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Buchanan Institute Education Policy Team

Proposal for the decolonisation of the Scottish History curriculum.

[March, 2021]



Table of Contents

About the Authors.....	2
Executive Summary	3
Introduction.....	4
Research Methods.....	5
Stakeholders.....	6
Discussion.....	7
Background.....	7
Key Findings.....	9
Existing Efforts	12
Recommendations.....	15
<i>Curricula</i>	15
<i>Pastoral</i>	16
Next Steps	17
Conclusion	17
Bibliography	19
Contact Details.....	21



About the Authors



Caleb Warren-Smith
Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations

I am conducting postgraduate research in Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations. My interest in education policy stems from my past experience as a teacher in Lebanon, and reflections upon my own education in the UK. I have thoroughly enjoyed leading this policy team, engaging relevant social issues and finding creative solutions through education.



Martha Loach
Politics and Economic and Social History MA

I am in my fourth year studying Politics and Economic and Social History. A career avenue that I am considering is think tank work or engagement with government policy. My involvement in Buchanan's Education Policy team has been stimulating, rewarding, and very enjoyable.



William Hardie
Social Sciences

I am in my third year studying Social Sciences. Being involved in the Buchanan Education Policy team has been engaging and very enjoyable. Looking into the massively relevant and important argument to decolonise the curriculum has been eye-opening and has provided a desire to make change.



Christopher Milligan
Economics and Economic History MA

I am a third year studying Economics and Economic History. My decision to join the Buchanan research team emanates from my desire to see pragmatic policy reform on a wide range of social and political issues. Working as part of such an insightful and dedicated team has been an amazing experience.

Executive Summary

Research Question: How do both state and private secondary schools in Scotland teach British colonial history and how might these institutions decolonise their History curriculums (further) in order to adequately inform students of British imperial history and its legacy?

There is currently a cultural deficit in the equitable representation of British colonial history within the Scottish national curriculum. According to Impact of Omission's survey, 86.2% of respondents learnt about the Tudors, whilst 7.6% of those surveyed said they learned about the British colonisation of Africa.¹ There have been localised efforts to rectify this, including the SNP North Lanarkshire Councillor Danish Ashraf's motion which gained support at national party level. Moreover, the independent school, Fettes College, has made efforts to decolonise its curriculum.

Although promising, these developments are insufficient as they rely on the efforts of individuals and specific schools, as opposed to operating on a national basis. Indeed, the response of the UK Government to a petition entitled "Teach Britain's colonial past as part of the UK's compulsory curriculum", which gathered 266,455 signatures, stated "topics within statutory themes are chosen by schools and teachers."²

Thus, The Buchanan Institute's Education Policy Team calls for a decolonial lens to be applied to the compulsory History curriculum in Scottish secondary education. Our research will focus on the first three years of secondary education following the national history curriculum and will assess measures taken in both the public and private sectors. Whilst this study focuses almost exclusively on the adaptation of school curriculums in the Edinburgh area, as the seat of Scottish power, it is pertinent to frame these measures within a national context. History must appreciate the contributions and sacrifices that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups have made, and continue to make, to Britain. We call for the equitable refocusing of British history from the perspective of imperialism to the lens of a global interlocutor.

The policies recommended in this report encompass curricula and pastoral reform.

Curricula: we propose that the decolonisation of Scottish history curricula is made compulsory across KS3 (S1-S3) in both public and private sectors of education, and that it adequately considers and critiques Britain's imperial history and elevates marginalised voices throughout history.

Pastoral: we advocate for comprehensive teacher training that promotes responsible, respectful and thorough teaching. We also stress the utilisation of diverse historical sources and materials that elevate the views of BAME people.

