



# Addressing Classification System Bias in Higher Education Libraries in England

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**abstract:** This qualitative research study explores the ways that academic librarians in England undertake and perceive classification and cataloging work to engage in wider decolonization initiatives. The research consisted of semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis was used to identify key themes. The study found that the participant librarians highly value this work based on a perception of its moral importance, rather than concrete proof of impact. Benefits from a decolonization perspective were not always clear. Challenges include staffing shortages and technological limitations.

## Introduction

The ubiquity of the Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress classifications in libraries around the world belies the subjectivity under which they were created. Both systems were devised by late nineteenth and early twentieth century Americans who had, arguably, an agenda of preserving and promoting American interests.<sup>1</sup> The majority of academic libraries in the United Kingdom (UK) use either Dewey or Library of Congress, although other, more locally based systems do exist, which may contain their own inherent biases.

General criticism of bias in library classification systems began in earnest in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Decolonization, attempts to call out and dismantle colonial-era perspectives that remain in research and scholarship, is a major concern of critical librarianship, and the wider academy, in the UK. Addressing bias in classification systems forms an important, if little studied, part of this decolonization work. This research study aimed to discover the views of librarians undertaking this work and their perception of its value.

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## Bias in Classification Systems

All library classification systems represent how the culture that creates them structures its knowledge. Although both the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) and Library of Congress (LOC) systems are regularly updated, they have not changed fundamentally since their creation. Indeed, it would be impractical to completely overhaul systems that support the majority of the world's libraries. Because of the specific social, cultural,

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and political milieu in which they were created, and the needs of the collections they were originally designed to support, both systems have biases in terminology and structure. Over time, the lack of impartiality in classification has become a problematic historical remnant that persists today.<sup>3</sup> Sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and legal status are all areas where the classification has not kept pace

with society's values.<sup>4</sup> Libraries can respond to this bias in a number of ways, including making changes to their own local classification systems, petitioning the editorial boards of the classification systems for changes, and raising awareness among students, faculty, and staff that this bias exists.

## The UK Decolonization Movement

*Decolonization* is a contested term that has been used to cover a broad range of activity. In their book *Decolonising the University*, Gurminder Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial, and Kerem Nişancıoğlu define it as "a way of thinking about the world which takes colonialism, empire and racism . . . as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view."<sup>5</sup> The aim of this thinking is to counter the effects of these forces by making visible not only the bias itself but also the people and scholarship that this perspective has historically ignored. The calls for decolonizing UK education were amplified by the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, which began at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in 2015. Cecil Rhodes, a British imperialist and mining magnate, was a dominating force in the European colonization of southern Africa. The protest demanding removal of his statue from the university was later taken up at the University of Oxford, where Rhodes left a legacy in the form of the Rhodes Trust. The campaign continues its fight to decenter Whiteness and dismantle imperialist structures in UK higher education.<sup>6</sup>

Universities in the UK have responded to this call to action in many different ways, from staff and student diversity recruitment initiatives<sup>7</sup> to revising curricula<sup>8</sup> and running workshops on rethinking research methodologies.<sup>9</sup> One common practice in library decolonization specifically is to add to course reading lists more diverse authors, such as authors from the Global South, including Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>10</sup> Another practice is to address the ongoing presence of colonial knowledge structures in classification systems. Examples of this include outdated or offensive subject classifications<sup>11</sup> and classification structures that prioritize Western publications or that treat colonial territories, ethnic minorities, or non-Western perspectives as different, less important, or



less desirable.<sup>12</sup> Although perhaps not as visible as increasing diversity in reading lists, addressing classification bias represents a crucial effort toward dismantling the structures that uphold colonial-era knowledges and ways of looking at the world. This paper reports on research into the actions taken by academic libraries in England to respond to classification bias as part of a larger effort to address the ongoing effects of colonialism in higher education.

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### Literature Review

This literature review summarizes the existing research into classification bias and cataloging ethics, before examining the current state of diversity in UK academic libraries.

#### Classification Bias

The bias present in library classification systems, specifically the DDC and LOC systems, is covered extensively in the literature. This bias can take a variety of forms, from outdated or offensive terminology to exclusionary structures and “othering”—that is, treating people from other groups as different and generally inferior. This section summarizes research into bias, its history, and impact.

