Staff Focus Groups Report
Imperial College

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Content

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

Two staff focus groups were held one with Black staff and one open to all staff. These were held on 09/10/20 and 04/11/20 respectively. Overall, there were 14 black staff and 5 white staff who attended the two groups. Some follow up email communication was received in addition to the focus groups. The staff who participated in the focus groups all had experiences of racism, or shared experiences of black staff and students facing racism.

This report is grouped under themes forming central elements of the nature of institutional racism at Imperial College and its impact on staff and students.

1) **Staff recruitment, retention and promotion**.

The representation of Black and racial minority staff within Imperial College is significantly low and not representative of a prestigious institution with global significance. Although Black and racial minority staff reported that some departments were very friendly and on the whole positive places to work the representation of Black staff was significantly low, and departments were described as *"very white especially at higher levels"*. Staff described Imperial College as being white and students recruited by A- level routes from private schools and colleges perpetuated this reality. One staff member reported that over the last six years only four PhD black students have been recruited within a department and they had raised concerns regarding racial and geographic disparities at all levels.

"I have been told I am too 'Urban' to apply for some jobs"

"To our knowledge, there has only been one black British research student in the last six years. I feel this reflects the lack of diversity in the system more broadly, but it seems to be particularly compounded within DIDE/SPH.

There was also a general concern about the paucity of BAME staff at senior levels and staff expressed a lack of belonging, feeling separate and outside the departments culture and norms. Staff expressed a feeling of being temporary, not foreseeing themselves as having a long-term future. Unlike white staff who they saw as structurally positioned within the departments as insiders and granted the benefits of belonging and automatically given unearned advantages. The majority white culture set

the policies and practices which include a location of structural advantage that all staff adhere to and reinforce.

"I have been with Imperial for five years and I have seen the subtleties that have been happening. There is diversity in some departments but in terms of career progression, we are not going anywhere, there are many excuses as to why we are not progressing. But when you see that exceptions are made for people of non- colour you begin to question yourself. There is a pattern, the 'Imperial expectations' – you need to act and behave in a certain way".

"The Career progression for Black and Ethnic Minority staff at Imperial is blocked by the culture as you need to act and behave in certain way-no visible understanding about promotion process- they promote white people who are not necessarily capable and create space and training for them -black staff are overlooked".

"They talk about being inclusive and get rid of discrimination but, yet they do it in such a subtle way – people of colour are not having any career progression".

"There is a lack of visibility over promotions, on a couple of occasions, white people who do not have the capacity to be in a position are in the position, but space has been made for them, yet someone like me I am overlooked even when promotions arise".

"Most people that got made redundant were black women".

"Imperial college colour blind approach treating everything in the same way …Do what you want to do as long as it does not affect us …. if it turns out to be a good thing, we can claim it after and put it under our umbrella".

The Black staff interviewed said that they do not feel that "Black African voices are valued" and "they do not think that there is a genuine willingness within departments to acknowledge and address this. Participants cited a lack of Black presence and visibility within departments, the disparities in authorship, leadership and in particular within departments that engage with global health.

"This is striking because a bulk of the department's work involves diseases affecting the global South, this erasure of collaborators from the global south sends clear messages that Black people are only good for gathering data. There is perceived hierarchy between these collaborators

on the ground and the technical skills/ expertise that is valued within departments. These issues are widespread amongst global health as a field".

This lack of representation also impacted significantly upon undergraduates and master's students from Black communities perusing PhDs and research careers. Black staff were concerned that Black Students studying at Masters' level were not aware of the access points into PhD study and were put off by the increased levels of student debt. A suggestion was made that the departments could do targeted outreach to promote the programmes to generate interest and bridge this gap.

2) Inclusivity and diversity.