¹ Jikiemi-Pearson & Bevan, 2021

² Petition: 'Teach Britain's Colonial Past as part of the UK's Compulsory Curriculum', 2021





Introduction

The Buchanan Institute's Education Policy Team is an ambitious research and policy team encouraging meaningful change in Scottish secondary education, with a specific focus and passion on decolonising the curriculum. This is an important, yet contentious issue. All members of our team currently undertake studies aimed at understanding the relationships between different groups within society. It is our view that this particular topic presents a fundamental opportunity to improve social relations and make education more equitable across all racial and ethnic groups. Throughout this policy paper, we will set out the reasoning behind why change is required and propose the implementation of policies to change the content and culture of the Scottish education system. We have chosen to focus on the history curriculum for ages 11-14 as this is when schools have the most choice as to what they teach their children, before examination-specific curricula in later years. We have also chosen to focus specifically on the secondary history curriculum within Scottish schools, both in the state and private sectors. As a team we have been inspired by the recent impact of groups like Black Lives Matter and the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, and we hope this paper serves as a platform to further the fight for racial equality through pragmatic policy proposals.

We have found great interest studying the challenges which face the Scottish Education Department and for the United Kingdom as a whole in addressing the history of colonisation and Empire. This is a topic which desperately requires further engagement from the Scottish Government and we hope this paper will contribute to this.

We welcome opinions and views on this topic. Please contact the team at:
buchananedupolicy@gmail.com

Hope you enjoy reading!

Caleb, Christopher, Martha, William

Research Methods

Our research methods were varied and encompassing to ensure we acknowledged a multitude of perspectives and types of data. First, we considered material produced by charitable organisations who sought to decolonise the curriculum, most notably the Black Curriculum.³ To complement this, we have engaged with more rigorous academic material produced by universities and also incorporated think tank reports.

A paper published by the Runnymede Trust entitled, “Teaching migration, belonging, and empire in Secondary Schools,” proved especially useful as it provided details of existing efforts. Generally, academic literature bestowed our report with intellectual insight. Furthermore, primary sources have proven instrumental, providing a necessary ‘bottom-up’ narrative to bureaucratically-produced documents. Interviews, petitions and opinion articles represented a vital qualitative element.

The insights of Sofia Akel and Rowena Arshad were invaluable. As we progressed through this research, our perspective narrowed to focus on Scotland. Contributing to this more specific insight was further ethnographic research including interviews with local teachers, politicians and government officials. A meeting with members of the Scottish Government’s Curriculum Unit proved extremely helpful, providing great insight into the work they are carrying out and potential solutions they have going forward. This meeting resulted in a slight recalibration of our recommendations, as there were aspects of our more academic research that had obscured the existing efforts of the Scottish Department for Education.

³ <https://theblackcurriculum.com/downloads/history>



Stakeholders

There were various arenas which provided an interest to our report. Primarily, our stakeholders are local secondary schools and government departments dealing with education. As this is a devolved issue, within this context, we will be discussing the Scottish Government in Holyrood.

Discussion

Background

Political Context

The subject of ‘colonised’ curricula and endeavours to rectify this are undoubtedly characterised by the political context. Since the turn of the century, there has been a demise in support for ‘multiculturalism,’ whilst xenophobic rhetoric characterised elements of the Brexit political discourse.

Kimberly McIntosh, Jason Todd and Nandini Das recognise how the vote to leave the European Union in 2016 has brought our relationship with migration, belonging, and empire to the fore.⁴ In the months following the 2016 EU referendum, racist hate crime increased by 16% across Britain, peaking at a 58% rise in the week following.⁵ More recently, the outbreak of COVID-19 has seen a rise in racist hate crimes against East and South-East Asian people. There were 261 hate crimes against Asians recorded in April 2020, increasing to 323 in May, 395 in June and 381 in July.⁶

Furthermore, the Windrush scandal of 2018 laid bare the dearth of understanding of successive British governments about the ‘winding up’ of the Empire and highlights the flattening of postcolonial histories within what has been repeatedly called “our island’s story”.⁷ This political climate of xenophobia, hostility and racism thankfully does not go unchallenged. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement rose to prominence during the Summer of 2020, catalysing a reckoning. Meanwhile the invaluable work of anti-racist organisations, such as the Runnymede Trust, has centered the topic of imperial history in popular consciousness. Within this current era

⁴ McIntosh, Todd & Das, “Teaching Migration, Belonging, and Empire in Secondary Schools,” *TIDE and Runnymede Trust*, July 2019

⁵ El-Enany, 2021

⁶ Townsend and Iqbal, 2021

⁷ Lidher, McIntosh & Alexander, 2020

of reconsideration and self-reflection on our history, there is no better time in which to address these problems within education.

