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Research article

## The Worlds of UCL: teaching, learning and institutional histories

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## Abstract

This article discusses an undergraduate module which introduces students to the study of the history of education through the lens of our own institutions – UCL (University College London, UK), founded in 1826, and the IOE (Institute of Education, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society), founded in 1902. The module critically examines the close, but often hidden, connections between British education and empire, asking what impact these imperial legacies have today. After outlining the module's origins and relationship with the history of UCL and the IOE, the article sets its creation in the wider context of initiatives that seek to critique and reimagine institutional histories within higher education for a variety of purposes. The article also explores the developing role of the IOE Archives team in teaching, and explores how academics and archivists work together to teach institutional histories, and how this work can prompt change.

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**Keywords** history; institutions; learning; students; higher education; empire; archives; objects; special collections

## Introduction

Undergraduate education is of relatively recent origin in the 120-year history of the IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK). The IOE is better known for initial teacher education, its extensive range of specialist master's programmes and its doctoral research opportunities (Aldrich and Woodin, 2021; Davis, 2022). In the 2000s, there were experiments with a foundation degree and a BEd, before the bachelor of arts (BA) in Education Studies was started in the 2011/12 academic year. This degree offers a strong grounding in the 'foundation disciplines' of education – history, sociology, philosophy and psychology. (The programme name is changing to BA Education, Society and Culture from 2024.) Starting with a mostly 'home' student cohort, in the past five years the proportion of international students on the programme has increased from less than 20 per cent to account for over 80 per cent of the cohort in the academic year 2022/3, of which a majority come from mainland China. This article discusses an optional first-year course developed for this programme. Called *The Worlds of UCL: Critical Histories of Education, Nation and Empire*, the 15-credit module introduces students to the study of the history of education through the lens of their own institutions – UCL, founded in 1826, and the IOE, founded in 1902. The module critically examines the close, but often hidden, connections between British education and empire, asking what impact these imperial legacies have today. The article starts by discussing the developing role of the IOE Archives team in teaching on the BA Education Studies programme. After outlining the module's origins and relationship with institutional history at UCL, the article sets its creation in the wider context of initiatives that seek to critique and reimagine institutional histories within higher education. As Krause (2010: 402) argues, academic reflections on using primary source materials with undergraduate students 'generally undervalue the educational contribution of archivists and special collections librarians in developing instructional materials and directly teaching students how to use primary sources'. In an article co-written by an academic historian and an archivist, we try to address how academics, archivists and curators can work together to encourage critical reflection on institutional histories. How does embedding archival research into the module assessment support this process? How should we deal in the classroom with the more troubling and controversial topics from universities' pasts? We end with our own reflections of working on the module, and its impact for our own research, teaching and professional practice.

## The Worlds of UCL and institutional histories

*The Worlds of UCL: Critical Histories of Education, Nation and Empire* has three main objectives. First, the module aims to introduce first-year students on an interdisciplinary education programme to history as a discipline, including to varied historical methodologies and to the range of ways in which history can be presented for different audiences to engage with. Few of the students taking the module, either home or international, have previously studied history beyond the first few years of secondary school. Second, there is a focus on the history of education as a subdiscipline, with particular emphasis on histories of higher education, teacher education, campus life and student culture. Third, it seeks to introduce new students to the institutions at which they have chosen to study – the IOE and UCL.

To date, the module size has varied between 47 and 105 students, with over half of the first-year intake on the BA Education Studies choosing the course in the most recent academic year. Reflecting the current profile of students on the programme, a large majority of those taking the module are international students. This does present pedagogical challenges, as many students have little understanding of the early-nineteenth-century context of social and political reform that enabled UCL's foundation as a university in London, free from religious tests. The innovative pedagogical approach to the subject is therefore important in order to overcome such barriers. Students investigate institutional histories, but with a strong emphasis on understanding how the presentation and interpretation of such histories has changed over time, for example, by critically analysing the selective use of history in UCL marketing videos. They work closely with primary sources and objects from UCL collections in every

seminar, and they explore the UCL campus through a series of scavenger hunts, walking tours and museum visits. Students are taught to understand how European colonialism shaped forms of knowledge in universities and schools, and how British imperial practices, in particular, influenced the development of many academic disciplines. For the main piece of assessment, students work in a small group to design a public history output that illuminates some aspect of these institutional histories. Creative and insightful, these projects draw on primary sources to produce films, interactive websites, online exhibitions, podcasts, board games, walking trails and choose-your-own adventure games.

