

## **Critical Eugenics at UCL: Research, Teaching, Engagement**

As an academic institution globally recognised for radical and critical knowledge production, UCL is well-resourced to address robustly the legacy of its study of eugenics. 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. The proposed investment would be a boost to UCL's application for the [Race Equality Charter Mark](#), to UCL's 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2026, and to UCL's contribution to the intervening [UN International Decade for People of African Descent](#).

### **1. Research**

#### **a. Theme, Committee, Centre**

Investing in serious intellectual inquiry into the impact of eugenics at UCL would reflect equivalent research themes across the globe, where our competitors are taking the intellectual legacies of settler colonialism, national eugenics, and racialised enslavement very seriously indeed. As UCL [reconsiders its links to Australia](#), work on colonialism by individuals at [ANU](#), [Melbourne](#), and [Tasmania](#), and a collaboration at [Queensland](#) should be our model. As UCL [consolidates its links with the Tri-state area](#), work on eugenics by an individual at [Yale](#) and a collaboration at [NYU](#) should be our model, as well as similar work at [Harvard](#) and [Alberta](#). UCL should position itself as even more radical and critical than [North Carolina](#), [Emory](#), and [Harvard](#), in their work on enslavement. Indeed, UCL should emulate the approach of [Virginia](#) and [Brown](#), where investment has been led from the top by the President. Brown's Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice—a diverse team of staff, student, and community or grass-roots researchers—collaborated for four years to produce a series of reports and recommendations, including a [post-doctoral fellowship](#) named in honour of the University's President. In her [inaugural address](#), 'Confronting Historic Wrongs: The University's Dilemma', delivered in 2014, when she opened Brown's Centre for the Study of Slavery and Justice, President Ruth J. Simmons urged universities to not be afraid to challenge injustices in the world, and to do so with 'integrity and independence.' Silence and a desire to take the least controversial route, she said, would leave them 'lowered in the esteem of society'. As [her successor rightly boasts](#), Brown has set UCL 'a very high standard for rigorous and unflinching analysis', with this 'model of responsible scholarship'.

#### **b. Fellow, Scholar, Chair**

In 1904, Francis Galton successfully petitioned UCL to establish, in Gower Street, a Eugenics Record Office, and a Research Fellowship in 'National Eugenics'. In 1907, the Office became the Galton Eugenics Laboratory and hired a Research Scholar. In 1911, UCL accepted Galton's bequest and instruction to endow a Professorial Chair in National Eugenics. Although, in 1963, we changed our mind on this, the arrival, in the 1970s, of new reproductive technologies institutionalised a new academic discipline to take its place: 'Liberal Eugenics'. So deep is its foothold in the academy, that Oxford's [Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics](#) is now the foremost academic advocate of 'Human Enhancement'. Yet, it has also incurred criticism and another member of the UK's Golden Triangle has begun to channel this criticism in a scholarly way, by setting in motion the process of institutionalising a third academic discipline: 'Critical Eugenics'. Building on Oxford Brookes's working group on the [History of Race and Eugenics](#), Cambridge's recent workshop, on '[Eugenics: Critical Historical and Ethical Reflections](#)', brought together historians, sociologists, philosophers, and social psychologists, in critical cross-disciplinary scholarly reflection, on Liberal and National Eugenics. Critical reflection reveals UCL's past institutional act of racial and social injustice to have had far-reaching consequences—both for [our university](#) and for the wider world. Some of these consequences (e.g. human genetics and the welfare state) contributed to '[the long term benefit of humanity](#)', but many of these consequences (e.g. the Shoah and the legitimisation of White Supremacy) did not. Those damaging consequences demand repair. We therefore propose the establishment of a physical Office, a Research Fellow, a Research Scholar, and a Professorial Chair in Critical Eugenics.

### **c. Origins, Histories, Legacies**

Critical Eugenics interrogates the origins, histories, and legacies of National Eugenics at UCL. 'Origins' encompasses all factors social, cultural, economic, political, and academic that occurred between 1492 and 1904 and can be shown to have had some causal relationship with the institutionalisation of National Eugenics. Purposefully broad, this embraces European competitive colonisation and the creation and contestation of whiteness. 'Histories' encompasses all developments in the newly institutionalised discipline that occurred between 1904 and 1963, when the Francis Galton Laboratory for the Study of National Eugenics was renamed the Galton Laboratory of the Department of Human Genetics and Biometry. 'Legacies' encompasses all the consequences of the now defunct discipline, that occur from 1963, through 2026, to 2034, and beyond.

### **2. Teaching**

Investing in both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching would show our responsiveness to our students, who—in initiatives such as [Why is my curriculum white?](#)—have already begun to think seriously about what eugenics at UCL means, for those who teach and learn at UCL. For undergraduates, UCL's unparalleled collection of archival material can, and should, be presented to all students as part of their introductory lectures. The cross-disciplinary reach of eugenics makes it relevant to all students, who would benefit from critical debate on the legacies of eugenics and on progress towards addressing such legacies. Mainstreaming eugenics could be supplemented by a stand-alone module, run by [UCL Global Citizenship](#), encouraging students to probe UCL's 'radical tradition', which is usually presented as unproblematic. For postgraduates, 'Critical Whiteness and Critical Eugenics', a core module in a new MA in ['Race': Difference and Domination](#), could harness UCL's unparalleled resources, scholarly and archival, to place the history and legacy of the world's first Chair in Eugenics, within the broader context of the European colonial invention, and constant contestation, of racial whiteness. Our development of these two unique modules would channel our students' campaigning energy into stimulating study and scholarship.

### **3. Engagement**

Research and teaching related to critical eugenics could be greatly enhanced and made more accessible to the wider public through the use of UCL's Galton and Noel historic collections. No other university in the UK or abroad holds collections and archives as comprehensive as UCL on the study and systemisation of 'race' science. During the 2011 centenary of Galton's death, UCL Museums and Collections used these resources to engage visitors and staff in difficult discussions about eugenics and 'race'. In ['Creating typecasts: exhibiting eugenic ideas from the past today'](#), Dr Debbie Challis—the author of *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* and the curator of [Typecast: Flinders Petrie and Francis Galton](#)—reflects critically upon how we engaged the public in 2011: 'However much an institution presents itself as neutral and aims to be balanced, its own history often provides evidence to the contrary, particularly when describing emotive areas in history and conflict'. From this observation, Dr Challis concludes that '[a] museum needs to concede that it has an opinionated voice, even voices, amongst its museum staff, and in its history, before inviting people in for discussion and critique' and that UCL should be 'supporting visitors and staff in dealing with exposure and difficult debate'. If meaningful public reflection, discussion, and debate around issues of eugenics and 'race' is to continue, it will require spaces in which the Galton and Noel collections are more accessible. An innovative teaching space, centrally located on the Bloomsbury campus—similar to the popular student hub in the Cruciform and BAsc. Common Room—would provide a multi-purpose, flexible space for secure visible storage, object-based learning, and public engagement. The space could host public events like film screenings, public lectures and seminars. In addition, UCL Museums and Collections staff could support research and teaching projects, such as a student-led public exhibition reinterpreting the Galton Lecture Theatre from a critical race perspective. An exhibition like this could run in conjunction with guided walks during Black History Month, and potentially change from year to year, responding to changing views and developing discussions.