Scotland

It should also be noted that Scotland specifically suffers from an especially uncomfortable attitude toward colonialism, instead highlighting England as the prime instigator of imperial exploitation and oppression. Dr Melanie Newton, Associate Professor of History at the University of Toronto, highlights “erroneous narratives” that are constructed to exonerate nations from responsibility for slavery and the slave trade, recognising these inclinations in Canada and Scotland.⁸

Edinburgh’s street names celebrate individuals who profited from imperial exploitation. For example, both a road and a 150ft high monument in central Edinburgh celebrate the Scottish politician, Henry Dundas, who amended Wilberforce’s proposed Slave Trade Act to a ‘gradual’ abolition, continuing the slave trade for a further ten years.⁹ Meanwhile, race equity researcher and specialist, Sofia Akel argues that “while England is of course responsible for obscene evils inflicted through colonialism, Scotland cannot simply hide behind this. Much like England, Scotland must be held to account for its role in colonialism. In order to decolonise in the Scottish educational context, Scotland must first reckon with its history, including the darker 'uncomfortable' sides of its history.”¹⁰

⁸ Edinburgh World Heritage, “Black history experts call for changes to curriculum in Scottish schools,” 17 July 2020

⁹ Newton, “Henry Dundas, empire and genocide,” Open Democracy UK, 30 July 2020

¹⁰ Loach, M, Interview with Sofia Akel, email, 16 Feb 2021

Key Findings

The UK Suffers from a Colonised Curricula

The primary evaluation of our research was that topics pertaining to Britain's imperial legacy are not included in the compulsory curricula. A recent survey by the Royal Historical Society of around 700 university-based historians highlighted that the curriculum at school level was narrow and limited, with consequences for Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) under-representation on UK history undergraduate courses.¹¹ Akel, defines the current, 'colonised' curricula as one "in which Western and Eurocentric perspectives dominate what is seen as 'legitimate' knowledge production and discourse."¹²

This results in curricula that determines "whose voices are platformed, whose are omitted and through whose lens we come to understand our world." Such institutional and discursive bias is especially apparent with regard to the history curricula. According to Impact of Omission's survey, 86.2% of respondents learnt about the Tudors, whilst 7.6% of those surveyed said they learnt about the British colonisation of Africa.¹³ Moreover, drawing on her personal experience as a history graduate, Akel tells how "we were almost exclusively taught a version of history that spoke only to the views, voices and perspectives of those who colonised much of the world."¹⁴

The English curricula is similarly deficient. Launched in 2014, the reformed English curriculum encapsulated a more 'traditional' domain, incorporating Shakespeare plays, the English Romantic poets, 19th-century novels and modern British fiction.¹⁵ Clearly there are opportunities within the English curriculum to bolster the platform of works by individuals from BAME backgrounds that are not being taken because of an inherent bias to revert to the status quo.

¹¹ Royal Historical Society, 2018

¹² Loach, M, Interview with Sofia Akel, email, 16 Feb 2021

¹³ Jikiemi-Pearson and Bevan, 2021

¹⁴ Loach, M, Interview with Sofia Akel, email, 16 Feb 2021

¹⁵ McIntosh, Todd & Das, "Teaching Migration, Belonging, and Empire in Secondary Schools," *TIDE and Runnymede Trust*, July 2019

Scotland Specifically

This ‘colonised’ curricula is evident in Scotland. Lisa Williams, the founder of the Edinburgh Caribbean Association notes how “there’s an issue with Scottish history not being taught in schools adequately enough.”¹⁶ Olivia Kanyike, ambassador for Intercultural Youth Scotland, agrees, explaining how Black history was completely absent from her education, “I had to learn it in my own personal time. It wasn’t introduced at school or secondary school. It was never part of the curriculum at all.”¹⁷ Hannah McGurk, a coordinator for the UncoverEd Project, adds that there is an extra layer of issues when trying to confront these problems in Scotland as there is a pervasive narrative that “We weren’t that bad...we weren’t involved”.¹⁸ All of this primary evidence proves that this issue is not limited to a single country within the United Kingdom.

