



Racism and Decolonisation at Cardiff University:

A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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“It's not a rotten apple. It's like the rotten tree with rotten roots.”

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The research for this report was conducted between 2022-2023, and an initial draft was written in August 2023. The time between data collection, drafting, and publication of the report reflects the rigour with which the authors wanted to engage with ongoing efforts to address inequality within the university. Hence, the current version has been updated to include recent policy changes at the University of Cardiff. To maintain the intellectual and ethical honesty of the research, this report is an independent scholarly opinion based on the research expertise of the authors and is not to be confused with an institutional position about 'decolonisation' and 'racism' at Cardiff University.

*All names have been changed to protect participants' identities.

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SUMMARY

This report presents the experiences of racialised students at Cardiff University. Drawing from focus groups, survey data, and material collected from workshops, this study generates and consolidates new data on understandings of 'decolonise' work – both what is needed and what it means – across the University student body. The data collected outlines elevated levels of isolation, mistrust, silencing, and feelings of instrumentalisation by students in relation to the University, and the perception that Cardiff University is a Eurocentric institution was common across our different data sets. Overall, racialised students consider Cardiff to be a racist institution in terms of its curriculum, treatment of students of colour, lack of representation of diverse voices, apathy from staff in senior roles regarding experiences of racism, to name a few of the issues raised.

KEY FINDINGS

EUROCENTRISM

- Students find that while issues of race, and gender are discussed these are overshadowed by Eurocentric perspectives.
- 81% of students believe that their seminars and lectures are skewed toward a Eurocentric perspective and 79% said they want to learn more about the world outside of North America, Europe, and the United Kingdom.
- 72% of students think Cardiff University needs to have an open conversation about 'decolonising' and specifically on the history of slavery, imperialism within the Welsh Context.

MISTRUST

- Students were deeply mistrustful of the University, including of reporting mechanisms and race equality representatives.

INSTRUMENTALISATION

- Students found that their experiences, and identities, were instrumentalised and used for the benefit of the University's reputation. Overall, students felt that the University's efforts so far have been performative and that initiatives focused on the bare 'legal' minimum.

SILENCING/SUPPRESSION OF VOICES

- Racialised students feel that they are silenced, and their lived experiences are suppressed by the University by direct or indirect means.

ISOLATION

- Students expressed an overall sense of isolation, and of not belonging to the University.

Introduction

The aims of the report are to generate and consolidate new data on understandings of 'decolonise' work - needed and what it means - by students at Cardiff University, and add evidence to the widespread feeling of isolation, mistrust, silencing, and instrumentalisation experienced by racial minority students.

Since 2016, Cardiff University had been under pressure to address racism within the institution (more below). In October 2021, the University issued an official response where it committed itself to review and improve its practices and become an actively anti-racist institution. The present study arose from these identified needs of Cardiff University.

As lecturers who specialise in critical scholarship, we developed this project as preliminary research that would help us identify 'decolonise' and anti-racist initiatives across the University as well as student and staff perceptions on these topics. In other words, we wanted to assess the initiatives that had arisen in the institution in recent years and gain some understanding of how staff and students perceive the University.

However, two issues drove the research to focus on students' experiences and perceptions. First, once the research began, it became clear that racialised students at Cardiff sought a space to speak about their experiences and required sustained support. Second, we encountered a substantial lack of understanding about race and the legislation that aims to protect minorities in the United Kingdom, across the institution. This lack of understanding severely impacted us, and it demonstrated that staff engagement required a lot more work than what we could offer within the scope of this project.

Considering the above, we decided to prioritise student initiatives to best safeguard our students as well as ourselves and attend to students' expectations.

**"Decolonising the university needs to go beyond the curriculum. support for students of colour needs to be holistic. dedicated and well-trained staff. extensive monetary support, etc."
(student suggestion)**

Methodology

The research was carried out between February and June 2023. This report is based on data collected from:

- a) one **online survey** comprised of closed-ended questions, collected from a total of 94 students, across the University;
- b) four **focus groups** comprised of semi-structured questions with self-identified racialised students, attended by 15 students;
- c) and two **workshops** led by external partners (the first open to students, and the second, open to staff and students, attended by 53 people).

The project sought to capture student perceptions and ideas of belonging to Cardiff University, focusing on racialised students. This means that the research prioritised students who are considered 'racialised minorities', i.e. race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion, as research has shown that these groups are underrepresented in higher education student and staff body, thus their thoughts are likely to be underrepresented, too.

