

Cambridge University Libraries Decolonisation Working Group Update 1 (May 2021)

The DWG first met in September 2020 and has met on a roughly monthly basis since. Its April 2021 meeting was its seventh meeting.

At its first meeting, the DWG agreed and signed off the group's Terms of Reference, which can be [found here](#) and contain a working definition of decolonisation in the library/archive setting.

The DWG contains members from across Cambridge, including library representatives from Colleges, from the schools of Arts & Humanities and Humanities & Social Sciences, from STEMM, and from the Decolonising through Critical Librarianship group. The DWG's work is sponsored by the University Librarian, and is attended by three Deputy Directors (one of whom also sits on the University's Legacies of Enslavement Advisory Group).

At the first meeting, the convenor welcomed in particular the DWG's non-library representatives: two student reps, three academic reps, a BAME staff network rep, and a University of Cambridge Museums rep. Mel made the point that the opinions of these members are particularly important, to ensure that the libraries are not working in isolation and without challenge.

Since the first meeting, the current president of Black Cantabs has been co-opted as an additional member.

The DWG agreed that its initial focus should be on commissioning and contributing to specific decolonisation projects.

Staff education

This project aims to inform library and archive staff in Cambridge about decolonisation and how it relates to their work, and to give staff confidence in doing decolonisation-related activities.

The Decolonising through Critical Librarianship group has done brilliant work over the past few years to gather information about decolonisation work in Cambridge on their [online platform](#) and to facilitate and lead conversations through workshops and brown bag lunches, and the group was asked to lead the thinking about this project.

The latest on this project is that the DWG has agreed, on the recommendation of the Decolonising through Critical Librarianship group, that a combined approach of some relatively generic training and some tailored sessions would be best. The tailored sessions would be arranged by the Decolonising through Critical Librarianship group. The DWG aims to have arranged for the more generic training to be delivered over the course of the 21/22 academic year.

Targeted cataloguing

Cambridge holds many collections that are either only partially catalogued (eg on very sparse cards) or not catalogued at all, many of which relate to the history of empire and other decolonisation-related topics.

As a sample project, some members of the Collections & Academic Liaison department with help from the Head of Periodicals and Legal Deposit have worked on catalogues of Official Publications material held in the UL. From late 2020 to a greater return to the office in recent weeks, they have added or edited over 3,000 often quite complicated records for material produced in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and the former Soviet Union. This is a fraction of OP holdings but each new record is an important step forward to making this material (largely otherwise only on card catalogues) discoverable.

The Head of Special Collections also informed the DWG of major progress in the cataloguing of Royal Commonwealth Society pamphlets during lockdown.

At the April meeting of the DWG, members of the UL's Archives and Modern Manuscripts department attended and spoke about the challenge to identify, adequately catalogue, and give access to archive collections that would support research into decolonisation. A preliminary listing of West Indies slave trade and plantation records from 1790-1800 had provided much food for thought and had inspired a bid for National Archive funding for dedicated work. While the bid was not successful, a similar project is being run at a different institution, which Cambridge will be able to learn from.

Decolonisation and communication

Appropriate and thoughtful language is necessary in all areas of our work, from blog posts and webpages to catalogue metadata.

In January, the DWG and the Cambridge Cataloguing Advisory Group held an open online session to discuss the Library of Congress subject heading "Illegal aliens" and related terms. Attendees agreed that Cambridge should make changes at the iDiscover level to less inflammatory terms (chiefly "Undocumented immigrants"). By leaving the underlying metadata untouched in Alma, the hoped-for eventual changes at the Library of Congress end would happen automatically both in Alma and then in iDiscover. The Cataloguing Advisory Group's technical lead is finalising these arrangements.

At the DWG's March meeting, the Archives and Modern Manuscripts department colleagues attending talked about problems with metadata, including anachronistic and wholly inappropriate language as well as a greater emphasis on the creator of material than on the material itself. They confirmed that a statement about language would be added to ArchiveSearch, the new Cambridge archive catalogue. They also noted that both the Getty Thesaurus of Geographical Names and Library of Congress authorities tend to lack indigenous place names.

Collection development policies (CDPs)

Subject-specific CDPs are gradually being written by the DWG convenor (as Head of Collections & Academic Liaison) with faculty and departmental librarians. The DWG's responsibility is to look at these critically to consider decolonisation issues and the diversity of collection development. Although this work had largely ground to a halt with lockdown, a draft African Studies CDP has been circulated to the DWG and discussed at length in a meeting. The discussion and conclusions reached gave a clear and helpful steer for the standard approach CDPs should take.

Mapping global connections and local decolonisation activities

The DWG agreed that it would be useful for library/archive staff to take the lead in mapping decolonisation groups across the University. The list has started and can be [found here](#). All staff are welcome to suggest additions (to decolonisation@lib.cam.ac.uk). The DWG will then agree next steps in terms of publicising the list and making connections with the groups listed.

The DWG also agreed that Cambridge libraries should map the collections and groups they have connections to around the world. Again, a list has been [started here](#) (note the two tabs, one for individual institutions and one for groups), and all staff are invited to suggest additions, to decolonisation@lib.cam.ac.uk. The idea of capturing these connections is both to have them ready for staff to use in case a reader could be helped via the connection and also to be able to think about possible joint projects to consider that would benefit both parties' readers.

Other projects and pieces of work that the DWG has been consulted about include:

- ideas for the use of the 20/21 income from the trust fund set up by Tobias Rustat, shareholder and a director of the slave-trading Royal Africa Company about whom [this statement](#) from the University Librarian was released in Michaelmas 2020
 - o the income was put toward electronic resources purchased in 2021 such as the Adam Matthew Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice, 1490-2007 database
- a proposal for a 6-month project between the UL and Black Cantabs to digitise the Society's records

The DWG is also tasked with planning and drawing up relevant **policy and practice documents** to help encourage and embed decolonisation work across Cambridge libraries and archives. So far, this has primarily taken form in the [framework](#) for decolonisation that was shared in early May.