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# Supporting decolonial futures:

Exploring the impact of the Museums  
Association's Decolonisation  
Confidence and Skills Programme

Final summary report 2024

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The **Museums Association** (MA) would like to begin this introduction by acknowledging the work to address the legacy of empire in museums that has been undertaken by dedicated and tenacious individuals over many decades. If it wasn't for the efforts of these individuals, who have often had to battle against the odds to highlight impact of empire and what it means for contemporary audiences and to seek redress, it would have been impossible for us to understand what needs to be done and for us to attempt to support their efforts.

Our work to create guidance on decolonisation and to support museums to address the legacy of empire, including racism, is a small contribution to the work that has taken place in the UK and internationally. With support from an expert working group we published the [Supporting Decolonisation in Museums](#) guidance in 2021 and subsequently launched [online training modules](#) on anti-racism and decolonisation, and developed the [Decolonisation Confidence and Skills programme](#).

Over the past few years we have seen a willingness among museum workers to engage with decolonisation and anti-racism; and we know that making the links between collections and systems of empire can open new ways of thinking and connecting with communities. But we also know that the work can be patchy, sometimes only skims the surface of the deep thinking and rigorous work that needs to be done, and if done badly can cause harm.

At the MA, as an organisation that was founded at the end of the 19th century, we have had to acknowledge that we are as much of a product of empire as the museums we represent. Museums have historically been at the forefront of colonial knowledge production and the ordering of the world and its peoples, and that inevitably rubs off on the MA and our ways of thinking and operating.

This evaluation highlights the need for a transparent and critical approach to our work and our support for the sector, and that means being honest about what worked, what didn't and how we will learn from that.

As we emerged from the pandemic we were keen to urgently address anti-racism and decolonisation, however this led to short-term thinking and a lack of consistency at critical times for delivery in the programme. There has also been a failure to acknowledge those that have been doing this work for many years; that the work must be rigorous and embedded, that research is vital; and that systemic barriers to meaningful decolonisation still exist.

With support and challenge from the programme participants and this evaluation we are now taking responsibility to respond to these challenges and to reflect, learn and improve.

*Our commitment:*

We are working with funders on a second iteration of the Decolonisation programme which will learn from this evaluation and that we hope will provide: networking and peer support for people of colour who feel isolated or burdened by decolonising work; recognition and application of decolonisation research, especially those voices that have been overlooked; professional development that supports gaining foundational knowledge and skills to move beyond tokenism; and advocacy to funders and policymakers to embed decolonising principles in all areas of museum activity.

Our immediate commitment is to:

- establish an anti-racism and decolonisation steering group which will have strategic oversight of our activity in this area
- launch our core-funded pilot anti-racist museum programme which we hope will foster deep reflection and make real change at organisational level
- update our online learning courses to incorporate content reflecting the contemporary concerns about anti-Muslim bigotry and anti-Semitism generated by the Israel-Palestine war
- embed anti-racism and decolonisation in the review of the Code of Ethics.

We want to create a supportive environment in which people and organisations, including the MA, have room to grow, be honest, learn, reflect, challenge and improve. Decolonisation in museums is full of tensions and complexities that require detailed and thoughtful research and patience and we are committed to supporting and delivering this work.

We would like to acknowledge and pay tribute to all of those who have been doing this work for many years and in particular to Roshi Naidoo, who patiently shared her knowledge, experience and challenge as programme lead; to all members of the working group that produced the Supporting Decolonisation in Museums guidance and the steering group that oversaw the programme; and to all participants who shared experience, insight and feedback.

Finally thanks to Katy Bunning, whose constructive approach to evaluation helped to improve the programme as it developed, as well as giving the insight shared here.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

For decades, activists within and beyond museums have drawn on the concept of decolonisation to call for deep, structural change in institutions shaped by the legacies of European colonialism (Lonetree 2012; Ariese and Wróblewska 2022; Wintle 2013). Over the last ten years, calls to decolonise have garnered new critical attention in museums and heritage organisations in the UK (Giblin, Ramos and Grout 2019; Van Broekhoven 2019). New initiatives, scholarship, and critical debates across the UK sector have surfaced in recent years.

Addressing colonial histories as part of an anti-racism directive has been a key feature of the Welsh Government's Anti-Racist Wales plan of 2020. A range of legacy-focused and community-centred decolonising projects have developed in Wales, together with development work to increase confidence and capacity within the museum and heritage sector. Meanwhile, the Scottish Government accepted the recommendations, published in 2022, from the Empire, Slavery and Scotland's Museums Steering Group, which included the need for colonial histories and anti-racism to be addressed within Scotland's museums. In Northern Ireland, extended periods of political instability with no Executive have hampered meaningful progress, but with support from the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund a recent project has helped to inform new decolonisation guidance (2024) specifically for the Northern Ireland museum sector. As across the nations, many English museums have welcomed decolonisation projects locally, yet increasingly have positioned this work under different umbrellas, due in part to a notable lack of central Government support for the work, and in some cases, direct hostility towards it. Nevertheless, the imperative to support the decolonising of museums has become a key campaign for the UK's Museums Association (MA). To meet the growing engagement and identified lack of experience and confidence in the work, the MA convened a Decolonisation Guidance Working Group that created sector-level guidance, and embarked on a new learning programme to build skills and confidence in this area.

To support learning from the process, the MA commissioned the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) to undertake a 12-month research and evaluation project to explore experiences of the MA's Decolonisation Confidence and Skills Programme, which ran for the first time during 2022-2023. The intention of the research - entitled 'Supporting Decolonial Futures: Exploring the impact of the Museums Association's Decolonisation Confidence and Skills Programme' - was to support the MA in developing future iterations of the Programme, and to offer insights into the experiences and needs of Programme participants in leading and supporting the work in the sector.