Aiming to address this inequality, we adopted decolonial methodologies, and Black Feminist, and critical race theory that centre perception and experience, and place students as knowledge producers. As such, our research encompassed an online survey that captured overall perceptions across the student body along with focus groups where racialised students could amplify their network of care, express their experiences, and, crucially, collectively decide on the outcomes of this project. This report is based on these discussions. Students provided an informal assessment based on their group's discussions which we have incorporated into the report. The students were also given the opportunity to read through and comment on the final version of the report.

The findings in the report have been anonymised. We have also decided not to provide identifiers for the quotes. This was done both in the interest of anonymity as well as a conscious decision not to manufacture a division among the students that participated in the focus groups which seemed unnecessary for the findings. Therefore, in most cases, we provide quotes without reference to the student's background, such as home/international student, ethnicity, and degree.

We use the terminology 'students of colour', and 'racialised students' according to the students' preference rather than following the legal framework of 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' in the Government's Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan. We also recognise that the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan acknowledges the importance for communities to identify themselves with whatever term they choose for themselves.

BACKGROUND

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY AND ISSUES OF RACE

In 2016, a racist incident took place in the School of Medicine related to a student-led play titled, 'Anaphylaxis' that had already received informal complaints in the past for anti-blackness, misogyny and homophobia. This incident garnered public attention after students filed an official complaint along with a backlash against the eight black students who complained.

An external review that followed the incident, the Bughra Report 2017 noted that more needs to be done to diversify the curriculum, have a zero-tolerance policy against offensive stereotyping of a person – or groups of persons, and more support during complaint procedure and after as well as creating career pipeline for BAME staff members.

While the University publicly declared it accepted the recommendations, its handling of the complaints themselves was seen to be unsupportive of the students and further alienating. It was noted in both the 2017 report and further public reporting of the incident that while numerous informal complaints were made, only one, led by a student and their parent, led to action by the then Vice-Chancellor who invited the independent expert panel.

From the students' perspective, the University's response and lack of safeguarding for the complainants (The Guardian 2017, and The BMJ 2020), were inadequate. A member of staff went as far as sending an email identifying the students who made the complaint, referring to the play as 'tradition' and the students' reaction as 'very and unduly sensitive'.

While the University said they were unaware of the email, for the students who complained this led to 'bullying' and what some described as social 'segregation' based on their race. This is noted both in public reporting (Guardian, 2017) as well as an independent report written by a former Student Union Vice President for Welfare and Campaign (Cardiff University's institutional racism).

THE UNIVERSITY'S RESPONSE

The Bhugra report as well as the Student Union Report, noted how the eight black students who complained were not given an 'apology'. As the SU report explains, the University asked the eight students who complained to come to a specific room at a specific time where they would be given an apology letter which they needed to read and sign a disclaimer, under supervision. They were not given access to their phone and were constantly supervised, and the apology letter was signed by twenty-six of the thirty-two students who participated in the play.

The thirty-two students who participated in the play were suspended from lab work and returned to complete their degrees. None of the eight complainants finished their degrees, citing the incident, the backlash following their complaint, and the lack of support from the University*.

In Linda Adey's investigation for the BBC3 documentary, "Is Uni Racist?" (BBC3, 2021) one of the complainants from Cardiff University talked about a lack of care and the feeling that they were never given a meaningful apology. Adey's investigation also included a Freedom of Information Request's (FOI) to different universities in the UK to reveal the number of incidents reporting racism. Out of a total of 140, only 93 universities responded to the FOI request. **Cardiff University had the 3rd highest number of reported cases of racism.**

The University's inadequate response, increased calls for anti-racist actions and led to the University being turned down for a Race Equality Charter Mark in 2018 (Wales Online 2018). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests reignited these critiques, and in 2021 the University called in Professor Dinesh Bhugra for a follow-up post 5-year review (Bhugra, 2021).

SOLUTION WITHOUT STUDENTS?

The 2021 Bhugra report acknowledged that the University is undergoing an organisational restructuring through the establishment of an Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) office, as well as an EDI structure that centralises equality work. The report further alluded to 'decolonising the curriculum' being carried out across schools and the need to support these initiatives as well as further work to be done in hiring BAME staff, and to communicate best practices across different schools through proper communication.