The course derives its name from UCL's institutional history *The World of UCL* (Harte et al., 2018) – first published to mark UCL's sesquicentenary in 1978, and updated several times subsequently. A full update and revision was undertaken in 2018 by module leader Georgina Brewis. The module title is, however, deliberately plural, reflecting the range of alternative histories that might be researched, written and presented about UCL and its merged institutions since its foundation as the self-styled London University in 1826. The topic of merger features strongly in UCL's recent history, as several formerly independent higher education institutions and research institutes have been incorporated into what is now the largest university in the UK by student number. Since the 1990s, these have included the IOE (2014), the School of Pharmacy (2012), the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (1999), the Royal Free Hospital Medical School (1998), the Institute of Neurology (1997), the Institute of Child Health (1996) and the Institute of Ophthalmology (1995). The styling 'worlds' of UCL is therefore intended to incorporate the history of such formerly autonomous institutions, many of which continue to mark their own anniversaries and celebrate their own histories.

In 2022, the IOE commemorated the anniversary of its 1902 founding under the brand IOE120 through a series of public-facing events and an updated edition of its centenary history (Aldrich and Woodin, 2021). A number of articles in the *London Review of Education* critically examine a wider range of topics in the IOE's history, including questions of decolonisation in international development (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022), the important research of the Thomas Coram Research Unit (Brannen et al., 2022), and the significance of critical thinkers, including Berry Mayall and Roy Bhaskar (Alderson, 2022), Susan Isaacs (Leaton Gray, 2022) and Gunther Kress (Adami et al., 2022). Spaces at the IOE's Bedford Way building were renamed in honour of former staff members, including the Whitty Wing after Geoff Whitty (1946–2018), who was IOE Director for a decade, from 2000 to 2010. At the time of writing, the IOE has no space named after a woman, but there are long-delayed plans to rename the Drama Studio after Deputy Director Margaret Punnett (1867–1946). Alongside such important new publications and other initiatives, including IOE history as part of an undergraduate taught module can help keep the IOE's identity alive. This is important because many education students now choose UCL largely because of its status as a top-10 world-ranking university, with little awareness of the IOE's long-standing status as an independent higher education institution.

As UCL approaches its bicentenary in 2026, there is growing appreciation of the institution's longevity, and particularly of its supposedly 'progressive' or 'radical' traditions, encapsulated in the recently adopted marketing strapline 'disruptive thinking since 1826' – a phrase interrogated by students as part of the Worlds of UCL module. The current university leadership also has an interest in promoting UCL as a visitor destination, and in improving the campus experience for students, alumni and visitors. For example, in 2022, UCL launched a free weekly history walking tour aimed at introducing the general public to this 'rich and radical' history, building on similar offerings at Trinity College Dublin and the University of Sydney, where UCL's Provost Michael Spence had previously been Vice-Chancellor. Like the merged institutions discussed above, UCL departments and faculties also continue to commemorate their own anniversaries. For example, the Bartlett marked 175 years in 2016 (Melvin, 2016), the Slade celebrated 150 years since its foundation across the 2021/2 academic year with an exhibition, film projections and public events, and Mechanical Engineering commemorated 175 years in 2022. However, while the 1820s foundation of UCL is well known, UCL's later history has been 'surprisingly neglected' in the academic literature on universities (Anderson, 2017: 28), and the place of students in such histories is less valued still. One of UCL's bicentennial initiatives is the project Generation UCL: Two Hundred Years of Student Life in London, which seeks to turn institutional history on its head by proposing that the first students should be considered the real 'founders' of UCL. Led by Georgina Brewis, this research and engagement project has been strongly shaped by teaching on Worlds of UCL, particularly by the interactions with students, archivists and curators. Introducing UCL's own history to current students through taught course content is an important element of this wider project. For example, elements of this institutional history now also feature on the compulsory Making History module in the History

Department, and on UCL's Introductory Programme and summer school courses, as well as on the MA in Public History at the new UCL East campus.

