

**Imperial College
London**



Race Equality Charter Student Focus Groups Report

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Biographies

The author of the report is David Woodger who is Head of Community Studies and a Lecturer in Social Science, Community Development and Youth Work at Goldsmiths, University of London. His research area is race and racism with a focus that enables professionals and managers to critically reflect on practice, policy and interventions tackling institutional racism.

Lara Paquete Pereira acted as a note taker and is a Youth & Community Worker and anti-racism activist, having been involved with the recent anti-racism student occupation GARA (Goldsmiths Anti-Racism Action). She is part of several anti-racism working groups at Goldsmiths, University of London, having a voice in shaping mandatory anti-racism training for staff at the university.

Introduction

The Race Equality Charter (REC) provides a framework for universities to self-assess and identify institutional and cultural barriers for BAME staff and students. A key part of the self-assessment process is to consult with staff and students. Consultation data are fundamental to developing a REC application and actions to change the College.

2018 staff and student surveys

We initially surveyed staff and students in 2018 to explore their experiences of race, racism and race equity at the College. The questions for these surveys are set by Advance HE, the organisation that runs REC. Our surveys had a good response from our Imperial community, with 1,516 responses to the staff survey, and 531 responses to the student survey.

2019 focus groups

Following on from the 2018 surveys, we commissioned an external consultant to explore the survey findings in more depth using qualitative interviews and focus groups. Unfortunately, only six students participated in these groups.

2020 focus groups

In recognition of the low number of student participants in our first set of focus groups, we held additional focus groups in July 2020. This report is a summary of that research.

Key areas in the Race Equality Charter include examination of these following areas;

- Professional and support staff
- Academic staff
- Student progression and attainment
- Diversity of the curriculum

Feedback from Student Focus Groups

The following is a report of the key themes that came out of four separate focus groups (held online on Zoom) with BAME Imperial College students. There were a total number of 34 students who participated in the focus groups with each session lasting one hour. All faculties were represented with 18 undergraduates; 9 taught postgraduate and 7 research postgraduate research students. Students were also given the opportunity to make contact by email with any further thoughts after the focus groups and six students chose to do this developing comprehensive reflections, experiences and ideas.

The comments from the groups have been themed and presented together under the following headings; **Isolation and marginalisation, Overt racism and racial harassment, Diversity of the curriculum, Assessment and grading concluding with Student thoughts on the way forward.**

1. Isolation and marginalisation

Across all the focus groups students expressed feelings of being separate and isolated from the student body of Imperial College, at the same time they also expressed feeling, as though they were in the spotlight. This dynamic of standing out yet not being part of an accepting, self-affirming group added considerable stress and pressure upon them. Constantly navigating these feelings, being hypervigilant, negotiating oneself within the lived reality of isolation and marginalisation excluded them from the student experience enjoyed by their white counterparts. This experience fed into being an 'outsider/ the other' or as a student described it as "imposture syndrome," the cliquy, segregating, racist and sometimes hostile, culture that is synonymous with whiteness.

A student who was part of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee in their department reported that gender equality dominated the agenda and subsumed any discussion around race, when s/he suggested on the lack of racial diversity within Imperial college it was dismissed as a sensitive subject and should be directed to the Dean. *"The Diversity and inclusion committee discussed gender issues and when I tried to create an open space for issues relating to race, the facilitator all but said that we can't be too forward with our thoughts on this sensitive subject and instead suggested we present our ideas to the Dean."*

Some students reported that their contributions were not valued or even acknowledged which was highlighted with the advent of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement, a black woman was asked to recommend a reading list that could enlighten her white counterparts yet never asked to share her experience or expertise. This objectification of BAME students, separating them out from having subjective, intellectual contributions which are rooted in lived experience and the impact and effects of racism, reinforces the dynamic of white privilege and power.

Students shared the following on being isolated:

"there are only 3 students who looked like me."

"London is very diverse, a plethora of people from diverse backgrounds, but it's rare to see people who look like me on the course."

"Numbers and representation are very low in Imperial College."

"It makes a difference to make friends with black students and in academia it's very hard to find black friends."

"Coming to London I expected the course to be diverse ... I have struggled to find people that have the same experiences as me."

"Imperial is very widely known and holds itself as a very international and diverse community, but you compare the number of black students and staff, compared to what London is there is a discrepancy."

"8 years at Imperial college and nothing has changed I was expecting to be one of a few people in the college...But it is striking to find only a couple of black students."

"The feeling of being the outsider/ othered our experiences are not shared and fully understood- the feeling you are not normal."