Melissa Adler has written extensively about the classification of sexuality and race.<sup>13</sup> She dissects how the foundations of both DDC and LOC built bias into classification, presenting the systems (erroneously) as the rational and objective result of the philosophical belief that all knowledge can be captured and organized. She goes on to demonstrate that their development coincided with a period of nation-building that required a commitment to the idea of American supremacy, which only added to their subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> Hope Olson says that this subjective focus might be acceptable in a single collection, but the imposed universality of these two major systems makes them especially problematic, and as Adler describes, an act of colonization.<sup>15</sup>

Olson goes beyond history to analyze how, regardless of its origin, a classification system is designed to exclude some groups and to give power to the people doing the classifying. Classification necessarily creates a “universality/diversity binary opposition.” She has written repeatedly about how the need to find books in a single location can lead to certain subjects or characteristics being prioritized over others.<sup>16</sup> Sara Howard and Steven Knowlton give examples of this in the Library of Congress through their analysis of classification within African American studies and LGBTQIA—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/transsexual, queer/questioning, intersex, and allied/asexual/aromantic—studies.<sup>17</sup>

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Other studies into classification bias include that of Paromita Biswas, who reviews the “East Indian” subject heading in LOC to discuss the “problematic vestiges of colonialism” that remain.<sup>18</sup> Another example is the video documentary *Change the Subject*, which depicts a public campaign by students at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, to change the Library of Congress subject heading “illegal aliens.”<sup>19</sup>

### How Librarians Have Responded to Bias

Accounts of interventions that libraries have made to address classification bias fall into two categories: (1) a practical approach, either through reclassification or revising subject headings in the catalog, and (2) a critical librarianship approach, which seeks not to eliminate bias but to educate students about its existence and how to operate within a biased system. This section surveys examples of both approaches.

Critical librarianship lies at the heart of library activism regarding both decolonization and classification bias. A blog post from the Association of College and Research Libraries summarizes the definitions of *critical librarianship* from several library and information services scholars. They broadly define it as acknowledging both the conscious and unconscious shoring up of systems of oppression in libraries, inviting both librarians and users to think critically about and challenge these systems.<sup>20</sup>

There appears to be consensus that it would be impossible to create a single, bias-free system that would be appropriate in all libraries. Earlier librarian activists, notably Sanford Berman, expressed the belief that working systematically through Library of Congress subject headings and making changes would fix the problem of classification bias. Even in the span of Berman’s own career, however, terms that would once have been an improvement themselves became problematic.<sup>21</sup> Rather than attempt to correct the entire system, Adler, Olson, and Jens-Erik Mai all advocate for local solutions, for finding the most meaningful changes for an individual library or community.<sup>22</sup>

Examples of this type of intervention include adding Indigenous terminology to the LOC records of the Archives of Manitoba in Canada; adding metadata descriptors in the native language of authors, in addition to the English-language record; combining sections of British, American, and postcolonial literature into a single section of contemporary English literature; removing “Cw” from class marks that referenced nations formerly of the British Commonwealth; and giving feedback to vendors providing shelf-ready resources about the presence of outdated or biased metadata.<sup>23</sup>

Other librarians see a critical, dialectical solution as more useful than a practical one. Emily Drabinski describes Berman’s pragmatic approach as limited. She views engaging in the act of reclassification or altering subject headings locally as participating in the same system of oppression—a performative activism done mostly for show that falls short of a real solution.<sup>24</sup> Instead, she advocates for a critical pedagogy approach—to teach students to think critically about the subjective nature of classification, rather than try to fix something that she believes fundamentally cannot be fixed. Examples of this in her own work include an application of queer theory to LOC subject headings and examinations of the colonial structures that underpin the LOC classification hierarchy.<sup>25</sup>

Examples of this critical pedagogy approach can also be found in the work of Howard and Knowlton, who advocate for creating interdisciplinary LibGuides to sup-



port researchers as they navigate the shortcomings of classification systems.<sup>26</sup> Marisa Elena Duarte and Miranda Belarde-Lewis, similarly, examine the possibilities of using Indigenous, community-based approaches to information to challenge the hegemony of traditional structures of knowledge. In the UK, Marilyn Clarke shares examples of how the library at Goldsmiths, University of London addresses classification bias through education, including creating and running “resistance researching” workshops.<sup>27</sup>

### **Ethics in Cataloging**

The value of cataloging and classification to students is clear—making resources accessible and easy to find. Beyond that, cataloging ethics and the value they can bring to an institution are also frequently discussed in the literature.

Gretchen Hoffman states that despite claims that cataloging focuses on the needs of users, the standards reflect little understanding of users’ requirements. Her research finds that the expectation falls on the individual cataloger to customize the bibliographic record, but they may be unaware of the needs of their users. Efficiency drives, including the move toward purchasing shelf-ready books from vendors, make customization at the local level increasingly difficult.<sup>28</sup>

A Cataloguing Code of Ethics was published in January 2021, created by and for catalogers in the UK, Canada, and the United States. Its mission statement expresses “a desire for the creation of a framework that provides guidance and examples of ethical dilemmas in our work in order to clarify best practices.”<sup>29</sup> The steering committee has begun to collect case studies that reflect the tenets of the new code, but it had published only four short examples as of March 2022.<sup>30</sup>

