

(If you are an individual affiliated with the OII and would like to add your name to this open letter, please follow [this link!](#))

Dismantling Systemic Racism at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII): A template for institutional change spanning the intellectual life of the department

The changes detailed in this document are explicit preliminary steps toward dismantling the systemic racism spanning the OII's intellectual life. This document foregrounds the long-standing, wide-reaching, and particularly violent problem of anti-Blackness in the academy while seeking to address wider racial and social injustices. It does so by articulating concrete commitments emerging directly from social science research on the structures and practices that reinforce and reproduce systemic racism in academic departments.

In this document, we put forward steps to institutional change that address racial injustice on three levels: 1) Representational, 2) Epistemological and 3) Structural. Our goal is to dismantle systemic racism by both increasing the access of Black and other minority ethnic (BAME) scholars to the OII, whatever they choose to study, and by increasing the OII's scholarship on racial and social justice.

- **Representational:** Increase the number of BAME faculty, administration and professional services staff, and scholars in the department.¹
- **Epistemological:** Foreground epistemological frames from non-White intellectual genealogies to increase the quality, scope, social impact and accountability of the OII's research and teaching.²³ Because increasing the presence of people of colour in the department does not in and of itself modify the epistemologies that continually reproduce their exclusion⁴, throughout the document we name and address the standards for hiring, promotion, and admissions which overwhelmingly favour White candidates.⁵ We lay out concrete changes to these standards of academic excellence and the criteria by which academic texts are judged essential reading at the OII.
- **Structural:** Change the structures that reproduce and reinforce systemic inequalities in access, representation, and epistemic authority. We explicitly name the still-persisting historical genealogies that have led to a) departments being overwhelmingly White and to b) the dominance (and unmarking) of White

¹ Cotten, S. R., Price, J., Keeton, S., Burton, R. P. D., & Clifford Whittekind, J. E. (2001). Reflections on the academic job search in sociology. *The American Sociologist*, 32, 26–42.

² Todd, Z. (2014). An Indigenous Feminist's take on the Ontological Turn: 'ontology' is just another word for colonialism (Urbane Adventurer: Amiskwacî). *Anthro{Dendum}*.

³ Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2013). *Decolonizing Methodologies*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

⁴ Ahmed, Sara (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press: London.

⁵ Fenelon, J (2003). Race, Research, and Tenure: Institutional Credibility and the Incorporation of African, Latino, and American Indian Faculty. *Journal of Black Studies*, 34 (1), 87-100.

epistemological frames, providing concrete changes in the department to dismantle these structures and replace them with just and equitable ones.⁶

By instituting these concrete changes, the OII, with its desire to innovate on the cutting edge, has an opportunity to publicly pave the way for other departments to follow.

This three-layered approach institutes and commits to concrete institutional change in four domains:

- 1. Hiring**
- 2. Teaching**
- 3. Student Admissions and Funding**
- 4. Statement of Accountability**

1. Hiring

Hiring practices currently rely on particular assumptions about what makes candidates “excellent”⁷, a standard that is often code for specific intellectual genealogies, publication venues, and institutional legacies that privilege White candidates over Black and other candidates of colour.⁸

Current standards of academic excellence:

- deprioritise teaching and service work, which faculty and students of colour are disproportionately asked to perform⁹, resulting in racialised inequalities in access to academic positions and promotions.
- undervalue work aimed toward community impact and wider public engagement, which Black scholars and scholars of colour are far more likely to undertake.¹⁰

⁶ Kayes, P. E. (2006). New paradigms for diversifying faculty and staff in higher education: Uncovering cultural biases in the search and hiring process. *Multicultural Education*, 14(2), 65–69.

⁷ O'Connor, P., & O'Hagan, C. (2016). Excellence in university academic staff evaluation: a problematic reality? *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(11), 1943–1957.

⁸ Ho, Karen. (2009). *Liquidated: an ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press, London.

⁹ Aguirre, A. (2000). Women and minority faculty in the academic workplace: Recruitment, retention, and academic culture. *ASHE- ERIC Higher Education Report*, 27(6), 1–110.

¹⁰ Drake, C. (1978) Reflections on Anthropology and the Black Experience. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 9(2), 85–109.