"As a Latino person, there isn't even an ethnicity box on the paper work, there are no statistics in relation to Latino's.... not many people know about Latin America. There is no record of Latino students at the college ... There is a lack of support for Latino students."

“I am always being asked by the staff in the RSM foyer if I am lost, my white mates never had this experience.”

The number of black students is relatively small at Imperial College and may not increase in the foreseeable future. However, this dynamic of inclusion and exclusion, visibility and invisibility, the notion of “otherness” is part of the dimensions of racism, which can be tackled. The black students said they spent considerable energy navigating this constant dynamic which impacted deeply upon their confidence, sense of belonging, self-esteem, identity and overall performance.

2. Overt racism and racial harassment

The recording of racist incidents across the higher education sector is in general very low. In 2019, The Equality and Human Rights Commission reported that UK universities recorded 560 complaints of racial harassment over a three and half years, while 60,000 students said they had made a complaint. This highlights the systematic lack of any adequate reporting and recording strategies within universities. The British Medical Association (BMA), highlighted in the launch of their charter to medical schools to “prevent and effectively deal with racial harassment” that 40% of medical undergraduates are from black communities, nearly double the 22% in universities generally. Importantly, racial harassment is recognised as a significant contributing factor to the gap in attainment seen between black students and white students and progression into the medical profession.

A student who is active within the African-Caribbean Society (ACS) reported; *“We are concerned that there is no official channel to report racial issues, there is no real protocol... and Imperial won’t have any data collection regarding racial incidents. There was an incident where due to a room booking clash with the ACS and another society, the Finance society were given the room. The vice president of the Finance society was extremely rude removing our laptop and insisting we leave the room immediately. Everybody in the room was black apart from them, security was called so many things alluded to the fact that their demeanour was racially motivated. I reported it to the student union and a body that address diversity and equality within the staff and their response was very disappointing. We received a written apology in March when the incident happened the proceeding October.”*

Reinforcing this scenario of students not knowing what to do when racially abused or attacked was shared by a president of his year; *“I haven’t personally experienced any racism but as president of my year, I have students coming to me to talk about problems that they experience... a black student suffered a full-blown racist attack and there are no guidelines on what to do.”*

Another student reported that when s/he was contributing to a chemistry seminar, a senior academic made comments and asked questions about her/his African hairstyle, s/he said, *“s/he was not malicious about it, it was definitely ignorance but the power dynamics made me feel I had to respond to the questions eating into my allocated time for presentation.”*

“When I was in the Halls in the first year, I experienced humiliating incidents, my identity, was a novel to many people, my accent, my hair, to my mannerisms, it was seen as weird to many people. They used the ‘N’ word in rap songs when this would of be sort of acceptable with my black friends it was not ok in halls. I was one of 7 black students in a hall of 300 students.”

“The security in Halls would always ask me for my ID every time I went in with a group of black students.”

“My issue at Imperial is that students don’t seem to get that what some of what they consider to be freedom of speech is actually insensitive racism ... white people blackening their face in fancy dress and saying the N word ... staff do not take this seriously.”

“One particular student that has been reported on many occasions for racial incidents, and thought it was acceptable to call me the ‘N’ word. There was an altercation, when it was passed on to a member of staff it was not treated seriously.”

“Whilst working on a project with peers, a black student who was struggling with his group came into class and found a banana on his desk, he shared this with the group and one of his white team mates referred to the incident as “rubbish”, he was then asked why he was not eating the banana. The incident was reported to a staff member and nothing was done.”

“On the ACS group chat, it was flagged out that a person from the finance society had been posting racist comments on their social media.... We wrote an email reporting it to her department, but all we received were excuses regarding the post.”

“My black professor was asked by the staff in the café if he was there to fix the air conditioning.”

“I haven’t any experiences of visceral racism, I had experiences of people asking me why I speak English so well... My experiences came from some on in a higher position, in class when we are talking about diseases in Africa, I could feel the professor looking at me and almost waiting for the answer.”

Many students said they did not believe there was any value in informing the College about racial harassment, one member of the focus group shared how s/he told a friend s/he should report it and *“s/he brushed it aside saying s/he did not believe anything would be done and that s/he had gotten used to it by now so its’s no big deal.”*

Students said they had reported many times to staff within departments of incidents of racial abuse and in many cases hard evidence was provided such as racist remarks on Facebook, and specifically after the murder of George Floyd. However, they felt that due to the lack of any protocol or reporting recording process the seriousness of the incidents were minimised and normalised as banter, humour or denied as racially motivated.

