

# Positive partnerships:

## developing effective collaboration between schools and universities

Sarah Longair launched a collaborative project between school history teachers and university historians in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this article, Longair and her teacher colleagues, Kerry Milligan and Emma McKenna, share how they used online collaboration to develop a flexible and practical approach to school–university collaboration, and reflect on its impact and the key factors behind its success. The project particularly focused on decolonisation in historical research and scholarship.

Milligan and McKenna share examples of the work the project enabled them to carry out with their departmental colleagues and students, exploring decolonisation and marginalised or silenced histories.

Our project seemed doomed at the start. We had just secured funding from the University of Lincoln's PEARL (Public Engagement for All with Research at Lincoln) scheme to run a decolonising workshop for Lincolnshire history teachers in summer 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Amid so much uncertainty, it seemed that our vision of bringing together teachers on campus to discuss the ins and outs of decolonising the curriculum would have to be put on hold indefinitely. Before long, however, we realised that the pivot to online learning could transform our working partnership. That the project took place against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests of summer 2020, with global protests calling for racial justice, added a sense of urgency and purpose to our work.

So, working together online, we embarked on a collaborative initiative between historians from the University of Lincoln's School of Humanities and Heritage and teachers in four schools within the Lincolnshire Teaching School Alliance. Our aim was to bolster teachers' confidence in approaching academic history and to provide a safe space in which to discuss the challenges and complexities of decolonising the curriculum while also moving forward with practical suggestions. This article shares how this collaboration developed, the reasons we have identified for its success, and how it proved more fruitful than we could ever have imagined given our unpromising start.

### Rationale for the project

The need to 'decolonise' the history curriculum has become a key area of discussion in recent years among educators in schools, universities and museums.<sup>1</sup> The Historical Association survey of secondary schools in 2021 found that while the majority of schools surveyed have made changes to Key Stage 3 to move to a more diverse history curriculum, there are still barriers, including lack of time, money, subject knowledge and training, and limited access to resources.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as Dan Lyndon-Cohen has argued, diversifying does not necessarily mean decolonising. Similar work is going on in universities; in the School of History and Heritage at the University of Lincoln, there are many researchers for whom the decolonising agenda is fundamental to their work.

Decolonisation of curricula is a highly complex issue, requiring interrogation of how imperialism and colonialism has informed the subjects we study and the methods we use, and re-evaluation of the types of knowledge and voices we have privileged in the past, in particular the reliance on texts from western perspectives.<sup>3</sup> In our project, we hoped to expose the power dynamics at play in the production of history over centuries, which have silenced numerous voices and shaped the kinds of histories that have traditionally been written and taught. There are strong resonances here with Lyndon-Cohen's approach and the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot.<sup>4</sup> These processes are relevant not only to the colonial and post-colonial world, but also to other periods, allowing us to take a more critical approach to an era in the curriculum. We wanted to work collaboratively, bringing together