Cataloging ethics has been under discussion for some time. Jennifer Martin traces the conversation from the earliest developments of cataloging standards through an increased awareness of ethics that started in the 1970s and continues today. She concludes that the issues in cataloging ethics include “neutrality, inclusivity, self-determination, and privacy” and that ethical considerations should be applied by everyone working with library metadata.<sup>31</sup>

In 2020, Karen Snow and Beth Shoemaker explored how practitioners of cataloging define cataloging ethics. They found that definitions varied widely, and that in many cases practitioners’ definitions went beyond that of the American Library Association Code of Ethics in their discussion of the prevalence of bias throughout the cataloging process.<sup>32</sup>

## **The UK Academic Library Environment**

The ability of libraries to address classification bias could be affected by trends that have deprioritized cataloging, by a lack of diversity in the workforce, and by the increased need to measure impact and demonstrate value. This section reviews these factors.

### **The Shift to a Service Model**

Academic libraries in the UK are shifting priorities, with many moving from a collections focus to a service focus.<sup>33</sup> For some libraries, this means fewer resources and work hours given to cataloging. Michael Cerbo outlines the debate over the future of cataloging, as

budget constraints and non-catalog discovery tools compete with the increased information and technological demands required to create and maintain digital repositories that support institutional needs beyond the library catalog. Rachel Turner examined cataloging job advertisements from 2016 to 2018, however, and concluded that cataloging as a skill is still in demand. The study was limited in scope and did not examine the stability in the number of cataloging and metadata positions over time, but it does suggest that these skills are still required in libraries despite the shifting trends and priorities.<sup>34</sup>

### Diversity in Higher Education

Black and minority ethnic (BAME) student attainment in the UK falls below that of White students. In the 2017–2018 academic year, the gap between White and BAME students gaining a first-class or upper second-class degree was 13.2 percent, with their performance before entering university unable to explain this gap in attainment.<sup>35</sup> More broadly, correlation has also been found between library usage and student attainment in the United States and the UK.<sup>36</sup> BAME students also report feeling held back from academia by feeling unwelcome. For example, a survey conducted by the Oxford University Student Union's Campaign for Racial Awareness and Equality found that "59% of BME students felt 'uncomfortable/unwelcome' because of their race or ethnicity."<sup>37</sup>

In the book *Rhodes Must Fall: The Struggle for Justice at the Heart of Empire*, contributors discuss the experiences of BAME students at "monocultural" institutions such as Oxford. They stress the importance of higher education institutions listening to students, actively working against normalizing Whiteness, and making BAME students feel seen and represented by the institution.<sup>38</sup> The position of the library profession in responding to increased calls for diversity, inclusion, and social justice is problematized by the demographic makeup of its workforce. A 2015 survey found that 96.7 percent of the UK workforce in library, archive, and information management professions identify as White.<sup>39</sup> Black academics have expressed frustration and burnout at being expected to shoulder more of the burden of tackling inequality than their White colleagues.<sup>40</sup>

### The Need to Measure Impact

Jens-Erik Mai discusses the power of classification to marginalize, pointing out that the assumption that libraries are neutral, objective spaces only provides a cover for continued exclusion. Yet he also asks what the benefit of changing biased systems might be.<sup>41</sup>

In 2019, a conference took place at Cardiff Metropolitan University in Wales titled "Decolonising Library Collections and Practices: From Understanding to Impact." Many of the presentations from this conference indicate that this work has moved from the "understanding" (learning) to the "impact" (taking action) phase, but none of the conference speakers presented any data that gave an indication of the impact of their work.<sup>42</sup>

A 2019 survey of BAME librarians by the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) revealed feelings that discussing equality and diversity in libraries is lip service and that little or no meaningful action will come from it.<sup>43</sup> Mai points out that there will always be a tension between the conceptual criticism of classification and the need to have concrete solutions.<sup>44</sup>





## Literature Review Summary

Ample literature examines existing biases in library classification systems and their potential for harm. Many authors also offer examples of interventions that librarians can make to address bias. Little in the literature shows evidence of the impact of these interventions, however. The research findings and discussion presented in this paper will explore these gaps by focusing on UK libraries and investigating how they measure impact.

## Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research project was to investigate the perceived value of the work of academic librarians in the UK who have undertaken projects to address classification or cataloging bias as part of decolonization efforts within the university. Informed by the literature review, two research questions were developed to address this aim:

1. What different approaches are UK academic libraries taking to address classification bias in the context of decolonization? What are the benefits and challenges of the different approaches?
2. How is work on classification bias perceived within UK academic libraries, in the wider context of decolonization work?

The subsequent objectives of the research were as follows:

- To investigate the experiences of UK academic librarians of decolonization work in the context of classification and cataloging;
- To explore the value of cataloging and classification decolonization interventions from the perspectives of the librarians; and
- To understand if and how the impact of library-driven interventions is measured.