This report, authored by Dr. Katy Bunning from the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester, offers a summary of key findings and recommendations for the MA and other sector bodies to support the development of decolonial practices in the museum and heritage sectors. These findings draw principally on the experiences of Programme participants.

## 1.1 About the Decolonisation Confidence and Skills Programme

The Museums Association's 'Decolonisation Confidence and Skills Programme' was an 18-month project with £90,000 of funding from Paul Hamlyn Foundation, John Ellerman Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Art Fund. The launch of this Programme followed the publication of the MA's 'Supporting Decolonisation in Museums' guidance in November 2021. The Programme aimed to support the use of this sector-level guidance and empower a group of museum workers to develop their decolonising practice. The ambition was to empower them to begin, or further develop, efforts to decolonise their museums. A part-time post was established to create and lead the programme for its duration, and a Steering Group was established in June 2022 to offer advice, guidance and support to those delivering the Programme.

The Programme set out to achieve three key outcomes:

- The Supporting Decolonisation in Museums guidance is widely disseminated and understood by workers in different job roles and levels, paid and unpaid.
- The Supporting Decolonisation in Museums guidance is applied by a range of scale and type of museums across the UK in their own practice.
- Decolonisation work is embedded in UK museum professional development and active networks promote and support decolonisation.

The Programme team sought to deliver the key outcomes of the project by:

- Delivering a new online learning module on Decolonisation as part of the MA's trusted Museum Essentials suite of online learning resources
- The creation of a Decolonisation Collective cohort of c. 45 people from across the sector who were beginning their decolonisation journey and seeking to develop their confidence and skills through talks and peer-to-peer learning. This included a series of online talks and workshops during the period October 2022 – September 2023.
- The creation of a Decolonisation Leaders' Network of 20-25 people who were already leading work on decolonisation in the museum sector, and who could create a platform for further advocacy and influence for decolonising practice within the sector. This included three in-person events across the UK during the period October 2022-September 2023.

Alongside internal evaluation, the MA commissioned the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG), University of Leicester, to undertake a small research project to understand the impact of the Programme as it unfolded, and to feed back the learning towards future iterations of the Programme. Emerging findings and themes were presented to the MA in March 2023 and September 2023, and offered an opportunity to review the Programme with funders and stakeholders.

## 1.2 Approach to the research

The research project sought to evaluate and assess the impact of the Programme, drawing in insights from the literature and comparator programmes. The project had three main questions:

1. *Individual experiences of the Programme* – what has been the impact of the Programme for individuals in the networks?
2. *Collective learning* – what insights around decolonisation has the Programme surfaced or generated?
3. *Sector action and next steps* – what learning can be drawn from these experiences and insights that sector bodies and funders can take forward?

Research activities took place from November 2022 to September 2023 and included desk-based and literature review work, analysis of pre-Programme survey data, observation of five workshops with the Collective, event evaluation, 13 semi-structured interviews with members of the Collective (n=8), and Leader's Network (n=5), and conversations with MA staff and steering group members. All research activities were subject to University of Leicester ethics approval.

It must be noted that this report is based on the insights generated through a relatively small-scale research project. As such the findings cannot claim to be exhaustive or representative of the views of all those involved, and should be understood within the context of a range of feedback from participants and others provided to the MA. Participants in the research were from a variety of different museums working with differing levels of organisational support for decolonising practices. They had different levels of confidence and previous experiences of decolonising work. They included people from each of the four nations of the UK, but the vast majority were based in museums and heritage organisations in England. This will have affected the overall findings.

## 2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The key findings were as follows:

- Overall, the research found that the experiences of the Programme were highly mixed. A time-limited programme designed to empower individuals to take decolonisation work forwards locally within their museums was ultimately unable to fully live up to its aims, and the need for more dedicated resource to deliver the programme became clear.
- It was clear through the research interviews that many participants welcomed the opportunity to learn more about decolonial ideas and practices, to network, and to gain access to new resources to support their thinking and practice.
- The online course was a particular strength of the Programme and was highly valued by participants.
- Participants in the Programme wanted more peer-to-peer opportunities for sharing and support that they could bring their own experiences and challenges to. They wanted to problem-solve together, and to be held accountable.
- In order to build confidence, participants wanted decolonisation work to be more collectively owned and championed in their workplaces, and wanted more visibility of the work across the sector. Recognising their individual, often isolated, roles as emerging or established leaders, participants wanted help with how to advocate for others in their workplaces to engage with the work, and do this work more deeply across all teams.
- Sector agencies and funders were asked to recognise the size and depth of the work involved, understand and advocate for the work more fully and visibly as an ethical imperative, and resource it over the longer term.

A number of recommendations emerged from the research towards developing a more effective professional development programme in decolonising museums:

- Resource the Programme more fully, and ensure there is sufficient capacity to deliver it.
- Share the processes and decisions around programme design more fully with participants and steering group members, together with ongoing feedback from participants.
- Explore experiences of similar programmes at the outset and ask how the Programme design can avoid known issues such as short-termism, power imbalances, and reliance on individuals to lead change.
- Model the work and share individual and organisational learning and progress regularly and openly in order to build knowledge and trust.
- Skills, confidence and action are critical, but must be foregrounded by a deeper exploration of commitment, intent and positionality; develop foundational knowledge on colonial legacies and decolonial approaches at the outset, and unpack the degree to which you are willing to decentre institutional needs.

- Create ample opportunities for face-to-face support and peer-to-peer learning.
- Continue the high visibility of decolonisation work at regional levels and national gatherings.
- Work with MA members, funders, organisations and 'standard bearers' to ensure the work – and the need for personal and structural change alongside the work - is understood, positioned and supported as critical for the sector.

## 3. DEVELOPING CONFIDENCE AND SKILLS

### 3.1 Confidence

The Decolonisation Confidence and Skills Programme was highly valued by several participants who were at a relatively early stage of working with decolonisation as a concept. It has given them more confidence and resources to take forward in their work.