## Archives, special collections and the BA Education Studies

Although undergraduate education has expanded rapidly at the IOE following the 2014 merger with UCL, the BA Education Studies remains the largest programme in the faculty. A highly rated, distinctive programme, it draws on history, sociology, philosophy and psychology, providing students with the critical tools necessary to reflect on education, society and culture and 'to become leaders of social and political change' (UCL, 2022: n.p.). From early in the programme's evolution, staff worked closely with IOE archivists – and after merger, with colleagues across UCL Special Collections and UCL Culture – to ensure that teaching on the degree draws on UCL's rich libraries, archives and museum collections.

The first experience that IOE Archives staff had of teaching with collections on the BA Education Studies was on a compulsory first-year module called Introduction to Education Studies. In conjunction with the module leader, Archives staff planned a workshop to complement the first lecture of the term 'What is History of Education?' This session aimed to give first-year students hands-on, practical experience of using archives, and to build their confidence and skills in accessing and using archival materials throughout their degree. The IOE Archives team had noticed that while postgraduate and research students would access the collections, the numbers of internal undergraduate students using the Archives were very low. Introducing first years to the IOE Archives through a core taught session would develop knowledge, skills and confidence in using and accessing archive resources.

Since this initial, successful, workshop, the IOE Archives have become an integral part of several modules across all levels of the BA Education Studies, including A Social History of Learners and Learning; Elites, Education and Inequalities; and Youth and Youth Movements in the Modern World. Such modules engage with items relating to the history of the IOE, and with deposited and donated collections, such as the archives of youth organisation the Woodcraft Folk, the personal papers of educationalist Brian Simon and the records of the National Union of Women Teachers. Most importantly, Archives colleagues co-taught the Archival Research and Oral History in Education module from its inception, collaborating with the module leader Mark Freeman on a UCL Liberating the Curriculum small grant to extend the range of resources available (Freeman, 2018). As the student intake has changed, so too has the curriculum been internationalised. New modules from 2022/3 include Materials and Meanings of Education: International Perspectives, and Children, Families and Education in Modern China, 1890 to Present. The latter uses archival sources relating to China from the archive of the National Union of Women Teachers, the World Education Fellowship and the papers of former IOE Director Fred Clarke. Engaging students with primary source materials during taught courses has resulted in an increase in the number of undergraduates accessing the two Special Collections Reading Rooms for their own research outside of the taught sessions. In 2013, fewer than one in 10 (9.3 per cent) of researchers using the IOE Archives Reading Room were IOE students of all levels. By 2022, this had increased, with over 12 per cent of the readers being BA Education Studies students alone, and over a third (35 per cent) being UCL students. This is a high proportion for a university archives service. As the team have been digitising more resources, and making them available both on virtual learning spaces for individual courses and on the publicly accessible digital repository, the number of students accessing sources in the Reading Room has reduced slightly. However, this increase in digitised material was hugely beneficial to students (and other users) while working remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020.

Central to the Worlds of UCL, then, is the concept of collaboration between the module leader and the archivists and curators who care for UCL's collections, and this operates at all levels, from initial course design, to planning seminar activities, to delivering the taught sessions and to assessment. Most of the seminars involve some element of archivist or curator co-teaching – whether that involves presenting to the whole class or discussing records or objects in small groups. For Georgina, as module leader, this has been an important element of running the Worlds of UCL, enabling students to have direct access to those with the most knowledge and experience of the collections. It has also enabled us to have difficult conversations with students about why UCL might retain, preserve and make available objects and items that in themselves are offensive or problematic because of racist, sexist or ableist content, or links to our colonial pasts or to eugenics.

