



UCL EUGENICS INVESTIGATION

London, England

51.5245625, -0.1362288



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Executive Summary

In 1912, the First International Eugenics Conference was hosted in London. The conference was dedicated to Francis Galton, whose legacy with eugenics continues to be associated with University College London. The legacy of Galton and other eugenic scientists remains for many a symbol of racism, imperialism and inequality. This study examines the decision-making process of UCL to modify the historical legacy of eugenics, which until recently remained visually present in UCL buildings and facilities. The case study examines how different academic actors, including university professors, students and administrators, responded to official attempts to come to terms with UCL's eugenic legacy.

Introduction

In December 2018, University College London (UCL) launched an investigation into its history with eugenics. This inquiry concluded in February 2020, with the provision of recommendations on how UCL should confront its historical legacy. More specifically, it discussed how buildings and spaces named after eugenicists, such as Francis Galton, should be managed. However, the committee did not reach an agreement on the final report. UCL has since set up a group to address these splits and decide what its next steps are.

Background

Eugenics at UCL

The Oxford English Dictionary defines eugenics as:

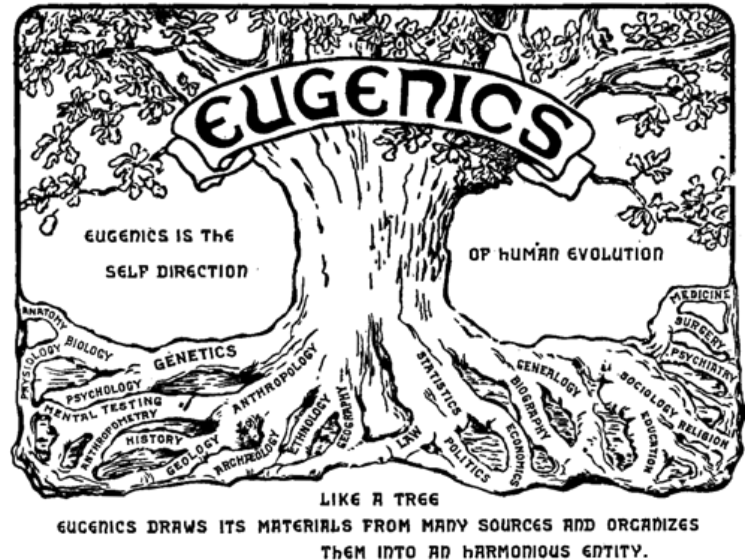
(The study of) the arrangement of human reproduction to increase the proportion of characteristics regarded as desirable (or to reduce the proportion regarded as undesirable) within a population or the species as a whole.¹

These ideas, as well as the term ‘eugenics’ itself, were first developed by Francis Galton in the second half of the nineteenth century, among a flurry of debate over the implications of Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection for human societies.² A central tenet underlying Galton’s work was the notion that civilisation had interfered with natural selection in the human species. Galton claimed that civilisational progress contributes to the preservation of physically and intellectually inferior people who would not have survived otherwise and consequently threatens to suspend or even reverse the upward progress of human evolution.³

These claims became increasingly pertinent in British society in the decades following the turn of the 20th century.⁴

As Lucy Bland and Lesley Hall argue,

Britain in this period faced increasing challenges to its position as an economic superpower from



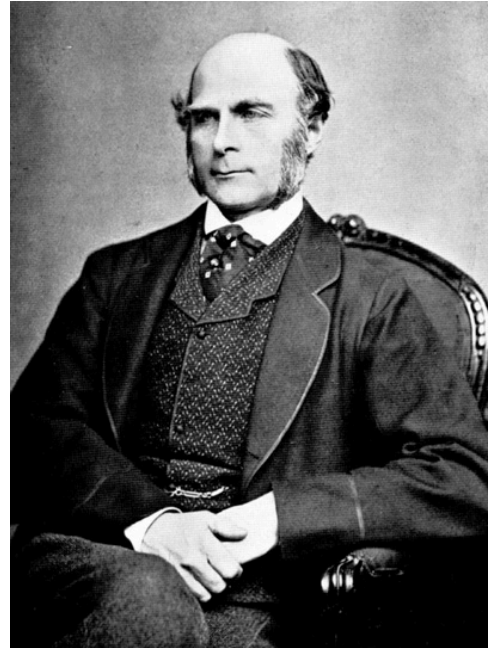
¹ "Eugenics, n.", *OED Online*, June 2021.

