

WE ARE OUR HISTORY: TOWARDS RACIAL EQUITY

HELEN WORRELL writes, on behalf of the Internal Steering Group:

Overview of the project

‘We Are Our History: Towards Racial Equity’ (WAOH) ran from Spring 2021 until Autumn 2024, generously funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. With the aim of building on existing work in the Bodleian Libraries on equality, diversity and inclusion, the WAOH project emerged specifically from an identified need to address issues of racial equity and empire histories in the Bodleian's collections, staff and services. The project's title is taken from a quote by James Baldwin: ‘History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history.’

The Mellon funding allowed WAOH to hire a Project Manager, Jasdeep Singh, who led the project between June 2022 and June 2024. This was key to momentum, as it meant there was a dedicated member of staff with the responsibility of driving the project forward and working with colleagues to deliver its aims. The money also funded a Research Associate, Devika, to conduct in-depth research into our collections and links to empire, colonialism and coloniality. The funding was also used to deliver workshops and public events linked to the project themes, and to digitize some relevant items in the collection. WAOH aimed to address legacies of empire and colonialism, by taking a close look at our collections, our work with audiences and our staffing, through the lens of racial equity and imperial legacy, delivering this work through eight workstreams, in order to ensure that all aspects of the organization were examined and influenced by the project.

This was a complex project to deliver, and therefore required a comprehensive governance structure. The Principal Investigator was Richard Oviden, Bodley’s Librarian. Under his overall supervision, WAOH was led by an Internal Steering Group, comprising of the Project Manager, workstream leads, and Antony Brewerton, the sponsor for the project from the Bodleian Libraries’ Executive team.¹ An Advisory Board was also formed to offer expert guidance to the Project Manager and Internal Steering Group, made up of key colleagues from the University, from the Equality and Diversity Unit and from the academic community. Other members with expertise in this area joined us from external organizations and other UK academic libraries. The Internal Steering Group met every six weeks, while the Advisory Board met four times within the timespan of the project.

Each of the eight workstreams had a workstream lead, an existing member of staff, to carry forward the work of the project alongside their day-to-day duties in the Library. Each workstream lead developed a plan for the delivery of their workstream with the guidance and support of the Project Manager. At the end of the project, each workstream also produced a set of recommendations, with guidance on priorities for sustaining their work into the future.

Workstream overviews:

The Bodleian and Empire:

This workstream focused on examining how the Bodleian Libraries acquired its global

¹ The members of the Steering Group were as follows (in alphabetical order): Antony Brewerton; Lanisha Butterfield; Devika; Alexandra Franklin; Beverley Harry; Abigail Hipkin; Linda Pope; Jasdeep Singh; Judith Siefring; Maddy Slaven; Susan Thomas; Helen Worrell.

collections. It aimed to uncover hidden stories and research the origins of our collections, specifically focusing on the role the British Empire played in collecting. One of the major outcomes of this workstream was an in-depth report on the history of the Bodleian and Empire. Research showed that donations to the Bodleian represented wealth from empire, from the very earliest days until well into the twentieth century. Additionally, it also found that archival material held in the Bodleian emphasizes the voices of colonizers and administrators of empire. As well as a research report, this workstream facilitated conversations between staff, academics and stakeholders through workshops. It provided a platform to experiment with engagement, to find what works: for example, research workshops that offered opportunities for 'counter-archiving' and exploring new narratives.

Collection Description:

The Collection Description workstream reviewed the language used in the cataloguing and classification of our collections, and updated historically insensitive terms, in order to make descriptions more inclusive. It additionally aimed to look at how we describe authorship and ownership within the context of our collections. This work was primarily focused on items in our Special Collections and Archives. During the project the workstream team organized a seminar for staff on description, and on understanding sensitive language issues. As part of this workstream, work was done on rekeying Sanskrit items in our online collections to enhance their discoverability.

