

Podcast Transcripts

Yuncong: Hello, welcome to Yuncong's podcast where I share my research experience working on eugenics related topics in higher education, setting about six years of studying and working at UCL. I thought I know everything of this university every year it seems I know more buildings outside of my department, which is particularly useful when I work as a student ambassador in the open days and during orientation.

However, a project I participate as a research assistant proved there is still a lot to learn. The history related to eugenics legacy is definitely one of them. Thanks for this years really early Career Impact Fellowship, which allows me to invite some team members of Eugenics Legacy Education Project (ELEP) that I work with for the past year and share their research experience to a wider audience.

Today we have Helen Knowler, the associate professor at ELEP.

Helen Knowler: Thank you, Yuncong, for inviting me. I'm Helen, I'm the academic lead for ELEP, and my role is to manage the academic direction of the project, devising the aims and outcomes, and working to develop resources and academic publications for the project so that everybody at UCL and in the wider academic community knows about the project.

Yuncong: We have Tor, our project manager.

Tor Wright: Thank you. Yuncong. I'm Tor Wright right. As she said, I'm the project manager. So the professional service side of this work and I'm working closely with Helen to support reaching our goals, reaching our aims and all the practical sides of the project.

Yuncong: We have two students at IOE (Institute of Education) Xiaoyan and Görkem.

Görkem: Hi. I'm Görkem. I'm a PhD candidate at the Department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment, and it is my last year this year, and my research focuses on immigrant Turkish students attitudes towards science from a cultural perspective. In this project, I'm also working as a doctoral researcher in this exciting project, and we are creating sessions, activities, collecting data and analysing.

Xiaoyan: Hi everyone! I'm Xiaoyan, a doctoral research assistant for ELEP. I'm currently a second year PhD student from the Department of Culture, Communication and Media. My research interests revolve around, learning analytics and learning design. My role for this project was mainly help our team to investigate ways to devise and evaluate educational resources to foster engagement with eugenics legacy, to help them developing some research skills.

Yuncong:

Thanks everyone for being here. For those who might not know this concept, eugenics, I would like to provide a quick introduction. Eugenics, the pseudo science of improving

human population through selective breeding had its root at UCL. UCL academics, including Karl Pearson, played an important role in developing and legitimising the study of eugenics in the 19th and early 20th century.

Yuncong: This dangerous ideology cemented the spurious idea that a variety of human life could be assigned different value. In January 2021, UCL issued a formal public apology for its history and the legacy of eugenics. The apology and this project are part of a range of actions to acknowledge and address UCL's historical links with the eugenics movement. Following the publication of Eugenics Inquiry Response Group report in 2021, a Eugenics legacy education project (ELEP) was established.

Yuncong: Our team aims to embed visibility and awareness of UCL's history of eugenics across organisation. We aim to actively engage with UCL eugenics legacy in relevant educational activities. We aim to understand and address ongoing consequences of eugenics thinking today and incorporate these into inclusive teaching and learning activities where relevant. Finally, we aim to develop knowledge and the critical thinking skills so that educators might use their learning for working with other difficult or insensitive curriculum areas.

Yuncong: Please Google ELEP UCL for more information and I would like to ask, what do you think when you heard the word eugenics? Are you aware of the UCL issued apology in 2021?

Helen Knowler: That's a really interesting question. I was aware that UCL had done some work around its eugenics legacy, and there was a lot of news at the time about the apology. Some of the news was positive and lots of people welcomed it, and some of the news was not so positive, and people were kind of saying, why is this happening now?

Helen Knowler: Why is the apology happening now? So, yeah, I was aware of it. Certainly.

Yuncong: What about you, Tor? Are you aware of this? I mean, have you heard of this, concept? Where? Are you aware of the public apology UCL issued?

Tor Wright: So I just heard of eugenics as a kind of pseudoscience because it, relates to areas that I'm interested in. But I was actually working at UCL at the time of the inquiry in a different role in professional services. And I just have a very vague memory of maybe a news article in UCL news. Nothing really struck me.

Tor Wright: I wasn't particularly invested. It just was happening and of kind of neutral about it.

Yuncong: Yeah, I think I might know about the building renaming thing. I'm aware of Pearson correlation coefficient. I think anyone if you study any statistic module, you probably find this name very familiar. And interestingly, the studio we are doing the

reporting right now was renamed from Pearson Building to a northwest wing. How about you guys, Xiaoyan and Görkem? Do you know these? The public apologies.

Xiaoyan: well, from me as an international student study at UCL. To be honest, I don't know, UCL's history, associations with the eugenics. But I do have a certain understanding of the concept of eugenics. So, I think it's kind of an ethical and harmful movement that aim to improvement human populations through selective breeding, which kind of leads to significant, ethical violations.

