



First Town Hall meeting on the history of eugenics at UCL

1 March 2019, 15.00-17.00

Gustave Tuck Lecture Theatre

Welcome - Prof. Iyiola Solanke, Chair of the Commission of Inquiry

IS introduced the Town Hall on the Inquiry into eugenics at UCL – past, present & future.

IS acknowledged the activists and academics at UCL who had brought this Inquiry into being and congratulated UCL on taking a lead in the UK by tackling the history of eugenics at the university. IS also thanked the members of the Commission and the Provost for inviting her as independent Chair of the Inquiry.

Background - Prof. Michael Arthur, Provost and President

The Provost outlined the context which led to the Inquiry being established, citing concerns raised by UCL students and staff, the discovery that an honorary member of UCL staff had arranged a 'London Conference on Intelligence' and a request from Tom Fearn, former Head of Statistical Sciences, about the name of the Galton Lecture Theatre.

The Commission would produce a report, which would be sent to the Provost. The Provost added that he would probably consult his Senior Management Team on the recommendations and may also send the report to Academic Board and Council. The Provost explained that there would be a management response to the report, which would set out how the recommendations would be implemented, and a 1-year Post Implementation Evaluation would be undertaken.

Explanation of current phase (Phase 2), introduction of Commissioners and three questions for discussion - Prof. Iyiola Solanke

IS introduced the members of the commission: Professor Tom Fearn (TF - former head of Statistical Science), Professor Mark Thomas (MT - Professor of Evolutionary Genetics at UCL), Samira Abdalla (SA - Black and Minority Ethnic Students' Officer), Fiona McClement (FM - Head of Equalities and Diversity UCL), Professor Tamar Garb (TG - Institute of Advanced Studies), Professor Ann Phoenix (AP - Institute of Education), Marcia Jacks (MJ - Co-chair Race Equality Steering Group), Professor Ijeoma Uchebue (IU - Provost's Race Envoy), Subhadra Das (SD - UCL Culture), Dr Caroline Bressey (CB - Department of Geography), Ash Talwar (AT - Equalities and Diversity, UCL), Professor Peter Fonagy (PF - Head of the Division of Psychology and Language Sciences), Professor Joe Cain (JC - Head of Science and Technology Studies), Abeni Adeyemi (AA – Women's Officer, Students' Union) and Ben Meunier (Secretary).

IS explained that the Inquiry is collecting evidence upon which to base its recommendations. She explained that the purpose of the Town Hall meeting is to hear from UCL staff and students, and use this information to inform the design of the empirical survey that will take place shortly.

Definitions of eugenics - Subhadra Das

Questions for discussion

Question 1: how does information on the history of eugenics at UCL change your perception of UCL?

Panel: Iyiola Solanke, Subhadra Das, Joe Cain, Caroline Bressey

It is important to maintain the historical integrity of personalities such as Galton or Pearson, who were pioneers in statistics and other sciences and who contributed far more than their work on eugenics. UCL has been a radical institution since it was founded.

Eugenics was motivated by racists but also by people who wanted to make the world a better place. Pre-implantation diagnoses or 3-parent babies are examples of contemporary eugenics. What distinguishes 'bad' eugenics from 'good' public health initiatives?

The unpleasant bit of eugenics ended with Lionel Penrose. UCL's response to the London Conference on Intelligence was rather muted.

Apologies for Galton or Pearson are quite disturbing. For those who advocated genocide of people, any good they may have done is overshadowed.

Relationship with UCL changed hugely for some participants when they uncovered the history of eugenics at the university. The Inquiry should focus on actions: how can we change that legacy?

Some students had mandatory tours on eugenics and advocated for greater awareness across the UCL student body of UCL's history on eugenics. GEE and IoA were examples of departments where the history of eugenics was taught.

UCL's history on equality is presented as different to Oxford and Cambridge but UCL should be more transparent about the eugenics history. UCL can take a very strong position on what it stands for and what it disowns. UCL should not be an apologist for eugenics.

Question 2: What is the significance of the names of prizes, spaces and endowed professorships on campus, especially those named after persons who founded and zealously promoted eugenics? (e.g. The Galton Society (formerly the Eugenics Society); The Galton Chair (formerly the Chair of Eugenics); The Galton Lecture Theatre; The Pearson Building; The Petrie Museum)

Panel: Iyiola Solanke, Tamar Garb, Tom Fearn

There is an enormous wealth of knowledge relating to Pearson and Galton's legacy at UCL rooted in the GEE department. Suggestion to shine a light on the positive legacy and publish an honest assessment of negative contributions. Perhaps there should be an exhibition/public outreach on the history of eugenics, so that the whole university is familiar with the history of eugenics, rather than only the groups/courses which currently do know.

If spaces were re-named, UCL risks becoming a global laughing stock as the figures listed were founders of their academic disciplines. Removing the names is an act of scientific vandalism. Vilifying the names of Galton, Pearson, Petrie is not right: association with Hitler is not comparing the same thing.

Others should be in scope of the Inquiry, such as Rockefeller, who funded UCL buildings because he was an ardent eugenicist and admired UCL's eugenics work.

When entering lecture theatres, it is disturbing for students to enter spaces named after eugenicists. UCL should look at changing and justify why it is doing so. It is problematic to have these spaces named with no acknowledgement of wrongdoing. By removing the name of a room, we are not addressing issues or creating change. However, consideration should be given to the impact of walking into a space named after someone who would not have wanted BME people to exist or who did not believe they were fully human.

UCL was involved in knowledge production that was aligned to racism and needs to be honest about this. Things that are named are things that are being valued. UCL should acknowledge the wrongdoing and remove these names from buildings. To live up to its progressive values and fight inequality, UCL must take action.

Question 3: how do you think UCL should approach its historical role in the teaching and research of eugenics in the future?

Panel: Iyiola Solanke, Abeni Adeyemi, Mark Thomas, Ann Phoenix

There is a lot of confusion on what eugenics is. UCL holds resources that eugenicists left behind: UCL should recognise that these collections are there and should be available. Need to think about how to define and differentiate eugenics at UCL as opposed to the eugenics practised by the Nazis, if there is a difference.

Historical role question needs to be forward-focused: UCL should acknowledge where individuals have done wrong as well as how to tackle this for the future.

Eugenics was linked to scientific racism (and continues to be). UCL need to open themselves up to the community they have damaged. This is not about tearing down history, but about doing justice.

There needs to be public involvement, so that the process is not obscured. UCL seems to be responding in a reactive manner, rather than pro-active. Teaching on eugenics should be done, as all teaching, with academic rigour and moral integrity. It is very problematic to hear discourse about positive and negative eugenics. UCL needs to enshrine what its core values are and should recognise the wrongdoings of the past.

GEE academics volunteered to teach more widely across UCL on the history of eugenics at UCL. Could UCL embed mandatory induction on eugenics for all students?

As an institution, must do everything to promote the doctrine of the sovereign individual. UCL should make the case against perfectionism and think about human dignity and where UCL stands on this.

Concluding remarks

IS invited TG to talk about the establishment of the Centre for the Study of Race and Racism at UCL. TG explained that UCL is putting significant resource behind the study of the category of race in the new Centre, and that a Director was being appointed imminently. TG added that the Centre would take up volunteers as experts on the history of eugenics.

SD suggested that UCL could establish a Science Museum where the history of eugenics could be presented publicly.

IS thanked all participants and attendees at the Town Hall meeting.