*'It's been incredibly valuable. I'm glad to have done it. I think it's maybe just given me more things to think about than I started with.'*

Some revealed that previous discomfort in relation to this work had fallen away, and that knowledge and confidence had increased.

*'[I now have] more confidence to address decolonisation. Have previously felt guilty, defensive, lacking in knowledge/tools to address.'*

At the same time, others described or conveyed ongoing feelings of inexperience and a lack of knowing how to move forwards with the work. Members of the Collective expressed the experiences of working in an overwhelmingly challenging landscape with significant barriers to decolonising work. Reflective time and peer learning through the Programme was often taken up with these concerns, rather than with the creative or liberating aspects of decolonising work. In order to build confidence, participants wanted decolonisation work to be more collectively owned and championed in their workplaces, and wanted more visibility of the work across the sector.

For more experienced participants, the Programme was able to offer valuable 'examples' of practice that supported, reinforced and 'clarified' their understanding of decolonisation, and offered 'inspiration' to take things forward locally.

For some in the Leaders' network, levels of confidence may have been affected by unmet expectations of the Programme, and a lack of focus and clarity on the purpose of the network. Many were looking for, and expecting, faster routes to action, but different levels of experience and knowledge in the group affected this.

*'I would love to have had more certainty for coming out of those events about what the right thing is to do or what the options were and I don't feel I learned. I don't feel I became more confident in the approach we're taking.'*

### 3.2 Leadership and advocacy

For many, and closely linked to confidence-building, the Programme reinforced a sense of leadership and a confidence to take up a leadership position. This was shared by several members of the Collective cohort and by a member of the Leaders network.

*'I now feel quite strong and confident that [I] should [be] leading this for the organisation'*

*'It's been really good for me to solidify in my mind that I should be acting in a leadership position.'*

Others reported that their membership of the Programme (in itself) was positively adding to their confidence and sense of leadership. For many, being on the Programme offered them greater visibility, 'credibility' and 'gravitas' within their organisations and teams. Drawing on the connection with the Museums Association was able to 'add weight in [their] organisation', and demonstrated their own role and commitment to this work to others, and 'the organisation's commitment.' Being involved in the Programme was seen by some as part of good leadership, and 'leading by example' with their team. While positive experiences, some of these responses also came from those who have less experience, suggesting there is a tendency for participants to demonstrate and showcase their commitment to decolonisation prior to decolonising work being undertaken. Participants seemed to gain a sense of status and power from their connection with the Programme, despite being at an early stage in the process. As Lowe-Mbirimi notes within decolonisation work, 'intention can easily be mistaken for action' (Lowe-Mbirimi in Dalal-Clayton and Puri Purini 2022).

Through the creation of the Leaders network, the Programme's ambitions were to support a group of 'leaders' who were more advanced in their decolonising practice to come together in a network in order to shape and influence change. Despite the intentions of the Programme, however, the conditions were not felt to be there for the development of more substantive or collective leadership. The criteria for inclusion in the Leaders network was unclear to its members and not sufficiently distinct in membership from the Collective network. Indeed, the Leaders network was experienced as a mixed group of practitioners with very different levels of experience and capacity to lead change.

*'[O]riginally it was going to be for leaders, people, that [...] could actually make systemic change in the sector or [...] make some significant decisions within institutions, but actually it then opened up to be [more like the Collective network]'*

The division of the Collective cohort and the Leaders network was repeatedly called into question by those in both groups, particularly as the groups became more aware of each other during the Programme. The split was felt to be 'unproductive' and 'artificial', and questions around what leadership in this context means was a feature of the Programme.

Questions also arose from some members of the Leaders network around the MA's readiness to support decolonisation work, as the organisation seemed to be uncritically replicating some of the problematic structures that decolonisation works to address, such as short-termism, pressure on individuals to lead, and an exploitative process where the MA team had not created the conditions for mutual benefit and genuine learning.

At the close of the Programme, many expressed wanting to know more about advocacy in this area. For example, 'What are the skills needed to bring people with you?'; 'How to get resources, funding and capacity for this work?'; 'How do we make the case for an holistic approach?'; and 'How to influence at the top of organisations/secure support'.

### 3.3 Self-development

For members of the Collective, the Programme offered materials, examples and membership of a community of support. In general, people valued the time together and the opportunity to be supported by peers. However, the Collective and Leaders network members felt there needed to be more time for peer-to-peer learning.

The Collective events, and the online Museum Essentials course that was launched early on in the Programme, were warmly received as tools for professional development by those who engaged. In terms of the events, participants valued ‘the opportunity to think more deeply’, the ‘sense of accountability’, and the ‘examples of good and bad practice’ that they offered.

For individual participants, the Programme contributed to new levels of awareness around the complexity and challenges of decolonising work, while, for some, it crystallised realisations in how to move forward. For example, the need for senior leadership support, foundational knowledge, and the recognition of how ‘interconnected everything is - antiracism/decolonisation/intersectionality/social justice’.

*‘It’s just increased my knowledge, which is always a good thing. You know, I do feel that I have a broader understanding’.*

While the ‘Supporting Decolonising in Museums’ guidance, and the Museum Essentials course were felt to be ‘excellent’, offering resources and inspiration for individuals in their workplaces, most struggled to prioritise their engagement with the online course in the timeframe of the Programme. Barriers to engagement were lack of time during the working day, and the need for more structured support to complete the course alongside the cohort. For a minority who were more advanced in their decolonising practices, the online course was useful in offering references and tools, but didn’t contribute significantly to their growth and development.

The Programme offered an experience of professional development in this area that was new to many participants. Some reported engagement with workshops and comparable programmes but for most, this was a unique opportunity for networking and support in this area. The short-term nature of the Programme, however, called into question the opportunities to embed this kind of networked, supportive, reflective way of working.