² Derek W. Forrest, *Francis Galton: The Life and Work of a Victorian Genius*, (Taplinger Publishing Company, 1974), 84.

³ See, for example, Francis Galton, "Hereditary Talent and Character", *Macmillan's Magazine* VII (1865), 326.

⁴ Deborah Barrett and Charles Kurzman, "Globalizing Social Movement Theory: The Case of Eugenics", *Theory and Society* 33, no. 5 (2004), 488.

countries like the USA and Japan, as well as challenges to its colonial dominance in Ireland, India, and Egypt.⁵ Internally, a general fear for the British 'unfitness' was reinforced by news of the significant rejection level (37%) of British volunteers during the 1899-1902 Boer War, as well as by the emergence of differential birth rates within Britain, with members of the poorer classes appearing to reproduce at an increasing rate relative to the wealthier ones.⁶ For Galton and others, eugenics provided a way to counteract these trends through policies which would 'cause the useful classes in the community to contribute more than their proportion to the next generation.'⁷ The advocacy for specific policies varied widely between individual eugenicists: Galton himself generally favoured policies encouraging the more 'useful' parents to reproduce more, while others like Marie Stopes called for the sterilisation of 'the hopelessly rotten and racially diseased.'



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The views of eugenicists also varied based on their broader political ideologies, as eugenic ideas were adopted by both conservative and progressive writers. Ethel Elderton (1878–1954), who became an assistant professor of eugenics at UCL in 1909, used statistics to argue that 'degeneracy' was overwhelmingly determined by inheritance rather than environmental factors, concluding that contemporary social legislation was futile in efforts 'to keep a nation strong mentally and physically.'⁹ On the other hand, Caleb Saleeby emphasised the continued importance of social upbringing in his conception of eugenics and sought to dissociate himself from economically conservative arguments made by Elderton and others.¹⁰

British eugenics in the early 20th century is, therefore, difficult to pin to a single ideology or set of beliefs. However, certain legacies have stood out as foci for condemnation by later generations. From the late 1930s onwards, the association of eugenics with the Nazi racial ideologies undoubtedly damaged the legitimacy of its proponents in Britain, despite the British Eugenics Society's efforts to dissociate eugenics from the Nazi ideas.¹¹ Indeed, the Eugenics Society only removed the term 'eugenics' from its name in 1989, when it changed its name to the Galton Institute.¹² The Galton Institute continues to promote the study of human heredity, making clear its

⁵ Lucy Bland and Lesley Hall, "Eugenics in Britain: The View from the Metropole," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 213.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Francis Galton, "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims", *The American Journal of Sociology* (1904), 1-25.

⁸ Marie Stopes, *Radiant Motherhood, a book for those who are creating the future* (London: G.P Putnam's Sons, 1920), 223.

⁹ Chris Renwick, "Elderton, Ethel Mary (1878–1954), statistician and eugenicist," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, July 12, 2018; Ethel M. Elderton, *The Relative Strength of Nature and Nurture* (London: Dulau and Company, 1909), 33.

¹⁰ Caleb Williams Saleeby, *The Methods of Race-Regeneration* (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Company, 1911), 12; Michael Freeden, "Eugenics and Progressive Thought: A Study in Ideological Affinity", *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 3 (1979), 647-8.

¹¹ Lucy Bland and Lesley Hall, "Eugenics in Britain: The View from the Metropole," in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, ed. Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 222-3.

¹² Galton Institute, "About", *Galton Institute Website*, accessed 25 June 2021.

rejection of Galton's 'outmoded and discredited ideas' while also acknowledging his 'many profound contributions to the development of genetic science and genetic medicine.'¹³ At present, the imperial and racist views of eugenicists have come under particular scrutiny. One such example of Galton's discriminatory ideas is the discussion of the 'typical West African Negro' in comparison to the Englishman, where he reinforces racial stereotypes and hierarchies which underpinned British colonial expansion.¹⁴ As shall be seen in the following section, these legacies have been a particular focus of the 2018-20 UCL inquiry.