Black staff reported that although Imperial College and the departments purported to be inclusive, promote diversity, upholding and following policy and procedures, the impact upon their lived and professional experience was the opposite. They did not feel included or secure which resulted in them becoming hyper vigilant *"having to keep their guard up so that they weren't misunderstood"* or the racial nuances were made explicit. The staff shared experiences of HR investigations and a fear of job insecurity.

"In the department I work, there are few people from BAME backgrounds, so I have to be careful because any confrontation will come back at me. Since I have started, three women from ethnic background have left one in particular left because she felt it was the only solution. She had such a difficult time and the job insecurity and the impact upon her mental health. She told me her line manager asked her very personal and sensitive questions, she tried to change herself as she did not want to be perceived as the angry black woman".

"There is a need for more work to be done within departments on biases and perceptions, there are people who have never had interactions with black people. There is a perception that staff are employed because of who they know".

"In my interview as a young black woman, I had only older white men on the panel, at the time it did not bother me as I felt it was easier to assimilate into what they expect of me. If your interview is only white men, it's indicative of what your department will be".

"You have to conform to what they want you to conform with… it's like they are constantly pressing your buttons".

"We don't have an opportunity to be ourselves".

"As people of colour we are constantly switching its exhausting".

The impact on staff mental health and well-being was clearly affected by working in these environments alongside there being no-where these issues can be reported, or someone staff can receive support from.

3) Experiences of racial harassment and racial abuse.

Black staff reported experiences of both overt and covert racism within departments. When they challenged or suggested alternative understandings the common response from white colleagues included anger, withdrawal, emotional distancing, guilt, argumentation and a dissonance that precluded any direct accountability.

Key themes within the focus groups were Black people being treated as perpetrators and victims to stereotyping.

> - An example was given regarding a woman who was a victim of sexual assault inside the college, she was treated as a perpetrator of aggressive behaviour and not the victim of sexual assault.
> - A black woman said she tries to change the way she is so that she is not perceived as the angry black woman.
> - Lack of actions and consequences against racial harassment and racist bullying even when reported
> - Complaints were made about the procedural responses outlined in policy not being followed or adhered to.
> - Lack of recognition of the impact of racism upon the emotional and mental health of staff.

"There is a lack of any actions against perpetrators of racism and bullying at Imperial … I know mangers that have had complaints made against them for racial harassment and nothing was done".

"When I walk around the college it shocks me on how white it is. There are certain ethnic groups that people have conceived stereotypes regarding the subjects they would be good at and comments such as you are really normal for a black man".

"There are ethnic people here that are just invisible, when I first started my department it was diverse, over time it has become white especially white women".

"I have experience of covert racism recently when working on my research, my research was not mentioned in the press, I am worried I won't have anyone supporting my fellowship. This means I won't be allowed to progress in my career I just want to scream but then again you can't show emotions because you are being angry".
The problem in Imperial is that your line manager is your boss…I had to change my line manager and I was told that due to loss of funding the project was going to be stopped. On the last day I was asked to teach a white man everything about the project, it was not a shock for the white man that I would be passing all the information about the project on to him".

There is a shutdown mentality to key issues such as representation in the department and we are representing students that come to study at Imperial".

"I stared in 2007 and my experience in the beginning has been very good… Things started to go wrong when I changed line manager… I have been put in a lower level and my current line manager is hesitant to accept my competencies and accused me of plagiarizing someone's work… he had gone on holidays without supporting my application for a promotion… I have been struggling a lot as I am the only BAME staff"

"My line manager doesn't like me applying for funding to run new projects"

"My line managers are always pestering me and at some the point I had members of staff shouting at me, I have reported it, but nothing was done… I am considered a problem in the department… he wants to get rid of me".

4) Marginalisation of Black staff

Black staff reported they felt marginalised, often vulnerable within a system that they felt didn't not afford them equal security as their white counterparts. The testimonies from black staff describe this:

➢ One staff member said out of 200 staff only one is Black.
➢ Making contributions from a minority position invokes feelings of insecurity any negative backlash or disagreement becomes

localised within the Black individual and vulnerable to scrutiny based upon stereotypes.
- ➢ Staff feel insecure and lack trust within fairness of line management. One staff gave an example of a Black women leaving due to the line manager and needing mental health support.