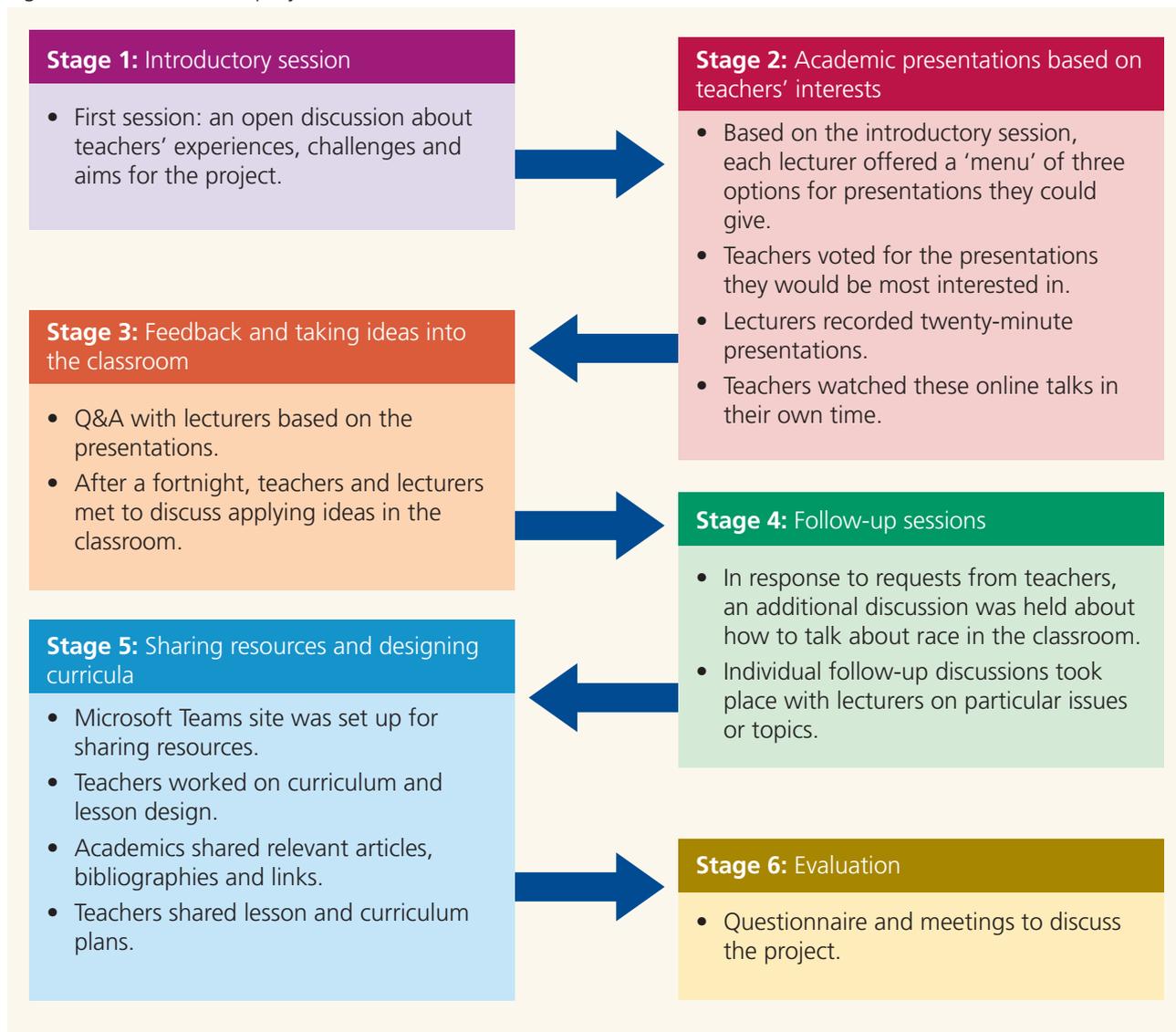
### Sarah Longair, Kerry Milligan and Emma McKenna

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Figure 1: Outline of the project



educators from schools and higher education, to think about these absences, how they have shaped the historical record and how we can move forward.

This approach to decolonising was in part inspired by the range of lecturers participating in the project. Sarah Longair, co-author of this article, who specialises in the history of empire, invited three colleagues to join the project who had been integral in advancing decolonising work at the University of Lincoln. Decolonisation informs and is embedded in all their various research specialisms. In addition to Sarah, the team consisted of Dr Antonella Liuzzo-Scorpo (medieval history), Dr Leon Rocha (history of medicine), and Dr Christine Grandy (history of race in twentieth-century Britain). This range of disciplinary and chronological perspectives offered a wealth of possibilities for discussing decolonising and the power structures that have informed the creation of historical narratives. These were more explicit in the case of imperial history and the history of race, but we were also able to interrogate decolonising approaches to medieval history and the history of medicine.

Many examples of important work to decolonise our curricula at university and school level already exist. Access to resources via online platforms and the use of social media by teachers have transformed the way schemes of work are

developed and lesson ideas and plans are shared. *Teaching History* regularly features new lessons and approaches.<sup>5</sup> We decided early on that our focus would not be on creating new resources, but rather on fostering effective collaboration. This issue of *Teaching History* reflects the importance of thinking carefully about collaboration, building on the work of Watts and Grimson, Hibbert and Patel, and Bird *et al.*, among others.<sup>6</sup> Our introductory discussion with the teacher team revealed that they wanted to engage with up-to-date research and academic ideas but pressures on time and access to resources limited opportunities to do so. Decolonising also involves sensitive histories which can discourage risk-taking.<sup>7</sup> We wanted to build a realistic model for busy teachers to engage effectively and efficiently with academic history and historians, exploring the challenges that some histories might pose and how to address them. We therefore shaped the project around how best we could facilitate teachers to engage with new historical perspectives and to discuss the application of these in the classroom.

