

Tuesday 24th January

Dear Faculties of Classics at University College London, Kings College London, Royal Holloway, Birkbeck (University of London) and the Institute of Classical Studies,

As students and alumni of the various Faculties of Classics at the University of London, we write in light of the long-entrenched racial injustice which exists within the field of Classics, a discipline that is still plagued by its colonial history and a close historical relationship with white supremacy and other racist ways of thinking. This letter, therefore, calls on all Classics and Classics-related departments within the University of London to implement a series of changes in their academic approaches, racial and ethnic representations, and treatment of people of colour in student bodies and faculties.

Anti-racist movements in recent years, most significantly marked by the Black Lives Matter protests around the world since 2020, have brought to the forefront the issues of structural racism within our society. In their efforts to scrutinise and oppose racism and ethnic inequality— in spite of considerable forces which resist such progressivism— we have seen some introspection and attempts at reforms carried out by some academic institutions, which we respect and appreciate.

However, despite these attempts at reform, Classics, as a discipline, continues to be obstinately reluctant to embrace change and truly address the impact of its intellectual history. We believe that the structural failings left unaddressed within the discipline impede the liberalisation and development of Classics towards becoming a more inclusive and academically rich field. Fighting against prejudice, upholding justice and equality for its students and faculty members, and broadening its academic outlooks are essential to the decolonisation and survival of Classics. Further, we believe that the academic world should not just work to reflect the fight against racism but should instead be at the forefront of active and consistent introspection and a source for ideas to facilitate the effective realisation of decolonisation in British society.

With this in mind, this letter focuses on four key areas in which we ask the various Classics and Classics-related departments within the University of London to undertake serious reflection and adopt changes to their working practices. In writing this letter we are conscious that some of your departments have started to make some changes to address the racial inequalities which exist within Classics; these developments are certainly welcomed but we urge you to go further and take into account our full set of requests so that the University of London can be a truly safe and inclusive place for Classics students and academics of colour.

1. Language requirements in undergraduate courses

The study of Ancient Greek and Latin is closely connected to 'Classics' by tradition but does this mean that they need to be studied as part of a 'classical education'? We make the following key observations in this regard:

- The study of Ancient Greek and/or Latin prior to university level is limited to a select few; they are usually only available at private schools in the UK. Further, within those schools, these subjects are perceived as old-fashioned, impractical, and perhaps even undesirable, creating a bottleneck wherein a very small number of privileged students will actually study Greek and Latin prior to university. It is therefore a serious issue of accessibility that a number of UoL's university programmes will only accept students with an A-level in one or both of these subjects into Classics degrees. It is noted in this regard that other universities, like the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, provide different 'tracks' for undergraduate students in Classics based on their level of knowledge of Greek and Latin (including for students with no prior knowledge of either language).

- Although many Classics departments offer courses such as Classical Studies at KCL and Ancient World at UCL which require neither prior knowledge nor subsequent learning of Greek and/or Latin, these degrees tend to have a more limited choice of modules and are often considered less “prestigious” compared to a Classics degree.
- The study of Ancient Greek and/or Latin does not always have relevance to the subjects taught and researched by students: if one has an interest in or focuses on literary theory, art and archaeology, or reception, then one might need less Greek or Latin, or even none at all.
- Other ancient languages may be of more relevance to a student’s background, interests, and/or research, such as Sanskrit, Hittite, or Cuneiform. A wider array of options in terms of Ancient language choice would reflect the diversity in the ancient world, and the large number of non-Graeco-Latin texts that are often marginalised by ‘the Classics’ and may have had an immense impact on the Greco-Roman world: for example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, composed in Akkadian. We recognise this change would require new teachers and experts to run these modules, but we have already seen an increase in these subjects for MA students: it should be possible to expand teaching to the undergraduate level.
- The learning of one or more Ancient languages as part of a Classics degree is not always helpful and/or desirable and may discourage non-linguistically minded students from applying for a Classics degree in the first place. Those who do not wish to study languages are still able to access a wide, varied range of material in their studies; modules taught in translation have proved that you do not always need Latin or Greek to engage with ancient texts, particularly at the undergraduate level.
- LCOC conducted a series of surveys in March 2022 amongst UoL students concerning language requirements in Classics departments.
 - On the question of ‘should Greek and Latin be required knowledge for a Classics degree?’ 79% of all 150 participants disagreed. On the question of ‘should Classics degrees have a language requirement for applicants?’ 85% of 148 participants disagreed.
 - However, reality contrasted these expectations. 91% of 141 participants recognised that ‘language requirements constitute a barrier to entry for the subject’.
 - Also, in regard to curriculum requirements, 59% of 135 participants felt that students should be able to study works only in translation. Expanding the variety of ancient languages, including Sanskrit, Akkadian, and Hittite, taught in Classics departments was endorsed by 96% of 139 participants.

