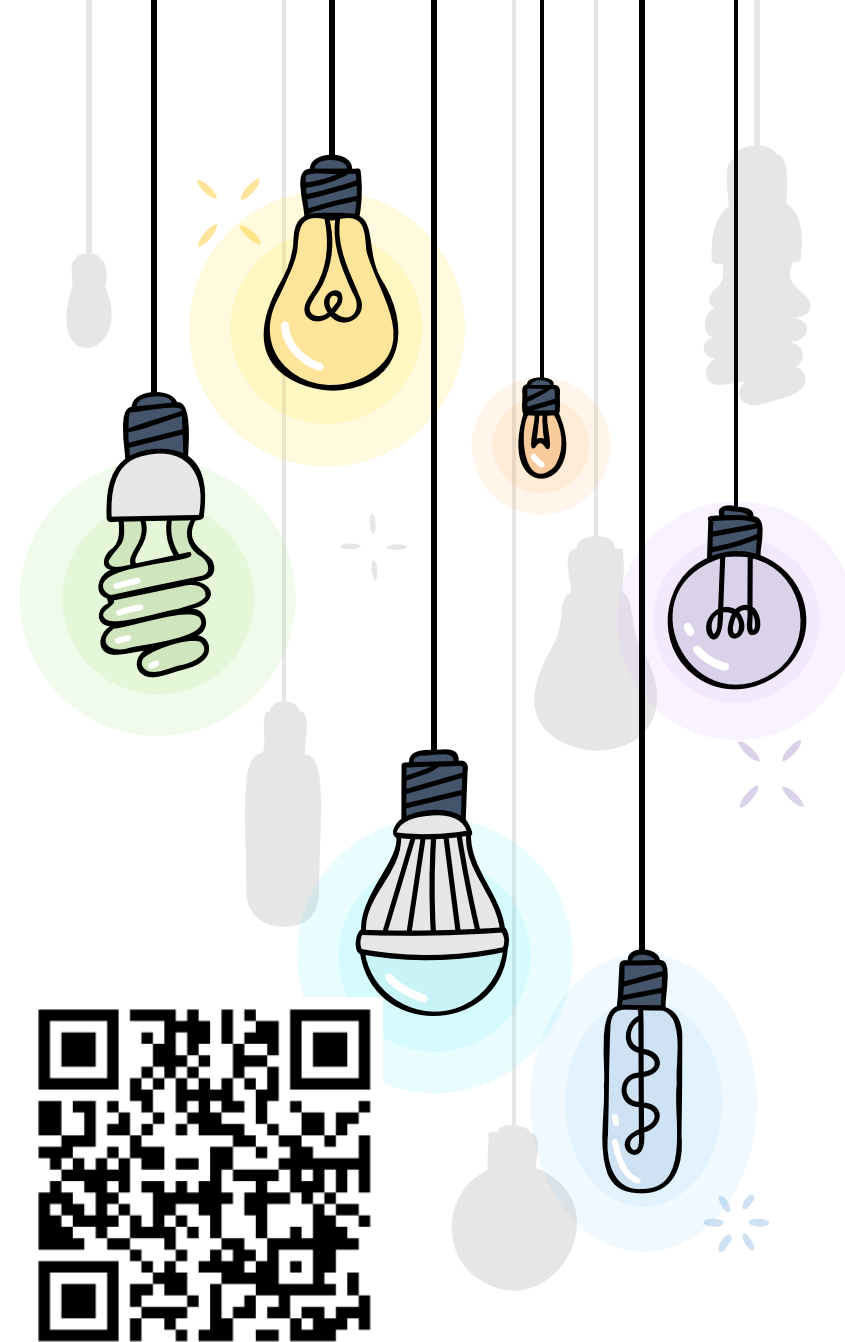
Her classmates and her lecturer say nothing but just stare blankly at their screens. After enough silence has passed to make her regret saying anything, the lecturer says "Well, I think now's a good time to send you into breakout rooms for your first task."