Görkem: I've never heard these words until I started studying at UCL as an international student with Turkish origin. But when I first heard the word eugenics, it evoked a sense of concern and awareness of its dark history and the idea of categorising unveiled in human lives based on selective breeding is deeply troubling, and I was also aware of UCL's public apology in 2021, and I think it was a crucial step in acknowledging and addressing the university's historical ties to this dark ideology, the renaming of buildings like the transition from Pearson Building to Northwest Wing is symbolic and necessary in reshaping our institutional identity I believe.

Yuncong: Okay, thanks for sharing and for Helen and Tor. I wonder what initially drew you to this project?

Helen Knowler: Great question. So I have a background in special and inclusive education. I've spent many years thinking about how classrooms can become inclusive and how to remove barriers to participation for people, who have disabilities, or particular neurodivergent or chronic conditions. So, I was aware of eugenics in that way is a historical construct. when I saw this role, this project, I was really interested in how we link the past and ideas about the past to current education and also future education, because the thing about eugenics that interested me is that it has these afterlives.

Helen Knowler: So there's this version of eugenics that is the history that we know about at UCL. But we also know that eugenics ideas haven't gone away. And so for me, I was really interested in how do we teach that in modern classrooms, in higher education? How do we work with students and colleagues across UCL to understand why it's important to still keep looking at this history and legacy?

Helen Knowler: Tor, what about you?

Tor Wright:

I think I came from a little bit of a different perspective, being a member of the professional service staff at UCL. You can sometimes feel a bit like a cog in a machine and you can't really see your impact. So, you know, day to day, you know, students are appreciative. People say thank you, but you're not making really a change, a difference at UCL in, you know, in your heart you're not sure you're doing something.

Tor Wright: And then a project like this. It's such a specific cause. And you think, you know, a three year project. We can make a difference. You know, we can make people

listen and understand and maybe learn a bit more about how they're teaching, how they're learning. So it was really interesting a chance to make change at UCL.

Yuncong: Cool! Helen, we just mentioned we work with three projects. I wonder if you can briefly introduce the three projects to us.

Helen Knowler: Yeah. So, as part of our work, we wanted to collaborate with academics at UCL., so we first port of call out to ask for people who are interested to work with us, and so one project was from, a colleague in geography who was looking at the he was teaching statistics, as Xiaoyan mentioned.

Helen Knowler: if you learned statistics, you know about Pearson and Pearson's coefficient, and this colleague wanted to put some context around his teaching and wanted to include the legacy in his module. The second project is a colleague in archaeology who wanted to look at the ways that we could increase student engagement with the topic. So there we've explored different methods for student engagement in seminars.

Helen Knowler: The final project was a colleague engage in IOE (Institute of Education) in education who was interested in culturally sensitive approaches to teaching about the eugenics history and legacy.

Yuncong: Okay. Xiaoyan and Görkem, my next question is, what do you think some of the main challenges we face when addressing historical legacy, such as eugenics in higher education or, broadly speaking, any challenges you encountered while working on this project? One challenge I remember is like when we were doing the literature review earlier this year and I didn't find many available literature, I wonder, what do you guys think?

Görkem: Yeah, I completely agree with you. Find, like the lack of existing literature was a big challenge for me too. And in additionally, I think it was that we were trying to create some activities. We believe that it's very important to make it culturally relevant, and it was also very important to not offend or damage anyone in the country or any culture when they're talking about this kind of sensitive topics.

Görkem: Therefore, when we were creating the activities to conduct in the sessions, we were very, very careful, even for each every single word that we are going to use during this session.

Yuncong:
What do you think, Xiaoyan?

Xiaoyan: I completely agree with Yuncong and Görkem that we do have, like, limited literature review page to build up our literature, but, it does pose some challenges to develop well-rounded educational resources and engage in informed discussions. But I think that's also motivate us to fill the gap by trying to developing some strategies or

guidelines that teacher in higher education can think of when they approach to this kind of sensitive or difficult topics.

Xiaoyan: And also, I think another challenge can be when we confront such a controversial and sensitive topics, it can be a challenge because it requires careful navigation to respect diverse perspectives while acknowledging the harmful impacts of their eugenics.

Yuncong: I think all five of us have different experience of teaching. So my next question is, in what way has this project change your perspective on teaching and learning in higher education?

Yuncong:

Tor, do you want to start?

Tor Wright: But from a broader sense, when I've been surveying across UCL to see who's teaching about eugenics and seeing some resources and talking to people, I've just realised how there's not enough. I think there will never be enough or whatever you did. not influence, but kind of, importance put on how you teach, not just what you teach.

Tor Wright: And I think that's something that's become very clear during this project.

Yuncong:

Okay, cool. I mean, that's a perspective I never think about. What do you think of Helen?