## Method

### Research Approach

Because the experiences of academic librarians were required to inform this research, a qualitative method was chosen. This was primarily because of the need to gather data on participants' perceived impact of the work they did and their feelings and opinions about the work and its value. The approach was grounded within an interpretivist paradigm which encompasses the concept that "realities are multiple, constructed and holistic," that they are embedded in context, and, in the case of qualitative research, that results are shaped by the interaction between researcher and subject.<sup>45</sup>

The chosen data collection method was that of semi-structured interviews, conducted individually so that participants could respond honestly and not feel observed by colleagues or others in the same field. The aim was to draw out their individual experiences as well as their personal reactions to and beliefs about the work. It allowed the participants to discuss their experience in their own words, without the need to focus on positive outcomes.



## Sampling

The participant sample needed to be purposive, in that subjects had to work at an academic library or archive in the UK and have some involvement in a project that addressed classification and cataloging bias in the context of decolonization. Information professionals who had undertaken wider decolonization efforts in libraries not related to cataloging and classification were excluded, as were librarians from institutions not connected in some way to higher education. There were no restrictions on the role or professional level of the participant nor on the nature of the intervention, if they met the basic criteria described.

Homogeneity among participants was not required beyond meeting the basic research criteria. Neither was heterogeneity of participants specifically sought.<sup>46</sup> The goal was to elicit the individual perceptions of the librarians and not to draw any general conclusions about their demographic group.

Many librarians engaged in this work have shared their experiences via blogs, conference presentations, library websites, and published articles. Therefore, a search of these relevant resources was undertaken to identify potential interviewees. The project was designed to explore how UK universities specifically address decolonization of their classification and cataloging. Librarians from all four UK nations (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) were contacted.

Although the project was planned as an investigation into the work of UK librarians, all the respondents worked in England, so there was no representation from Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland. Each of those nations has their own relationship to British colonialism and therefore would potentially have unique insights into how they address bias in their libraries. Such insights did not form part of the results of this research.

## Sample Size

The sample size was carefully considered to determine a number that would provide a robust amount of data but not be impractical to manage. The aim was to interview 7 to 10 people, enough to gather data on a broad spectrum of experiences while ensuring that the data fit within the scope of a small research project and limited time frame.<sup>47</sup>

## Sourcing

Contact was made by e-mailing people directly to describe the project and invite them to be interviewed. This yielded three participants. Snowball sampling, in which people who had been contacted recommended others, produced another four. Convenience sampling was employed because specific individuals were not sought—anyone who met the criteria for the research was a potential subject.

To ensure finding sufficient participants, a broader sampling technique was also used. A request for interviews was sent to the mailing list of the LIS-DECOLONISE discussion group via JiscMail, which hosts e-mail lists for people in education and research in the UK. A call for interviews was also included in the July 2021 newsletter of the Community, Diversity and Equality special interest group of the Chartered Institute for Library and Information Professionals. These interventions yielded another three participants,



bringing the total to 10. The research sample consisted mainly of librarians from higher education institutions. One participant (Participant 2) is employed by a heritage library that hosts university researchers. Participant 5 is an archivist within the special collections team at a university. Within libraries, there was a range of roles represented, from assistant librarian to library director. See Table 1 for the list of interviewees.

### Data Collection

Once initial contact had been made, there was a discussion to determine if the work of the potential interviewee was appropriate for the research objectives. A total of 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted online during June and July 2021, with librarians from nine different libraries. The need to conduct the interviews online was the result of COVID-19 restrictions and not related to the specific aims for data collection.

Interviews took place over Google Meet video conferencing. One interview (Participant 2) was conducted with audio only. Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. Google Meet was used to record the audio and video. A secondary audio recording was taken on an iPhone. Google Meet captions were captured via the Tactiq Chrome

**Table 1.**  
Participants' job titles and places of employment

Participant	Job title	Institution description*
Participant 1	Special collections librarian	Midsized public research university
Participant 2	Solo librarian	Heritage library and reading room
Participant 3	Subject librarian	Small public research university
Participant 4	Senior library assistant	Specialist research institute attached to an academic department in a large university
Participant 5	Archivist	Midsized public research university
Participant 6	Subject librarian	Small public research university
Participant 7	Subject librarian	Large public research university
Participant 8	Metadata and open access librarian	Large Russell Group university
Participant 9	Assistant librarian	Private higher education institution
Participant 10	Library director	Small public research university

\*A small university has a student population of 5,000 or less, a midsized university has 5,000 to 20,000 students, and a large university over 20,000. The heritage library is based in an English historic site and supports researchers working in areas related to the site. The Russell Group is an association of 24 research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom (<https://russellgroup.ac.uk>).