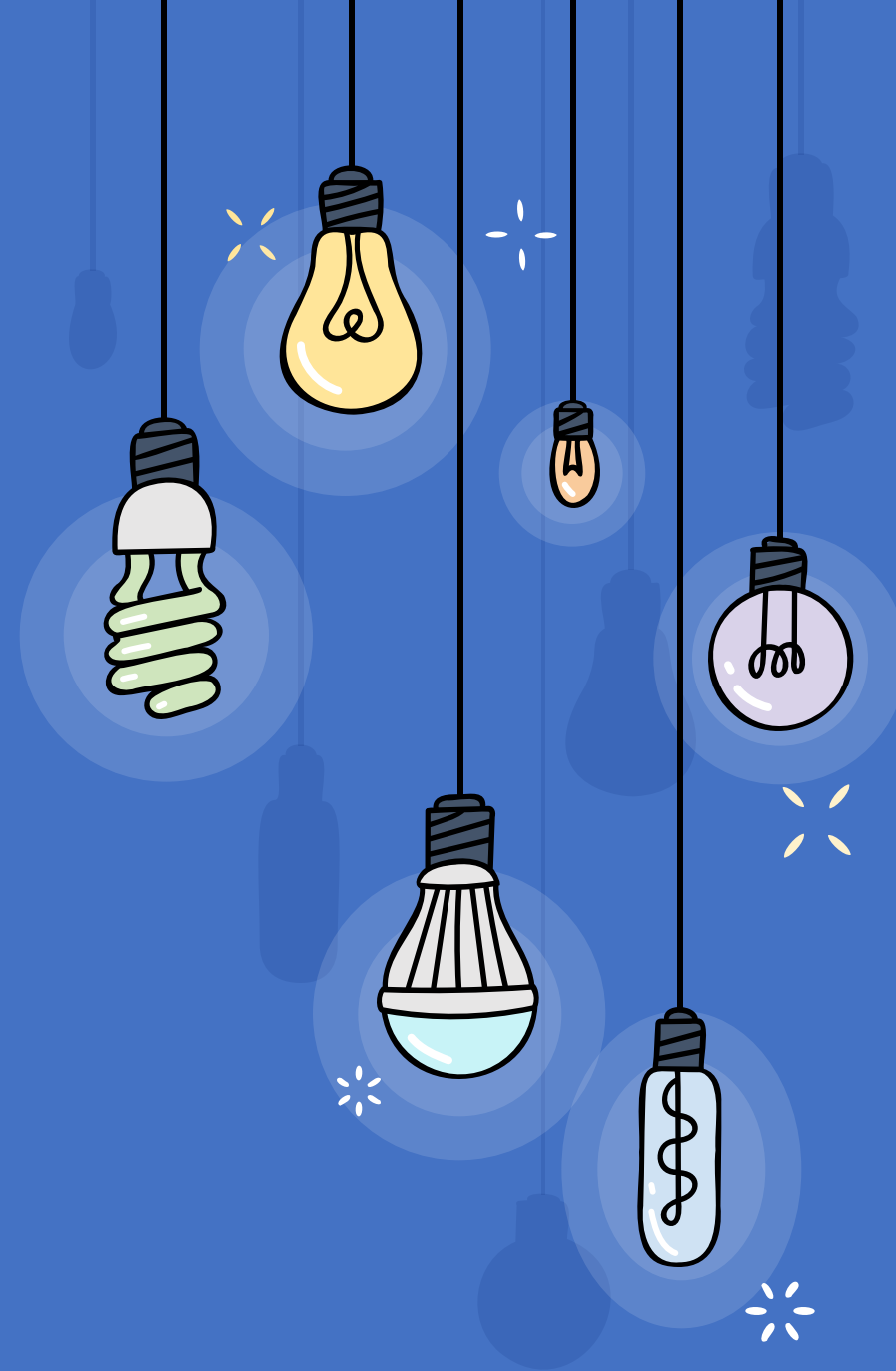# Case Study 4: Reflection questions. Please comment in the **[Padlet](#)** or use the QR code