This Has Damaging Consequences

By obscuring historical truths, contemporary hierarchies of oppression are protected by ignorance and historical amnesia. Crucially, Akel asserts that because “many believe we are now in ‘post-colonial’ times” the “multitude of ways that colonialism still dominates our education systems (globally)” perpetuate. This inequality and injustice permeate “even the national values and narratives that we hold today.”¹⁹

Schools are Bound by Exam Board Syllabi

Secondary schools across Scotland are limited in what they are able to teach as they are bound to the curricula set by examination boards. The only year groups that are not bound by examination-specific curricula are S1-S3 (ages 11-14), hence our focus on this age range. Yet even with the autonomy individual schools have over the curriculum at these levels, some secondary schools still seek to prepare their students early for National examinations. This

¹⁶ Edinburgh World Heritage, “Black History”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Behrooz, 2021

¹⁹ Loach, M, Interview with Sofia Akel, email, 16 Feb 2021

narrows the scope of individual school leadership, and their say in forming the curriculum, to just a few preliminary years in secondary schools before examination-specific curricula must be followed. Therefore, the examination boards must also be held accountable if the curriculum is to be decolonised across Scottish secondary education.

Teachers Are Not Adequately Trained

A central finding was that many teachers are ill-equipped at dealing with these ‘challenging’ topics. Several studies in the past decade have highlighted secondary school teachers - and those involved in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) - lack of confidence in dealing with issues of equality, especially concerning race.²⁰ Working with trainee history teachers over a three-year period, Richard Harris found that some teachers avoided topics they deemed controversial.²¹ Meanwhile, a survey of teachers carried out by the Runnymede Trust, University of Manchester and University of Cambridge project Our Migration Story found that 78% of those surveyed wanted training on teaching migration and 71% on teaching empire.²² Further, 65% of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQT) said they felt unprepared to even teach pupils from a BAME background.²³ Ultimately, Bhopal and Rhamie conclude “greater training is needed in relation to the practical assistance that student teachers require in terms of increasing their understanding of diversity.”²⁴

Furthermore, White indigenous Scots are over-represented in the teaching profession, accounting for 93.5% of teachers, whilst those from BAME backgrounds are significantly underrepresented, comprising merely 1% of educators.²⁵ Yet 3.3% of the pupil population are BAME, suggesting that teaching staff are not representative of the children they teach.²⁶ The diversity of educators is

²⁰ Arshad, “Decolonising and Initial Teacher Education”, 2021

²¹ Harris, “‘Purpose’ as a way of helping white trainee history teachers engage with diversity issues,” *Education Sciences* 2 no. 4 (2012), pp. 218-241

²² McIntosh et al, “Teaching”

²³ Lander, 2011

²⁴ Bhopal & Rhamie, “Initial teacher training: understanding ‘race,’ diversity and inclusion,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 17, no. 3 (2013)

²⁵ Dr Michele McClung, Christina MacDonald and Graeme Mason “Teaching in a Diverse Scotland: increasing and retaining minority ethnic teachers,” Glasgow City Council Research Paper (2018).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

vital, especially with regard to countering imperial, White-centered, narratives. A more diverse staff may also foster discussion between teachers that might aid the tackling of challenging topics.

Retaining Teachers' Desires for Flexibility

During our team's consultation with the Scottish Government's Curriculum Unit, we raised the issue of offloading the responsibility teaching subjects such as colonial history to teachers themselves. We learned that as a consequence of the Great Teaching Debate in 2002 there was a desire to move away from a centralised approach to curriculum choice, as previously teachers had felt "hemmed in" by legislation. Instead of mandatory topic choices there is a desire to integrate policies within the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) framework, which places emphasis on skills and knowledge and not just facts. This was a crucial factor which is not discussed in the recent scholarship within the context of Scotland.