## Universities, students and uncomfortable histories

The Worlds of UCL module forms part of a wider movement that seeks to involve students in reinterpreting histories of higher education institutions and in re-evaluating campus memories. There is growing recognition of the value of university history and heritage to alumni, staff and students, its value for marking anniversaries, and greater understanding of the significance of higher education institutions to regional economies as both employers and tourist destinations (McManus et al., 2021). Some of this work in re-evaluating campus history is positioned as part of wider attempts at ‘decolonising’ universities, but there are other drivers too. In the USA, much of this work has been linked to institutional grappling with the histories and legacies of slavery and the slave trade (Clarke and Fine, 2010). From the 2000s, a growing number of high-profile universities and colleges instigated research projects examining their links to slavery, including Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Duke, Brown, Georgetown, William and Mary, the University of Virginia, the University of Maryland and the University of Alabama. Clarke and Fine (2010: 84) note that the university as an institution is ‘uniquely able both to examine its past, and to offer a successful apology’. Some of these initiatives have been top-down, set up as official working groups on slavery by university administrations. Others are better described as ‘bottom-up’, like the Princeton & Slavery project, which grew out of an undergraduate history seminar and involved students as core researchers (Sandweiss, 2020: 305). Elsewhere, as at Georgetown University, when students became disillusioned with the progress of an official university working group, their ‘activism energized the community and raised the stakes of what we were trying to accomplish’ (Rothman, 2020: 300).

In the UK, there have been similar projects of re-evaluation, reparation and apology, again often envisioned as part of a wider call to ‘decolonise the university’ (Bhambra et al., 2018). Although lagging behind the USA, several universities have set up official inquiries into links with slavery and the slave trade, including the University of Glasgow, which was the first British university to set up an extensive reparative justice programme (Mullen, 2021; Draper, 2018). Other notable examples include individual Oxford and Cambridge colleges, notably All Souls College, Oxford, which has taken some steps to reflect on its associations with planter and slave-owner Christopher Codrington, who in 1710 left a bequest to fund the college’s new library (Mullen, 2021). In some cases, such as at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, these inquiries have been undertaken and published with student support, despite significant internal opposition (Bell-Romero, 2022).

There is an extensive literature on decolonising curricula at all levels of education as part of wider efforts of decolonisation (see, for example, Miller et al., 2022; Schucan Bord and Coupaye, 2021). Indeed, Bhambra et al. (2020: 510) argue that the ‘most effective of the campaigns “to decolonise the university” across UK campuses focus on the need to address our shared colonial histories as well as to examine the racial inequalities that structure practices of teaching and assessment’. Nonetheless, at many universities in the Global North, it has been the campus and its buildings, statues and memorials that have often been the focus of efforts to increase knowledge and understanding of links to slavery, empire, eugenics and colonialism, rather than curricular change. At the University of Oxford, influenced by the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Cape Town, students and others have campaigned against the visible commemoration of imperialist Cecil Rhodes by the university and its colleges. To date, the campaign to remove the Rhodes statue on the facade of Oriel College has not been successful. At the University of Bristol, concern has focused on the Wills family, prominent tobacco merchants whose wealth derived from enslaved labour. A 2017 student petition to rename the Wills Building was unsuccessful, but the 2020 Black Lives Matters protests ‘amplified’ concerns, leading to a review that was to include the university logo, although at the time of writing it is unclear what action has been taken (University of Bristol, 2022; Jones, 2018).

Such reparative efforts, however, are not always resourced or formalised by institutions, and they rarely feature in published histories or official campus tours. In Oxford, the failure to remove the Rhodes statue led in part to the creation of Uncomfortable Oxford, a social enterprise run mostly by postgraduate students that delivers alternative tours of the university and the city. Broader than just a focus on the legacies of empire, the tours explore issues of racial, gender and class inequality, as well as the history of medicine and LGBTQI experiences. A sister organisation has since been set up in Cambridge. Globally, there are now numerous examples of similarly ‘alternative’ tours and trails exploring hidden, uncomfortable or unacknowledged histories at higher education institutions. The University of Sydney, for example, offers an Indigenous Heritage Walk alongside its other heritage campus tours. In many cases, however, these are designed and delivered by individual students, scholars or curators. At

Princeton, where early Princeton students inhabited 'a landscape of slavery', historian Martha Sandweiss (2020) unsuccessfully sought institutional support and financial backing for the Princeton & Slavery project. With hindsight, she acknowledges, this gave the team greater freedom to develop the outputs they wanted, including a documentary film, public art and theatre pieces. At the University of Alabama, Hilary Green (2020) developed her Hallowed Grounds project from 2015 in response to the limitations and failures of earlier attempts at reconciliation, which had included a 2004 institutional apology for the university's slave past. The project created an alternative campus tour, as well as lectures, trails and publications based on the tour. Yet, as Green (2020: 40) reflects poignantly, 'I am only one person', noting that such work is often unfunded and falls disproportionately on 'Black women's shoulders'.