One student reported that in response to ‘Black Lives Matter’ the college published statements departmentally informing students’ if they needed support and guidance to contact the ACS. Another response from a Wellbeing Officer when asked by a student for her justification of not sharing anything to support the BLM movement stated; *“s/he didn’t have much knowledge regarding it and didn’t want to alienate other students.”* Student’s expressed their disappointment with the college/ departments lack of response or communication to students regarding George Floyd’s death and the subsequent events that followed. They felt an opportunity was missed to engage with, offer support, empathy and collectively show solidarity with the global humanitarian conversations for racial justice.

3. Diversity of the Curriculum

The curriculum, the content of programmes and preparation for fieldwork and placements raised concerns for all the students who participated within the focus groups. They reported that the focus was Eurocentric, omitting any references, historical context or contributions from black physicists, designers, medical doctors etc. A student reported that within the geology department its exploitative history of mining in Africa has never been discussed or given any space within the curriculum.

A medical student on placement in a GP surgery reported experiencing racist comments from patients, s/he felt demoralised and insulted by these comments and ill equipped to respond to them within a professional context.

The lack of placement preparation in terms of guidance on complaints and support around preventing and effectively dealing with racial harassment highlights this colour-blind approach to the differing realities of black students in the field. The BMA medical student committee has said the most common racist incidents raised by black students include patients refusing to be treated by them. They have found that many responses from medical schools in relation to racial harassment see it as separate, as one-off incidents rather than a problem with the institution. (BMJ investigation 'Are medical schools turning a blind eye to racism?' :12 February 2020).

One student reported that on the one occasion s/he decided to share her/his experience of racial abuse whilst at work placement s/he was discouraged from raising it; *"don't do it, it is bad being a student it's hard to know how to deal with racial abuse."*

Another student shared; *"As a medic, I always expect those racist comments, I approach with caution as I don't know how they will react to me."*

"In a GP placement, I could see the differential treatment between me and a white student."

"As Ph.D. students' we are expected to attend many conferences, being the only black person in my department, I am used to being 'othered'... On one occasion, I had an overseas conference and gave a presentation, unfortunately I ran over time, I was not allowed to finish my presentation even though everybody else was". This impacted upon the student's confidence making he/her feel negative about themselves in relation to giving presentations as the only black person." S/he did not report this as s/he did not want this ascribed to *"something else"* as she put it; *"I felt quite crap on how my presentation went."*

Students commented on the class divide within the courses, they said that white students are mainly from private / public schools and either know each other or have a collegiate resonance which gets reinforced in study groups and friendship groups. Having unequal access to recruiters in the business world and opportunities for employment often have differentiated outcomes for black students.

One student reported that when she was speaking on the phone to a recruiter it went well and s/he felt s/he had secured an offer, however, when they met her in person s/he said, *"his face dropped and looked shocked,"* and s/he did not hear again from them.

Students felt the teaching around diversity, race and racism was non-existent to minimal and any understanding around the concept of decolonising the curriculum was abstract and limited. Students reflected that the question we posed about decolonising the curriculum would be a good question to present to the academic staff as they saw little evidence of any thought on this. Learning resources reflected the white majority and lecturers had to be reminded from black students of the lack of diversity and representation.

"Coming from Kenya I intend to have (at least part of my career) back home and not a single one of my readings, case studies or tasks have involved the African continent except for one brief example based in Nigeria given in my strategy class. Also, being on a programme that requires lots of group work and in class participation, I believe it has disadvantaged me not having that context that most students from the European / Asian countries have when working through a case study that is based on companies or working environments that they are familiar with."

The isolation and exclusion in classes further compounds the disengagement in the classroom, with black students choosing not to go into lectures; *“I know I won't engage with other students in the same way that they engage with each other (especially in classes where I know there'll be lots of 'okay discuss this with the person next to you' for 5 minutes) and these are usually the classes I end up doing worse in overall. In group discussions, I have also noticed there are times I will say something and it doesn't resonate but when someone else in the team says the same thing, suddenly it is a good idea.”*

In a psychology lecture around intelligence, the images the lecturer used displaying different types of intelligence such as spatial, musical, kinaesthetic, all had images of white men. The student reported that the lecturer failed to recognise the lack of race and gender parity and thought it was a varied slide, failing to appreciate these limitations. After s/he received the comments from students, s/he changed the slide.

“There is a big petition from medical students regarding dermatology and skin tones, medical students are not taught about other skin conditions – this has impact for exams and mis-diagnosis.”

This issue was shared by several students, and for them demonstrated the whiteness of their teaching and training, reinforcing to them their non-existence.

Several students shared experiences of ‘the unconscious bias and active bystander training’ stating it was superficial and not given the priority, status and seriousness across their cohort. The training did not focus or give much attention to race and racism and in fact white participants own misconceptions on race were given a platform to legitimise their racist responses and students in the focus groups felt these were not sufficiently challenged.

