

Towards a More Inclusive Modern British History? Reflecting on Barriers, Challenges, and Opportunities in Twenty-First Century UK Higher Education

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In September 2010, the UK's Higher Education Academy (HEA) commissioned an investigation into what the future of 'inclusive' teaching and learning at British universities might look like. Their report was published in the same month in which I began my academic teaching career. The HEA report offered an early, if somewhat bland, definition of inclusive teaching and learning: 'the ways in which pedagogy, curriculum and assessment are designed and delivered to engage students in learning that is meaningful, relevant and accessible to all.'¹ Thirteen years later, this policy discourse has become embedded in Higher Education (HE) across the UK, expressing objective values of 'fairness and equality of opportunity for all citizens to access education as a basic human right' and emphasizing respect for the identities and cultures of all learners.² The growing trend towards 'inclusivity' has informed all three areas of researching, teaching, and learning modern British history in clear ways. Essentially, research within the field has placed new, frequently intersectional approaches to telling a more multi-layered, representative story of the modern British past in dialogue with pedagogical debates over which parts of this past are taught and how, and advancing fresh considerations of who learns this history, and how. Since 2010, I have taught modern British history at the Universities of Edinburgh and Manchester, both of which may be classed as 'conventional' ancient and redbrick universities respectively. In early 2023, however, I became a lecturer at The Open University (OU), a distinctively and proudly 'non-conventional' university whose lineage and *raison d'être* is grounded in providing open access to higher education and designing and delivering inclusive forms of learning. Accordingly, this reflection places 'inclusivity' in HE within a slightly less familiar frame, offering a series of purely subjective perspectives on how teaching and learning modern British history 'works' within a very different kind of institutional context.

¹ Liz Thomas and Helen May, 'Inclusive Learning and Teaching in Higher Education', Higher Education Academy Report (2010), 9.

² Sarah Hayes, *Postdigital Positionality: Developing Powerful Inclusive Narratives for Learning, Teaching, Research and Policy in Higher Education* (Boston, 2021), 12.

Briefly contemplating the ‘bigger picture’ of change across academic teaching in the last 10 years or so, the new agenda around inclusivity in HE, alongside the growing prominence of inclusivity discourse in public life, has certainly shaped the contours of my first decade as an academic in exciting and thought-provoking ways. With the growth of the digital age, new technologies such as social media have amplified the links between what we research and teach in HE and how this ‘fits’ with the world around us. In particular, in the wake of growing global social justice movements, impetus for scrutinizing Britain’s imperial past with a view to demanding racial justice in the present has gathered fresh force. From an intellectual perspective, too, a seismic shift has occurred within the field, incorporating the transformative exchange of peoples, ideas, products, and legacies between the British metropole and colonies into ‘mainstream’ modern British history. As Rohini Rai and Karis Champion note, the field has become a key site for ‘decolonising’ debates which reappraise the power imbalances, influences, and legacies of colonialism.³ These debates have set up a rich vein of thinking that has encouraged more historians of modern Britain to scrutinize the field from increasingly multicultural perspectives, although significant tensions remain between articulations of the ‘decolonial turn’ at both conceptual and practical levels.⁴ Generally speaking, then, intellectual and societal principles of ‘inclusivity’ in teaching and learning modern British history have meshed in new and stimulating ways, requiring academics to navigate the multiple ideas and forms of expression that our students are responding to in the world around them with intensified duties of care and responsiveness.

At the time of writing, however, historians in universities across the UK are working within a challenging—to put it politely—landscape.⁵ Heavily politicized debates about who is and who is not included as either a historical or present-day stakeholder in the British ‘nation’ have attained acute levels of urgency and ugliness, the fallout from which is deeply affecting the field and future of modern British history.⁶ A string of right-wing political and media attacks has placed academics on the frontlines of confected ‘culture wars’, with some historians effectively standing accused of treason for offering students opportunities to learn critical approaches to studying Britain’s history as an imperial nation.⁷ Anxieties have also arisen that studying modern British history (or any History) in certain institutions, or among first-generation students, may revert to being the preserve of socio-economic elites.⁸ Against this backdrop, issues of who ‘gets’ to research, teach, or learn modern British history have become increasingly divisive.

Widening Access to Studying Modern Britain’s Past: The Open University

In this increasingly difficult climate, the OU continues to play a major role in ensuring that students from socially or economically disadvantaged backgrounds are not shut out of higher education. Founded under Harold Wilson’s Labour government in 1969, the

³ Rohini Rai and Karis Champion, ‘Decoding “decoloniality” in the Academy: Tensions and Challenges in “decolonising” as a “new” Language and Praxis in British History and Geography’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45 (2022), 478–500.

