



ANTI-RACIST OPEN LETTER: OXFORD UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSE

JUNE 2020: Common Ground Oxford wrote an open letter calling for the administration to tackle institutional racism in the University, with over 10,500 signatures.

LATE JULY: the University responded.

We have included the response in its entirety here, along with our comments.

TL;DR: the University's response shows promise in certain areas, but fails to address major aspects of our original concerns. Unfortunately, their response is reflective of wider issues and attitudes to institutional racism within the University.

HAVE OUR CONCERNS BEEN ADDRESSED?



Dear Common Ground Oxford,

Thank you for your letter to the Vice-Chancellor who has asked me to reply on her behalf as the University Advocate for Equality and Diversity. We are delighted to see that our community is so engaged with these vital issues.

Since your letter was drafted there has been a great deal of work done within the university and a variety of communications between the central university, the colleges, and staff and student groups. You can find the University's statement on anti-racism, and responses to three open letters, here

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2020-06-15-statement-university-anti-racism> and an open letter and response from the BME Staff Network here:

<https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/bme-staff-network>. **You will see that these collectively address** many of the specific points you raise in your letter.

Concerns still not addressed:

- The majority of colleges and PPH's* still don't pay the Oxford Living Wage.^[1]
- No substantial inroads made to tackle the University's legacy of imperialism, such as independent enquiries into how it benefited from slavery & colonial wealth (See University of Cambridge and Glasgow).
- All-white shortlists seem to remain the norm for staff appointments.
- No plan of a Race Wage Gap analysis to date – to better understand the disparity between Black and Minority Ethnic labour relative to white labour at the University.

*PPH's: Permanent Private Halls



ACCESS BEFORE AND AFTER ENTERING OXFORD

The late release of the 2020 report...

...reflected a lack of appreciation of the relationship of race and class to the pandemic.[2]

These commitments should not be the first to falter in the face of adversity.

 Cherwell Online

Stop Hiding, Oxford: why the university should not have delayed its access report

You will also have seen that the **Annual Admissions Statistical Report** for 2020 has been published. The report shows that the proportion of UK BAME students, and specifically of Black British students, among the undergraduate body continues to rise; to **22.1% and 3.2% respectively this year from 14.5% and 1.5%** in 2015. We are, however, well aware that the success of our undergraduate access programmes needs to be carried forward in **improving students' attainments and experience** of studying at Oxford, and are excited that the first Opportunity Oxford cohort arrives this year.

Accusations of racism at Christ Church JCR hustings

Gove and Johnson 'sold as slaves' at Oxford student charity event

Covid will reinforce race inequality at Oxbridge, warn experts

Between 2017–19, twelve of the Colleges admitted just 5 or fewer Black undergraduates.^[3]

We acknowledge that numbers of Black students have indeed gone up, but we must also question why they are so underrepresented in certain colleges.

The academic Access initiatives by the University are welcomed. However, it must take steps to improve the experiences of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) students at Oxford given the University's poor response to **recent and historical racist incidents.**

COMMUNITY OUTREACH 1/2



You mentioned in your letter the need to engage more closely with our local community and this is something the university is committed to continue to do more of. We are looking closely at how the Oxford which emerges from lockdown can be more accessible and engaged than in the past. For example, we will have an enormous **library of virtual lectures**, and will look at how we can turn these into a resource for people outside the University, **in consultation with the academics involved**.

We welcome this initiative, and we look forward to hearing of a more concrete commitment with a clearer time frame, and a parallel view to lecturer protection policy soon.

For more information, see [4].

The city of Oxford and its residents must become more than an afterthought.

Given Oxford's unequal gap in resources between the 'Town and Gown', the "primary school children" example of community access they provided is superficial, doing nothing to address the fact that large parts of the city will still be inaccessible to most Oxford residents.

We are happy to support the University in partnership with other anti-racist campaigns to explore and implement ways to share resources and cultural capital with the community in a meaningful and sustained way.

See the work of **ANTI-RACIST CITY** [5].

Once the university eventually opens physically, we are keen to examine how we can offer the **public greater access to colleges' and university spaces**, for example, to encourage **routine visits by local Oxford City primary school children**.



Without a parallel commitment to ensure that college employees are also paid a living wage, this amounts to a commitment to “raise the profile” of unfairly paid jobs to Oxford’s Black and Minority Ethnic community.