extension, which formed the basis of the transcripts (<https://tactiq.io/>). The reviewer listened to the recordings and corrected any errors to create the transcripts. Transcripts were anonymized to remove the names of individuals and institutions and other identifying information.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts to uncover important themes in the data, rather than to develop new theory. Importance can be judged by the number of occurrences of the theme in the data set, as well as the judgment of the researcher.<sup>48</sup>

The interviews were analyzed for key themes using a constant comparative approach, in which the newly collected data were compared with data collected in one or more earlier studies. This approach was designed for working with large amounts of descriptive data. The data are compared to “develop conceptualizations of the possible relations between them.”<sup>49</sup> The categories or themes thus develop from the data gathered. Continuous comparison was used to code the data, following a three-step process described by Alison Jane Pickard:

1. Open coding—in which categories are identified;
2. Axial coding—in which links are made between categories and subcategories; and
3. Selective coding—in which the themes are further refined.<sup>50</sup>

Coding began after the first interview, noting categories that emerged from the conversation. Each subsequent interview provided an opportunity to revisit and expand the categories. Analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached and no new insights were emerging from the data. Coding was conducted and managed using NVivo software (Nvivo for Mac, Release 1.5).

### Data Presentation

The data from this project are presented in the next section in the form of anonymized quotations from the interviewees (numbered from 1 to 10; see Table 1).

### Findings

Research question 1 asked, “What different approaches are UK academic libraries taking to address classification bias in the context of decolonization? What are the benefits and challenges of the different approaches?”

#### Inspiration and Motivation for the Work

The approach taken by the interviewees was shaped by the motivations for undertaking the work. The impetus to work on classification bias came from a variety of sources. Several participants mentioned that student activism was a motivation, with one librarian giving an example of students specifically asking the library to reclassify, not just address decolonization generally:

Probably three or four years ago, there was a very public open letter to the English faculty, which basically directly implicated the library and library classification in their calls to decolonize. So, they were saying, why is the postcolonial literature separate from the rest of English literature and down in the basement away from the rest of the runs? And so one of their demands was to reclassify.

Participant 4

For others, the decision to look into classification bias came from their own perception of their collections:

We both kind of opened up the existing catalog, saw all of this, you know, all of these racist slurs, absolutely nothing to kind of quantify or explain. And we were like, OK, yeah. We need to do our best here.

Participant 5

It just seemed old-fashioned to me, really. I'm not sure it was actually causing any problems or any issues for any library users, but it just seemed like, just wrong, really.

Participant 9

Conversations with colleagues also served as inspiration to examine classification and cataloging practices. Multiple participants mentioned the influence of the documentary *Change the Subject*, about the student campaign to change the Library of Congress subject heading "illegal aliens."<sup>51</sup> Examples included the statements of two interviewees:

Some of my colleagues there had been following what was happening in the United States with all that controversy about the subject heading "illegal aliens". . . Anyway, we looked at our catalogs and, lo and behold, we had that subject heading. So, we all decided to change it.

Participant 8

The obvious one was illegal aliens, because a lot of us went to the premiere of *Change the Subject*, and those of us that were there kind of agreed that this is something that we should change.

Participant 3

### Types of Intervention

Participants took a variety of approaches to address classification and cataloging bias. Some chose physical reclassifications, while others focused on updating subject headings and raising student awareness of the existence of bias.

#### *Reclassification*

One interviewee (Participant 7) removed the "Postcolonial" subcategory in the literature section, while another (Participant 9) chose to divide the classification for Africa and Latin America into subsections for individual countries. They also reclassified to remove Western European bias:

Originally, if a book was about European art, it would be in a book called Art in General. And if it was about Asian art, it would be in a section called Asian Art. If it was about



Italian art, it would be in a section called Italian Art. So, the main change was that the European art and the Western art got moved into geographical sections.

Participant 9

For one librarian, a plan to just revise subject headings turned into a full reclassification project:

She said, well, this is offensive too. Are we going to change these? And she kind of picked up the ball and started running with it, and got back to me with a spreadsheet of suggested new call numbers. And I thought, well, she's already done the work, so we'll change the subject headings and the call numbers this time.

Participant 8

### *Revising Subject Headings*

For others, the priority was changing the subject headings rather than the call numbers or locations of the books:

But the cataloging I mean, I think that's probably a good place to start because it's something visible to the world, where we should start chipping away at things.

Participant 6

It's not actually for shelf location, it's to make sure that the online browsing functionality for the whole library, that our material slips into it, so that people could do digital browsing and our stuff will just pop up.

Participant 1

### *Awareness Raising*

For others, the goal was to encourage critical reflection on classification bias. One participant ran a workshop looking at offensive subject headings in their collection, with the goal of then updating those records. Another participant shared that their library intended to retain the existing subject headings (alongside updated terminology) for their educational value.