This last suggestion of centralisation builds on and refers to the University's strategy document published in 2020 (Race Equality Strategy), which takes an Equalities Act and Public Action Duty approach to race equality..

This strategy is based entirely on tackling the issue of racism through the prism of 'protected categories'. It further suggests broad-stroke aims of, a) student well-being, inclusion, and learning; b) staff recruitment and progress; c) accessible digital and physical environment for individual needs; and d) a governance structure based on Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

The Race Equality Strategy sets up the creation of an EDI structure that flows from schools to colleges, placing the head of EDI and the governance body as the central figures for handling complaints. As of August 2023, the 'race equality section' on Cardiff University's website - curiously also adds the contact of 'risk and compliance' with no justification within the report or explanation as to its use or purpose to advance race equality.

While the strategy report emphasizes building structures for collecting data informed by student and staff involvement - it has not provided more since the release of the report either in ways of actions or data.

The most recent iteration of race equality strategy for 2024-2028 gives a framework incorporating key themes of belonging, equality and contribution. Currently, this is the latest and only centralised policy tackling issues of racism within Cardiff. In many ways, except discursively, it appears similar to the previous strategy plan, maintaining its focus on 'Equalities Law. While the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan is mentioned, some of the key themes of the devolved policy that are critical of the Equalities Act, particularly on the importance of a 'lived experience' approach are still absent in the University's policy.

TRUST AND VOCABULARY

As this report reveals, the approach by the institution (its strategy and structures) has some fundamental issues. First, data collection requires a high level of 'trust' and openness that the institution is presuming. It also requires a clear acknowledgement of 'lived realities' that do not neatly fit within its current approach of 'protected characteristics' and the legal vocabulary of compliance. In sum, centralisation assumes that students and staff trust the institution to handle a complaint well. It also assumes common grounding on what is considered 'racist' that is consistent with those who experience racism.

The deeper issue with the University policy across the years is a fundamental misunderstanding of 'equality'. Specifically, that 'race' or 'equality' broadly means everyone is treated 'equally' rather than developing equity to address historically systemic marginalisation of certain communities/groups of people. Equating the discomfort of learning about colonialism or discussing genocide to facing racial violence that is 'anti-black' or dehumanises Palestinian students/staff is a clear example of this gross and fundamental misunderstanding.

For substantial future action, it is of the essence that Cardiff University's commitment to data collection is not foreshadowed by fear of reputational damage, of changing its institutional culture. It is similarly important that the institution aligns its understanding of racism and issues of race to that of those it claims to protect. Before even beginning to think of a 'framework', or attempt to collect data, a more grounded approach to understanding, opening up, and being honest about student perceptions is necessary.

This report is based on principles guided by decolonial methodology, Black Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory, which follow practices of safeguarding, trust, courage, care, and respect for 'lived experiences' and the students 'narratives'. Our report draws from recent leading scholarship on Racism and Higher Education led by students and staff (often in collaboration) to frame the issue in the first place. Some examples that have led to institutional shifts are, "Insider-Outsider" by Sofia Akel (2019) on Goldsmith University, and notably a report/manifesto that led to an award of a charter mark for the University of Kent - UoK Manifesto (2019).

FINDINGS

Student Perceptions

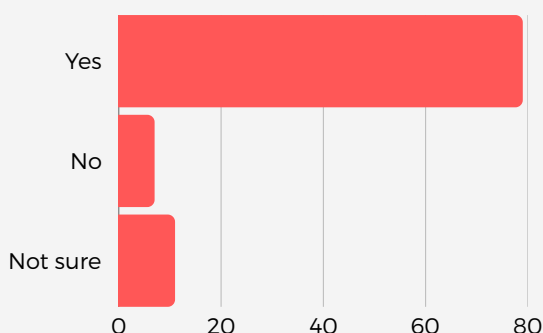
The findings of this research evidence how students across Cardiff University perceive the institution as Eurocentric and desire a curriculum that is more representative of the global majority, and that engages with the question of colonialism in Wales, regardless of their racial identification. The research with racialised students unveiled a large level of mistrust in the institution, and feelings of instrumentalisation, silencing, and isolation. These findings detailed below provide a snapshot of the students' perception, with a particular focus on racialised students experience.

The findings in the report have been anonymised. We have also decided not to provide identifiers for the quotes. This was done both in the interest of anonymity as well as a conscious decision not to manufacture a division among the students that participated in the focus groups which seemed unnecessary for the findings. Therefore, in most cases, we provide quotes without reference to the student's background, such as home/international student, ethnicity, and degree.