Helen Knowler: So for me, I agree with Tor, an additional dimension for me. So I've worked in education all my life either as a teacher or as a researcher of education. And what I've learned is, I think at the start of the project, I thought we could do a kind of singular module that could go across the whole of UCL and would be compulsory, and that everybody could do it.

Helen Knowler: And where what challenged me is actually, it probably isn't a whole scale change. You probably don't need to change a whole programme or even a whole module. But actually in our projects, what is emerging? That small but impactful changes to the curriculum content or to teaching practices can have quite a big impact. And I think where we're at a place that actually the acknowledgement of the history and legacy is really important.

Helen Knowler: so yeah, I think originally I saw big, massive changes. That was the way to go. And as we've worked together, I've realised that actually what seems to be more influential on what makes change is more small and gentle, structured, change.

Yuncong:

Excellent! Görkem, I remember you said you were a science teacher in Turkey?

Görkem: Yes.

Yuncong: So I just wonder, has a project I mean, in any way this project change your perspective on teaching? Maybe like in secondary school? Oh, do you think it's too early to teach like this kind of topic to a secondary school students.

Görkem: Thank you for asking with this great question. I don't believe that it is too late to early to teach these sensitive topics in science education, especially in secondary school, because it is very important to have this awareness that science can be used for some bad intentions as well. I think it is very important to, it's very important to make students aware of, how science can actually fulfil their lives, but also can damage our lives very badly.

Görkem: That's why I believe that it's very important for me. from my perspective, it was an amazing experience for me that I was a part of this project, and I learned a lot as well as a science teacher. Science. Yes, we love science, but sometimes it can be dangerous. it is very important to have some acknowledgement about this.

Yuncong:

Thank you for sharing. Xiaoyan, I remember you are teaching some STEM subject to secondary students recently, and I wonder if you what if you were taught to design, curriculum? Well, you include eugenics related topics in your handbook? What do you think is too early to teach this topic to 11 and 12 years old, secondary school students?

Xiaoyan:

Thanks Yuncong for asking this question. I think as you mentioned, I do teach STEM course at year seven, eight students, I don't think it's too early to let students know this concept. It's very important for students to be equipped with this kind of awareness. And also, it's very important to create such an inclusive environment that trying to facilitate this kind of a historical awareness and also ethical considerations of legacy of eugenics.

Xiaoyan: Also it's very important to force foster, comprehensive and a respectful educational setting to let students know what's actually happening in the past and how do we, respond to those kind of actions.

Yuncong: Okay. I just, through reviewing the literature and through having a focus group with student, I just realise the timing of teaching sensitive and difficult topics is really an important issue.

Yuncong: Some students, I mean, postgrad students, they think it's a bit too late, and they (think) we should have, this kind of module in undergrad study. So I wonder, what do you guys think. Should we put in maybe a compulsory module to the undergrad or maybe in a session in the postgrad?

Helen Knowler: Yeah, that's a really good point. I think part of our project will report on that issue, because I think it is we need to do probably more thinking about when do students encounter this issue, how we do it. And I guess in an ideal world, every student would know when they came to UCL, they might be introduced to the idea through just the history of UCL and the world of UCL.

Helen Knowler: And I suppose what we do know from the research literature is that, you know, we do have to be careful about how much content around difficult topics like this we use with students. So, you know, would I want to see a module in the first year that was all about this? Probably not. It's too difficult.

Helen Knowler: It can be very hard to learn about this stuff. I probably would like to see a differentiated approach. I'll call it the drip, drip, drip approach. Like maybe something in the first year it's revisited again. Or a spiral approach where actually wherever you are on you in your course, you do encounter some learning about the legacy. So yeah, it makes more work because the but yeah, probably we it would be good if undergraduates knew about it and didn't find out.

Helen Knowler: You know, in the final year of my postgrad studies, I guess.

Yuncong:

Great. Okay. The next question is what has been the most rewarding aspect of being involved in this project?

Tor Wright: I think I can start on this one that, it's the positive reactions we've had from I'd basically say everybody, you know, we've met with the provost, we've met with teaching staff, with support staff, with EDI teams. There's no one rolling their eyes and being cynical about this. Everybody's been engaged. They want to support us. They want to support the work.

Tor Wright:

There's not really been a we should never talk about this, you know, sweep it under the carpet for this, you know, our dark history, I think that positivity has been refreshing. And to see it, across different faculties and areas, it's just been really rewarding.

Helen Knowler:

Yeah, for me, I've had some real moments of, like, real joy and, yes, moments in this project. And that's happened when I've seen students and staff collaborating together. So recently, we've attended some meetings where students have worked on changemakers projects and then reported to staff teams. And the next steps for those projects have been staff, teams and student teams agreeing to work together for curriculum change.

