



Citation Justice at the University of Birmingham

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Vicky Wallace and Judith Hegenbarth, Library Services, **University of Birmingham**

Anita Lateano, Decolonisation Project, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham

The power of citations

Citations play a powerful role in academia, both institutionally and for individual careers. They are hugely important as they often form the bedrock of research assessment practices and are increasingly influential in job applications and promotions, grant applications and university rankings. There's no denying that citations matter. However, worryingly, there is [increasing evidence that women, people of colour, and other minoritized groups are systemically under cited](#). From a research point of view, a lack of diversity in the knowledge we discover is also problematic, but often overlooked, as it has historically been the norm. [Privamvada Gopal](#) puts it succinctly, “a largely white or largely male curriculum is not politically incorrect, as is often believed, but intellectually unsound. Monocultures do not produce good thinking and are in themselves a lethal form of unmarked narrow identity politics.”

Alongside strengthening our own teaching and research, institutional pledges for equality, diversity and inclusion (see University of Birmingham's [here](#)) are increasing across the sector. What role might citations play in our commitments to addressing inequalities and how might we use our citation practices to begin to change things?

A bit of background

The University of Birmingham Library's work on Citation Justice has been spearheaded by Vicky Wallace from the Research Skills Team. The world of citation metrics is complex and emotionally charged. Many researchers are not served well by traditional citation metrics so the Research Skills Team keeps up to date on bibliometric developments to ensure advice encompasses best practice and is in line with the principles of responsible research assessment (especially [DORA](#), to which the [University of Birmingham](#) is a signatory). This helps to inform and empower researchers by setting their citations in the wider context.

As part of Vicky's current awareness, in November 2022 she attended a webinar called "[Cite Black women](#)" which introduced the concept of citation justice. She had also been working on **Layla Saads'** "[Me and white supremacy](#)" workbook. The webinar prompted her to consider the power of citation to include or exclude particular voices. It made her aware of the uneven playing field and disadvantage to all researchers, but particularly those from Black and minority ethnic groups and the global south; fundamentally those who have not traditionally been in the privileged position of the west.

The team began to think about many practices around citation, from undergraduate level, through to PGRs working on their PhD, researchers going through peer-review to get their work published, and the related citation influences at play. There was much to learn from others such as the **FEMS [group in Maastricht](#)**, who were offering practical approaches such as citation style guidance. With the University of Birmingham's 2030 strategy acknowledging the link between citation power and the status of a top 50 university, this work seemed ever more timely.

Finding local partnerships

As part of the formation of a new EDI & Wellbeing Team in HR at University of Birmingham, a campus-wide survey was undertaken. Vicky took this opportunity to contact the new team to let them know about the work the library was starting. She was immediately put in touch with the team of the **[Business School's Decolonisation Project](#)** composed of **Anita**, and her colleagues, **[Caroline Chapain](#)** and **[Emma Surman](#)**. Together, they began conversations into the importance and use of citations in the project's work in understanding the institutional importance of diversity of sources in research and teaching, and how awareness could be built and how citation practices could be interrogated and improved to ensure they reflect the stance on equality and inclusion within the Business School, and hopefully in the University more widely.

Vicky's enthusiasm for the work was infectious and Anita, Caroline and Emma felt that this was important work that they wanted to support as part of the Business School Decolonisation Project, so planning soon began for a university-wide workshop on Citation Justice, scheduled for International Women's Day on 8th March. The workshop hugely benefited from the presence of FEM Maastricht, who spoke about their own research into the topic, the impact of their [citation guide](#), and how they've been able to increase awareness and begin to take action. Vicky's talk culminated in a workshop style activity to explore the concept of Citation Diversity Statements, a way for authors to increase awareness about citation bias and help to mitigate it.

Since then, the Library Services team was asked to lead a seminar with another research institute (who are considering citation diversity statements at their forthcoming away day) and presented to the university EDI Community of Practice and an informal 'Researcher Developer' team.

Practical ways for the Library to advocate for Citation Justice

Inside Library Services, the Research Skills Team has been keen to share findings with colleagues. They have given introductory talks to staff at all levels, and led a workshop with Academic Skills Centre counterparts, who work with undergraduates and taught postgraduates on information literacy. Ways in which the narrative of citation justice might

be woven into staff and student contact at all levels was discussed. In the immediate future advocacy will take the shape of:

- Raising awareness of the range of bibliographic databases available, to reduce bias in literature searching
- Pointing to University of Leeds excellent 'global south' databases list: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1N2Wf1i1sqZzcFk6SINLbdMOZn6MRUj1L/view>
- Promoting the homegrown [EDI resource list](#)
- Promoting [More Books](#) (for PGRs and students) – an initiative which encourages users to recommend texts for purchase.
- Creating an online ‘Inclusive Researcher’ course, to include a section on citation justice. There is potential to commission researchers to add sections to the course over time.
- Offering an ‘open to all’ one hour ‘what is citation justice?’ workshop, new for Autumn 2023.
- Talking to groups of researchers about citation diversity statements as appropriate.

Vicky’s work with Anita, Caroline and Emma from Birmingham Business School Decolonisation Project has been a truly valuable partnership between academic colleagues and the Library and contributed to promote the usage of citation statements when thinking of decolonising academia. Research culture is intricately bound up with publication practice and acknowledging the inherent bias in the ‘canon’ of research literature is essential if we are to begin to move towards equity.