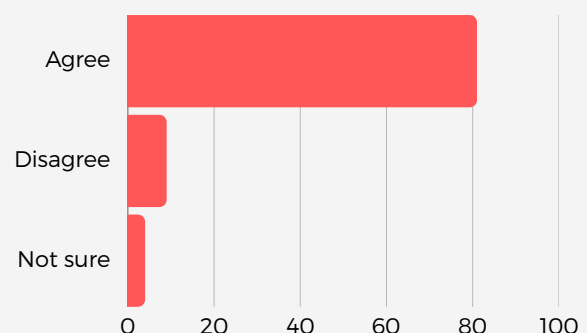
EUROCENTRISM

Eurocentrism at Cardiff University was the most prominent issue raised in the survey. Most students (81%) believe that at least some modules are skewed toward a Eurocentric perspective, and 79% said they want to learn more about global issues outside of North America, Europe, and the United Kingdom. It is worth noting that decolonising the curriculum was one of the recommendations made by the independent expert report in 2017, which was agreed in toto by Cardiff University.

I WANT TO LEARN ABOUT GLOBAL ISSUES OUTSIDE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM, EUROPE, AND NORTH AMERICA.



I THINK SOME MODULES ARE SKEWED TOWARDS AN EUROCENTRIC PERSPECTIVE



Considering the result of the survey, it is not surprising that the idea that the teaching at Cardiff University is Eurocentric was common among the students who participated in the focus groups.

“On the first day of uni., I was really surprised about how white-dominated our course was.”

“I’m surprised by the curriculum. I’m surprised by the general ignorance and interactions I have had.”

In relation to the **curriculum**, some students complained about core modules having an exclusively European focus either by design or because the lecturers lack expertise. This was true even for modules or courses that had the word ‘international’ in their title.

“But he's not putting anything outside of Europe on the sheet. And so whenever, like, in our seminars, I start talking about Kenya or Congo or whatever, everyone is so confused, because no one knows. But it's all current. [...] This would be perfect for our essays. For that deeper analysis, but it's not been touched.”

[student about a module supposed to address international issues]

“The stuff that we learn about it's very Eurocentric, and there's an acknowledgement of the Eurocentrism [in the discipline], but there's never like the next step forward. So, what are we going to do about that?”

[student from the Natural Sciences]

“The modules are so selective and so Eurocentric; I find myself so restricted. Say I would have interest in European politics, I would have so many resources but if my interests were Middle Eastern or Asian politics in general, there aren't resources available”.

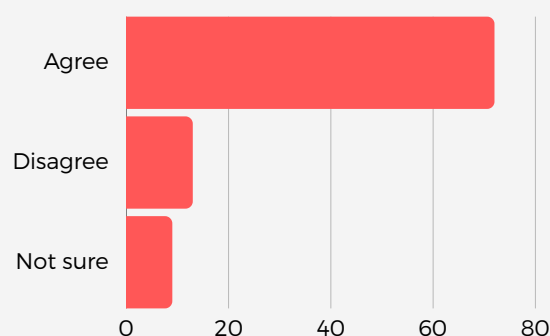
“But in terms of people here, especially in my School [Law and Politics], I don't think they have any perspective on anything that is outside of Europe.”

WALES AND COLONIALISM

Students' overall perception is that Cardiff University must do more to discuss Wales and colonialism. From the survey, 72% of students think 'Cardiff University needs to have an open conversation about Wales, its history of racism, its role in imperialism and the slave trade.'

In the focus groups, students who grew up in Wales shared their experiences both outside and inside the university, noting the curriculum as well as the geography of the University. In one of the workshops, staff and students who grew up in the city shared how the **location of the university**, including its plans of expansion, maintains the historical-geographical/racial segregation of the city.

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY NEEDS TO HAVE AN OPEN CONVERSATION ABOUT WALES, ITS HISTORY OF RACISM, ITS ROLE IN IMPERIALISM AND THE SLAVE TRADE



EUROCENTRISM AS VIOLENCE

The daily impact of a Eurocentric education brought up both by all students. Regardless of their country of birth and School, students discussed how the University's Eurocentric curriculum reinforces inequalities by allowing a 'wilful ignorance' about whiteness in Britain and British involvement in conflicts abroad – where some students are from.