There were felt to be some gaps in the content. Those with more specialist areas of interest or who were more advanced in their work on decolonising did not always feel well supported by the content of the Programme. Participants were keen to know more about who they could contact for more specialist conversations with those who engaged in different aspects of decolonising work.

### 3.4 Development of others

As a key aspect of leadership, many participants in the Collective were able to support the development of others, including leading on discussions locally. The sharing of learning and insights from the Programme with others was verbal in some cases, such as discussions during team meetings, but also included the sharing of links to key resources. In some cases, this led to concrete actions within organisations (see below).

*‘I’ve loved [the Programme content]. I’ve gone back to it. I’ve shared articles with some people and I think it’s one of those things I will keep going back to.’*

While some reported working in supportive and open environments, others shared a number of challenges in disseminating the guidance and resources at work. Questions were raised throughout the Programme on how to engage others in these conversations. Many expressed wanting to support other staff to learn and train in this area, but lacked a sense

of how to support and compel people to engage, particularly across a range of teams (beyond curatorial and engagement), and how to effect change upwards in organisations and get senior buy-in. Underlying these issues were questions of how to manage the impact of change and how to conduct challenging conversations within teams.

These staff development challenges contributed to a sense of isolation for some who experience a significant sense of pressure as lone individuals within organisations tasked with, or tasking themselves with, the work to lead change in this area. The need for more collective responsibility and upskilling was surfaced. However, the resources provided by the Museums Association's online course were helpful in alleviating some of this pressure to educate others.

*'[The Programme is] giving me facts that I can use, resources that I can refer people to, to read, rather than them expecting me to tell them everything [which] I do not have the energy or the time to do.'*

Questions of equitable access to the online course arose at several points of feedback during the research.

*'a big question for me is all of my colleagues who either are not Museums Association members, so can't do the course, or [who are] say, Front of House. We're not gonna have the time, and we can't expect people to want to give up their personal time to do this.'*

### 3.5 Being empowered to take action

The Programme resources supported a number of Collective members to move into action in their workplaces. Specifically, learning from the Programme supported the design of a number of new initiatives including: the creation of a local decolonisation network; a new programme of public events; and an art trail. The Programme also offered some participants some new connections and opportunities, and encouraged some to open up their decision-making to wider communities. Membership of the Programme has also been used to 'bolster funding bids' and support the completion of the Associateship of the Museums Association (AMA). As such, the Programme impact has been significant for some individuals.

Looking ahead, participants noted that, following the Programme, they are most likely to apply more holistic and critical approaches to their work, including critical approaches to their collections and relationships. These more process-focused impacts included making more time for reflective practice.

Towards the end of the Programme, some participants noted that the work of decolonising felt more complicated than it had previously seemed, and they felt less sure of how to take the work forward.

*'[The Programme] changed how I think a lot – harder to know how it can impact my work and move beyond individual/personal skills development and move that to organisational change and sector shifts.'*

This chimes with wider experiences of supporting decolonising work, where colleagues can gain new insights but can be overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge to change

organisations (Morse and McCann 2019). There can be a desire for a checklist or solutions-focused approach to put the learning into action (Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures 2023). However, along with the confidence and skills to support the work, the experiences of the Programme showed that decolonising work demands time and facilitated support for the emotional work on our complex positionalities in relation to colonial histories and neocolonial realities (Dalal-Clayton and Puri Purini 2022; Minott 2019). It requires supported unpacking of our complicity, whiteness and power, disinvestment in unfair privileges, and collective support for these endeavours from the top for radical change within organisations (Glasgow Women's Library 2018; Morse and McCann 2019; Robinson and Graham 2022; Dalal-Clayton and Puri Purini 2022). In light of this, a rush to 'action' can feel unethical to some.

In summary, some participants could point to clear actions arising from their involvement in the Programme. For those people, the Programme could be said to have lived up to its aims to empower people to 'begin or develop' efforts to decolonise their museums. However, a greater number of participants could not point to concrete actions, expressed uncertainty on how to apply the learning, and were unable to give the time they wanted to give to the Programme and online learning resources. Participants were able to point to several areas of the Programme that could be enhanced to support their next steps, and the next section summarises these suggestions.

It should be noted that it is unusual for an ambitious professional development initiative focused on changing institutions to be fully successful from the start. Wider experiences show that intended outcomes or impact is rarely seen in the first iteration of an innovative programme (Dalal-Clayton and Puri Purini 2022; Robinson and Graham 2022). The different levels of experience and knowledge in the group, and ultimately, the level of support and institutional commitment to institution-wide change, can deeply affect the outcomes of such programmes.

## 4. INFORMING THE NEXT ITERATION OF THE PROGRAMME

As part of the research project, RCMG were asked to elicit insights that could support work towards an enhanced iteration of the Programme. Several insights emerged from the research interviews and from direct feedback to the Museums Association. In response to this feedback, an outline proposal for the group of funders who had supported the Programme was developed by the Museums, which was shared with members of the Collective and Leaders Network towards the end of the Programme.

The final Programme event on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2023 brought members of the Collective and Leaders Networks together for the first time, as well as some members of the Steering Group, and comprised a full-day workshop in person, in London. Facilitated by an expert facilitator, Cheryl Garvey from Talk, Listen, Create, the day included a structured space for reflection on the Programme and draft proposal for further funding, and an opportunity to develop recommendations for the Museums Association, funders and other sector-bodies to support ongoing work in this area. Key activities on the day were also repeated during an online session the following week, to allow those who could not attend the event a further chance to input. In addition, several members of the Leaders Network offered direct feedback to the MA to inform the next iteration of the Decolonisation Confidence and Skills Programme.