- devalue the intellectual contributions of other forms of knowledge production emerging from BAME intellectual genealogies and epistemologies¹¹ (often, as not “theoretical”).¹²

These standards must be shifted to combat anti-Blackness and increase the department’s commitment to racial and social justice more broadly, as they currently devalue meaningful and impactful forms of scholarship.¹³ This call should not be seen as anti-theoretical, but rather as a call to recognise that the separation of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ is itself a legacy of White, Enlightenment ideologies of knowledge production.¹⁴ Instead, it seeks to shift attention to scholarship based in community engagement, social justice work, and directly aimed at dismantling systems of inequality as intellectually vital and generalisable to other fields of knowledge.¹⁵ These shifts will concretely benefit the quality and scope of scholarship, impact of research, and intellectual life of the OII.

As a department, we commit to the following:

In meetings for faculty hiring committees, the chair of the meeting will prioritise the following as criteria by which to measure excellence *as part of evaluation of **research quality***. These criteria will be formally listed as priorities before high impact factor journal publications, and will be given equal weight in the process of assessment:

1. Research Agenda: The extent to which the scholar substantively engages with questions of social justice in their scholarship and as part of their research agenda.
2. Public & Community-Based Scholarship: The extent to which the scholar has actively been a public scholar, seeking to expand the social and educational impact of their research beyond the academy (e.g. writing in publicly accessible and readable forums, delivering public talks, producing creative or community-based outputs such as exhibitions, films, or community organising work). This includes the extent to which the scholar performs community-based or community-focused research which feeds back into supporting the well-being of underrepresented communities *and/or* addresses forms of social injustice.

¹¹ Daniels, J. (2012). Race and Racism in Internet Studies: A review and critique. *New Media & Society*, 15(5), 695–719.

¹² Mbembe, A. (2015). [Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive](#). Lecture. May 2, 2015 at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research.

¹³ Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press: London.

¹⁴ Baffoe, M., Asimeng-Boahene, L., & Buster, B. (2014). Their Way or No Way: “Whiteness” as Agent for Marginalizing and Silencing Minority Voices In Academic Research and Publication. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 3(1), 13–32.

¹⁵ Sinclair Allen, J. & Cecil Jobson, R. (2016). The Decolonizing Generation: (Race and) Theory in Anthropology since the Eighties. *Current Anthropology*, 57(2), 129–148.

3. Service & Social Justice Scholarship: The extent to which the scholar engages in scholarly activities, either as part of or outside of their formal research projects, that contribute to increasing social justice. This includes mentorship and service work inside and outside of the academy.
4. Teaching & Mentorship: The extent to which the scholar demonstrates a clear commitment to addressing questions of racial and social justice in their teaching, teaching materials, and mentorship model.¹⁶
5. Perspective and Experience: The uniqueness of the candidate's world perspective and experiences relative to the current composition of the department on the basis of the intersections of the candidate's racial, ethnic, gender, and personal identities.¹⁷

The engagements listed above must be serious and sustained ones, and committees should explicitly search for scholars who demonstrate meaningful and substantive engagement with these questions and activities. A commitment to these criteria will help rectify the implicit advantages conferred upon White candidates through existing criteria, such as those detailed in the OII's Personal Development for Early Career Researchers document, by which research excellence is measured.¹⁸ This commitment will also increase the impact and rigour of the OII's research.¹⁹

STEWARDS: Director of OII + OII Steering Board

The use of specialist academic leadership recruitment firms with a demonstrated commitment to BAME recruitment could provide a complementary function to the OII's internally-led recruitment strategies.

Recognising that such staff members are often the point-of-first contact for prospective and existing students, we further commit to increasing the representation of BAME staff members within the OII's administration and professional services team.

STEWARDS: Head of Administration and Finance

Finally, it is important that as we increase the work we do in this area, we value that work in the form of compensation and formal recognition. Any committees, positions, or responsibilities created for OII scholars in pursuit of departmental racial and social

¹⁶ Martinez-Cola, M. (2020). Collectors, Nightlights, and Allies, Oh My! White Mentors in the Academy. *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege*, 10(1), 25-57; Hughes, A., Horner, P. S. & Vélez Ortiz, D. (2012) Being the Diversity Hire: Negotiating Identity in an Academic Job Search. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 48(3), 595-612.

¹⁷ Hughes, A., Horner, P. S. & Vélez Ortiz, D. (2012) Being the Diversity Hire: Negotiating Identity in an Academic Job Search. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 48(3), 595-612.

¹⁸ Ho, K. (2009). *Liquidated: an ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press, London.