"The UK was like was the main cause of the conflict; it was the enemy in the skies. I guess like I want a lot more people to have that awareness. To have that, I guess, education about certain issues outside their geographic region."

"Some seminars ask you if want to do something that is [related to] global problems. It's like, okay, 'but where do I fit into this subject?' So that's when you go and try and have more expansive conversation or conversations. I feel like I get that, like, disinterest, or 'I don't think I can really help you'. Like, they don't want to have that conversation in the first place."

For a student who grew up in Britain, Cardiff University is part of a continuum of experiences that privileges a white version of Britain. For the student, *"there is a wilful ignorance in that the curriculum is based on Britishness. They don't want to know anything apart from what makes a good British person in a British Society - but we are so multicultural and so diverse"*. In this context, being minoritised feels alienating and demeaning. As another student summarised, *"It's about whose knowledge is valid right?"*

INSTRUMENTALISATION

Students found that their experiences, identities, were instrumentalised and used for the benefit of the University's reputation, and profit. Overall, students felt that the University's efforts in terms of representing the perspectives and experience of the Global majority as well as of addressing racism have been performative, tick-box exercises.

"I feel like with the black community, you hear [about the University] when they want you or want you to get involved. After that, it's just [...] like they don't even give us the space."

"It's so dehumanising to be used like that. To have your anger, your blood, your sweat being pushed aside, then when they need a PR gimmick like a big ticket, they use it and take it from you - becomes their brainchild not yours."

Students spoke about the University **doing 'the bare legal' minimum**, highlighting a distrust in the institution's real intentions.

"The University will say 'I pride myself in being an ally' - an actual senior management rep. you can't just say you are an ally and not practice it in action, so we all know. If you put in action, then we know, you don't have to say you are an ally. It should come from the minoritised group to take you, because if a group doesn't take you, how can you call yourself an ally? That's literally black friending, it's what you are doing."

"You can't really tell [with Cardiff], in terms of representation, because it's very performative but I'm not sure it...like, I'm not sure it would be able to last long-term."

The feelings of instrumentalisation and mistrust was particularly prominent among black students from various backgrounds. These students were particularly critical of the University's attempt to engage with Black History Month.

"So especially during the Black History Month. It was a thing that is kind made us feel we were being used, in the sense that everyone was reaching out to us. But then it'd be like nothing. Or people would be like, 'yeah, we'll do this, and we'll do a collaboration, raise awareness.' As soon as it gets done with our portion of it, that was it. So then, for me, it came to a point where I was like, a lot of these things aren't actually being done to make change or being useful, what's the point?"

PROFITING FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

International students expressed feeling tricked during recruitment. One student from Kenya discussed the University's long-standing presence in the country where it portrays itself as the go-to destination for Kenyans wanting an internationally renowned education. Yet, international students agreed that Cardiff failed their expectations and instead of an 'international' university, they experienced an alienating one that misrepresents their countries, or completely excludes them.

All international students spoke of their experiences of being denied help by the institution once in the UK.

Some of the issues they brought up were, delays in their confirmation of study or in providing documents that severely impacted their immigration status, lack of support settling in and dealing with landlords, and, importantly, insufficient support during the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Some of my other friends were lucky enough to have family in the UK. Even though they were not in Cardiff. But then there were some people who just have no one else and they came alone; they had to come and quarantine. [...] [there was] no support from the Uni at all.”

“Coming here, the [student] support didn't help much.”

SILENCING/ SUPPRESSION OF VOICES

Overall, racialised students expressed feeling silenced by their institution, and discussed having their lived experiences suppressed by direct and indirect means.

“We wanted to do an event on Black academia, but it got cancelled because we were told that, ‘it sounds like you are cutting a lot of people off by calling it Black academia’.”

“As a student, it's not like you have a legal team, when you get told something by the University, you just have to do it.”

“There is a weird culture in Cardiff, where something used so much in a legal form is...you are discriminating against white people so you can't have this event or do this research.”

Students also recounted having their experiences in the Global South or within their communities **disregarded** or **mocked** in class by lecturers.

“She was saying everyone had different stories. I'm sorry. It's like it just came off as like we have the right to oppress others. She said there's no objective truth. [...] We were just asking the question, and they said, ‘oh, yeah’. They were very dismissive.”

[student on colonialism in their homeland]

“There was a time when she [lecturer] was talking about like racism and the white teacher but she was like, ‘Oh, I can see some people are like upset about this topic’ and laughed about it. It was serious and we were studying politics, and she could laugh about it.”