UCL was a notable centre of eugenic study in the early 20th century, and many eugenics legacies remained visible within the university long after the Second World War. The university provided research space for Galton, including the Eugenics Record Office from 1904 and The Francis Galton Laboratory of National Eugenics from 1907.¹⁵ The laboratory was later renamed The Galton Laboratory of the Department of Human Genetics & Biometry in 1963 as the university attempted to move away from its legacy of eugenics.¹⁶ At Galton's request upon a financial donation, UCL established the Galton Chair in National Eugenics in 1911, which was not abolished until 1996.¹⁷ ¹⁸ The university also holds the Galton Collection, a museum resource for inquiring into and reflecting upon the relationship between science and society. Until recently, there were also lecture theatres named after Galton and Karl Pearson, the first holder of the Galton Chair in National Eugenics.^{19,20}

Other eugenicists and supporters of eugenics have included Flinders Petrie, Marie Stopes and Charles Darwin, Galton's cousin and strong supporter of his research. Petrie and Pearson also have campus buildings named after them, including the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology and the Pearson Building.²¹

History of the Contestation

Public debate on the legacy of eugenics at UCL

The legacy of eugenicists at UCL, particularly concerning Francis Galton, has been a matter of concern for many years. However, it was not until 14 October 2014 that the debate reached a broader public. On that day, Professor Joe Cain submitted a memorandum to the UCL Estates Management Committee proposing that UCL change the name of the Galton Lecture Theatre.²² This letter resulted in the establishment of a small committee set to investigate Cain's proposal.

¹³ Galton Institute, "The Galton Institute rejects the eugenic past," *Galton Institute Website*, accessed 25 June 2021.

¹⁴ Francis Galton, "Hereditary Talent and Character", *Macmillan's Magazine VII* (1865), 321-6.

¹⁵ Jess Murray and Ollie Phelan, "Eugenics Heading for a Eulogy", *The Cheese Grater*, 2015.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Peter FitzSimons, Jasmine Chinasamy and Elias Fedel, "Inheriting Galton: The People Working to Make UCL Less Racist." *Cheese Grater*, 2018.

¹⁸ "How Does a University Deal with Its Legacy of Eugenics?" Runnymede Trust, 2015.

¹⁹ "Galton Collection Online Catalogue," The Galton Collection, 2020.

²⁰ Peter FitzSimons, Jasmine Chinasamy and Elias Fedel, "Inheriting Galton: The People Working to Make UCL Less Racist." *Cheese Grater*, 2018.

²¹ "The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology," UCL, 2020.

²² Joe Cain, "Proposal for Changing Name of Lecture Theatre," UCL Estates Management Committee, 2014.

However, according to Cain, the scope and composition of the committee was too narrow, and before it could be diversified, the committee chair left their UCL post, and the 'issue fell into abeyance'.²³ Cain acknowledges Galton's 'important contributions to emerging sciences, such as statistics, meteorology, anthropometry, and fingerprinting,' while also highlighting that Galton's name is 'inextricably linked with racist, misogynist, and hierarchical ideologies that are abhorrent and indefensible.'²⁴ Joe Cain develops his ideas further by arguing that:

UCL must associate itself with leaders in the struggle for equality. By any metric, Galton was not one of those leaders. Honouring Galton with a named element of the estate associates UCL, rightly or wrongly, with elements of those abhorrent ideologies. This undermines our aspirations towards leadership on equality. Whatever might have been the merits of honouring Galton in the past, the time has come to honour others, particularly those with strong associations to the equality agenda that is the moral heart of our institution.²⁵

Writing later in 2014, Dr Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman,²⁶ who worked at UCL until 2015, details how eugenics became a scientific discipline and how the eugenic ideas are 'entrenched in our universities as a foundation of legitimate disciplines such as economics, statistics and genetics.'²⁷ He questions how the problematic legacy of eugenics can be dealt with and, taking note of Brown University's inquiry into its historical relationship with enslaved people, advocates in favour of launching an inquiry into UCL's history of eugenics as well as for other British universities to examine their historical links to slavery.²⁸ Coleman, writing in 2014, stated that 'justice demands a public discussion about why we have (and about why, for so long, we have kept) those names.'²⁹ Coleman further argued that:

It will come down to whether UCL believes facing up to its invention and institutionalisation of National Eugenics, and, crucially, to all legacies of those wrongful actions, is something worth prioritising and paying for.³⁰

Later, in 2015, UCL Students' Union magazine *The Cheese Grater* published an article asking whether 'UCL [will] find the courage to examine its murky past'.³¹ Soon after, the Runnymede Trust, a leading race equality think tank, published a blog post addressing UCL's engagement with its legacy of eugenics. Runnymede Trust also published Dr Coleman's paper titled 'Critical eugenics at UCL: Research, teaching, engagement', which explains how UCL can address its history of eugenics.^{32,33}

²³ Joe Cain, "Francis Galton and Building Names at UCL," 2018.

²⁴ Joe Cain, "Proposal for Changing Name of Lecture Theatre," UCL Estates Management Committee, 2014.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Dr Coleman puts a line through his surname to highlight that it was given to his family by slave owners in Jamaica. <https://www.oxfordpublicphilosophy.com/philosophers-racialised-as-black/adam-tobias-coleman>

²⁷ Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman, "Eugenics: The Academy's Complicity," UCL, 2014.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman, "Eugenics: The Academy's Complicity"

³⁰ Jess Murray and Ollie Phelan, "Eugenics Heading for a Eulogy", *Cheese Grater*, 2015.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² "How does a university deal with its legacy of eugenics?" Runnymede Trust, 2015.

³³ Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman, "Critical eugenics at UCL: Research, teaching, engagement," Runnymede Trust, 2015.

Renaming buildings, rooms, and titles would negate UCL's reputation for progressing public understanding of our world. A response encompassing research, teaching, and engagement would be more intellectually sound and more socially reparative.³⁴

In 2019, *The Cheese Grater* detailed two previous UCL reports that remain unpublished. One, which looked into addressing racism and white favouritism at UCL, is thought to remain 'indefinitely buried,' and the other, a qualitative report was undertaken in 2014, examined the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff.³⁵ In addition to these reports, there existed an Ethics Committee that addressed UCL's history of eugenics; however, it was disbanded in 2014 and its findings also remain unpublished.³⁶

On 17 November 2017, the 'BRICKS + MORTALS' project was launched. It takes participants on a narrated walking tour around the UCL Bloomsbury campus to discover the university's history of eugenics and the 'pivotal role UCL has played in establishing the science of eugenics.'³⁷ The project is organised by UCL Collections curator Subhadra Das, who believes that 'if we learn about and laugh about it together, we can change the legacy of that challenging history for the better.'³⁸

Like many other universities worldwide, there is a decolonising movement at University College London - 'Decolonise UCL'. The movement calls for the decolonisation of the academic curriculum at UCL. Amongst other things, 'Decolonize UCL' lobbies for a greater diversity of staff and taught content, as well as campaigns for a greater celebration of BAME academics. The movement also calls for the decolonisation of the 'mind' - 'Decolonize UCL'. The organisation strives to counter white-centrism, which 'Decolonize UCL' identifies as key to achieving greater cultural understanding and creating a wider representation of minorities. Finally, 'Decolonize UCL' engages in initiatives that challenge historical inequalities at the university and are committed to changing UCL's legacy of racism.³⁹ The movement predominantly addresses the eugenicist legacy at UCL, noting that

'It is not enough to change the names of these buildings [Petrie Museum, Pearson Building and Francis Galton Laboratory and Lecture Theatre], the twisted ideology and the legacy of racism they have propagated and created must be opposed.'⁴⁰

Establishing an inquiry commission

In December 2018, an inquiry into 'UCL's historical role in, and the current status of, the teaching and study of the history of eugenics as well as the current status of UCL's benefit from any financial instruments linked to the study of eugenics' was launched.⁴¹ The commission had an independent Chair, Dr Iyiola Solanke, a Professor in the School of Law at the University of Leeds,

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Jasmine Chinasamy and Zoe West-Taylor. "Will the Eugenics Inquiry Learn from Past Mistakes?" *Cheese Grater*, 2019.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ "Bricks + Mortals, a History of Eugenics Told through Buildings," UCL, 2017.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "Decolonise UCL," UCL, 2020.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ "Inquiry Launches into History of Eugenics at UCL." UCL, 2018.