1) What would have been a better way to encourage students to discuss race?
2) How can you make sure that discussions of race don't fall onto the shoulders of your few BAME students?
3) What would have been the appropriate way to react to the student's story?
4) How can we encourage comfortable and open discussions when experiencing online learning?
5) Why can discussions about race be uncomfortable for students of all races?
6) What could the lecturer have done to manage some of the uncomfortable feelings - while also enabling additional discussion of this issue?
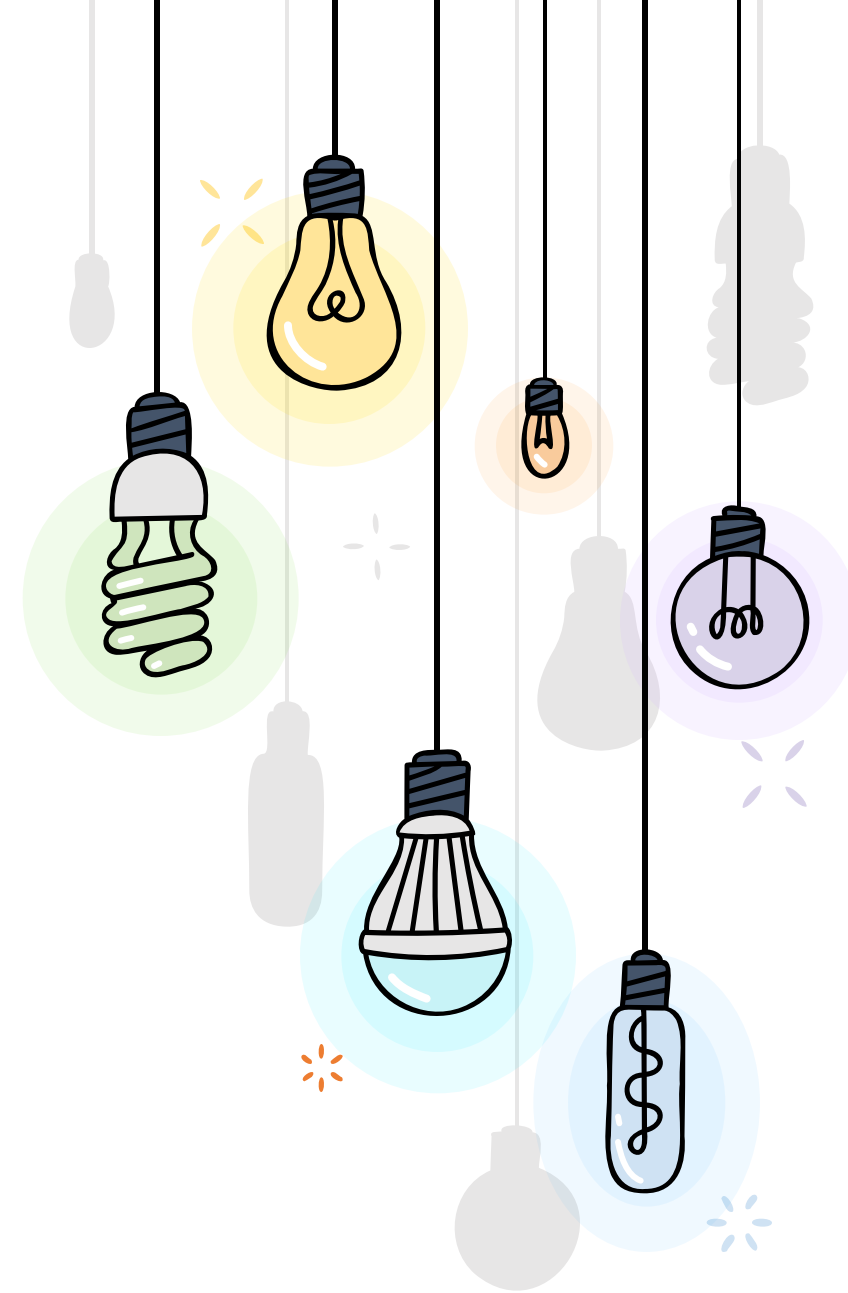
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Case Study 5