¹⁹ Richards, N. (2013). Absent from the Academy: The lack of black academics in the UK limits the wider impact of universities. Retrieved June 12, 2020, from <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/72367/>

justice (e.g. roles for syllabus decolonisation, mentorship work, anti-harassment work²⁰, committee work²¹), whether for students or faculty, should be compensated work and formally recognised as central to student and faculty roles. One of the documented problems contributing to racial and social inequality in the academy is that students and faculty of colour do the bulk of racial and social justice labour for departments without any form of compensation,²² whether in terms of academic career progression or monetary compensation.²³ Our own valuation of this kind of work will contribute to rectifying this issue through the hiring criteria listed above, monetary compensation, and other formal recognition including titling, promotion, and credentialing.

STEWARDS: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee

²⁰ Shaw, A., Consalvo, M., Huntemann, N., Chess, S., Stabile, C. & Stromer-Galley, J. (2014, 4 November). [GamerGate and Academia](#). *International Communication Association* (Blog).

²¹ Ahmed, S. (2007). "You end up doing the document rather than doing the doing": Diversity, race equality and the politics of documentation. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(4), 590-609.

²² Aguirre, A. (2000). Women and minority faculty in the academic workplace: Recruitment, retention, and academic culture. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report*, 27(6), 1-110.

²³ Haag, P. (2005). Is Collegiality Code for Hating Ethnic, Racial, and Female Faculty at Tenure Time?. *Education Digest: Essential Readings Condensed for Quick Review* 71, 57-62.

2. Teaching

As a department, we commit to the following:

1. Circulating an evolving document on how to design syllabi that engage substantively with questions of anti-Blackness, social and racial justice, and non-White intellectual genealogies and epistemologies.²⁴ This circulation should occur at least yearly and at least a month before syllabi are due, so that all faculty and graduate students read this document and are encouraged to use it as guidance before designing courses.²⁵ *STEWARDS: Director of Graduate Studies + Programme Directors.*
 - a. This document should problematise the theory/practice divide, a dichotomy based in a narrow White European Enlightenment intellectual genealogy, which in the social sciences tends to restrict BAME scholarship to the realm of practice rather than theory.²⁶
2. Specific attention should be paid to the core courses that frame student learning while at the OII, and are currently labelled as providing an overview of and introduction to the wider field. These courses should substantively include critical theory developed by BAME thinkers and theory from the Global South, at minimum in equal balance to White Euro-American scholarship.²⁷
3. Creating and maintaining a centralised database of literature which critically addresses questions of anti-Blackness and social justice, as well as work by Black scholars, which faculty and students can continuously update. The DPhil Seminar Convenors can commit to updating this document with students at least yearly. The Graduate Studies Committee can ask faculty to update it at least yearly as well. *STEWARDS: DPhil Seminar Convenors and Graduate Studies Committee.*
 - a. This is an opportunity for the department to create and maintain this resource as a public-facing database that other departments use as well.

²⁴ Agrawal, A. (1995). Dismantling the divide between indigenous and scientific knowledge. *Development and change* 26(3), 413-439; Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press, London; Todd, Z. (2020). *Should I Stay Or Should I Go?*. *Anthro{Dendum}*.

²⁵ SOAS (2018) [Learning and Teaching Toolkit for Programmer and Module Convenors](#). *Decolonisation Toolkit for Convenors*.

²⁶ Mbembe, A. (2015). [Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive](#). Lecture. May 2, 2015 at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research.

²⁷ Adams, M. & Bell, L. (Eds.) (2016). *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*. New York: Routledge, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315775852>

4. Creating a process and platform where at least two weeks before the formal start to term (and/or before syllabi are due) faculty share the syllabi for that term's courses with other faculty and graduate students, opening them up to suggestions and contributions. *STEWARDS: Director of Graduate Studies + MSc Coordinator + Graduate Studies Assistant*
 - a. We know from experience that there is room for the syllabus to change between the due date of syllabi and the beginning of the course. It is important to acknowledge the lived institutional realities as well as the formal deadlines, and edit both as needed to enable this kind of syllabus engagement and support.
5. Creating an open and dedicated Microsoft Teams channel where all teaching faculty and graduate students discuss the courses on offer for the following term. These conversations can be about both the larger goals and construction of the course ethos (before formal syllabi are constructed) and/or spaces to bring syllabi into conversation and share ideas, support, edits, and additions. This channel is also a space to work together to develop the above three resources. *STEWARDS: Director of Graduate Studies + respective Programme Directors + MSc Coordinator + Graduate Studies Assistant*
 - a. This is also a space where faculty and students can work together to ensure that courses do not just focus on White Euro-American locations and scholarship.
6. Administering proper faculty training to ensure supervisory and mentorship relationships are cultivated with awareness, support and sensitivity to the backgrounds of BAME students.²⁸

²⁸ Martinez-Cola, M. (2020). Collectors, Nightlights, and Allies, Oh My! White Mentors in the Academy. *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege*. 10(1), 25-57.