as well as a panel that included UCL academic and equality representatives from both UCL and the Students' Union.⁴² Making a statement about the inquiry's launch, UCL President Michael Arthur said the following:

We acknowledge that UCL has a problematic history with eugenics which has caused, and continues to cause, a significant concern for many in our community. It is important that we approach this history proactively and confront our role in eugenics by understanding the past. This past should not be hidden but openly and critically discussed. Racism, antisemitism, inequity and inequality of opportunity have a profound impact on the sense of belonging that we want all our staff and students to have at UCL.⁴³

The inquiry has culminated in a report providing ten key recommendations on three themes: UCL's current position on the teaching of eugenics, the dissemination of eugenics, and research into eugenics.⁴⁴ However, the inquiry team did not reach an agreement, and as a result, UCL has set up another group to produce a formal response to these recommendations.⁴⁵ It has also published a podcast called 'Living with Eugenics', which attempts to critically examine the university's eugenic past.⁴⁶

In addition to launching an inquiry into the history of eugenics, UCL has also established the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation.⁴⁷ The Centre was originally titled the Centre for the Study of Race and Racism before being the first body at UCL to be renamed in 2020 as recommended by the UCL's Buildings Naming and Renaming Committee.⁴⁸ This interdisciplinary research centre will be part of the Institute for Advanced Studies (IAS) and aims to harness academics from across UCL in efforts to forge a critical study of race as well as the history, theory and politics of racism and its effects.⁴⁹ Professor Paul Gilroy, historian and cultural theorist, was appointed founding director in August 2019.⁵⁰ The Sarah Parker Remond Centre will be staffed by two lecturers and an administrator and will hope to attract doctoral and postdoctoral researchers.⁵¹ UCL has also funded a two-year research fellowship to continue research into UCL's associations with eugenics history and is in the process of raising funds for a new scholarship programme for students based in the Sarah Parker Remond Centre.⁵²

Criticism of the Plans

The inquiry and the Sarah Parker Remond Centre have received both support for endeavouring to address racism and criticism concerning the Centre's ability to be self-critical.⁵³ Moreover, the committee tasked with carrying out this inquiry could not reach an agreement on their final report

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ "UCL Announces Action to Acknowledge and Address Historical Links with Eugenics," UCL, 2020.

⁴⁵ "UCL Eugenics Inquiry Leads to Rival Reports," Research Professional News, 2020.

⁴⁶ "UCL Announces Action to Acknowledge and Address Historical Links with Eugenics," UCL, 2020.

⁴⁷ "Bricks + Mortals, a History of Eugenics Told through Buildings," UCL, 2017.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ "Director of UCL's New Centre for the Study of Race and Racism Announced," UCL, 2019.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² "UCL Announces Action to Acknowledge and Address Historical Links with Eugenics," UCL, 2020.

⁵³ Jasmine Chinasamy and Zoe West-Taylor, "Will the Eugenics Inquiry Learn from its Past Mistakes?", *Cheese Grater*, 2019.

– with Joe Cain, a member of the breakaway group, stating the official report had ‘failed UCL’.⁵⁴ Dr Iyola Solanke contests this, drawing comparisons between the official report and rival recommendations and highlighting their overlap.⁵⁵ The need to address this division has led to a delay in implementing these recommendations.

Moreover, while there appears to be a consensus that simply renaming the spaces is not a sufficient solution, there remains considerable debate on how the naming of buildings and rooms is best to be managed. Subhadra Das, the curator of UCL Collections, advocates against ‘tearing down the markers of UCL’s troubling past’, stating that: ‘if we take Galton’s name off the lecture theatre, there is nothing to talk about.’⁵⁶ Coleman holds a similar position, arguing that changing the names of spaces and buildings simply ‘aid[s] the coloniser in brushing colonialism under the carpet.’⁵⁷ Coleman is also critical of the Centre, arguing that ‘by avoiding specific reference to British National Eugenics, and by naming the Centre only in broad general terms such as ‘Racism’, UCL permits itself to sidestep its own role in Racism: a role that has been about White Power.’⁵⁸ Meanwhile, historian Dr Karen Weitzberg of the IAS has concerns that the Sarah Parker Remond Centre may present “a very tokenised idea of representation”.⁵⁹