⁴ As Meleisa Ono-George argues, ‘decolonising’ through diversification strategies alone is an imperfect solution to widening inclusivity. Meleisa Ono-George, ‘Beyond Diversity: Anti-racist Pedagogy in British History Departments’, *Women’s History Review*, 28 (2019), 503–4.

⁵ See Royal Historical Society (RHS), ‘History in UK Higher Education: A Statement from the Royal Historical Society’ (June 2023), <<https://royalhistsoc.org/policy/history-in-uk-higher-education-a-statement-from-the-royal-historical-society/>> accessed 31 August 2023.

⁶ For instance, former Education Secretary Michael Gove’s ill-fated attempts to revise the history curriculum for English schools in 2013.

⁷ Jack Maidment, ‘Liz Truss Warns Against ‘Woke’ Attacks on UK’s History and Culture’, *Daily Mail*, 8 December 2021.

⁸ RHS, ‘History in UK Higher Education’.

institution was originally conceived as a ‘University of the Air’, a term proposed 6 years earlier in Wilson’s famous ‘white heat’ speech promising a ‘totally new attitude’ towards investment in education, science, and technology. As Daniel Weinbren notes, the OU’s roots lie deep in Britain’s post-war democratic settlement, and its Royal Charter mandates the university’s objective of delivering innovative, inclusive, and accessible education to all.⁹ At the time of writing in 2023, the university retains a distinctive student demographic that encompasses part-time and (mainly) mature students; students without prior qualifications; students with disabilities or caring responsibilities; and students learning from within secure environments, including prison and hospital units. Teaching modern British history at the OU thus proffers rich opportunities to communicate with a highly varied localized and national student base.

Since its inception, models of distance tuition have been at the core of OU teaching, and the OU has always been very quick to appreciate the benefits of employing technological advances such as videos, and radio and television broadcasts, alongside more traditional printed correspondence materials in developing pioneering pedagogies aimed at lengthening the reach of learning. In the twenty-first century, the rise of the Internet, networked computers, and interactive digital resources have opened up a new era of online teaching and learning and the creation of new online learning communities which can support each other from afar.¹⁰ The outbreak of global pandemic in 2020 saw universities across the UK pivot towards some of these distance-learning practices, although most have now returned to some degree of in-person teaching. The digital classroom, however, remains integral to teaching and learning at the OU. While many other HE institutions make use of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) as repositories for reading or setting up learning activities, since around 2012, modern British history teaching at the OU has taken place largely within a bespoke VLE through which students can access books, journal articles, and collections of primary sources online. Embracing the online sources and databases in the OU’s Library meant that History at the OU was able to solve a big problem deriving from the old ‘box full of content’ model: now, the student can (and should) be looking for their own sources and making choices about what to focus on, which brings the OU’s history learning outcomes much closer to the rest of the sector.

The OU’s VLE also enables modern British history students to take an ‘active learning’ approach to life in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain, using diverse digital resources and activities. For example, on the second-year module, ‘The British Isles and the Modern World, 1789–1914’, students can access an interactive map of Great Britain and Ireland (1801–1911) that visualizes changing population data drawn from censuses and explains key political and geographical terms. Similarly, students can add their own events and notes to an interactive timeline containing colour-coded major political, economic, social, and cultural historical events from the period. In facilitating these types of increased levels of accessibility and varied learning approaches, the VLE has been particularly impactful in terms of opening up HE to students with physical or learning disabilities, who correspondingly make up a significantly high proportion of the OU’s modern British history students (as indeed they do at the OU in general).

Yet the rise of the digital classroom necessarily linked to online sources has also created new forms of exclusion for some groups of OU students, especially those in prison. As students in secure environments (SiSE), these learners often have only patchy access to a version of the VLE that is reliant on prisons having access to both a specially designed virtual campus and computer terminals. Barred from accessing additional Internet resources for

⁹ Daniel Weinbren, *The Open University: A History* (Manchester, 2015), 4–8.