At UCL, the main focus of inquiry to date has not been on connections to slavery but on institutional links to eugenics. In January 2021, UCL issued a public apology for its role in 'the development, propagation and legitimisation of eugenics' (n.p.). The apology resulted from a two-year inquiry into the topic set up by then Provost Michael Arthur in 2018 after the discovery that a 'secret eugenics conference' – the London Conference on Intelligence – had been held on the UCL campus on several occasions. The revelation by a student newspaper caused widespread media coverage and outrage among both students and staff (Bothwell, 2018; UCL, 2020a, 2020b). A Eugenics Response Group was set up to implement the recommendations of the official inquiry, and to date it has 'de-named' spaces on the campus named after prominent eugenicists Francis Galton and Karl Pearson, alongside other activities such as establishing the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Race and Racialisation. Alongside this work, then Galton Collection Curator Subhadra Das continued to raise awareness of the links between UCL and eugenics through talks, podcasts and her innovative Bricks and Mortals audio trail, which turned UCL's Bloomsbury campus into a temporary exhibition. The trail is still available to download, but by 2021, most of the descriptive panels had been removed from the campus. Recognition of UCL's historical role in legitimising eugenics, and the contested process of coming to terms with this legacy at UCL in the twenty-first century, is core content in the Worlds of UCL module. There have also been various initiatives such as tours, podcasts and exhibitions celebrating UCL's queer past. UCL's 'official' history tour addresses eugenics and figures such as Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie in passing, but it does not fully acknowledge the epistemological and pedagogical legacies of colonialism on the university. Such questions are, however, being addressed by ongoing decolonial work in the IOE's Centre for Education and International Development as it grapples with its origins as the IOE's Colonial Department, where staff were closely involved with colonial relationships, 'but generally silent on the dispossession, war and exploitation that shaped them' (Unterhalter and Kadiwal, 2022: 12).

Nonetheless, it is rare that efforts to challenge widely understood institutional histories make it on to the formal taught curriculum of these universities, in the UK at least. Indeed, teaching a university's own history at all is rare. There are examples from the USA, often linked to campus slavery research projects – such as Adam Rothman's undergraduate course at Georgetown – but we can find only a very few taught courses in the UK that invite students to consider their own institutions or to interrogate campus history. The University of Manchester 'actively encourages' students from all disciplines to study and research its past as part of their course or programme, but it does not currently run a module (University of Manchester, 2022: n.p.). Other examples include the work of the Beniba Centre for Slavery Studies at the University of Glasgow, which has brought discussion of the university's history and its links with the slave trade and slavery into some taught courses. At the University of Roehampton, the Roehampton Campus Project provided the opportunity for students to 'engage academically with their environment' through study of the buildings, artworks and histories of the university and its constituent colleges (Behr and Nevin, 2019: 395).

Most relevantly, a small number of courses with an explicit focus on exploring histories of empire and colonial legacies have been introduced, mainly at London-based institutions. At SOAS, the module Colonial Curricula: Empire and Education at SOAS and Beyond was designed by historian Eleanor Newbigin, and 'uses the history of SOAS to explore the development of imperial education up to the present day' (Newbigin, 2019: n.p.). Its introduction in 2019/20 was one of a series of measures aimed at grappling with the question of 'what decolonising History teaching and research at SOAS really means', and it allowed students to think critically 'about how the inequalities we are tackling at SOAS now are shaped by our imperial birth' (Newbigin, 2019: n.p.). Similarly, at King's College London, a module set up by historian of empire Jean Smith called Investigating the Colonial Past of King's College London explores questions of the university's connections to slavery, empire and colonial education. It asks in its final session, 'Can we really decolonise colonial institutions?'