The project was built on the foundations of earlier successful collaboration. I (Sarah) met Kerry at a local Historical Association branch lecture which I gave in April 2018. I then visited The King's School, Grantham, where Kerry and Emma both worked at the time, to run a session with sixth form students. We had several fruitful discussions about

Figure 2: Some of the contemporary texts and historical scholarship recommended by lecturers during the project



how universities and schools could work better together. When Kerry became History Lead for the Lincolnshire Teaching School Alliance and I saw some funding available for public engagement at the University of Lincoln, we seized the opportunity to expand our working relationship into something more substantial. Schools in the Alliance were invited to join and three other history teachers from schools across the county signed up. The project, entitled ‘Decolonising history: sharing research and approaches with schools’, ran from March 2020 to March 2021.

## How the project worked

Originally, we had intended to bring a group of teachers to campus for a single afternoon of intensive discussions and talks with lecturers. The move to online meetings was transformative. Events which would normally have taken months of planning, and required funding for cover and expensive travel across a large county, were now possible at the touch of a button. Collaborative meetings and workshops online are now the norm, but at this point in 2020 it felt like a departure into the unknown. Figure 1 shows how we transformed one half-day session into a more sustained and responsive project.

## Working together

Over the course of the project, we continuously reflected on how to enhance our collaboration, listening to teachers’ and lecturers’ suggestions. There were four key principles which shaped our approach, and which we see as critical to its success:

- i. We kept the project small-scale, ensuring that we all felt safe discussing potentially controversial issues in such a forum. The small group size also meant we were able to find mutually convenient meeting times more easily.

- ii. Ownership of the project was shared between the university and the school, with teachers driving the direction and development of the project.
- iii. We remained flexible, which enabled us to respond to emerging needs; online meetings aided this.
- iv. We kept the outcomes for teachers flexible, avoiding pressure to produce specific materials, and allowing teachers to reshape their curriculum and lessons to the extent that they felt was realistic and achievable.

As part of this flexible approach we held sessions additional to those originally planned, such as one focusing on ‘talking about race’, in response to teachers’ requests. While the lecturers did not claim to have ‘solutions’ to this question, we used this session to share our experiences and approaches. This example not only shows the importance of remaining responsive, but also the commitment from teachers and lecturers alike to the benefits of learning from each other in such a forum. The lack of prescriptive outcomes ensured that engagement with these discussions and the sharing of experiences were the formative elements of the project. Whether a teacher redesigned the whole of Key Stage 3 or just one lesson, the experience of thinking through these issues was the priority. One teacher lacked the scope to make major curriculum changes at the time, but nevertheless felt more confident in class when questions of race and decolonisation arose, for example around the Black Lives Matter protests. Another teacher drew on the project in order to support work with senior leaders on decolonising work across the curriculum, rather than just in history.

### Emma’s perspective: increasing teacher confidence in teaching the British Empire at A-level

We had already benefitted from Sarah’s expertise when she came to school to discuss popular culture and imperialism

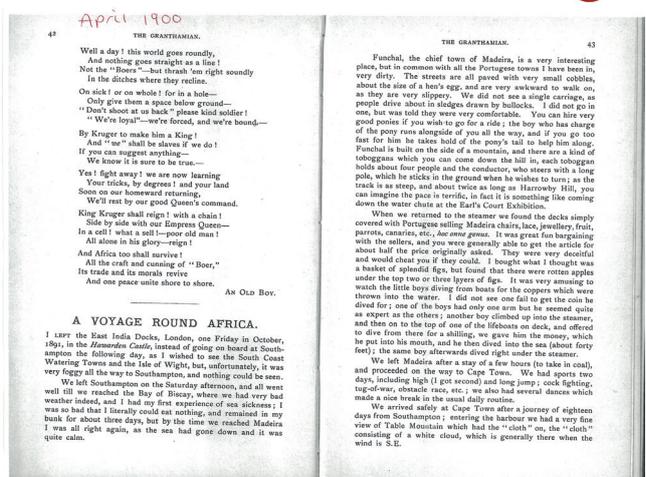
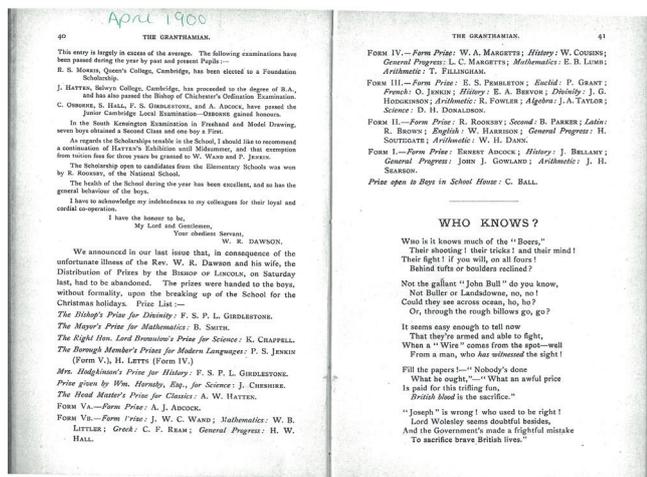
Figure 3: Pages from *The Granthamian* with Emma's Year 12 lesson questions

