

ICU Position on History Dialogue Next Steps

Proposer: Dr Lloyd James (President)

Seconders: Nathalie Podder (Deputy President (Welfare)), Calyste Revel (LGBTQ+ Officer), Grace Fisher (Working Class Officer), Lottie Barot (Mental Health Officer), Camilla Billari (Environment & Ethics Officer), Awais Seyyad (Disabilities Officer)

Union Notes:

1. The 'History Group' was commissioned by the Imperial College President's Board to "examine the history of the College through its links to the British Empire, and to report on the present understanding and reception of the College's legacy and heritage in the context of its present-day mission" [1].
2. The History Group produced a report [2] making a range of recommendations, identifying certain individuals who have been undercelebrated by the College, as well as others whose roles in history have been more problematic.
3. Most notably, the History Group recommended that the Beit building and the Huxley building be renamed, and that statues of Beit and Huxley be removed where possible.
4. In intervening months, the College has undertaken a 'dialogue' process in which the views of students, staff, and alumni have been sought in relation to the recommendations. A summary of views expressed in this dialogue process has been published [3].
5. On February 21st President's Board met to consider the feedback received and decide next steps. These steps, for which a 'History Working Group' has been established to oversee implementation, are [1]:
 - a. "We will find new ways to mark the impact and contributions of brilliant but undercelebrated Imperial people like Professor Abdus Salam, Dr Margaret Fishenden, and Dr Narinder Singh Kapany. This is long overdue, and we will continue to seek out new figures deserving of greater celebration and ways to make their contributions more widely known."
 - b. "We will consider a joint name for the Huxley Building, with the aim of adding the name of a pathbreaking scientist from a Black, Asian or other minority ethnic background."
 - c. "The name and bust of Huxley will be retained, but it will be clearly put into a fuller context in order to provide everyone with a more complete understanding of Huxley's complex character and achievements as well as his flaws, including his racially prejudiced writings."
 - d. "A similar approach will be adopted for the Beit Building and statue, with a focus on providing a fuller understanding of the Beit brothers' impact in southern Africa. The College will consult with students and explore whether to add an African scientist to the building's name."
 - e. "Contextualising narrative will also be developed for any co-named person."
6. The response from the College community to (5.a) has been entirely positive. However, the suggestion of double-barrelled building names has been met with some derision, with many commenters suggesting that this 'compromise' is worse than either renaming the building or leaving the name as is.
 - a. Past ICU President Abhijay Sood said: "...this proposal makes me and many other alumni to whom I've spoken extremely uncomfortable. This is a compromise that

will please no one... To me, the contradiction is almost unbearable. Can we really announce double-barrelled building names between the defenders and beneficiaries of empire and slavery and the victims of these institutions? Between inveterate racists and BAME academics? This marriage would be warped, and divorce preferable.”

- b. Imperial alumna Dr Madina Wade said: “I'm really confused about this "racist person + person of colour" approach. This doesn't address the racist legacies left behind, or continuing racial inequalities. Honestly it's a slap in the face that they wouldn't even consider naming it after a PoC alone.” [4]
 - c. Imperial alumnus Ansh Bhatnagar said: “Imperial's strategy to add a "joint name" of a token BAME scientist next to the names of racists, eugenicists and colonialists is as stupid as it is offensive.” [5]
7. Alfred Beit, after whom the Beit building is named, made significant donations to the College in its early years. His fortune derived principally from diamond and gold mining in South Africa, industries which were profoundly oppressive of their largely Black migrant labour force [2].

Union Believes:

1. That the enhanced recognition of undercelebrated scientists, detailed in (5.a), is an unambiguously positive step.
2. That as the primary occupier of the Beit building, Imperial College Union has a particular interest in ensuring that the name of the building is not offensive to the moral conscience of students.
3. That the College community may be *informed* about the historical actions, contributions and controversies of individuals without *celebrating* those individuals.
4. That the naming of a building after an individual does little to *inform* about an individual and much to *celebrate*.
5. That Alfred Beit does not deserve to be celebrated.
6. That double-barrelling the names of Huxley and Beit with those of BAME scientists is more offensive than either renaming the building or leaving the name as-is (with context).

Union Resolves:

1. To mandate the Union President to publish materials condemning the College’s decision to seek joint names for the Beit and Huxley buildings.
2. To mandate the Union President to request that President’s Board commit to change the name of the Beit Building to instead recognise one of the aforementioned ‘undercelebrated’ individuals.
 - a. If this is not agreed by President’s Board within a reasonable timeframe, to authorise a referendum of all students on the name of the building, with options including retention of the ‘Beit’ name along with alternatives chosen by Council.
 - b. If the referendum concludes that the name ought to be changed, to require the Union no longer recognise ‘Beit’ as the name of the building and to use the student-selected name in all official documentation and publicity, until such a time as this name is officially recognised by the College.
3. To mandate the Union President to work with the College to ascertain how the plaque commemorating Beit might be removed or altered.

- [1] <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/equality/activities/history-group/>
- [2] <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/administration-and-support-services/equality/public/history-group/History-Group-Report-2021---Version-2.pdf>
- [3] <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/administration-and-support-services/equality/public/history-group/History-Dialogue-Summary.pdf>
- [4] https://twitter.com/madina_immuno/status/1497581068098101253
- [5] https://twitter.com/AnshBhatnagar_/status/1497525600680095746