

Engaging with race, ethnicity and migration

Safina Islam talks about how the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre and Education Trust is supporting world-leading research around race, ethnicity and migration and engaging with local community groups and schools.

I WAS appointed to head up both Manchester's Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre (AIURRRC) and its sister Education Trust in March 2019.

There were big shoes to fill: the previous director, Jackie Ould, had been involved in the organisation since its inception in 1998 until her recent retirement.

I joined AIURRRC and Education Trust from the public programmes team at Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, where I was a communities and inclusion specialist. Prior to that, I spent two years as chief officer at Ananna, the Manchester Bangladeshi Women's Organisation, where I am still chair. So my background is in community engagement rather than libraries and archives.

I have entered the sector at a time where there is much talk about "decolonising" collections; not deleting old tellings of stories, but enabling communities to produce and curate their own narratives.

The Centre and Trust

AIURRRC was established in 1999 by Lou Kushnick OBE, who's been a lecturer for over 40 years and is an emeritus professor at the University of Manchester. His vision was for a collection that would not only have huge research value, but also be instrumental in celebrating cultures, com-



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bating racism and helping communities to tell their own stories. His main aim was to increase diversity on campus. That's why it's always been an open access library – to engage more local BAME people. The Centre currently has four part-time members of staff and two part-time casuals. A PT collections access officer post is currently vacant.

Sister organisation the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Education Trust is a registered charity that was established in 2001 to allow us to diversify our funding. With five additional part-time staff, we are currently financed by Manchester City Council, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and various other sources, as well as the university. On paper, I work 2.5 days a week for each organisation, but obviously in reality, it's a bit more fluid than that.

From politics to folk tales

Our library collection has over 14,780 titles, covering topics including culture and identity, history, politics, and local studies. We also publish a range of our own books and resources for schools and young readers, created in partnership with Manchester schools and community groups. They include folk tales written and illustrated by local children, biographies, personal stories, local histories and teaching resources to support multicultural education. The folk tales we publish are illustrated by children within their classrooms, and they also tell their own stories for the community archives, which has really allowed us to engage in a way that's quite unusual.

Civil rights to visual arts

Some of the highlights of our collection include many of the key US civil rights texts along with pamphlets and reports that document the civil rights struggle, and UK race policy and practice publications covering the changing issues around race since the 1960s. These include the Commission for Racial Equality's archive and some of the original documents relating to the Manchester City Council-commissioned *Macdonald Report*, which concluded that race had been a key factor in the murder of 13-year-old school boy Ahmed Iqbal Ullah, after whom the centre is named. We also have an extensive arts and photography collection showcasing the visual art and craft traditions of African, Caribbean and South Asian cultures.

A unique library

Our library is quite unique in the sense that we're part of the University of Manchester, housed within Central



The library has more than 14,780 titles and publishes teaching resources for schools.



Digital officer Drew Ellery, a Transforming Archives trainee, is an Art Gallery & Museum Studies MA student who works alongside community groups to create interactive displays.

Library – Manchester's largest and most iconic public library – and have funding from several different sources. We don't fit the straightforward academic library model, but we are used by academics, independent historians and the public. The majority of our collection is available on loan to anyone with a Manchester library card.

Being part of both the university and Central Library is very beneficial for us, as we have always had a certain amount of autonomy, but we operate in the context

of these large institutions. Archives+, a Central Library based partnership of seven Greater Manchester organisations including the Trust, is a wonderful example of one of the benefits of being part of these respected establishments. The partnership features displays and exhibits – including video and audio – within a prominent area of Central Library, acting like a shop window for our collection.

Although there are many benefits to being part of such respected institutions, one of the biggest challenges for us right



AIURRRC helps community groups lead their own projects and archive their own collections.

now is fitting into these large structures whilst maintaining our own identity and ensuring that we don't lose sight of our founding principles. Our mission now is the same as it was 20 years ago – to support world-leading research around race, ethnicity and migration alongside engaging in meaningful ways with local community groups and schools.

Community engagement

The University of Manchester is one of only a handful nationally that has social responsibility as one of its top three priorities, and part of that is community engagement. Our work strongly supports that agenda, and operating as an independent trust allows us to be more agile in terms of the projects and activities that we develop.

We're focused on supporting black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups to explore and preserve their own heritage, rather than simply adding things to our own archives. We want communities to genuinely lead and have agency with their narratives – that's really important for us and where we differ from a lot of cultural and archive institutions.

A lot of library and museum collections come from a western, Eurocentric lens. We help community groups to build the capacity to be able to lead their own projects and archive their own collections, while at the same time promoting national discourse around race, ethnicity and migration.

As part of the National Lottery Heritage Fund-supported three-year project *Coming In From The Cold*, we are working with a couple of groups each year, to help them to write a funding application and then set up,

deliver their project and produce archival quality outcomes.

Then there are other projects who just want a sounding board or maybe some technical help. We also offer training in collecting oral histories and support around how best to disseminate and share the material and raise the profile of the stories. It's not just about sharing the story within the community, it's about sharing the stories with the whole of the city and beyond and getting that engagement.

Difference, similarity

Our current exhibition at Central Library (until 18 June 2019) is a strong example of how we work with communities and our partner organisations to raise awareness of cultural identities. *Aratta: Armenian Heritage in the North West* is a project which was initiated and managed by Zara Hakobyan, an Armenian researcher living in the north west, and funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. It focuses on the constructs of identity and Armenianness, showing people's differences and similarities through combining photography and oral history interviews. The Trust has been supporting Zara with the project, ensuring that her team produce archival quality materials. Once the exhibition is over, the recordings will be preserved in our archives.

Oral histories

The oral histories we produce with community groups form a very important part of our collection. We have interviews, transcripts and photographs with people of Kosovan, Kashmiri, Sikh, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, West African, Congolese, Zimbabwean,

Caribbean, Kurdish, Afghan, Liberian, Yemeni and Somali origin or heritage, all living in Manchester. We also have many donated oral history collections. Themes covered include anti-racism and anti-immigration campaigns to migration journeys, education, employment, housing, identity, religion, cultural traditions, generational differences and community organisations.

Small organisation, lots of goodwill

Interns for the Trust carry out an incredibly important role in documenting and archiving the collections. As well as helping us to provide community support and manage our collections, they gain valuable experience as part of post-graduate placements or to help with career development. Interns have gone on to work with high profile organisations including The Royal Academy of Arts and the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts, Trinidad and Tobago.

We're incredibly proud of what we've achieved, and continue to achieve, for what is a very small organisation. We have a huge amount of goodwill within the communities we work in, and our work with schools in particular has been incredibly rewarding.

Our partnerships are always community-led. We don't just want to go in and take; we want to support communities to do this work themselves. We've got a long way to go and we don't always get everything right, but we're doing something different and we hope other heritage and cultural organisations can learn something from us. **IP**