With these observations in mind, we ask that each of your departments takes the following steps:

- Reduce/amend any Ancient language requirements in place for **all** your undergraduate Classics degrees such that students without any background or experience in Greek and/or Latin may apply;
- Increase the language options and flexibility available to undergraduate Classics students such that:
 - If they have no background or experience in Greek and/or Latin, they are able to study whichever of these languages they wish to learn as part of their undergraduate degree;

- o They are able to study Ancient languages other than Greek and/or Latin within their undergraduate degree, including Hittite, Sanskrit, Assyrian, etc; and
- o If students so desire, they do not have to study any Ancient languages as part of their undergraduate degree and can study any Ancient texts in translation.

2. Changes to the undergraduate and postgraduate taught curriculum

The discipline of Classics has been constrained within and is still dominated by a singular narrative focused on Greco-Roman society, undermining and diminishing the influence of other ancient cultures and the role of 'foreigners' in the Greco-Roman world. This narrow approach has been detrimental to the discipline as it hinders attempts to attain a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the ancient world. As a result, many recent academics have striven to expand the intellectual vision of the discipline by conducting studies of other ancient civilisations, the social, political, economic, and cultural impact of non-Greeks or non-Romans on either society and Classical reception, specifically concerning the ways in which it was exploited to justify colonial efforts and racist attitudes.

This shift in academic interests should result, and in some cases has resulted, in an expansion of the Classics curriculum. All UoL Classics departments offer some modules that concern, at least in part, the aforementioned topics; for example:

- o King's now offers undergraduate courses that focus on the reception of the Ancient World and interaction between the Greco-Roman world and other civilisations such as those in the Near East.
- o UCL added Sanskrit and Hittite to the list of ancient languages that undergraduate students can choose from; courses such as *Race and Antiquity* also demonstrate progress. Introduction modules, especially the Introduction to Ancient History, also include studies of Near Eastern societies and their influence on the Classical world.

However, there still exist a few notable issues in this regard, in particular:

- Professors specialised in the study of ancient civilisations such as those in the Near East and North Africa are often few in number which leads to an unreasonable level of pressure and workload put upon them and cancellations of modules when/if they leave their positions or go on research sabbaticals;
- Departments could take further steps to encourage and promote these research areas, including by increasing the range of modules available to students on non-'traditionally' Greco-Roman topics.

We therefore ask that each of your departments takes the following steps:

- Financially and practically support current and future faculty members so that they can research and teach outside of 'traditional' fields of Classics, in particular:
 - o Research which amplifies the voices and experiences of minoritized people in the Greco-Roman Ancient World;
 - o Research into non-Greco-Roman Ancient cultures, such as the Ancient Near East, Ancient India, Ancient China, and other geographical areas in the Ancient World;

- Research into Classical reception and (e.g.) Classics' role in imperial expansion and historical racist attitudes, as well as its use and adoption by non-White communities
- Financially and practically support the review of existing teaching modules within your Classics and Classics-related degrees to ensure that they contain relevant content regarding (i) non-Greco-Roman Ancient cultures; (ii) minoritized voices from the Ancient Greco-Roman world; (iii) reception of the texts within their module from a race perspective, keeping in mind the existing workloads and responsibilities of faculty members, for example:
 - Encouraging staff to use one week of any specific module to deal exclusively with scholarship on race in the primary source material and/or its reception in colonial discourse, where this is relevant.
- Financially and practically support the racial and cultural diversification of students' reading lists, seminar reading, and other recommended and required reading
 - At least a portion of the essay questions which contribute to course credits should focus on EDI issues such as imperialism, immigration, race, gender etc.
 - These subjects should be explored with early undergraduates and not presumed to be too complex to introduce until later in the degree programme
- Financially and practically support the critical evaluation and engagement by students and faculty members of existing scholarship from the 18th – 20th centuries from a race and diversity perspective, including encouraging staff to introduce any texts (Ancient and modern) to students with sensitivity and active acknowledgement of the context of that text.

3. EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) work in Classics

Many Universities have made pledges to raise standards of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion across their institutions. Some of the UoL Classics departments have taken the initiative to hold focused meetings in order to tackle issues related to the subject, but even then these meetings have been small and infrequent. As it has been noted widely in both academic and non-academic fields (for example in the research conducted by Sara Ahmed), very often it is people of colour who take on the burden of EDI work within institutions, and it is often assumed that since the figure is a person of colour, they are interested in race and decolonisation and hence are willing to take on EDI work. Students of colour are similarly often expected to have knowledge of issues of race and decolonisation while this expectation is not imposed on their white counterparts.