Existing Efforts

McIntosh, Todd and Das recognise that the exam boards OCR and AQA have launched GCSE level units on 'Migration to Britain' in 2016, which include some coverage of empire and that at Key Stage 3 (KS3) level, migration and empire are signposted as 'suggested topics'.²⁷

Meanwhile, there have been localised efforts to challenge the existing curricula. The SNP North Lanarkshire councillor, Danish Ashraf, initiated a motion that gained support at national party level.²⁸ Moreover, the independent school, Fettes College, has made efforts to decolonise its curriculum and is continuing to make significant efforts to develop this further.²⁹ Meanwhile, in October 2020, the journalist Anahit Behrooz launched her editorial project at Bella Caledonia to

²⁷ McIntosh et al, "Teaching."

²⁸ Paterson, "'Scotland's biggest anti-racism step' in North Lanarkshire given green light," *The National*, 18 August 2020

²⁹ Hardie, W, Interview with A. Shackleton, Zoom, 19 November 2020

explore the decolonisation of Scottish institutions, however this has yet to come into fruition. A webinar, hosted by the British Research Association in September, welcomed educators and policymakers, with the intention of promoting open discussion and debate for contributing to best practice in research, teaching and learning for decolonising the curriculum.

Existing Efforts Fall Short

Although promising, these various developments are insufficient as they rely on the efforts of individuals and specific schools, as opposed to operating on a national basis. If worthwhile and meaningful change is to happen, it is crucial that a unified national effort is made to get behind curriculum changes. Indeed, the response of the UK Government to a petition entitled “Teach Britain's colonial past as part of the UK's compulsory curriculum”, which gathered 266,455 signatures, stated “topics within statutory themes are chosen by schools and teachers.”³⁰ By offloading responsibility onto teachers, the Government fails to ensure that children are adequately informed of British colonialism, and that the teachers are adequately trained in how to best present this information. Akel stresses the centrality of structural change that transcends institutional reforms, stating “institutional change, required institutional forms and resourcing. As we have seen in the higher education sector, this work often falls on a few lone individuals, who carry the weight and burden of their institution. It will not be sustainable without structural changes.”³¹

What All This Means

From Brexit to the Black Lives Matter protests, events over the past decade have been a catalyst for exposing racially motivated injustices in our society. Our research has highlighted and corroborated views that Scotland specifically has significant inadequacies in its approach to tackling the decolonisation of its education curricula. It's been suggested one reason for this may be the unwillingness to accept the country's uncomfortable links with the slave trade. Although

³⁰ “Teach Britain's colonial past as part of the UK's compulsory curriculum,” UK Government Petition, closed December 2020

³¹ Loach, M, Interview with Sofia Akel, email, 16 Feb 2021



in the UK as a whole there have been many grassroots movements helping to retrospectively tackle this issue and campaigning for change, recent political efforts have so far failed to materialize into anything substantial. From correspondence with stakeholders we have discovered a myriad of complex reasons that have prevented an expedited change to the curricula, however, there remain key ways in which we and others feel the system could be improved.



Recommendations

After extensive research, there are a number of recommendations that we would like to put forward. Ultimately there must be a concerted effort led by the Scottish government to prioritise the decolonisation of the curriculum and put appropriate measures in place as soon as can be achieved. This includes accessible frameworks handed down from the government for the enactment by secondary schools across Scotland. We have split our recommendations into two categories: Curricula, dealing with the changes to the structure of the teaching material, and Pastoral, dealing with its presentation and the social responsibilities that arise from its implementation.

Curricula

We propose that the decolonisation of Scottish history curricula is made compulsory across KS3 (S1-S3) in both public and private sectors of education, and that it adequately covers:

- British colonialism in Africa and Asia, as well as Scotland's specific role in these atrocities.
- the Transatlantic Slave Trade, as well as Scotland's specific role in this,
- the experiences of BAME people throughout British, and particularly Scottish, history such as Septimius Severus, Mary Seacole, Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince and Stuart Hall.
- The work of prominent BAME individuals currently campaigning for racial equity, such as Sir Geoff Palmer and Baron Boateng.