### 4.1 Decolonising work at the Museums Association

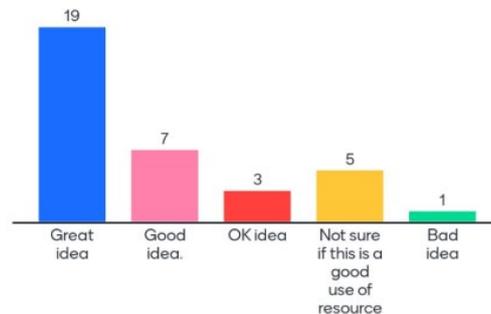
There were voiced concerns that some of the structural issues that decolonisation aims to address were, in some ways, potentially replicated in the design of the Programme and its evaluation approaches. These structural issues included short-termism in funding and commitment (with questions raised about the nature of ‘campaigns’), and the overburdening of individuals to lead complex projects. Some members wanted to see more demonstrated commitment and personal involvement from the wider MA team, to offer much needed support and greater impact.

In response to the future-facing funding proposal, there was strong support for a dedicated decolonisation lead at the Museums Association; felt to be ‘a much-needed role’, that could keep the work visible, support individuals in their practice, and make connections with other sectors including charities and academics.

*'This work really needs dedicated staff to help shape the practices of the sector.'*

*'it would ensure that focus is kept on decolonisation, and that it doesn't become a short term campaign.'*

## What do you think about employing a full-time decolonisation lead: a research-based post to hold and explore issues around decolonisation?



There were concerns, however, that a decolonisation lead would be on a fixed-term contract, with comments including: 'what happens when the funding ends?'. There were also concerns raised about the heavy nature of the role and the need for wellbeing support to be in place for the candidate, with a suggestion that the MA should 'create more than one role':

*'It's a lot for one person to carry [...] there might need to be at least two posts or multiple to hold the responsibilities of the network, training programme and research'.*

*'Consider the positionality of people working on this and their welfare' and 'wellbeing'.*

*'What support will this individual have in facing external pressures?'*

Participants felt that the MA should carefully consider how the candidate would be supported to inform practice (in addition to research). There were suggestions that the role should 'unlock funding to allow us to do the work', influence policy and funders, and support grass-roots activities.

*'There is so much great knowledge and research already. Should this role be focused on embedding this existing knowledge and tackling the things that hinder this (which are already clear)?'*

## 4.2 The Museum Essentials online course 'Supporting Decolonising in Museums'

The online course was launched with members of the Collective network ahead of a full launch as part of the Museum Essentials suite of courses. Feedback from participants on the course content was overwhelmingly positive. The 'mixture of different resources [...] podcasts, videos, articles' was highlighted, as was the use of reflection activities in each section.

*'[The course has] done a lot to [...] improve my understanding of what decolonisation is and what it involves.'*

Recommendations for future delivery of the course as part of the Programme were mainly focused on supporting participants to engage with, and complete, it. Towards the end of the Programme, no participants reported having completed it, most said they struggled to work through it fully, and a few admitted they had yet to begin it due to a range of issues such as workload and illness. The length of the course was highlighted as an issue by many, but the flexibility to 'dip in and out' was also welcomed.

*'Course quite resource heavy, it requires a lot of time to go through and not just about time to do the course, it's the time to process it, because it needs a lot of mental space.'*

In order to support completion and engagement, several suggested that the Collective events could be used as 'milestones' for completion of specific sections. More feedback on the activities and reflections could then be offered.

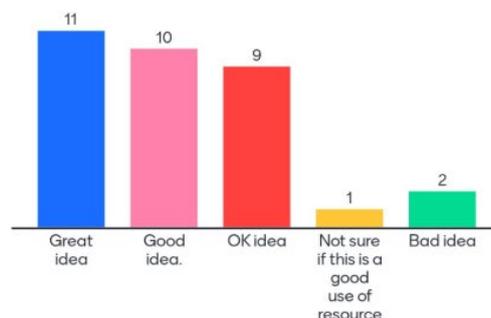
*'I think the course needs to be facilitated for those going through it to help them to take on the learning.'*

*'I needed a bit more structure/indication of how to break it down. Having a "here it is" and no accountability didn't work for me.'*

The difficulties with completing the course were felt to affect the Collective experience overall, with members noting that people were 'starting at different levels' in their learning. Indeed, foundational knowledge was felt to be key and the concept of making part of the course compulsory as an entry requirement for future iterations of the Programme was tested with participants. A 'minimum level of knowledge' was felt to be needed in order to support meaningful engagement in the sessions, and the confidence to take forward the work (see also Dalal-Clayton and Puri Purini 2022).

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## What do you think using the Introduction to Decolonisation online learning course as an entry requirement to being involved in the programme?



Participants at the final workshop in September 2023 were asked what they thought of using the online resource as an entry requirement to being involved in the Programme. While there was general positivity for making the online course compulsory, concerns were raised around the equity and accessibility of this approach.

Across the interviews and surveys, many highlighted the issue of the online course being 'behind a paywall', in that individual membership of the MA is required to access it. This was felt to be unhelpful when aiming to create change within organisations with colleagues who may not have ready access to the course or the Programme. In particular, this was felt to disadvantage volunteer-run museums, community stakeholders, and front-of-house staff who are 'least likely to be paying for own membership'.

*'It should be freely available – not just to members. This would help organisations share learning and training.'*

*'Excellent idea IF it can be more accessible – financially, also perhaps with different levels (FOH? Volunteer-run museums?). Does everyone have the privilege to take part?'*

Some of the concerns here were related to the need for significant time to do the course:

*'Do we think all museum staff will be supported to do this in work time? Of course great if they are, but may end up being “extra curricular” for many which will privilege certain people.'*

For participants, losing access to the course at the end of the Programme was a significant concern; several became individual members solely for the purpose of applying to the Programme. Suggestions included allowing ongoing access for 'graduates' of the Programme.

### 4.3 Strengthening the Collective and Leaders networks

The majority of respondents asked for the networks to continue but to be brought together. This could address what was experienced as an unhelpful division and open up opportunities for cross-fertilisation.