# THE KING'S SCHOOL

Read the extracts from *The Granthamian* – the school magazine:

- Old boy in India (September 1932)
- Sermon about the Zulu War (April 1908)
- Information about the Civil Service as a career (November 1902)
- Poem about the Boers (April 1900)
- A voyage around Africa (April 1900)

- What kinds of qualities are celebrated?
- How are colonies / indigenous peoples described?
- What do these extracts suggest about the relationship between the school and the British Empire?
- How does race fit into these ideas?
- What evidence can you find of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism?



with our sixth-form students. We identified a need to decolonise the curriculum for all year groups, but most urgently our teaching of the British Empire: 1857–1967 at A-level. We realised that our focus on the exam board specification had resulted in a narrow scheme of work, where in places we found ourselves simply narrating the story of empire.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, we were not fully addressing the experiences of indigenous peoples within the British Empire, nor helping our students to understand how and why nineteenth-century ideologies reinforced and embedded colonial power structures.

We set out to address this by drawing on a project session in which Dr Leon Rocha of the University of Lincoln spoke about Darwin and his influence on British intellectuals, such as Galton and Pearson, and the application of Social Darwinism in the eugenics movement and its legacies. Leon underlined how scientific knowledge on race and evolution was presented as objective and disinterested but served to legitimise and naturalise colonialism. Although we were aware that the publication of *The Origin of Species* (1859) and later *The Descent of Man* (1871) had provided justification for the expansion of the British Empire and the treatment of peoples within it, particularly during the more aggressive 'new imperialism' of the late nineteenth century, our teaching had not

previously explored this concept and its relationship to the British Empire in sufficient depth for our students to really grasp its significance. Leon recommended Daniel Kevles's book *In the Name of Eugenics: genetics and the uses of human heredity*, which gave us the confidence to explore the significance of this topic in more detail with our students (Figure 2).

Following Leon's lecture, we decided we should set aside two lessons at the start of the course to ensure students had a secure understanding of how ideas about race had influenced the British Empire. We hoped that moving this topic earlier in the learning sequence, and ensuring a greater emphasis on ideologies at the outset, would pay dividends in Year 13 when students began studying the decline of the British Empire, because they would have a better understanding of the role of popular politics and British attitudes during the era of decolonisation. The first lesson introduced students to early interactions between East India Company officials and the Indian population, highlighting the mutual respect and understanding that underpinned many interactions. Students charted the deterioration in relations over time, as traders began living like South Asian princes and ideas about western racial superiority emerged; this occurred even before the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, which was used

Figure 4: Fifteenth-century manuscript illumination from Froissart's *Chronicles* by the Boethius Master, showing Edmund Fitzalan, Earl of Arundel, and Hugh Despenser before Queen Isabella



simply to justify existing beliefs. We finished the lesson by asking students to read an extract from David Olusoga's *Black and British* to deepen their understanding of British ideas about race in the mid-nineteenth century and the impact of these ideas on the British Empire. In lesson two, we used an overview of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism to further develop students' knowledge about the historiography of western attitudes to race. Students read extracts from Victorian writers looking for examples of Orientalism in their work, and considered the impact this might have on ideas about the British Empire. We also introduced criticisms of Said's work and the concept of Occidentalism.