When Black staff were asked in the focus groups what do they think should happen in response to their experience of racism, harassment and marginalisation the general conclusion was: more accountability, transparency of the racially coded languages that reproduces racist images and perspectives whilst simultaneously reproducing the comfortable illusion that race and its problems is located in the other.

"They need to start dismantling the institutional racism that they have built".

"Be honest don't make assumptions".

"Make a long-term commitment to change institutions"

"More transparency to the numbers in terms of diversity in the departments".

"Consult the community hear us".

"Bi-Yearly meetings addressing the issues".

"There is a need for a central HR. the line managers seem to have all the power"

"More transparency in HR".

"Some managers do not show any interest in taking part in workshops … its mostly a thinking box tick exercise".

"We need to make institutions more accountable some people just want to maintain the status quo".

5) Leading and taking responsibility on race and racism

In the dialogue around the Black Lives Matter movement and the discourse around racism and whiteness within Imperial College, Black staff reflected upon the expectation white colleagues had of them in taking

the initiative and lead on the developments with regard to race. The centrality of whiteness and the institutionalisation of racism supports the inertia of white staff and the comfortable positions they hold, this further reflects white staff inaction to open up and explore themselves as white.

"As a person of colour starting that conversation (about race) is second nature to me, but when I am around colleagues that are mostly white Europeans, it is quite uncomfortable to have those conversations… considering that we are working with outreach, we are meant to be quite openminded and willing to have those discussions"

"Across the college, just looking around how things tend to be when dealing with race   issues, it tends to be very difficult…"

"You have to conform to what they want you to conform with… It is like they are constantly pressing your buttons"

"We don't have the opportunity to be ourselves"

"As people of colour, we are constantly switching "

"My line managers are always pestering me and at some the point I had members of staff shouting at me, I have reported it, but nothing was done… I am considered a problem in the department… he wants to get rid of me"

"One of the key issues I have identified is having the discussion regarding increasing participation from underrepresented groups… People finding it very uncomfortable when you mention race and ethnicity"

"There is a shutdown mentality to key issues such as representation in the department and are we representing students that come to study here"

"Across the college, just looking around how things tend to be when dealing with race issues, it tends to be very difficult…"

"I have used a benchmark regarding the conversations I had 12 months ago, against conversations I had since the black lives matter movement… 12 months ago, my suggestions or feedbacks were not taking seriously… fast forward 12 months there is now an impetus to change that… Because it is in the public eye, so it is time to do it"

"I made an assumption that this school would do something regarding black history month, then I realized it wasn't happening" …. the problem that I have is that because I am passionate about representation, I have become the person "to go to" with everything to do with race… I get to say if something is black enough and culturally enough… It is fantastic that voices are being heard, but there is a problem where you became the poster person".

Black staff are structurally positioned as the problem and solution of matters relating to race and racism and therefore are ultimately held responsible for providing solutions and recommendations. This is premised on the disadvantage and invisibility of white staff in engaging with race and racism.

6) Proposed solutions from staff.

- ➢ Active recruitment of BAME staff and increased opportunities for PhD Students in teaching and research
- ➢ Accountability and strong leadership on race from senior staff members and managers
- ➢ Inclusion and Diversity policies to be reviewed
- ➢ Staff training programme on race and racism
- ➢ Human Resources to hold staff and managers to account and start to listen to the experiences of Black staff.
- ➢ White staff to open up and see the part they can play in developing diversity within Imperial College.
- ➢ Scoping out access and routes in for students from BAME communities
- ➢ There is a need for a central HR team that maintains transparency and authority and leadership in relation to the line managers who hold all the power
- ➢ A review of reporting processes and procedures in relation to racial harassment and racial abuse