*'Cross-level working would be so much more beneficial and would open real opportunities for collaboration and change'*

Smaller, more specialist networking groups were suggested by a number of participants. These could be led by more experienced members of the group, and could offer the chance for more focused discussion in specific areas of decolonising work. Learning could feed into the Collective and help develop the MA's resources, workshops and activities.

*'Smaller networking groups (similar to SSN's?) so similar institutions can talk honestly and learn from each other in their specific areas of focus/collections.'*

*'More dialogue in small settings around specific themes and topics.'*

More time together in person to build relationships was felt to be key to the success of both Collective and Leaders' networks. A mixture of online and in-person was felt to be suitable, but with in-person, relationship-building sessions at the outset.

*'We need time in-person to form relationships. It was the simplest thing that was missing'.*

*'I think we should have met more regularly to create more momentum'*

Going forwards, there is significant appetite for the networks to continue, or for there to be some kind of 'legacy' and ongoing contact. Some suggestions were put forward as to how members could add value to the experience of new cohorts.

*'there is that opportunity, as I've said, where [...] one of this cohort now undertakes the project or an activity [which] we can then present to the next cohort about what we've been doing [...] just to kind of show that progress'*

#### 4.4 Clarifying the purpose of the Leaders network

Reflecting back on the Programme, a lack of clear objectives and shared purpose for the Leaders network was raised by several members. While it was understood that the Leaders network could shape this for themselves, and the openness was valued, there was a need for stronger facilitation to bring these ambitions to fruition, and to create the conditions for all members to contribute. Some members felt disempowered to contribute in the space.

*'there's really strong opinions in the room and those tend to be the opinions and voices that rise to the top'*

The speakers at the Leaders network events were felt to be excellent, but Leaders wanted to be more challenged to take activities forward in-between sessions.

*'I was hoping for a call to action, and it didn't come. [...] I thought this was about how do we do it? How are we going to do it? What have you done? What have you done since the last time we met?'*

Towards the end of the Programme, several members of the Decolonisation Leaders network – Sam Allen, Ananda Rutherford and Jane Henderson – took the initiative to develop a document for the MA setting out how they would like the group to evolve. Alongside clarifying the purpose and intention of the group, specific suggestions were offered on the format of meetings in order to support members to engage with 'current research and practice' and 'disseminate and evidence this work to peers, colleagues and managers in their organisations':

*'This shifts the emphasis from leadership to informed advocacy and genuinely begins to form a network of practitioners. The group would be responsible for nominating speakers and topics but would require admin support from MA and an [honarium] for speakers'.*

The feedback document from the Leaders network in September 2023 offered a number of other recommendations to support the MA to shape the next iteration of the Programme. Members of the Leaders Network would have valued some explicit acknowledgement of the

document and some ongoing contact with the MA team following the Programme's final event. This would have helped to demonstrate an ongoing commitment to the networks and acknowledgement of their efforts in supporting the development of the programme.

## 4.5 Enhancing the Collective network

The intended aims of the Collective network were clear to its members, although the extent to which these aims were realised was felt to be mixed. The Collective was understood as a platform to look at different approaches to decolonisation, and to have a safe space to talk to people in similar positions. A key reason for applying to the Collective was to join with others and feel less isolated in the work.

Participants in the Collective found the programme of talks highly rewarding, but wanted more peer-to-peer opportunities for sharing and support that they can bring their own experiences and challenges to.

*'I thought it was gonna be more sharing amongst ourselves [and] less hearing experts'*

They wanted to problem-solve together, hear more 'real stories of change' in organisations, and see wider shifts towards decolonial practice.

*'[...] really keen to hear what other museums are doing'*

Towards the end of the Programme, several members of the Collective shared that they had not created any significant relationships from the group.

*'I certainly would struggle to think of people I could connect to in this collective, and that defeats the purpose of starting a collective.'*

*'Still doesn't feel like I've got that peer network.'*

Unlike the Leaders network, the Collective didn't meet face-to-face until the final event, and this was highlighted as a missed opportunity to build 'trust' and to understand who else was part of the Collective.

Despite these issues in connecting as a group, several members experienced the Collective as a 'safe space' where they could bring questions without being made to 'feel inadequate'. This was made possible by skilled facilitation of the Programme Lead.

The content covered in the Collective events was necessarily limited to specific areas. Curatorial and programme-related decolonising work was covered in detail, but areas like reparative justice, educational programming, community engagement work, and trauma-informed practice were felt to be missing from the content. In addition, some participants wanted opportunities to learn more about decolonisation as an ongoing and emotive practice:

*'The only thing that I think is missing is the personal reflection. So what feelings did this evoke in you? And why do you think they're there? [...] I think it's really important to have reflection on emotions because of how emotive this topic is. And being able to be conscious of how your emotions might impact your reactions to certain things.'*

*'I want us to talk about decolonisation as a practice, how we run museums, not as programmes/special events. Not just public facing stuff. More sustained work. Equity work informing everything [...], how to work together beyond decolonisation teams and budgets.'*

## 4.6 What Programme members wanted to know more about

At the close of the Programme, members of the Collective and Leaders network expressed an interest in knowing more about the following aspects of decolonising work:

**Advocacy skills** – This included how to bring people with you, how to advocate upwards and get resources and funding for the work, and how make the case for an holistic approach within organisations.

**Addressing power structures** – This included how to break down the silos, deal with institutional blocks, and penetrate power structures. Members wanted to know more about how to deal with trustees who were creating barriers to change, and how to challenge teams that are not addressing the issues.

**Who to connect with** – Which institutions are doing the work and how other organisations have influenced leadership and brought in change.

**How to support colleagues emotionally** – What trauma-informed practices look like, while making space for emotions in the work. How to deal with defensiveness and fragility, and make space to be reflective. How do we get this skillset across our boards, volunteers, senior management, front-of-house, and so on.