In his lecture, Leon also explained how universities were primary sites of the production and reproduction of scientific knowledge and were also where aspirational, socially elite young men were trained to take on roles as colonial administrators in the colonies in the nineteenth century, informed by these racial ideologies. The lecture inspired us to search our school archives for evidence of the perspectives of the colonisers: examples of alumni who had worked in the colonies, perhaps. We are fortunate that, from the late nineteenth century, our school published a school newspaper, *The Granthamian*, in which we found examples of former students travelling and working in the colonies. We were excited to make the study of this period of British imperial history more relevant to

our students by exploring these direct links between the school, the local area and the British Empire.<sup>9</sup> We gave Year 12 students selected articles to read and asked them to identify the qualities being celebrated and how colonies and indigenous peoples were described. Students were shocked by some of the terminology used to refer to colonies and indigenous peoples; but the articles also provided examples of cultural respect, demonstrating the degree of complexity in nineteenth-century attitudes that we wanted students to understand (Figure 3).

As a result of our collaboration with academics from the University of Lincoln we have continued to develop our teaching of the British Empire. We give greater attention to indigenous voices and to evidence of dissent within Britain. We also emphasise the way in which the power structures of empire silenced indigenous voices and have shaped the histories we have traditionally told. To do this, we have integrated extracts from two books recommended by Leon which focus on anticolonial resistance and British dissent: *Insurgent Empire* by Priyamvada Gopal and *Imperial Reckoning* by Caroline Elkins. We use these as part of our teaching of the Indian Rebellion (First War of Independence) in 1857, the Egyptian nationalist uprising in 1882 and the decolonisation of Kenya. In this way, collaboration with academics provided us with a better understanding of the historiography and of how academic thinking has progressed, as well as the opportunity to share

Figure 5: Slides from Kerry's Year 7 lesson on medieval queens

## Other problems facing historians

- One of the main sources of information for the medieval period are chronicles.
- These are problematic for historians studying medieval queens because:
  - Queens are seldom centre stage.
  - They are written by men (usually monks).
  - They reflect women in a stereotypical way – they are either portrayed as the Virgin Mary or wicked Eve.



## Problems historians face when studying medieval queens

- 'Women have usually stood half hidden in the wings of history. This is true of all periods, but it is an acute problem in the early Middle Ages.'
- What does this quote mean?
- Why is this a problem for historians?

ideas on addressing sensitive issues. Time constraints and the range of topics we teach often limit the extent of our research. The opportunity to engage in conversations with academics who could provide background information about key aspects and direct us to the most appropriate texts for further reading was therefore an invaluable and enriching experience.

### **Kerry's perspective: using up-to-date academic research to teach about medieval queens**

Participating in this project made us realise that many of our existing Key Stage 3 schemes of work told an historical narrative from just one perspective, and that as a result our curriculum was narrower than we would have liked it to be. This realisation grew out of our work during the project on decolonisation. Discussion of decolonisation

made us begin to question and to dismantle the power structures which historically have silenced these voices. We quickly recognised that the voice of women in history was missing from our units in Year 7 and 8 about power and democracy. This was a result of a traditional focus on the power of the king, which meant that our pupils would not encounter female agency until Year 9, when we studied the Suffragette movement. The emergence of the #MeTooMovement, and the school's context as a boy's school, made this an important area to address. We decided to add in a lesson on medieval queens to the Year 7 unit 'Did medieval kings hold all the power?', which had traditionally contrasted the power of the king with that of the church and the barons. We hoped that a lesson on medieval queenship would add another dimension to pupils' answers to the enquiry question. We were aware of the work of Susannah Boyd and Elizabeth Carr, who reshaped their units to centre women's narratives more

explicitly throughout.<sup>10</sup> In this case, however, we judged that the lesson on the role of medieval queens could be integrated as part of pupils' journey towards answering the overall enquiry question. Without changing our existing enquiry focus, this small step diversified our curriculum and raised questions with our pupils about why the role of women has historically been sidelined.

Our collaboration with the University of Lincoln's history faculty put me in contact with Professor Louise Wilkinson, whose research focuses on women in the medieval period. Louise met with me online to explain how historians currently approach the role of medieval queens and to share some recent research findings. She kindly shared her own lecture material and lent me works by Jennifer Ward and Margaret Howell.<sup>11</sup> This access both to current research and to resources was invaluable because it is hard for teachers to justify spending money on academic texts to inform and resource just one lesson. It can also be difficult to find appropriate historical sources; access to sources that Louise had already curated for this topic was enormously helpful. These included images such as Figure 4, which prompted discussions about the role of queenship. The image of Queen Isabella presiding over the trial of Hugh Despenser the younger and Edmund Fitzalan provoked not only a discussion of the judicial role a queen could hold but also the political role. Pupils were able to use the story of Isabella organising a rebellion against her husband King Edward II, and knowledge of her involvement in the gruesome execution of the two men in the image, to evaluate the more traditional image of a medieval queen more thoroughly. It also led to a lively discussion on why these roles may have been downplayed by historians.