## Object-based learning and space and place

Uniquely among the modules identified above, The Worlds of UCL: Critical Histories of Education, Nation and Empire is aimed at education students rather than those on history programmes. The module is taught through a range of creative pedagogies, including object-based learning (OBL), and the UCL campus itself is also central to teaching and learning. While lectures generally take place in the IOE's brutalist Bedford Way building, the students appreciated having seminars in UCL's OBL Lab, a refurbished space under the Portico in the heart of the original classical Wilkins Building. The Lab is designed for teaching with objects, artefacts and special collections. The Worlds of UCL module was one of two across UCL selected to pilot the space between January and March 2020, unfortunately coinciding with the Covid-19 pandemic. Teaching for the module moved online for the final two weeks of term, but UCL's decision to cancel all first-year assessment and to replace it with a single capstone assessment meant that the course ended abruptly. In cases around the walls, the Lab displays objects from across UCL Collections that include ancient Egyptian figurines and vessels from the Petrie Museum, and natural history specimens from the Grant Museum, as well as objects from the Science Collection, notably a set of phrenology busts and death masks by German phrenologist Robert Noel, and research instruments used by Francis Galton. Student feedback about being based in this unique OBL Lab has been very positive. Students comment that the 'atmosphere' of being surrounded by objects increased motivation and engagement in the seminars. As one student put it:

The OBL [Lab] definitely makes seminars more interesting, we get it [*sic*] physically see and touch the objects, it is really cool to know that I am holding an object that dates way back in history. Also, the OBL [Lab] is based in the Main Campus, and this is the only module I have done somewhere outside of IOE, so it was very exciting.

Moreover, the module treats the UCL campus itself as a 'learning landscape' (Cox et al., 2022). One seminar activity involves a scavenger hunt in which students form small teams to visit a series of sites across the Bloomsbury campus, with close observation required to answer questions, and bonus points for taking photographs of unusual features. During the course, students also visit at least two of UCL's public museums (usually the Grant Museum and the Petrie Museum) for a session with curators. A trip through the so-called 'secret' Rockefeller tunnel under Gower Street is always a module highlight for students and staff. Students learn about the IOE's evolution from the London Day Training College into the Institute of Education, by way of its physical transition from its purpose-built origins on Southampton Row via its sojourn in Senate House to Bedford Way. During the pandemic, staff made a series of video talks on location around Bloomsbury for students not able to visit the campus in person. In an institution that has been teaching on the same site for almost two centuries, students learn to interpret the UCL campus as a memory landscape where many generations of students and others have left traces (Behr and Nevin, 2019). It further recognises how the 'built environment of the campus reflects and shapes university life' (Cox et al., 2022: 149). The module can help orient first-year students on campus and make them feel part of the wider university.

OBL is central to the pedagogy of the Worlds of UCL, and it is this which makes the module so engaging for a diverse cohort of home and international students with little grounding in history or historiography. A session early in term involves a 'mystery object' activity in which students are presented with a range of objects from across the collections that anticipate the core themes of the module, including legacies of empire, UCL's links to eugenics, gender, student mobilities and migration, and campus culture. Students are asked to observe the objects very closely, and to discuss in small groups the possible origins and use of each artefact – without the aid of the internet – before more information about it is revealed. Objects presented include paintings and drawings from the Art Museum, UCL clothing including a 1940s' college blazer and tie contrasted with more recent hoodies, campus maps and plans, medals, trophies and silver tea urns, and copies of student magazines. A folder on the e-learning platform Moodle is then made available, containing background and provenance of each object, high-resolution photographs and further reading lists. Student feedback generally emphasises the fun, engaging aspects of OBL, as well as the somatic, embodied experiences of touching objects. As students reflected: 'It's really interesting to touch the objects related to the history of UCL. I enjoy this process of going on a quest that is discovered by myself'; 'I enjoyed it quite so. It was very interesting to be learning in such a fun style. We could have a tangible feel of the items and it really is different to

when you see it as a picture'; 'Learning UCL's history in conjunction with related historical objects makes the module more vivid and makes the history that I thought would be boring more interesting.'

For first-year students, who often arrive with only a very limited awareness of the IOE as having a separate history from UCL, the chance to engage with objects and archival materials from the IOE Archives – including gowns, a library bell, copies of the *Londinian* or *Slate* student magazines and London Day Training College memorandum books containing pasted-in timetables, correspondence and celebratory dinner menus – helps make this distinct IOE history more real.