3. Student Admissions and Funding

As a department, we commit to the following:

1. Adopting a process of contextualised assessment that accounts for the additional burdens faced by BAME applicants.²⁹ Standards used to assess the ‘merit’ of applicants can inequitably prioritise the experiences of White students. The following points concretely address these inequities. *STEWARDS: Admissions Committee + Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee.*
2. Conducting a formal internal audit of the admissions process, including clear documentation of MSc and DPhil admissions choices. Subsequently engaging community organisations with a specific focus on BAME representation in OII-related fields³⁰ in order to develop a set of specific recommended changes in the admissions process to support Black applicants and applicants of colour, especially first-generation Black students. *STEWARDS: Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee*
3. Dedicating a portion of the OII budget to researching and documenting funding opportunities for prospective students of historically underrepresented backgrounds to join the OII, with a focus on Black students who remain underrepresented even amongst BAME students. If no role at the OII exists to research funding opportunities for students, commit to creating this role. Document the post-holder(s), their contact information, existing resources, and their remit on the OII Website so prospective students can easily contact them. *STEWARDS: Director of Research + Research Facilitation Team.*
4. Emailing alumni asking them to optionally fill out a survey if they identify as BAME. This survey will ask about their individual experiences, being sure to gather data on experiential differences (e.g. a Black British student will likely have a different experience and needs than a Chinese American student). This survey will elicit suggestions on how the quality of education can be improved and supported by the department. The survey results will be published on the department website and discussed at the Town Hall meeting detailed in 5.3. A concrete response to the survey findings will be published on the website after the Town Hall. *STEWARDS: External Relations Team.*
5. Dedicating a proportion of the External Affairs office budget and time to involvement in the University of Oxford outreach activities, including graduate access mentorship programmes and outreach to Black students in the UK and in the Global South. *STEWARDS: External Relations Team.*

²⁹ Russell, S. (2003). In Search of the Meritocracy. *American Indian Quarterly*, 27(2), 400–411.

³⁰ E.g. [NSBC](#), [iAAMCS](#), [Data Science Africa](#), [Black Girls Code](#), [Deep Learning Indaba](#), [Black in AI](#), [LatinX in AI](#)

5. Statement of Accountability

As a department, we commit to the following:

1. Detailing the ways in which our field(s) and specific department are complicit in anti-Blackness and other forms of racial and social injustice (e.g. its legacies of epistemic violence, racism, imperialism, colonialism, homophobia, and sexism), and putting this reflection in a publicly visible location, such as the department website. *STEWARD: Director of IT & Web Services.*
2. Adding to the department's Strategic Plan a commitment to taking an anti-racist approach to research and academic practice, including but not limited to the structural changes above and explicitly grounded in BAME scholarly definitions of anti-racism in academic institutions. We have attached a bibliography to help with this framing, which can also form the beginnings of the database listed in 2.3. *STEWARD: Deputy Director of the OII.*
 - a. For example: changing the use of "Diversity and Inclusion" in committee titles and other departmental writings to "Equity and Justice"³¹ and committing to the latter principles; prioritising review of BAME manuscript submissions.³²
3. Instituting departmental change above and beyond the structural changes listed above; committing to thinking creatively and expansively about the specific modes of anti-Blackness and racial and social inequality perpetuated by departmental practices; and laying further out specific, actionable roadmaps to change. This thinking will take place consistently throughout the year, and will also be discussed in a dedicated yearly all-department Town Hall culminating in yearly documents with timelines of concrete changes that will emerge from those meetings. *STEWARD: Director of OII.*
4. Making public these commitments through an open announcement on the departmental homepage, official OII social media channels, and any other public-facing media. *STEWARD: Media & Communications Manager.*

We, the undersigned, are ready to commit to these changes as an OII community and work together toward a more just OII. In adopting these approaches and making our work public, we are also paving a way for other departments to concretely increase their commitments to opposing anti-Blackness and to promoting racial and social justice writ large. We call upon the Directorate to join us: to publicly commit to these changes and to the periodic updates on our departmental progress detailed above.

³¹Stewart, D. L. (2017, March 30). [Language of Appeasement](#). *Inside Higher Education*.

³² The Black Geographies Specialty Group Executive Committee. (2020, June 10) [Black Geographies Specialty Group's Call for Transformative Racial Justice](#). *Black Geographies*.

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