The University must take urgent action against casualisation and uphold workers’ rights.

Work to raise the profile of the university as an employer among the **local BME community** will also be prioritised in the coming year.

What is the Oxford Living Wage?

The Oxford Living Wage is the *minimum* amount per hour needed to live in this city. It is currently set at £10.21 per hour and is reviewed every November by Oxford City Council. It is a voluntary rate, but we consider it every employer’s moral duty to pay and every worker’s right.

It is different from the legal ‘National Minimum Wage’, and separate from the Living Wage Foundation’s ‘Real Living Wage’.

**OXFORD CITY
LIVING WAGE
CAMPAIGN**



DECOLONISING THE CURRICULA

The University offers little support to the Oxford and Colonialism Working Group.

The faculty involved do this on a voluntary basis, taking time from their schedules to do extra work without compensation. As a network – rather than an organisation – they receive little to no funding from the University: in fact, their funds ran dry while developing this website this year, delaying its creation.

Considering this, we find it astonishing that the university would use this as an example of their stance on racism, when it is clear that providing regular funding for the working group has not been made a priority.

Your letter asks us to do more to ensure our courses are not narrowly Eurocentric and that we engage more fully with issues of colonial legacy. The University is actively taking forward this issue in a number of ways, and the various letters which have been sent to our direct communities have referenced this work, but I would like to outline just two here. The **Oxford and Colonialism Working Group** is in the process of completing a website (planned for launch in Michaelmas term) which will highlight the work being currently undertaken by individual College and Departments to confront this issue, including **decolonising curriculums**. The Centre for Teaching and Learning will undertake a number of actions to support more **inclusive teaching content** and methods in the coming year including hosting a workshop/conference in 2020/21 on **curriculum diversification** and introducing a **curriculum diversity** category in the 2021 Teaching Awards.

This mistakenly conflates 'decolonisation' with 'diversification'.

In reality, decolonisation addresses past discrimination and attempts to elevate previously underrepresented communities, while diversification does not address or allow for this healing process.^[6]

See 2020 HEPI report 'Miseducation: decolonising curricula, culture and pedagogy in UK universities'.^[7]

Decolonising the curriculum is not simply about being more inclusive; it is about being more accurate.

It helps avoid situations such as a second year History student asking why they should study "[non-European] peoples who were ... irrelevant to the formation of our modern world"*.

A colonised curriculum fails its own students.

*CG Experience poll for Oxford History undergraduates, 2018^[8]

CLOSING REMARKS



I appreciate that the information provided here is necessarily brief. However, I hope that together with the responses in the links above, it offers further assurance that the University of Oxford is unequivocally committed to tackling systemic racism. This is a priority because we understand our responsibility to all members of our community and because we know Oxford will be a better university as a result. We are encouraged that so many of our community hold these values and understand the appeal for change to happen at a faster pace.

With best regards,
Dr Rebecca Surender

University Advocate for Equality and Diversity

There are some promising sections, on which we will strive to hold the University administration accountable. Many of the commitments in this letter are unclear, with wording that does not directly address our demands. Their willingness to ignore our anti-racist demands reflects a larger attitude of indifference towards systemic inequities within the university.

It should also be noted that the university has not acknowledged the fact that we have offered to meet and work with them to address these issues in partnership with other liberation and anti-racist campaigns. As noted previously, we are still happy to do so.

There is still a long way to go. Common Ground will follow up these commitments and hold the university accountable on each, providing updates as they arise.



REFERENCES

[1] <https://oxfordlivingwage.org/the-research/>

[2] <https://cherwell.org/2020/06/07/stop-hiding-oxford-why-the-university-should-not-have-delayed-its-access-report/>

[3] <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education-and-careers/2020/07/22/universities-must-do-address-wellbeing-black-students-close/>

[4] <https://ucubranhcsolidaritynetwork.wordpress.com/2020/07/02/lecture-capture-resources-for-branches/>

[5] **ANTI-RACIST CITY** <https://www.antiracistcity.com/oxford>

[6] https://socialhistory.org.uk/shs_exchange/decolonise-not-diversify/

[7] https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/HEPI_Miseducation_Debate-Paper-23_FINAL.pdf

[8] CG Experience poll for Oxford History undergraduates, 2018