This is more than microaggressions^[1] performed by individuals. As mentioned, the normalisation of Eurocentrism means that many members of staff are not prepared to discuss race, and/or present countries in the Global South. Students experienced this as a deliberate attempt by university managers and decision-makers to marginalise questions of race and create a hostile environment for racialised students who want to apply their academic knowledge to their experience.

“I'm saying these institutions that we participate in, the structure they've built on. It's not a rotten apple. It's a rotten tree; like, the roots are rotten.”

“You can't really tell [with Cardiff], in terms of representation, because it's very performative but I'm not sure it, like, I'm not sure it [anti-racist actions] would be able to last long-term.”

RACIAL ILLITERACY

Students spoke of the need for racial literacy among staff, and efforts that go beyond ‘representation’.

“It's like, 'let's have a person of colour on an anti-racism committee' because not all skin-folk are kinfolk, right? Just simply having an identity doesn't mean you have the rights politics. So, when anti-racist committees are put together, it's very interesting who's picked and who is admin comfortable having on that committee because it often tells you they are most likely to side with admin.”

“They try to sound like they are not ignorant of it, but they are.”

MISTRUST

Mistrust in the institution and staff, including lecturers and seminar leaders, was commonly reported in the focus groups. As mentioned, students who had been in the University for longer or had had experience dealing with the University structure directly stated that they had initially not wanted to participate in our research because of previous experiences.

“I'll be real in terms of this research project, I, initially, when I got the email was not going to participate. [...] I've had a lot of people reach out, 'oh, can you do this type of research thing', and it always comes across, I feel like when it's affiliated with the university, it's always we're just going to fill in a couple of boxes that need to be ticked.”

REPORT? NO!

Worryingly, students expressed a clear mistrust in the existing mechanisms of reporting.

“When its them trying to explain my experiences to me and look at me like I'm crazy. They try to justify it and say it was a misunderstanding. No! like I'm telling you this is why! I know a lot of people at School who experience racism but don't report it because it's almost like they turn into the perpetrator and its turns into a soft interrogation. They try and say it's a safe space and just want to hear all sides, narratives can be misunderstood and questioning, what the point in continuing.”

“I am a bit disappointed to learn that the only thing that UK is better than (other countries) is hiding inequalities.”

[1] Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour” (Sue et al. 2007; Akiel 2018).

ISOLATION

Considering the above, it is not surprising that students expressed an overall sense of isolation that results from the lack of preparedness of the teaching staff to mediate discussions and teach on issues related to race, inequality, and/or the Global South; of the professional services to support racialised students; and of the University to make the necessary changes to change this picture.

“I feel like when the topic of like race comes up, they think that you're like stating an opinion, but it's not really an opinion, it's more of a fact. And then they just feel threatened by it. And kind of refuse to acknowledge they [facts] exist because they feel like you're stating your opinion.”

“I realised that when you use experiences you've had before and you use this when you speak in the seminar, and use case studies from where I'm from, I feel, like, sometimes when I say [something]... 'oh this girl again'.”

“Eurocentric curriculum makes us feel like we don't exist, like, we aren't worthy of a perspective. Because courses are taught and written by white people.”

One student had been preparing for an interview for a prestigious scholarship but when presented to previous award winners, they felt unworthy. As they put it, “I'm the only Asian face. Like, I feel like they will just see me as I'm not good enough. when they invited like past recipients of scholarships, I guess what, they're all white.”

As mentioned, students are mistrustful of the institution and find the support available to them insufficient both in terms of responsiveness as well as preparedness to factor in race. Instead of accepting Eurocentrism and denying race inequalities, students wanted more dedicated support as well as being allowed to hold spaces that centre on racialised identities for peer-support, and free discussions. The next section compiles some of recommendations for the University.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

A STUDENT-LED FRAMEWORK

“Keeping equality efforts to a legal bare minimum is unacceptable. Students of colour are worth more than the bare minimum. Otherwise, it is dehumanising and racial violence”

(Student commenting on the present university framework and race strategy)

The student group discussions overall indicated that what is missing at the most foundational level within Cardiff University is a sense of trust. Attempts at ‘data collection’ or reliance on ‘self-reporting’ ignore these aspects of racism within an institutional space. The discussions with students highlighted in this report show that qualitatively, the lived experience of students of colour at the institution is one where students are already resigned to the notion that the University does not care enough for them.