The seminar with Louise enabled me to put the previous lack of focus on women in this period into context by discussing with pupils how historical narratives are constructed by historians based on available sources, and the fact that until recently the political role of women had not been a focus of research. The mainstream popular view of the medieval period is one in which women had little political agency; we therefore took care to explain that the relative silence from historians on the topic reflected the focus of academic research on kings as rulers, not a lack of political action or agency on the part of medieval women (Figure 5). Pupils were engaged by hearing how historians currently approach this topic because it introduced the role of historian in a much more explicit way than previous units. They were initially surprised by the degree to which historical narratives were constructed and asked questions about how we know we can trust historians, which in turn led to discussions about the contested nature of history.

As the history team at King's has continued to develop this lesson this year, pupils have explored the reasons why medieval queens have not previously been studied as much as kings. We have also continued to build on these foundations of understanding of how historians work, and how history is constructed, in other units of work in Years 8 and 9. We hope that this explicit focus at Key Stage 3 on how history is constructed will enable our

pupils to approach interpretations passages in the GCSE and A-level exams with increased confidence; perhaps even more importantly, we hope that, when students have left school, they will be able to analyse and question historical narratives and their selective use, for example, by the media and politicians.

This project gave us renewed confidence in tackling new topics and silences in our curriculum. This has, in turn, encouraged us to develop, independently of the academic team, a new unit on LGBTQ+ histories. We drew on recent scholarship on LGBTQ+ history, and throughout the unit highlighted how and why LGBTQ+ people and their histories have been marginalised, and what sources can be used to explore how attitudes have changed over time. At the end of the enquiry, pupils used their knowledge to evaluate how well the title of Amy Lame's book *From Prejudice to Pride: a history of the LGBTQ+ movement* reflected the changing experience of LGBTQ+ people in the twentieth century. The inclusion of this unit has diversified our Key Stage 3 curriculum and continued our emphasis on historical silences and restoring the voice of the marginalised. This work on the LGBTQ+ unit took place after the project finished but exemplifies the long-term impact of the collaboration and our ongoing determination to decolonise and diversify, and to question the dominant voices of history.

## What we learned from the collaboration

Our intention in sharing this project is to offer a model of good practice for how universities and schools can work together. We were convinced by the possibilities of online workshops as highly effective avenues to bring lecturers and teachers together in an inclusive setting. Many such initiatives exist, including the BeBold history network, and there is scope for more.<sup>12</sup> We tried to create a non-hierarchical setting for our workshops, and in many ways the online environment, with faces randomly across the screen, aided this. In contrast to a panel of academics at the front of a room presenting to teachers, we had a more open forum in which everyone participated on an equal footing.

A team of academics was also an essential part of the project. While Sarah led the administration and collaboration, taking on a topic as vast as decolonising the school history curriculum requires expertise from various periods and approaches. There is no single route to decolonising or to creating an inclusive curriculum; the varied academic approaches were vital in demonstrating this. While this appears time-intensive for the university, working as a team and with teachers made this one of the most rewarding and enjoyable outreach experiences for the lecturers, at a time when they are expected to undertake such work on top of their other commitments. Working with teachers is efficient in terms of academic impact: a meeting between a lecturer and a teacher has a long-term and broad effect on that teacher's approach and will influence many students. The academics also had much to learn from the teachers. Teacher questions on presentations prompted new reflections

on research and its significance. It was enlightening and inspiring for academics to see how research is absorbed and reformulated as learning experiences for school students.

As is clear from Emma's and Kerry's perspectives in this article, there has been a marked increase in these teachers' confidence to explore 'untold' histories and incorporate these into the curriculum, as well as responding to new scholarship. In this example, we have shown how decolonisation – a complex and intimidating concept for some teachers – can be explored and approached through careful, flexible and sustained interactions between lecturers and teachers. Lecturers working together with teachers is by no means a new practice. What we sought to create here, however, is a model of how teachers with limited time, resources and experience of working with academics, can with relative ease exploit the digital environment to have a transformative effect on teacher engagement, confidence, and curriculum development.

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