### **Approaches to the Work**

Some common threads in how to approach the work appeared across different types of intervention. While several participants mentioned that planning was important and advised other librarians to set aside enough time for it, one participant acknowledged a sense of frustration in trying to get it right:

At the moment, there's no book written about it, which I think, as librarians, we struggle that there's not a book to go to that's, like, the Holy Grail of what we're meant to do, because we like standards and rules . . . It still feels all kind of a bit like, oh, what's the right thing to do? And everyone's absolutely terrified of making a mistake. But I think my advice would be that . . . if you make a mistake, you just own it and be just, like, we're trying. I think people just respect that.

Participant 1



Several people mentioned the importance of involving students, particularly BAME students. Multiple people acknowledged the lack of diversity in library staff and encouraged seeking input from diverse communities, while not taking their participation for granted:

If you are a predominantly White [institution], which we are, engage with students and academics of color who want to be involved and want to give you advice, and actually listen to them, don't pay lip service to them.

Participant 1

Paying Indigenous people for their expertise in re-envisaging what the classification scheme could be. Otherwise, we're working with just our bias—like, we're all White in the library. We're working with our own biased perspective to reclassify.

Participant 4

We were very conscious coming into it that we were neither American nor African, and we wanted to do our best to kind of reflect those communities and reflect how they would think about themselves and, where possible, try and let those organizations lead.

Participant 5

## Benefits and Challenges

### *Benefits*

Many of the interviews expressed that this work is part of the overall role of librarian as service provider. Participant 2 explained, "Because you're not just doing that for yourself. It's always for readers. It's always for others, it's the whole ethos of libraries."

The benefits of the reclassification work were both practical, in making resources easier to find, and educational, in incorporating awareness of bias into the information literacy taught to students. For one researcher, running workshops on classification bias combined all the benefits, while also giving the librarians guidance about how to proceed with future reclassification work:

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Democratizing that process and bringing it to students as well was so valuable. We learned a lot from them, and I think they got a real sense of the library in quite a different light . . . We asked for their feedback and quite a lot of them said, you know, I didn't even know about subject headings, now I'm going to use them. So, on just like a core kind of information literacy level, it was really useful for them, but also in terms of, like, you know, if I'm searching for this stuff, I might not be able to just use the terminology that I know is appropriate. Because in the library, they're using different terminology that is historical or used in a different context or whatever. And actually, their search strategies need to reflect the systems that they're working with, if that makes sense.

Participant 4



### Challenges

Capacity of staff was regarded as the biggest challenge, especially a lack of dedicated cataloging librarians who could devote themselves more fully to reclassification work. Two participants summed it up as follows:

None of us are solely cataloging or anything . . . it's just one thing amongst everything else that we're doing. So yeah, it is hard with a small team . . . Because I think actually, if you had a team of dedicated catalogers, it would be quite easy to say to them, this is part of your job now . . . But when cataloging is maybe 10 percent of your time, to then make a whole project that's going to take thousands of hours is quite a big thing.

Participant 4

I'm really overworked, and I make time for this project because it's something I'm passionate about. I know not everyone else is and they've got a million other things to do, and this is not the right time, but I think this is probably what a lot of libraries are coming up against, when trying to do projects like this.

Participant 3

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Similarly, the capacity and capability of the available technology proved problematic. The capabilities of the library management system had a sizable impact on the feasibility of subject heading revisions. For one librarian, the limitations of their system meant that plans to revise subject headings had to be abandoned in favor of other decolonizing work:

We changed to a new LMS, library management system, in 2014, I think. Which—it was open source and no one else uses it basically, and it's extremely user unfriendly . . . One of our goals when we started the group . . . [was] to change just five subject headings, as a pilot, not all of them, just five of them, which seemed manageable at the time. But then we found out that we can't do global edits automatically . . . so then it kind of went on the back burner. And it's still something that kind of annoys me at the back of my mind, that this was the original thing that I thought would be easy and that really needed to be done, and it just hasn't happened.

Participant 3

For librarians with different systems, however, the technology was a help, not a hindrance:

I didn't really get around to changing "illegal aliens" to "undocumented persons" until the summer. But I just ran a batch job on the library management system and then changed it. And that was that really. Job done. It only took a day . . . And we check periodically that no new instances of that have happened. And if they have, then we run the same job.

Participant 8





## The Value of Their Work

Research question 2 asked, “How is work on classification bias perceived within UK academic libraries, in the wider context of decolonization work?” All participants viewed the action they took to address classification bias as beneficial, but several expressed doubt that this value was perceived by students or even by other librarians. One interviewee, Participant 4, was reluctant to give her work undue importance, saying, “I don’t want to kind of elevate what I’ve been doing with my colleague into the status as like a ‘project.’ I think that’s almost like too . . . yeah, it’s kind of bigging it up too much.”