¹⁰ Weinbren, *The Open University*, 21–22.

study, these SiSE students rely instead on less technological teaching methods, including pre-arranged telephone calls with tutors and the timely delivery of offline coursebooks and source materials.¹¹ Financial constraints to foundational access modules and eligibility restrictions on student loans also present barriers to learning while in prison. So even as the OU's unique distance learning model offers one of British society's most marginalized populations a real chance to be included in HE, those who perhaps stand to gain most from accessible study often remain trapped in a 'digital dark age'.¹² Self-evidently, the material practices of *how* we teach continue to play a significant role in determining *who* we teach, inevitably (and frustratingly) restricting the length of our educational reach in certain areas.

My actual role as lecturer in modern British history at the OU is highly unusual in that curriculum design and delivery are disaggregated, due to the sheer size and scale of teaching and learning. For instance, between 2020 and 2022, an annual average of around 700 students were registered on the level two modern British history module. Furthermore, undergraduate students enrolled in part-time study take only one module per academic year, across 6 years.¹³ Thus, with only six modules across a degree, the OU introduces students to a broad range of material in largely populated and generally expansive thematic modules, operating at a very different level of granularity to other HE institutions. With each module being allocated a lifespan of 10 years, the module team certainly feels the pressure to design and write it 'right first time'.

However, this also presents opportunities to look slightly differently at how modern British history is brought into wider frame in teaching. Lacking options to silo off various aspects of Britain's past into disconnected specialist options rooted in theme or geography, as module teams, we have to think creatively and expansively about how to teach a genuinely 'British' history. This is especially important because, as a HE provider which is funded and based in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the OU's institutional affairs and student enrolment are closely enmeshed with the nations' policies and governance. The History department is acutely conscious of its responsibilities towards our students from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and ensuring that these students 'see themselves' in the curriculum.¹⁴ To this end, implementing pluralistic pedagogies that reflect the many identities, cultures, and needs of the OU's nations-wide learning community is essential. Rather than adopting approaches rooted in concepts of separation, therefore, the OU's large-scale teaching model grants the necessary breadth to construct relevant polycentric narratives that emphasize shared historical experiences of (for instance) war, industrialization, and socio-cultural change across nineteenth-century Scotland, England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.¹⁵ This also facilitates what John MacKenzie calls a 'four-nation approach to the history of the British Empire', encouraging modern British history students to understand how English, Scots, Irish, and Welsh peoples participated in industry, commerce, and military conquest in Britain's global empire.¹⁶ While the OU necessarily practices different levels of granularity and focus in its approach to delivering modern British history, our curriculum design thus shares and embodies the wider field's

¹¹ Rosalind Crone, 'Studying History in a Secure Environment: Legacies, Challenges, Opportunities', RHS Historical Transactions Blog, <<https://blog.royalhistsoc.org/2022/10/10/studying-history-in-a-secure-environment-legacies-challenges-opportunities/>> accessed 31 August 2023.

¹² Crone, 'Studying History in a Secure Environment'.

¹³ Two modules per academic year for full-time study.

¹⁴ Open University, 'Innovating Pedagogy Report' (2023), 22–25.

¹⁵ Naomi Lloyd-Jones and Margaret M. Scull, eds, *Four Nations Approaches to Modern 'British History': A (Dis)United Kingdom?* (London, 2017).

¹⁶ John MacKenzie, 'Irish, Scottish, Welsh and English Worlds? A Four-Nation Approach to the History of the British Empire', *History Compass*, 6 (2008), 1244–63.

recognition that emphasizing imperial connectedness at home and away throughout the modern British past enables the calibration of a more inclusive teaching praxis.¹⁷

Summary

In the 2020s, with the outbreak of world-wide pandemic, increasing levels of poverty and division within British politics and society, and multiple new appalling conflicts taking place across the globe, the fragmented remnants of Britain's dubious claims to effective domestic and international leadership have splintered even further. At the time of writing, it is not clear how these issues might urgently drive forward teaching, learning, and researching modern British history across the next decade. But as this short reflection on my first year at the OU reminds us, how we teach and whom we teach remain equally as important as what we teach in building a genuinely more inclusive future for the field of modern British history.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Rosalind Crone, Paul Lawrence, Neil Younger, and Chris Williams for sharing their extensive wisdom and experiences of teaching at the OU. Thanks also to Eloise Moss and Laure Humbert for their perspectives on 'inclusive' teaching in HE.

¹⁷ Andrew Mansfield, 'Increasing Inclusion for Ethnic Minority Students by Teaching the British Empire and Global History in the English History Curriculum', *Oxford Review of Education*, 49 (2023), 371.

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Modern British History, 2024, **35**, 50–54

<https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwae017>

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