When EDI work is being done, it is also often completed by students and faculty members, and as a result, is either underpaid or entirely unpaid. It is often expected of students and faculty members to participate in EDI projects in addition to their regular workload. When suggestions are made to departments as a result of this work, they are often regarded as optional, which devalues this work and its impact. When suggestions are made to departments as a result of this work, they are often regarded as optional, which devalues this work and its impact.

With these observations in mind, we ask that each of your departments takes the following steps:

- University departments should acknowledge that there is still progress to be made in decolonising their departments, and publicly commit to pursuing this goal;
- All University of London Classics Departments should have an EDI committee, and these committees should be provided with enough time and reimbursement for their projects;

- Departments should encourage all students, including those who are not students of colour, to be involved in EDI and decolonisation work;
- Departments should take steps to reward EDI and decolonisation work through course credits and/or monetary compensation in addition to promoting individual voices of all members of the department who support and uplift EDI work
 - By way of example, we understand that Royal Holloway (University of London) make paid placements available for decolonising and amending reading lists within the Humanities Department. The RHUL English department has taken advantage of this; this sort of scheme ought to be encouraged in Classics Departments around London.
- Institutions should provide wider opportunities to make EDI work more accessible and reduce the burden on junior scholars, such as through EDI sabbaticals;
- The burden of decolonisation should be the responsibility of the institution and the departments, not driven by the students. This can be driven by department-specific initiatives;
- Student-led or student-run initiatives should not act as a replacement for the EDI work needed within departments;
- Departments should be transparent about EDI work taking place at the time that it is commenced and provide regular updates about the progress of this work to the student body and faculty members;
- Departmental EDI work should be outcome-focused and not consist solely of (e.g.) survey or opinion-taking, although we recognise that this kind of information gathering will comprise an important first step in the EDI process.

4. Supporting and retaining POCs in Classics

Whilst some forms of support are already made available for students in Classics belonging to marginalised communities in UoL's various Classics departments, concrete implementations of such support remain lacking in sufficiency and consistency, resulting in Classics' persistent retention problems beyond the undergraduate level with regard to scholars and students of colour (see for example the CUCD Equality and Diversity in Classics Report (2020)).

Students of colour are still facing racist microaggressions within a classroom environment. Some examples include: tutors and lecturers confusing POC students for one another; the regular mispronunciation of student names; and assumptions made about their background or race (and therefore their academic interests).

We understand that nobody is infallible and that microaggressions often do not have malicious intent, but instead of simply asking students to move past such comments, we ask that there be systems in place to support the victims of such microaggressions. We believe that implementing such a system is an opportunity for growth, not only for staff but also for students. Holding one another accountable is not a way to publicly diminish or shame individuals but rather a way for us to learn from each other and understand what we could potentially change about our words or actions to make others feel more comfortable and supported. Departments are a place for education, and everyone should feel welcomed and safe, no matter who they are.

As such, we ask that your departments take the following steps so that students can be supported better:

- Implement mandatory unconscious bias and microaggression training for staff. Introducing such training, ideally carried out by an external organisation, is a helpful preventative measure that could educate staff on their own personal biases. This would create a safer environment for POC students as all staff would ideally come away able to understand the different types of microaggressions that students face (and be able to practically manage microaggressions if they happen in practice).
- Create systems within your departments that allow students and faculty to report microaggressions and other racist behaviours safely and anonymously (should they wish to remain anonymous). There are insufficient systems in place by which students can currently safely report incidents of microaggression – for instance, reporting to a different staff member would compromise a student's anonymity, especially when departments are so small and POCs make up an even smaller group within the department.
- Practically and financially encourage and assist associated student organisations or societies to set up regular pastoral sessions supporting and ensuring the mental welfare of POC students (or departments could host such pastoral sessions themselves).
- Make an active effort to support students of colour in further studies within the field to ensure that more Classicists of colour are genuinely encouraged to pursue postgraduate studies and research. This includes, for example, (1) the provision of specific scholarships and funding for POC Classicists at the postgraduate and ECR level; (2) active education of POC Classics students about further study and research beyond the undergraduate level; and (3) the provision of practical support to those students (e.g. individual mentoring on how to complete PhD and funding applications, Q&A sessions).
- Departments should hire and retain more staff from minority ethnic backgrounds to reflect the diversity of the UK population. Departments should (if they do not already) ensure that racial diversity is one of the factors taken into account when making hiring and promotion decisions (including decisions about tenured positions), and regularly review the ethnic composition of their staff to assess whether hiring and promotion practices need to be adapted or improved.

We understand that some of these requests are implementable in a shorter time frame than others. We would be grateful for the opportunity to meet with your respective departments to discuss the measures and actions proposed herein and an expedient timeline.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Signed, London Classicists of Colour & its allies (individual signatures below)