Another participant felt that in her workplace, there was a sense that addressing bias and thinking about decolonization was not something all library staff should concern themselves with:

I get the feeling people think this isn’t common, this is not for everybody. This is for the subject librarian. This is for high up. And I think that we shouldn’t have that attitude. It should be, you know, immersed in everybody’s work, day in and day out.

Participant 6

While participants found reclassification work valuable, they were unsure if that value was perceived by nonlibrarians:

We didn’t change the call numbers on those items then because we thought that it was only the subject heading that was offensive. And to be quite honest, having worked in university libraries for a while, it’s only catalogers and people who classify who understand how the class marks are derived.

Participant 8

Classification is so . . . it’s like a behind-the-scenes thing. And I think that’s the reason why it gets so much less attention than stuff like reading list changes. And, you know, decolonizing the collections, which are kind of much more visible, high-profile elements of this kind of work—reclassification basically just is like a lot of time and effort. You’ve really got to want to do it, I think. Which is also why we’ve kind of stumbled a bit. Because it’s very labor-intensive.

Participant 4

## Support by Management

All participants felt supported by their library managers to do this work, describing the attitudes of managers as “open-minded and appreciative” (Participant 7), “positively disposed” (Participant 8), “great” (Participant 2), and “keen” (Participant 1). Some managers went beyond personal support to recognize the work more formally through establishing operational groups and working groups to ensure that the decolonization work was sustained.

For one interviewee, Participant 10, acceptance by management was crucial to proceed with the work and for it to gain traction in the institution more widely. That

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person said, “I don’t know if you could have that impact without the support when it comes to the hierarchies that we work in . . . That is really key [to] have that leadership behind the work.”

Support from management did not extend, however, to work hours, additional staffing support, or funding for work on classification bias and decolonization. Two participants (1 and 5) were each hired onto short-term projects to catalog a collection that was previously uncataloged, which meant that decolonizing efforts were rolled into their work from the outset of these cataloging projects. For the rest of the participants, decolonizing the library was treated as a side project to fit in around their main responsibilities.

I proposed it to my line manager. His only concern was time management. He said, well, if you manage to fit it in with all your other duties, I see no problem with this. And I then reassured him and said, yeah, I can, I can fit it in.

Participant 2

Even the director of a university library with a high-profile decolonization platform defines this work as an addition to standard librarian duties:

I mean, you know, it’s whatever time they can devote to it. If it’s not possible, then it’s not possible . . . Because we’re not really in that kind of luxury of, you know, you can spend four hours a week on this particular area. It is more like trying to do that work as and when as part of their day-to-day job.

Participant 10

### Measuring Impact

Most evidence of the impact of these projects was anecdotal. It was also largely positive—no participants mentioned any negative feedback.

In instances where there was believed to be tangible impact (for example, increased circulation of the reclassified books), no data had been collected to back up such beliefs, although a few participants expressed an interest in pursuing such data in the future. The participant who had run the workshop asking students to critique their subject headings did include a survey in which students gave positive feedback and said they learned a lot about bias as well as classification and cataloging generally.

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**Students gave positive feedback and said they learned a lot about bias as well as classification and cataloging generally.**

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One participant shared an example of a change that had taken place among the faculty as a result of the library’s work, but this was an outcome of library liberation work more widely and not a specific example of addressing classification bias:

We arranged meetings with all heads of academic departments or heads of learning and teaching committees in academic departments to talk about what we were doing in the libraries, of our decolonization work, and also to find out what they were doing and how we could then, you know, work in partnership or share our knowledge to connect.



It was very much a mixed bag, some were quite advanced in the work, some were at the very beginning . . . But after a few occasions, when meeting with the library, they did then go on and create their groups. So, that was really great, to know that we had that kind of impact.

Participant 10

The themes in this section moved beyond the nature of addressing classification bias to consider how the participants viewed their own work, as well as how they felt this work was seen by others. Interviewing these participants about their experiences allowed for an exploration of their feelings about the work, beyond merely recounting what they had done. The implications of these results are discussed in the next section.

## Discussion

### Inspiration and Motivation

Having student activism inspire this work and recognizing the importance of involving students in this work reflects the general trends in this area of librarianship. Such trends are seen in the *Change the Subject* documentary and in the suggestions from Mai and Olson, who advocate for finding solutions that are most meaningful for the community the library serves.<sup>52</sup> They also reflect the origins of decolonization in the UK and the current need in university libraries to prioritize student feedback.

### Approaches to the Work

The participants who chose more student-facing interventions, such as workshops and awareness-raising activities, reflect the accepted concept that bias will always be present in classification, and critical pedagogy is preferable to attempts to “fix” that bias.<sup>53</sup> For the participants who chose physical reclassification projects, the benefits were clear but were not entirely focused on critical librarianship and information literacy. The advantages also included improving discovery generally and making cataloging easier, which suggests decolonization was not the sole motivator for those projects.