**How to deal with hostility** – Particularly how to respond to hostility in press and social media, how to manage the message internally and externally, how to protect Front-of-House teams from public backlash without discrediting changemakers. The question was asked as to how the MA can support with this.

**How to shift the workforce** – To hear more examples of workforce development including diversification of boards, and changes to recruitment processes.

**How to measure change** – How to evidence the work and prove it is happening.

## 4.7 Utilising the Steering Group

The Programme Steering Group were a small group of leading practitioners in decolonising work across the UK, including representatives from all four nations. They met approximately quarterly and were tasked with offering support and advice to the programme team. However, the Group collectively felt that their skills and experiences were under-utilised by the programme team. Steering Group members did not feel enabled to guide the programme itself, and were not brought in sufficiently well to understand and help resolve emerging issues around the Programme, nor guide the evaluation of the Programme. As a result, their involvement overall felt tokenising and uncomfortable. There was also uncertainty over whether participants in the Programme were aware of the existence of the Steering Group and its role. Greater recognition of the Group's role, and less pressures on

time and resource within the MA team, could have helped ensure that the Group could fulfil their role through offering guidance and support as the Programme developed.

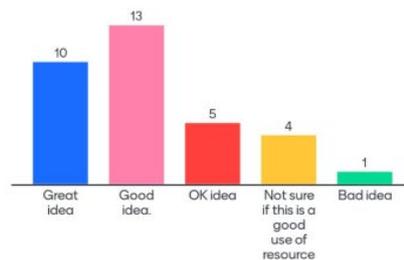
## 4.8 Creating a development and evaluation partnership

The proposal for the next iteration of the Programme included the suggestion of a research and development partnership with a recognised research organisation such as RCMG at the University of Leicester. This would be overseen by a UK-wide group.

Most agreed in principle, noting the need for independent evaluation. However, questions were raised around the need for ‘more research’ with a suggestion that ‘funding action is more important’. The focus of the evaluation was also called into question:

*‘Reinventing the wheel with a new research project could take away from effort to actually measure impact and apply existing research’*

**What about creating a dev & evaluation partnership with a recognised research org such as RCMG Leicester? This would be overseen by a UK-wide group.**



Questions were also raised around approach which suggests a lack of trust in the process.

*‘Will it be more back patting exercise?’*

*‘Pre determination of a research team seems like default to the establishment’*

The need to decolonise research and academia was also noted, with questions on ‘who is doing the research’ voiced.

Others were interested in shared research that could unpack how ‘qualitative impact’, and how people feel, can be measured in the context of this work.

*‘As long as the evaluation [is] valuable and not just tick box, and is shared and can drive/influence further change.’*

## 4.9 What else could the Museums Association do?

During the interviews and at the final event, Programme members were asked what else they felt the Museums Association could do to support decolonising work in the sector. The following is a selection of ideas that emerged in participants' own words:

### **Provide greater visibility of the work**

- *'Providing visibility and therefore greater impact of small-scale work'*
- *'Continue to develop ideas, talk, practice'*
- *'Feature work at conference every year'*
- *Ensure decolonisation continues to have 'a really high profile'*
- *'Would have been interesting for this to be talked about by the MA or in the Museums Journal [...] to get that sort of groundswell of activity [...] the Collective needs to be more visible'*
- *'Do the Museum Development Officers know this is happening so they can [link people up] at a regional level?'*
- *'Keep the profile raised outside of the museums sector as well'*
- *'Visibility of it feels like a really important next step'*

### **More workshops and training to support ethical approaches**

- *'More workshops on decolonisation'*
- *'Partner with academic organisations across the country'*
- *'Connect with graduate courses to embed at an early stage'*
- *'Support organisations to find longer-term funding and work beyond project structures'*
- *'Support organisations/managers to better support this work without over-burdening People of Colour'*
- *'Support people who are weathering abuse and the 'lowest entry level curators that are doing the work'*
- *'We could as a group create something where we could help people in these kinds of structures who have powerful positions to understand where they can start'*

### **More focus on structural change**

- *'Support organisations to think through the structural power dynamics'*
- *'more from MA on diversification and getting people into roles'*
- *'Support workforce development'*
- *'Support young people of colour getting into the sector and staying in the sector'*
- *'Ensure equity within this work, making sure people with lived experience are being compensated for contributing to this work. [For example] challenge advertisement of jobs so that they are fairly paid'*
- *'I think in terms of the MA and what it could do, I think there needs to be long term investment in this that contributes to resources in the long term for institutions to (change the structures) because it is long term work, it's not project specific work. Organisations like my own can only fund posts like mine through projects/redevelopments, but these roles need to be embedded within the org.'*

### **Advocacy and collaboration with other sector bodies and holding them to account**

- *'Hold organisations to account'*
- *'Hold national museum leaders to account'*
- *'Advocate upwards, hold others to account'*
- *'Advocate with other sector support and standard holders to ensure consistency in approach'*
- *'Put more pressure on leadership in national organisations to engage with decolonisation'*
- *'Advocate for evidence of decolonisation to be part of quality assurance schemes such as Accreditation'*
- *'More advocacy with NMDC and senior leaders'*
- *'Advocacy to government about its importance'*
- *'Advocate on behalf of organisations'*
- *'Advocate with funders to make it easier to get funding for projects that might not have quantifiable outcomes'*
- *'Lobby funding bodies [who] dictate how museums conduct themselves'*
- *'Lobby funders to do the work as well'*
- *'Join up with other sector bodies to create change'*
- *'[I would like to] see the MA advocating for other bodies to embed some of the decolonisation principles as well. Like Collections Trust'*
- *'a renewed determination to advocate for this work [...] be really bold about that and about speaking up for our Members where they don't feel they can. [...] And fighting for the resource to do it.'*

#### **Provide more entry routes to the Decolonisation Programme**

- *'More entry routes including for Front of House'*
- *'Prioritise non-curatorial/engagement activity – where are FOH, retail, cafes, schools, how can we bring them in?'*
- *'Reduce cost of individual membership and events to enable access'*
- *'MA could help break down some of the barriers – the question of the cost is a big factor – you pay to be a member, MA conference is too much money [...] not all museums are able to support.'*

#### **Self-reflection and showing growth from feedback already given**

Several respondees noted that a lot of feedback had already been given, and a clear sense of how this feedback was leading to change would be good to see.