The following recommendations are not conclusive or exhaustive as a more detailed and ongoing effort needs to be made to understand and acknowledge this relationship that students have with the University. Nonetheless, these recommendations in principle and overall offer an alternative to a ‘centralised’, or ‘presumptive’ approach to student voice and collaboration. These are starting points that teaching staff, management, school/departmental and college committees or individual endeavours to ‘decolonise’ or towards ‘anti-racism’ may want to consider if they want to centre student voice or student perspective moving forward.

a. Building Trust by Ceding Space

“Priority - ensuring professionals making decisions about race are majority people of colour and bare minimum students of colour are brought onto discuss and approve the decisions as they are the ones being affected.”

Resources should be allocated for this space, and there should be minimum oversight over how students choose to manage it. Instead of a strict oversight done by management, we recommend a flexible and facilitative approach to support students' efforts. In other words, an approach that centres and encourages students, and provides support to further student voice, experience and position rather than leading or controlling the direction of the space. This 'space' can be created at departmental and college levels, allowing students to have a significant impact from the bottom up.

The Student Union (SU) is not enough. In the focus groups, students asked for a separate space because they felt that the SU does not adequately empower and represent them. Similarly, some discipline-based societies were also not seen as welcoming to racial minorities.

On the University's structural level, in our own assessment, the current governance structure does not provide a meaningful space for students.

Approaches that do not include students will not be well-received by students for the reasons highlighted above.

It is clear from the students' perspectives on 'decolonisation' and 'anti-racism' at Cardiff University that there is mistrust and a perception that any endeavour associated with the University or staff members is 'performative' and 'instrumental' and aims at advancing a positive image of the institution.

Rather than an internal, centralised structural approach to tackle EDI concerns or set up committees without any meaningful space ceded to student groups, student societies and the Student Union, more efforts should be put into creating a decentralised space for student voice and action led by and constructed by students of colour.

Such a space should empower students to question, assess and lead independent enquiries into the University's mechanisms without the interference of a central governance structure.

b. Supporting BAME students

“I would want specific support and advice for students of colour (for those going abroad for placement year), would these be people who understand the BAME perspective? How consistent and intensive would the support be?”

Lack of student support is a driving factor of ‘mistrust’ and sense of not belonging or not being taken care of adequately by the University. This was most clearly expressed by international students in relation to cultural, logistical, and intellectual support. The lack of real support translated into students feeling exploited by the University, particularly in the context of high and ever-rising student fees.

We suggest a facilitative and integrative approach to help students of colour, including international students from the Global South, through coaching that meets their needs as well as access to mentorship networks (both peer and discipline-specific, industry networks). In other institutions such as notably the University of Kent, these efforts have improved student well-being and academic performance.

Meaningful support can easily be provided through existing mechanisms. Yet, it is necessary that experienced staff members, who are aware and critically minded on questions of racial marginalisation, are approached for this purpose to create a mentorship/coaching model to support students of colour throughout their studies

Mentorship work should be included in the University’s Workload Allocation Model (WAM). The support provided by the staff of colour and experienced staff often continues beyond specific issues, as they guide students along their academic and professional journeys.

Unlike the existing role of ‘personal tutor’, the framework above requires staff to take an active approach in helping students with time management, structuring their studies, advising on preparation of any future applications for further studies/internship/jobs as well as empowering them to self-critique and learn to recognise what patterns of work/study suit them. A specific team of teaching or professional service staff hired/allocated in this way also extends to a program like this integrating industrial networks that advance and mentor students (for example bringing in UK-wide networks of support such as Black Solicitors Network, Muslim Lawyers Hub), and facilitating and structuring a peer support group specifically for students of colour.

C. Facilitating Independent student-staff Spaces

“I want to look at how I can challenge/rebut tutors or lecturers in positions of power when they have hostile/questionable views.”

Student mistrust extends to the teaching staff, who also increasingly performing administrative and pastoral roles. A core component of distrust is that students feel silenced, have no avenue to challenge tutors due to the power dynamic, and the feeling that many staff members do not have racial literacy. Students are acutely aware of the shortcomings of the required ‘training’ on race equality and are critical of bias training as a tick-box requirement. This sense of distance from staff members is another aspect that hinders any meaningful racial equality.