A successful way of connecting students (of education, in particular) with the course content has been by asking them to think about and reflect on their own educational experiences. For example, in one session, students are asked to draw plans of what they remember from their own classroom as a very young child. Students then design real or fantasy classrooms using the 'Tiny furniture' (a selection of miniature classroom furniture originally produced as a sales item donated to the IOE Archives as part of the collection of school architects David and Mary Medd). Students are also invited to share objects related to their own educational histories – these have included graffitied school shirts from 'muck-up day' (Australia), graduation badges, yearbooks and trophies (China), dress-up Viking helmets from 'Poslední zvonění', the 'last ringing' end-of-year high school parade (Czech Republic), school ties (UK) and coloured transparency sheets used as learning tools (Japan).

The module is assessed through a group public history project. Students have free choice of topics on any aspect of the history of UCL, and projects have focused on gender relations on campus, the experiences of international students, campus life and student culture, eugenics and imperial legacies, the impact of the First World War on student life, UCL's museums, and the architecture of the campus. Groups are assessed on teamwork as well as on project content, and they are encouraged to be creative and reflexive in their ideas and in the presentation of their research and analysis, drawing on pre-existing skills in illustration, animation, web or app design, film-making and editing, vlogging or blogging. Moreover, the very international nature of the student body enables them to access secondary literature, and even primary sources, in other languages that are not accessible to the teaching or Archives staff. For example, students have uncovered information about the 'Choshu Five', a much-celebrated group of students who came to UCL from Japan in the 1860s, or Irene Ho-Tung, an IOE student in the 1940s, whom many Chinese students recognise as being from a prominent family in Hong Kong. The research for these projects requires students to seek support and advice from UCL archivists and curators, a process that we have found is helped by the students being familiar with Special Collections and UCL Culture colleagues from seminars. As an archivist, Kathryn has found that the students' familiarity with members of Archives staff gives them greater confidence to ask for assistance when making appointments, and, equally, our familiarity with the requirements of their assessments makes it easier for us to help direct them to additional material that might be useful to them. All the Archives staff who have attended the end-of-term student project presentations have expressed admiration for the creative and innovative ways in which the students have analysed and interpreted archive sources in their public history projects.

## The Worlds of UCL: some concluding reflections

Developing and teaching the Worlds of UCL module has been richly rewarding for all those involved. For Georgina as Module Leader, developing a taught module that allows students both to learn more about UCL's and the IOE's histories and to interrogate how and why those histories are used in the present, has been a really important element of 'doing' institutional history that is just as important as research and writing. Students' creative and imaginative public projects provide an insight into current concerns and what inspires or repels them from the past. Teaching the course has led Georgina to research new topics in order to be able to teach these better, including the experiences of international students in the past, particularly those from China, whose stories are not well explored. It has also led to productive collaborations with colleagues elsewhere, including at SOAS. It has made her reflect on how students' own reimagining and retelling of UCL's and the IOE's institutional histories – both through assessed work and through co-curricular projects and placements – can be an important element in institutional history.

For Kathryn as Archivist, it has been illuminating to have engaged conversations with students about why we keep items containing racist assumptions and colonial attitudes, such as curricula of the IOE Colonial Department or international student files, which fits with wider calls to decolonise archival practice. Student files, in particular, often include sweeping judgements that are influenced