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**Bias will always be present in classification, and critical pedagogy is preferable to attempts to “fix” that bias.**

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### Benefits and Challenges

While no one doubted the benefits of this work, the challenges were numerous. The best approach for tackling classification bias will depend on a number of factors, and libraries will have to evaluate the nature of their collection, the level of outreach or teaching they can do, their IT and network infrastructure, and what they can achieve with the staff they have. What works will be different for every library, and likewise decolonization will take different forms depending on the collections held by the university.

Rather than a clear delineation between the benefits and challenges, some of the areas raised by participants—such as technology—were regarded as benefits by some participants and as challenges by others. This difference again highlights the contextual

nature of these projects and that there can be no “one size fits all” model to addressing classification bias.

The current UK academic library environment, in which budgets are tight, cataloging staff numbers are declining, and focus is moving elsewhere, makes it increasingly

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**There can be no “one size fits all” model to addressing classification bias.**

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difficult for libraries to take on these potentially large-scale projects. But as several participants suggested, such efforts may eventually be rolled into standard operating procedure for libraries and therefore will not require specialist interventions that are seen to be taking time away from other tasks. The outsized role that technology

played in helping or hindering these projects also suggests that, with the right technical solutions in place, this work might be easier and could be rolled into existing workloads without requiring significant staff time. This use of technology would likely apply more to updating subject headings (and therefore online discovery) than to updating physical class marks, but the data suggest that subject heading interventions were seen as more meaningful and more visible than class marks to library users.

The topic of diversity within library staff did arise but was not described particularly as a challenge in the interviews. Participants who brought up the fact that they were White did so within the context of acknowledging that they did not want to be viewed as an

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**It is important that White librarians do not shy away from taking on this work, to avoid putting increased pressure on their Black and minority ethnic colleagues.**

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authority on how to tackle bias, stating the importance of seeking advice from BAME communities. As raised in the literature review, it is important that White librarians do not shy away from taking on this work, to avoid putting increased pressure on their Black and minority ethnic colleagues.<sup>54</sup> Participant 4 expressed an interest in paying Indigenous community members to consult on their classification scheme, but that was only a wish for the future.

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**The Value of Their Work**

Despite having a sense of the importance of decolonization and the presence of bias in classification systems, the language of the participants suggested a reluctance to assign too much value to their work or to think that it should matter to anyone not working in cataloging. This raises the question of why they felt the need to do this work and could also explain why little effort went into formally monitoring its impact.

**Feeling Supported by Management**

Support and encouragement by their managers was acknowledged across all the interviews, but the participants perceived such support as almost exclusively emotional. For most, it did not result in any tangible assistance. The idea that librarians are encouraged to take on work beyond their normal responsibilities, yet still feel supported by their managers, is a concept that warrants further study.



### How Can the Impact of This Work Be Measured?

Finding examples of the ways that libraries record the impact of addressing classification bias was a key objective in this project. Library work outputs and outcomes are often measured or monitored to demonstrate the value and impact of such work. There was a consensus, however, that this work addressing classification bias did not necessarily need to be monitored, possibly because it was regarded as “the right thing to do” and because universities are under scrutiny to take action on decolonization in as many ways as possible. In most cases, no additional resource was given to the library for the work, which could be another reason why justification of such work through monitoring was not required—it did not draw funds or staff away from other library functions. This finding contrasted with the literature review, which suggested that libraries are under more pressure to gather and respond to student feedback and demonstrate the value of their services. The view of some participants that students neither notice nor care about cataloging and classification suggests a reason for libraries not being concerned about student feedback in this area. If, however, libraries take the time to address decolonization of their catalog, then it could be argued that the onus is on them to educate students about the significance and value of these changes and to demonstrate their commitment to decolonization and to the information literacy of their users.

### Conclusion

Classification bias may be less visible than the ethnic diversity of the workforce or the curriculum, but its role in controlling access to information and knowledge makes it both a metaphor for colonization, and, in the global dominance of Dewey and Library of Congress classification, an act of colonization itself. By addressing this, UK libraries show they are willing to engage with dismantling structures that, intentionally or not, perpetuate inequality in UK universities and contribute to an unwelcoming environment for BAME students. Actions to dismantle a pervasive culture make it progressively easier for people to speak up and for change to happen. By sharing their experiences, the participants in this research give more visibility to this frequently unseen but important area of work.

The themes that emerged in the interviews suggest a disconnect between the moral value of addressing classification bias and the value assigned to the actual day-to-day, time-consuming act of reclassifying. The results of these interviews suggest that the participants are unwilling or unable to attribute a level of importance to this work that reflects their feelings about its outcomes.

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