Helen Knowler:

So for me, that's been amazing to see the actual transformation of the curriculum. So we're confident that, you know, in coming years when the project has ended, the work to look at our curriculum and take seriously the idea that we have to address the legacy

that will continue. So for me is the power of staff. Student collaboration has been really great to see.

Yuncong:

Excellent. That's what I like about being involved in this project. How about you guys, Xiaoyan and Görkem? Anything and like any rewarding aspect of being involved in this project.

Xiaoyan: Well I think the rewarding aspect, of being involved in this project is, we can we've witnessed improvement in student engagement, especially in this kind of difficult topics as, we just discussed, we were working on three modules to enhance student, awareness of eugenics.

Xiaoyan: So in one module, we're trying to develop some innovative approaches to enhance student engagement during seminar sessions. And we are very happy to hear the, feedback from the ones that, course leads, that, students are very engaged in the seminar compared to the, past cohorts. So which means, the approaches we derive do have some positive impact on student engagement, so that I also think this not only has enhanced, the student engagement but in some way can also develop their critical thinking skills, let them to prepare to tackle other difficult or sensitive topics, through curriculum teaching.

Görkem: I would like to answer this question from a personal place. because when I started working for this project, I was very excited and I was telling my friends, like, I started a new project and its name, eugenics. And they were like, what is that? We never heard this. And because my friends, all my friends at UCL are from all over the world, I started talking about eugenics and they found it quite interesting and it made me more interesting person as well than my friend groups.

Görkem: that's why it was quite rewarding for me.

Yuncong:

Okay, that's a positive side. we've talk about impact a lot in this project. I mean, so far we have presented our research at a conference at King's College London, I think it was in April, and we have British Education Research Association annual conference booked in September. And I wonder, is there any other way you suggest we could reach to a wider audience?

Yuncong:

See, I mean, this podcast is one of the ways (to reach a wide audience) and I wonder you guys, if you have any suggestions, how can we like, promote our research?

Helen Knowler:

So I think, your ideas around working with younger pupils, I mean, that's definitely something that you guys have brought to our thinking. So to what extent do we want to sort of work with 16 to 18 year olds, maybe before they come to UCL? so I think that

would be one way to promote the kind of stuff that we're doing, so people can see the examples of the projects that we've done.

Helen Knowler:

I do think, there's probably something about working with the community, but I think that work might have to happen after our project has ended. But we do have a strand of our project next year where we are going to talk to community. So again, we can share these reflections. So something like the thing we're doing today is really important for people to understand our journey.

Helen Knowler:

I know that word is a bit people don't always like it, but it does show how we've developed and thought about practices.

Tor Wright:

I think it's also about looking at speaking to academics and teachers more about the work, because it's quite overwhelming to try and introduce something like this into a module. And we've got examples now from your projects where small, small changes have big impacts. And I think that's something that I could imagine as a busy academic, if I just have to change one activity and add one slide in the first instance, then that's something I can do and have a positive impact.

Tor Wright:

And it might also be we've started to let people know UCL, are quite privileged that we are a part of the, HE (Higher Education) fellowship process for academics and these this kind of work for academics can lead to, really great case studies for them in their fellowship applications. So bringing in how this work is not only good for the students, but for your own career as an academic, I think will have a positive impact because then you don't have to be, you know, a warrior who is determined to change the world.

Tor Wright:

You can just do small things that make little difference, that will bring it into people's lives. And I think that's kind of like having said before, that's going to have probably more lasting impact than a big demonstration. If we did something, you know, a one off event, I think hopefully that will have more long term impact on people's careers and the ways that they teach and what they teach about.

Görkem: in addition to what Tor and Helen said, I would like to say something more. Many areas within higher education have historical ties to problematic ideologies and practices. For example, colonial histories and their impact on various academic disciplines could also benefit from a similar approach. In that sense, I believe addressing these legacies openly and critically can help create a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape.

Yuncong:

Where do you think, Xiaoyan?

Xiaoyan: So, as we already did some, academic research dissemination throughout our conference. And we can also present at the British Education Research Association (BERA) in this, September. So I think we could also effectively probably leverage some social media or academic networking SITES to share what we, what we find from our projects and probably something relevant approaches.

Xiaoyan:

How do we teach, some controversial topics online to engage with a broader community, probably also, as we also find some, postgrad students they find is kind of, not a good timing for them to learn eugenics because their course a schedule is kind of intense.

So I think probably the whole summer webinars and workshops throughout undergrad to postgrad to attract students who are interested in these (topics), to let them to have some awareness regarding this issue.

Yuncong: Great point. Thanks, everyone, for being here today. it's, great opportunity for us to reflect on what we have done so far for our audience. If you would like to know more about research within ELEP team, please Google us. Bye.