by pre-existing stereotypes. For instance, in a letter about Emmanuel O. Gabriel, a student in the Colonial Department at the IOE in the 1940s, the head of the department describes Gabriel as a potential ‘ambassador of goodwill’. He goes on to say, ‘We [the English] are often very bad at explaining ourselves, and when a man like Mr. Gabriel visits the continent and speaks about what we are doing here and in our colonies, he can carry conviction with him’ (IOE Archives, 1944–7). The student file of Sampson Udo Etuk, a Nigerian student at the IOE in the late 1930s, contains a reference from a school placement undertaken as part of his course. The reference states: ‘Good for a negro. I find it difficult to assess them. They do not really understand the white boys’ mentality’ (IOE Archives, 1938–9). Felix Gunsekera from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), at UCL in the 1920s, was described as having ‘a somewhat undistinguished appearance’, while the student file of Ezad Baksh Sheikh, a student at UCL from Peshawar in north India, noted that he was ‘a thoroughly nice and likeable chap, but rather feeble’ (UCL Records, 1920s). In seminars, students have questioned why UCL holds such archival items, and discussions have focused on how, if we did not keep these, we would be erasing a part of the past, rather than critically engaging with it. Kathryn has enjoyed discussing ways to interpret such sources, and has reflected more on how we catalogue or display such material in public spaces. As an archivist, it can be hard when cataloguing files that contain terminology that is ableist, racist or sexist. The challenge is to make it clear that this terminology was used at the time that the sources were produced, but also to acknowledge that attitudes and language that we now consider offensive were often widely held assumptions and understandings about groups and communities. Archivists ensure that the catalogue always uses quotation marks to make it clear an offensive term has come directly from the archival record. There is a content warning on the home page of the UCL Archives catalogue that reads:

Please note we hold collections that document the changing attitudes to a wide range of subjects including science, education and social history. Due to the content of these collections, the catalogue includes outdated terms that can cause offence. Where these terms appear, it is in the interest of historical accuracy and does not reflect the views or opinions of UCL or our staff. (UCL Library Services, n.d.: n.p.)

Working on this module has led to an increased awareness for us of how triggering archive content can potentially be, perhaps more so for first-year undergraduates confronting such materials in the classroom than for more experienced scholars. For Kathryn, the experience has made her think about the need to include content warnings on certain archive material. This is particularly important not only for topics of empire and colonialism, but also regarding obsolete terms used for what we now call SEN (special educational needs) and experiences of racism in school classrooms on other modules. The Archives team is now working towards having a more comprehensive explanation on the catalogue home page, and more content warnings throughout the catalogue, as well as a greater sensitivity when teaching using the collections. For example, working back through student files, archivists are adding warnings such as that for file IE/STU/B/33, which states on the catalogue record ‘Some correspondence contains racially offensive terminology’.

For Kathryn, the experience has prompted her to be braver in how archivists interrogate the Archives and interpret them. When she studied archives at university, the idea that the archivist’s duty was to provide a neutral catalogue description was still prevalent in workplaces, even if students were being encouraged to think critically about this viewpoint. Seeing the openness and critical thinking skills which the students use when working with the Archives has been really inspiring, and it has made Kathryn think about how we write catalogue descriptions and what we need to be actively doing to fill gaps in our collections to ensure that under-represented voices become heard and preserved in our collections. It has also led to an increased awareness of the voices that have traditionally been under-represented in institutional collections – in this case, the voices of the students, and perhaps of international students in particular. This has led to the archivists spending more time cataloguing the IOE student files, adding more detail to the online catalogue records to make them more discoverable.

The Worlds of UCL module has been very well-received by students at the IOE. The embedding of OBL, the centrality of the campus as a site of memory and learning, and the co-teaching with curators and archivists all contribute to high levels of student engagement on an innovative module. Module evaluations reveal that students had in many cases had their first impressions of UCL and the IOE challenged or modified as a result of learning more about these histories, and some students called for greater support in acting on this. As students noted:

My views changed from simple to wide, multifaceted and layered, especially in terms of knowledge base.

This course has given me a wide and basic knowledge on the history of UCL and IOE, and more detailed knowledge on the campus and museums, but of course, by learning this course, my knowledge is usually much wider than students who didn't take this course and thus may miss the chance to explore the interesting parts of the uni.

Explain how its relevant to the actual students who chose to take the class. We are the future who can define how decolonial thought is implemented within the curriculum. This must be emphasised more please!

The module is a contribution to a much wider project of reinterpreting histories of higher education institutions and campus life, and of engaging current students in that process. We do not claim any success in 'decolonising' the curriculum through this module, but we do consider that by teaching students something of the history of their own institutions, and in asking them to analyse how and why universities today select and use history for their own purposes, the course promotes critical thinking about institutions and their marketing messages, deepens understanding of the colonial roots and ongoing legacies of higher education, and inspires a desire for future change.

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## Declarations and conflicts of interest

### Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the IOE ethics board.

### Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

### Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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