Content

Case Study 5: Content

As part of her course, Jade is learning about arguments for and against using DNA data in education. Jade is interested and does some additional reading. She learns about its history and how it has been used to push a white supremacist agenda and can be incredibly political. As a black student, this makes her incredibly dubious of the arguments for its use, and is confused why this was not recognised in her lecture or assigned reading.
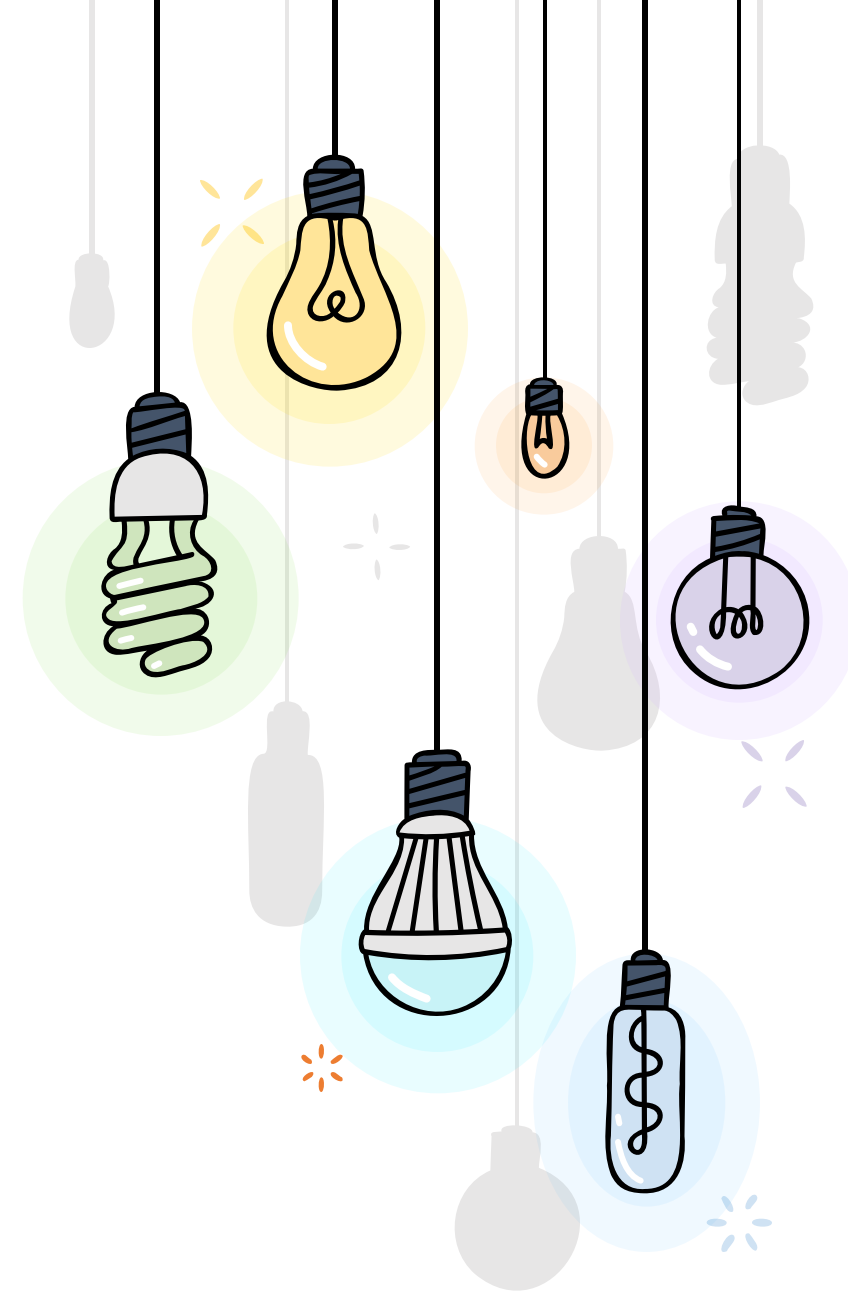
Case Study 5: Content (cont.)