“It is ridiculous as you have to spoon-feed the information to white students and even then, it was diluted as disability was also part of the training.”

“Training is needed that solely focuses on race and racism, otherwise race always gets side-tracked and taken over, we need strong trainers too.”

“I did not think the training was beneficial.... There was a superficial mindset of we do the training twice and that means we have addressed the discrimination and racism and students will adopt that behaviour and it will be fine.”

“In an event about race and diversity, the conversation got derailed as a white student started talking about affirmative action in America and how it is not fair that black people are given privilege to the entrance at work and school.”

“I come from a background in terms of education where there was diversity... it is interesting to see how different places responded to issues of race... Imperial is not on my list as the best way to respond to issues of race and racism.”

The students were clear that *“lumping diversity and inclusion issues together”* was inappropriate and race and racism needed to be responded distinctively.

4. Assessment and grading

The isolation, marginalisation, nature and extent of racial harassment, and lack of diversity within the curriculum has a considerable impact on the confidence, self-esteem, safety and sense of belonging these students have in studying at Imperial. These factors then impact and contribute to low levels of engagement within the curriculum, attainment and progression to postgraduate study.

The following quotes from students articulate the view and experience of many of the students in the focus groups with regards to the assessment and grading.

“You come to university with the same level /grade as your white colleagues, but when you leave the likelihood is to finish with a lower grade, the impact of negative experiences effects your confidence. My friend who had a banana placed on his/her desk said s/he had other incidents from the white peers, being excluded from small group working as well as his/her work not acknowledged or appreciated. You don’t get into Imperial unless you are Imperial material, for some BAME students to be performing poorly is a direct result of these incidents that affect confidence.”

“My colleague and I got marked down lower than expected and my friend felt it was because he was black.”

“I always wondered what the impact of putting my name in a piece of work if my name is African... am I getting an African mark.”

In terms of academia specifically I can relate to underachieving, as coming from South London, I had to take upon myself to do well so I can get into Imperial... Once I am in Imperial, who can ask for support when I can’t see anybody who looks like me? Having to ask for help is already very difficult?”

I study engineering and my friend and my black friend used the skeleton of another colleague (white) report to write our own. We got lower marks and he got first class... we tried to raise this but nothing ever came of it.”

“Another issue I would like to make in relation to racism, the assessment, appeals process and the process of challenging the mark you are given. If you do not agree with the mark you have been given or want additional feedback...I have difficulties with my department. I often feel as though I am shut down. The appeals process is general, is sort of set up to discourage students from even doing it. It’s an issue for black students because we are already at a disadvantage, we need faith that we can challenge our grades if we feel they have been unfairly awarded.”

“The attainment gap is continually being perpetuated in a system that already disadvantages you, and an appeal system that is set up to discourage you.”

“There are times that I have chosen not to use mitigating circumstances, as I was worried and knew what the response would be.”

5. Student thoughts on way forward

5.1 Staff training and embedded race equality on teaching programmes

The journey that Imperial is undertaking to achieve the Race Equality Charter, has highlighted the need for a change in culture and an institutional message that the issue of race and racism will be dealt with as part of a wider organisational strategic plan. Students within these focus groups suggested staff training is essential for all members of staff. They identified that this needs to sit alongside race equality teaching incorporated into their curricula. There was a desire for facilitated discussions and the space to discuss racism within their programmes and more widely in the College. The students were very critical of the active bystander training they received, as they felt it did not address the level of and institutional nature of racism.

Students felt that the academic departments and College leadership was not representative of the diversity of London and black students. A greater focus was needed to ensure that the conditions in which students are learning reinforce a sense of belonging and affirmation of their racial identity and place in history. The recruitment and promotion of black staff is imperative for this process to succeed as well as white academic staff who are prepared to engage with reflection and an appraisal of their own whiteness and power, they wield in relation to this.

“In terms of attainment, we might feel less comfortable in accessing support... there are things that I wanted to talk about with my personal tutor but didn't feel comfortable. I study engineering and I am aware that my background is underrepresented in that industry, a big part of how I make my decision is the level of diversity and inclusion exists within the workplace. I don't feel I can have conversation with my white tutor as they don't understand it”

“Staff being more attuned to how behaviour that appears to be harmless can be damaging in the long term mean they can support their students better and it will prevent people accidentally participating in these microaggressions”.

5.2 Racial Harassment and Hate speech

Creating a climate of zero tolerance towards racial harassment / racial abuse and hate speech, responding to incidents and escalating them within a policy with clear outcomes, disciplinary process and procedures, will change the culture from compliance and inaction to justice and respect.