It's also essential that the teaching of Britain and Scotland's colonial history isn't merely a dysconscious reproduction of facts but a critical analysis of the impact both then and now. The Fair Trade foundation highlight the need not just to learn the history of atrocities such as the Transatlantic slave trade but to also show how their legacies have created vast social injustices in today's society. One example is the case of Arthur Roberts. Roberts was a Black Scottish soldier

during World War I, who wrote extensively on his experiences of the war. Yet, teaching of the First World War is almost exclusively too often focused on White individuals such as Wilfred Owen or Charles Sorley, so little is known about him or his story. A refocusing onto the narratives of BAME individuals within Scottish history is just one small step which can initiate conscious change within a curriculum.

To help achieve these aims it is imperative that all teachers have the ability to share resources on decolonisation with other teaching colleagues. This is partly in operation through the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History (SATH), however, it is imperative that further efforts are made, such as a centralised and easily-accessible resource base, to improve the creation and dissemination of this information.

Pastoral

It is essential that we campaign for comprehensive training for teachers so that they can adequately and respectfully teach these challenging topics. We praise the fellowship programme established by Transformation by Innovation for Distance Education (TIDE) and The Runnymede Trust, and advocate for similar programmes within Scottish secondary education. The scheme, run for the first time in 2019, supports English and History secondary school teachers who are already teaching migration, belonging, and empire as topics. The innovative 12-week programme provides teachers with three cumulative masterclasses, online forums and specialist subject training under the guidance of the TIDE project team subject experts. Furthermore, Dorinda Carter Andrews, professor, writer and anti-racist educator at the College of Education at Michigan State University, stresses the need for teachers to engage in “critical self reflection” and situate themselves in a hierarchical system.³² Ono-George suggests that teaching practice is engaged, anti-racist and decolonial “if it forces students, especially those comfortably in the majority, out of their comfort zones.”³³

³² Carter Andrews, “The consciousness gap in education - an equity imperative,” *TEDxLansingED*, 10 March 2014

³³ Ono-George, “Beyond Diversity: anti-racist pedagogy in British History departments,” *Women’s History Review* 29, no. 3 (2019), p. 4.

With this in mind, we advocate for comprehensive teacher training that promotes responsible, respectful and thorough teaching. To enable this, it is also imperative that the decolonised history curricula includes a utilisation of diverse historical sources and materials that elevate the perspectives of BAME people, with Lisa Williams, founder of Edinburgh’s Caribbean Association highlighting the importance of trying “to bring in as many different perspectives from historians who are looking at it [history] through a different lens.”³⁴

Next Steps

Further consideration of pastoral methods of instruction and teacher training is necessary. Engagement with teachers, schools and educational institutions should be encouraged. Efforts should appreciate the specific skills educators already have, whilst furthering their abilities in other areas. In this way, Scotland’s existing flexible curricula could continue, but in a way that ensures imperial history is adequately attended to. Central to this step is listening to the perspectives and attending to the needs of BAME children, parents and teachers. We commend the Scottish Government Curriculum Unit’s commitment to listening and engaging with various organisations and groups. Although gathering information in this way may be time consuming, it is necessary to understand the nuanced and complex elements of school curricula. Furthermore, missions to decolonise the curricula should work in tandem with broader efforts to challenge racial injustice and inequality in Scotland, the United Kingdom and across the world. Campaigns for equality and justice are interconnected, intersected and inextricable. Our policy report is therefore situated in national and global struggles toward peace, justice and equality.

Conclusion

Through extensive research and in-depth study of current curricula, the Buchanan education team can conclude that both state and private secondary schools in Scotland do not adequately inform their students of British imperial history and the significant legacy that it has left behind.

³⁴ Edinburgh World Heritage, “Black History”



Ultimately the Buchanan Institute believes that the Scottish Government must lead from the front by providing frameworks for both educational institutions and leaders in the education sector. The policies set out in this report, regarding reform to curricula and pastoral aspects are vital if the necessary progress is to be made. We hope to contribute to a more equitable, open-minded and enlightened future.

The policies recommended in this report encompass curricula and pastoral reform.

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We welcome opinions and views on this topic. Please contact the team at:

buchananedupolicy@gmail.com



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Contact Details

The Buchanan Institute Education Policy Team
buchananedupolicy@gmail.com

The Buchanan Institute
The University of Edinburgh
Old College, South Bridge, Edinburgh EH8 9YL
Email: contact@buchananinst.org
<https://www.buchananinst.org>