Collection Development:

The Collection Development workstream built on the work of a previous project, 'Changing the Narrative: Championing Inclusive Collection Development'. This workstream aimed to assess the impact of recent collection policy-changes to encourage more globally inclusive collecting. The workstream devised a benchmarking strategy that involved analyzing reader views on the collections, staff attitudes to applying the policy change, and, lastly, conducting a statistical analysis of the collections. The workstream also worked with the Subject Librarian network to improve their engagement with issues of global equity and inclusion in our collections. As part of this, a workshop on 'Building Global Collections' was organized, with invited speakers from across the Bodleian Libraries and further afield from other UK institutions.

Digitization:

This workstream aimed to identify underrepresented collections for future digitization. Furthermore, it sought to develop and improve our approach to online delivery of collections related to colonialism and empire. As part of this, the workstream team conducted a digitization audit, which involved reviewing our digital content and gaining a better understanding of gaps within Digital.Bodleian. In addition, in liaison with the Collection Description workstream, a 'content warning statement' was developed for Digital.Bodleian to accompany sensitive materials. A proportion of Mellon funding was also allocated for digitizing items in our collections. Findings from the audit, and the Bodleian and Empire workstream, informed key areas of the collection for digitization. As a result, thousands of new high-quality digital images are now available to all, including materials from the Anti-Slavery Society, as well as papers from the Codrington Archive.

Public Engagement:

This workstream sought input from diverse communities on content for exhibitions and events, aiming to amplify unheard voices. The workstream wanted to increase the visibility and understanding of the stories and experiences of the Global Majority, as represented in Bodleian collections. The workstream team worked with Peter Brathwaite on a series of events and an exhibition entitled 'Mischievous in the Archives'. This piloted and formalized a

model for practitioner engagement that could be used by the Public Engagement team in future work. Through working closely with the 'Bodleian and Empire' workstream, the WAOH Conversations lecture series was developed. The series invited experts to speak on topics relating to the colonial records held at the Bodleian. In addition to the events hosted within the Weston Library, the team joined community events in the wider city, for example at the Westgate Shopping Centre.

Communications:

The Communications workstream supported the wider work of the project. The workstream team built a brand identity and developed web materials to showcase the work and activities going on across the eight workstreams. The team also created strategies for promoting events and workshops, building on existing audiences and developing strategies to reach new people. The workstream produced a variety of outputs, across web, social media and video content. As well as maximizing external communications, the team also utilized internal communications networks to increase reach on the project news and activities.

Organizational culture:

This workstream aspired to embed equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) into our organizational culture. It developed support for staff on issues around equality, diversity and racial equity through training and toolkits and produced EDI-specific content for the staff intranet. This included detailed pathways for self-directed learning. The pathways are made up of short learning resources, so that learning can fit into staff members' day-to-day schedules. Staff can pick which element of EDI they wish to learn about at the time and tailor their professional development accordingly.

Staffing:

This workstream focused on staff recruitment and retention within the libraries. It identified positive steps to help build a more diverse staff, and enabled recruitment colleagues to pilot activities that would address this. The workstream activities included a review of recruitment processes. Furthermore, the team implemented compulsory EDI training for recruiters and also developed a 'diversity statement' that is now included in all job advertisements.

Moving forward:

The project's innovative and extensive work was celebrated through winning the Vice-Chancellor's award for Commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Spring 2024, and formally ended in October 2024, with a final report delivered to the Mellon Foundation in January 2025. The overall project achievements and recommendations have been summarized in two internal documents. In addition, individual workstreams have published their own reports where relevant, for example the 'Bodleian and Empire report' and the 'Collection Development workstream report and summary of activities'.

Recommendations from the WAOH project will be taken forward in two ways, in order to ensure that its achievements have a long-lasting impact. Firstly, an EDI Committee is being formed to oversee work on equity and inclusion across all the Bodleian Libraries. This Committee will enable our work on equity and inclusion to be more joined up and build on the success (and learning points) gained from the WAOH project, so as to develop effective workflows to address further inequalities and engage other marginalized or minoritized groups.

Secondly, in addition to the EDI committee, many of the recommendations from the WAOH project have been integrated into strategic projects and activities. The Bodleian

Libraries' Strategy 2022–2027, for instance, now has EDI aims and activities embedded into the work of many of the Library's strategic working groups.

Further information about the project is available on this website:

<https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/about/libraries/our-work/we-are-our-history>