“Jokes that have racial undertones, that call upon harmful racial stereotypes giving rise to inappropriate actions should have clear consequences that both staff and students can follow. These incidents should be recorded and analysed to inform strategic interventions.”

“It does not address how seemingly well-meaning compliments about your hair, and accompanying hand to touch it, reinforces the feeling of being the “other / outsider / exotic.”

Students identified the potential need for additional training or a coaching style model for the Wellbeing representatives within each department. They said this would bolster their confidence and reassurance in reporting incidents of racial harassment. In doing so they can provide a service that is responsive and reflective of student's needs.

Students also identified support and equal access to mental health services that can respond to their lived experience of racism and that all staff are available and feel equipped and confident to discuss these issues and create open dialogue.

5.3 Curriculum

The students welcomed the review of Henry De La Beche and recognition of his role in the slave trade, whilst at the same time acknowledging his generosity to the department. They felt it was critical that all students had a complete understanding of the context and history in engineering and mining with its connections to imperialism, exploitation of Africa and the slave trade.

Decolonising the curriculum requires a comprehensive examination with academic staff leading in responsibility to consider and reflect on the connections that each of their disciplines and areas of expertise has within this context.

“I never had a black lecturer; I am used to that... In terms of the science industry in general, you can see it in the lecture as the only time your ethnicity is mentioned is when we are talking about a disease from Africa.”

This demonstrates the need of providing context and closer examination of the way teaching and learning is constructed that addresses the negative and problematised presence of black people and Africa in this case. The needs of white students for a curriculum that responds to the questions on race that includes an interactive learning environment was emphasised by the black students.

“When BLM (Black Life Matters) came out it became very clinical... my friends started reading books about it... I felt that reading books will not make you understand it.”

“One of my friends said I was an amazing black woman and asked for book recommendations.”

The impact of being excluded and disengaged in a variety of ways from the curriculum has negative consequences for black students in terms of their assessments and grades.

“Imperial could adopt a more robust strategic approach to tackling the attainment gap – gathering and scrutinising data in a far more comprehensive way than they may currently be doing, to inform discussions between university leaders, academics and students. Reviewing the complaints procedure in light of racial harassment and racial abuse, and adopting clear policies and protocols in relation to transparency and accountability to race equality.”

5.4 Relationships in the learning environment

Students identified that the teaching and learning environment was not always inclusive and supportive of them. Cases of hate speech and racial harassment had been reported to staff with no direct response or impact to the black students. They suggested that lecturers become more proactive and aware of the dynamics within the learning environment, providing an authority and safe keeping of respectful boundaries and etiquettes. Preparing students from the realities of racism within the field and giving them access to support and protocols that are enshrined within the policy and procedures of the College and appropriate legislation.

Students suggested that teaching staff could use different styles and methods within the delivery of the curriculum providing openings and use references of the diversity and experience of black communities, pair work, mixing groups, small group discussions and approaches to engage more participation and inclusivity.

“When I know, I will feel isolated in my classes, I chose not to go for lectures because I know I won’t engage with other students in the same way they engage with each other and these are in classes I end up doing worse overall.”

5.5 Student Support and Outreach

Black students reported feeling isolated and marginalised in terms of not seeing themselves represented within the college and or positive role models within the staff teams. The creation of a mentoring / buddying support system for BAME students through their life at College could help them navigate and affirm themselves within the College community. It was suggested in particular for new and overseas students whose aspirations of attending a prestigious university could be shaken at the lack of visibility and self-affirmation of black students.

Students suggested making stronger links with the community in the form of outreach to local schools and colleges, and the increased use of visiting lecturers who are active within the professional field.

“Despite the difficulty and disparity between black representation within Imperial College and the community in London, some suggestions of outreach could include: outreach event with schools who’s have diverse populations and schools who serve the poorer socio-economic backgrounds; clear roadmap for how all students could become staff within the departments and an active commitment to recruiting black staff at all levels.”

“If you do not have a good experience a sense of community it’s very hard to keep going... I get involved in mentoring new students so they feel part of a community.”

References

1)The Equality and Human Rights Commission: Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged 23 October 2019 – The report presents the findings to the inquiry into publicly funded universities in England, Scotland and Wales.

2)The British Medical Association (BMA), highlighted in the launch of their charter to medical schools to “prevent and effectively deal with racial harassment.”

A Charter for medical schools to prevent and address racial harassment 2019

3) British Medical Journal; “An investigation are medical schools turning a blind eye to racism? (12 February 2020).