The University can facilitate the creation of independent spaces for student-staff collaboration by allocating resources and seeking external partners who have experience and expertise on racism on university campuses, and literacy on ‘decolonisation’ and anti-racism to guide the process and provide safeguarding to students.

Both students and staff need to be rewarded for putting in the effort to create a space for

self-critique, open to learning and re-learning as well as building practices in their own teaching and administrative work alongside students. This particular recommendation is to encourage primarily staff members seeking to implement ‘decolonising’ in their own spaces to engage with students not presumptively, but carefully, with ethics, care and safeguarding to keep them involved and for them to reap the benefits of their involvement in a space they have a co-ownership on an equitable basis.

While student-staff spaces are rare UK-wide, some Universities (e.g. the University of Exeter, King’s College London, SOAS, and the University of Kent), that have done this with care as part of a research centre or a new space, do so with ethical considerations and knowledge of ‘decolonisation’ beyond the curriculum and are often led by groups of scholars with considerable experience in both the subject and work or student societies explicitly engaging with ‘decolonial’ work.

d. Internal Cultural Change: Addressing Racial Illiteracy

“Retrain staff: would people take it seriously? How will we judge how effective the training is?”

“Tools to implementing real change: How to be able to conduct change when the institution is against you?”

“Living wage pay for BAME students/staff: ‘reverse racism’, impact of strikes, unlikely to last long (performative).”

In their recommendations, students painted a clear picture of how managers impact their experience; they decide which student's voices are heard, who gets hired (with which expertise), and which policies are implemented across the student and staff body. The students also identified a lack of knowledge about issues of race, highlighting the acceptance of ‘reverse racism’[2] as an example of poor racial literacy among managers and staff. Students were clear that management should change. Although students are mistrustful of the efforts of the University, they proposed racial literacy training as a first step.

There are two key issues to consider. The first is that racialised students want to participate in this process.

This can be done by implementing training that is based on racialised students' inputs, and by co-creating ‘tools for change’ with students, as part of this process. Landmarks should also be developed with students. This should not be done in an extractive way where students are given a defined space to provide inputs and are given platforms that ignore the power differentials between students and managers. This process should be done in a way that safeguards the students' wellbeing and considers multiple ways in which students can get support and feel empowered through independent, peer, and mentorship avenues. Importantly, it is the type of training that will define how students and management will interact in this process.

[2] Prejudice or discrimination of a majority and dominant group, namely those racialised as white. The term ignores differential power between groups due to race, ethnicity, place of birth, and religion, and the historical and structural roots of these differences (Peucker 2023).

Considering the above, the second key issue is the type of training managers should receive. As the students put it, 'tick-box' exercises are not what is needed here. Cardiff University committed itself to being an anti-racist institution in 2021, and it should thus rely on external and independent partners that have expertise on anti-racism and decolonial education. This goes beyond gaining knowledge about the UK Equality Act 2010, which as we highlighted before it is also lacking among managers and members of the academic staff in key positions.

Concluding Thoughts: Importance of Building Principles

This report provides a snapshot of the experiences and perceptions of students racialised due to race, ethnicity, country of birth, and religion, and provides evidence of the continuous shortcomings of the institution in terms of its commitment to addressing racism.

The research identified four core areas: Eurocentrism, instrumentalisation, mistrust, and isolation, which mark the experience of racial minority students at Cardiff University. Students also provided insight into how they perceive the university's engagement with race equality as lacking.

The notion that the 'university is against us' was a strong sentiment, that is unfortunate, disheartening and difficult to hear. The recommendations we listed above are contingent on recognising the output of this project as well as the strong sentiment expressed by students. We therefore do not consider these recommendations a set checklist but as non-exhaustive first steps towards building a relationship of trust. This requires ceding space, building specific support, independent space for collaboration, and racial literacy. The last element of these recommendations is the most important one in our assessment as experts on 'decolonisation' and 'race' within Higher Education (HE), and research.

In order to move forward with any endeavour beyond simply curriculum, hiring and recruitment, or EDI talks/initiatives - a strong set of principles needs to be developed with active control, input and feedback from students of colour, facilitated by experts in decolonisation of HE outside of the University. These sets of principles can be useful for other staff committees at the college and school level, anti-racist action committees currently in the Business and School of Social Sciences, and even student union bodies.

Importantly, without proper guiding principles to ground this work within students' lived experiences and active engagement, agency and control, the perception of the University and its culture will remain one that is deeply steeped in racism and exclusion.

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