In a letter to the Chair of the Inquiry, Dr Iyola Solanke, the Chair of the Royal Statistical Society Deborah Ashby advocates against ‘blanket condemnation of the whole man [Galton]’, arguing that ‘one hundred years ago, almost the entire population used to hold views on race, gender and sexuality that would be thought abhorrent now’. Ashby goes on to say that because the work of eugenicists and their supporters is vast and linked to many scientific and academic breakthroughs, such as the development of weather forecasts, fingerprints in crime detection, or the development of statistics as a discipline, Ashby claims it would require ‘a lot of work’ to disassociate from them and their scientific achievements completely. Essentially, Ashby is considering a concept previously identified as the ‘principal legacies’. According to Yale University’s report of the Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming (CEPR), principal legacies are ‘typically the lasting effects that cause a namesake to be remembered’ although ‘significant parts of a namesake’s life or career may not constitute a principal legacy.’⁶⁰ Determining principal legacies requires ‘scholarly judgement on how the namesake’s legacies should be understood.’⁶¹

Decision-Making Processes

The legacy of eugenicists at UCL reached wider audiences in 2014 and has been subject to public debate ever since. Whilst pressure to decolonise the university and rename buildings has mostly come from below, the decision-making process is primarily top-down. UCL attempted to engage in self-reflection by establishing an official inquiry and publishing the committee’s report and

⁵⁴ “UCL Eugenics Inquiry Leads to Rival Reports” Research Professional News, 2020.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Peter FitzSimons, Jasmine Chinasamy and Elias Fedel, “Inheriting Galton: The People Working to Make UCL Less Racist,” *Cheese Grater*, 2018.

⁵⁷ Jasmine Chinasamy and Zoe West-Taylor, “Will the Eugenics Inquiry Learn from its Past Mistakes?”, *Cheese Grater*, 2019.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ “Report of the Committee to Establish Principles on Renaming”, Yale, 2016.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

recommendations. However, with disagreements on the report's findings and concerns that renaming buildings does not alone address historical legacies, the question of how to move forward appears unresolved, albeit progressing.

Dynamics to consider in decision-making include the ability of an institution to be self-critical of its past, publication of completed reports - transparency of inquiries, tokenism, principle legacies, and community involvement in decision-making.

Summary and Conclusions

While concerns over UCL's eugenics history have surfaced for years, it has only recently been addressed publicly by the university. Measures have been undertaken to address the legacy of eugenicists such as Francis Galton. Whether these actions constitute an adequate response to the issue remains to be seen. It seems appropriate to acknowledge that assessing the multiple legacies of the historical figures involved is a difficult and, as of today, incomplete process. The UCL investigation and the Sarah Parker Redmond Centre still raise questions on whether an organisation can be truly self-critical of its past, as it is intertwined with its present. The split in UCL's inquiry over its final recommendations means that despite taking steps to reflect, proposals on how to confront the university's historical legacy remain contested in the public sphere.

Research by Grace Sahota, Lauren Brown, James Morrison, and Mateusz Kacperski

Last updated September 2021

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Figures

Cadman, Steve. "University College London, by William Wilkins", Flickr, September 11, 2006. Licensed via CC BY-SA 4.0. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/stevecadman/246302724>. (Cover Image)

"Logo of the Second International Congress of Eugenics", scanned from "The Second International Exhibition for Eugenics" by Henry Laughlin (1921), Wikimedia Commons, December 4, 2010. Licensed via PD-old-auto-expired / CC BY-SA 4.0.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eugenics_congress_logo.png. (Figure 1)

"Sir Francis Galton", scanned from "The Life, Letters and Labors of Francis Galton" by Karl Pearson (c. 1850), Wikimedia Commons, March 28, 2005. Licensed via PD-old-auto-expired / CC BY-SA 4.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Francis_Galton_1850s.jpg (Figure 2)

About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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To cite this publication:

Contested Histories, "UCL Eugenics Investigation in England, UK", *Contested Histories Case Study #161* (June 2024), Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) at the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio), retrieved from [link], [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Contested Histories is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