- *'What can the organisation do internally. I'm talking actual work and not just 'reflecting''*
- *'Not to be complacent. Keep up their own learning but also check in with organisations as to what they are doing/needing'*
- *'Model the work to offer an example of deeper learning and reflection'*

- *'[I want to see a] long term commitment from the MA, a formalised statement from MA, which could feel more like a mandate, stronger, or maybe embedded into refreshed ethics, these 'touch point' documents.'*
- *'Unsure about how much the feedback is taken into account in developing the Programme further'*
- *'[...] we still have a great deal to learn and not just about how we support implementation of the guidance, but about how we ourselves manage the Programme in the future.'*

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SECTOR-BODIES

The final event of the Programme in September 2023 offered a chance for participants to reflect on what wider sector-bodies can do to support decolonisation work to grow and flourish. The following is a summary of responses.

### Funders:

- Make funding more accessible and the criteria for funding clearer.
- Move away from expecting external outputs and allow for more organic, less pre-determined outcomes
- Fund internal, low-visibility work such as staff time, resources, process, experiments and learning.
- Less focus on funding innovation, and more on funding social impact (without measuring this by numbers)
- Consider how to reduce bias in funding decisions (for example, by selecting projects that meet qualifying criteria by chance)
- Take back money if projects do not deliver promised community-focused work
- Ensure projects have positive legacies
- Fund long-term change, not just short-term projects
- Consider decolonising credentials in decision-making (similar to environmental sustainability)
- Recognise the picture is different in different parts of the UK
- Model the work and create trust and transparency. Make a visible and public commitment to funding decolonising work.
- Recognise that to do things properly and meaningfully takes time and resources.

*'My role is only a 2-year role and this doesn't give enough time [...], a very intense period in which to embed a complex process.'*

### Standard bearers:

- Embed decolonising into professional standards such as SPECTRUM and Accreditation so that organisations are accountable
- Model the work and create trust and transparency

### Other sector-bodies and research partners:

- Commit to best practice in recruitment and advertising roles
- Help sector-bodies to work better together as communities of practice
- Collaborate to create stronger advocacy to Government and other funders
- Model the work and create trust and transparency
- Make it a risk not to do the work
- Dedicate core funding to the work and find ways of holding yourselves accountable

## 6. CONCLUSION

The MA's Decolonisation Skills and Confidence Programme was welcomed as a much-needed programme in the current context of UK museum practice. However, experiences of the first iteration of the Programme were varied, and it is clear that there are significant opportunities to improve the Programme in the future, and to set out clearer and more achievable aims. The MA's reflections on the learning concluded that there 'are systemic barriers to meaningful decolonisation and there has been a failure of cyclical projects and programmes, including ours, to make lasting change' (Heal 2023). Experiences of the Programme reveal issues of trust, unclear expectations, and power imbalances that were largely unaddressed through the Programme. At the same time, holding up these experiences to the literature and comparator programmes shows that programmes are rarely designed 'right first time', and need to evolve in their approach as personal and institutional learning takes place (Dalal-Clayton and Puri Purini 2022; Robinson and Graham 2022).

The MA have been a highly reflective team, who have expressed the need to learn from these experiences and the feedback that has been shared throughout the Programme. While there were efforts throughout the process to design the Programme according to the MA's decolonising principles, this critical and reflective work was not always openly shared (Museums Association 2021). Greater transparency in the Programme design process, greater modelling of critical, reflective and decolonial practices, together with more involvement from the Steering Group and wider MA team may have helped to build a sense of collective ownership and support, and greater trust in the MA's ongoing commitment to the work.

At the time of writing, the MA is putting in place more resource and capacity to support decolonising in museums, and has plans in place to sustain and grow the Programme. A number of recommendations can be drawn out from this externally-led study, that can be used to take forward the development of this Programme, and can be used to support the design of wider professional development programmes around decolonisation:

- Resource the Programme more fully, and ensure there is sufficient capacity to deliver it.
- Share the processes and decisions around programme design more fully with participants and steering group members.
- Explore experiences of similar programmes at the outset and ask how the Programme design can avoid known issues such as short-termism, power imbalances, and reliance on individuals to lead change.
- Model the work and share individual and organisational learning and progress regularly and openly in order to build knowledge and trust.
- Skills, confidence and action are critical, but must be foregrounded by a deeper exploration of commitment, intent and positionality; develop foundational knowledge on colonial legacies and decolonial approaches at the outset, and unpack the degree to which you are willing to decentre institutional needs.

- Create ample opportunities for face-to-face support and peer-to-peer learning, and structured support that holds participants to account.
- Continue the high visibility of decolonisation work at regional levels and national gatherings.
- Work with MA members, funders, organisations and ‘standard bearers’ to ensure the work – and the need for personal and structural change alongside the work – is understood, positioned and supported as critical for the sector.

Finally, this research project has shown how research and evaluation cultures can be experienced as exploitative. The structures and norms of research and funding at the current time means that much of the time and effort from participants – speaking up at workshops, making time to be interviewed, and completing feedback surveys - upon which this research relies, goes unpaid. Issues around trust and professional safety also mean that participants can feel uneasy about speaking up. Despite this, participants in this study nevertheless generously and constructively shared their experiences to help sector bodies and researchers to move forward with their work. It is clear that research and evaluation cultures themselves are rife with power imbalances, and must also change to support more ethical, equitable, and decolonial futures.

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