In her contribution to the discussion board, she evaluates the arguments for DNA data in education, by criticising its history and how it has been used in the past to push racist agendas and further white supremacy, using historical evidence and the controversy and criticism around it. She notices the next day that her lecturer has responded and checks the feedback she has received.
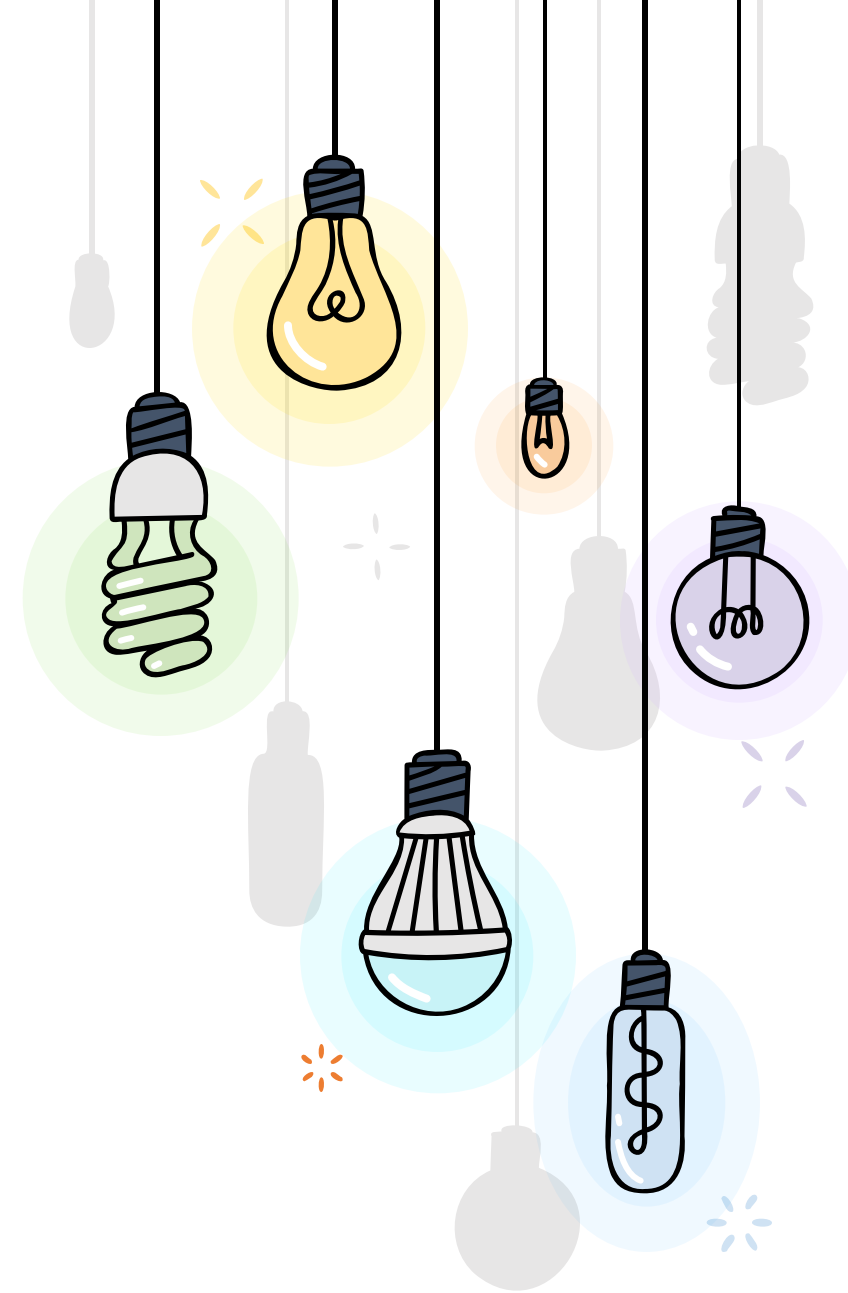
"Inflammatory language"

"Too political"

"Overly critical"

Case Study 5: Content (cont.)

Jade is left feeling shocked and confused. Was she wrong to have brought up race? Was she overly critical and too political? She didn't realise that her argument would be a problem and feels stupid for bringing up race in relation to this topic. She decides not to contribute to the group discussion when discussed in her online seminar, and keeps her camera off.

Thank you!

Any questions?

Our email: educationdeprep@yusu.org

DEC's website: https://www.yorked.online/