

**BME Staff Network**



Professor Louise Richardson  
The Vice-Chancellor  
University of Oxford

15 June 2020

Dear Vice-Chancellor,

The BME Staff Network stands in solidarity with the global Black Lives Matter Protests, as well as with the Rhodes Must Fall Movement at the University of Oxford, which seeks to decolonise the built landscape of our University, its social structure and its curricula. As these movements have shown, BME staff and students are heavily underrepresented in UK Higher Education and face institutional racism in many forms.

In the past weeks, we have been very concerned by the limited and inadequate messages about countering institutional racism sent from the University to its staff and student members. We are aware of the letter that the Heads of Colleges have written to the student community and have noted that an email was circulated from the Pro Vice Chancellor and Advocate for Equality and Diversity (Dr Rebecca Surender) to heads of departments. Both these emails were however not circulated widely to staff, and indeed many in the BME Staff Network have not seen them. We emphasise that the past months have been a challenging time for many BME Staff, not only in the context of the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent work undertaken by many towards anti-racist action but also because of the disproportionately high rate of COVID-19 casualties in BME communities. Additionally, we are disappointed by the University's decision to delay publication of undergraduate admissions data in this context and believe that publishing this data would enable our institution to acknowledge and address the common experiences of racism among the BME community. These issues of communication signal a wider institutional failure to address questions of race and racism at the University adequately.

As such, we are writing to ask for the following concrete steps to be taken as a matter of urgency.

1. **The Reporting of Racist Harassment** should be made possible through a clear, widely publicised and easily accessible mechanism. This would also enable the monitoring and collection of data on racial harassment within the University. Additionally, BME staff members should have a space in which to discuss issues of race and racism safely.
2. **Mandatory Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training** for all staff with an emphasis on race and racism. We note that all staff are required to undergo Data Protection and Security training. Thus, mandating ED&I training would not be without precedent. We ask that this include senior officers of the University, the Vice Chancellor and all who directly report to her, as well as College staff.

- 3. BME Representation** in all meetings and committees where questions of race are discussed. This includes BME Representation on all University Committees. We note that the Personnel Committee currently has no BME Members. This recommendation also includes consultation with the EDU and the BME Staff Network on any race-related messaging published by the Public Affairs Directorate.
- 4. Acknowledgement and Action** to support the BME community, including staff at all levels and students, during the present time of trauma due to the inhumane murder of George Floyd. This would entail recognition that the University is also complicit in racism, and indeed that while our work as BME Staff is foregrounded as proof of diversity, there are few mechanisms of support provided within the institution in solidarity against racism.
- 5. Assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic** on BME Staff with all Returning to Onsite Working activities. Mental health and caring responsibilities have been acknowledged in the University's messaging on COVID-19, but the impact on BME Staff has not been addressed. This is especially surprising as the University's own Medical Sciences researchers have been involved in studies showing this racial disparity. The assessment should include implications of furloughing on all workers with breakdowns along race and gender lines. Additionally, the University should outline the actions it plans to undertake in support of BME staff returning to work. This should include PPE provision, capacity to work from home where possible, flexibility to move to less public-facing roles where possible, and measures to enforce social distancing.
- 6. Commitment to hiring BME Staff at all levels.** Across the Higher Education Sector, BME staff are in a minority of 17%, with Black staff amounting to no more than 1%. This commitment is therefore, imperative in upholding the University's policies on inclusivity. This should include a plan to resource the Race Equality Charter (REC) to be on par with Athena SWAN, and for the REC's agenda to be actioned without delay. Furthermore, this should occur in consultation with the EDU and the BME Staff Network. This commitment entails focussing on the retention of BME Staff in acknowledgement of the challenges arising out of institutional racism, and the lack of support and resources available for career advancement of BME Staff.
- 7. Curricular Reform across the University** towards more inclusive content. This includes both publications by BME scholars as well as material that is race-critical and engages with different disciplines' own historical entanglements with histories of racism and imperialism. We ask for all departments to conduct an audit of their curricula – including college tutorial material – towards these goals.
- 8. Funding for BME-focused research activity** including an annual Black History Month Lecture, as well as resources for Racial Justice work through the Diversity Fund (equivalent to the provisions for activities marking the centenary of degrees for women at Oxford). Oxford would also benefit from the establishment of a Centre for the study of Race and Racism, as at institutions such as University College London. This should also include a permanent exhibit curated in conjunction with the Gardens Libraries and Museums Division that critically reflects on Oxford's place in Britain's imperial history. We ask that a working group, including more than one BME member, be appointed to consider this.
- 9. Restructure the Equality and Diversity Unit** to report directly to the Registrar rather than through the HR Director, in order to account for its cross-cutting influence and enabling collaboration with student-facing administrative units. The role of the Pro Vice Chancellor and Advocate for Equality and Diversity (currently held by Dr Rebecca Surender) needs recognition as a full-time position and a visible position in the University's organisational structure as one of the Vice Chancellor's Direct Reports.
- 10. Recruit another Race Equality Policy Advisor at the EDU** to support the work that Machilu Zimba is currently undertaking, focused on race and religion and addressing both staff and

student issues. By way of comparison, there are numerous Athena SWAN and other gender equality programmes, which are managed by dedicated representatives across the University. For disability, there is an entire team for students in SWSS and one staff advisor in the EDU.

**11. Commitment to community engagement** (BME communities in particular and more widely) at all levels (e.g. outreach, recruitment, public engagement). In particular, we note a lack of access to Oxford's own BME community in public engagement. In support of this, we ask that the University establish a BME activist in residence programme that will be tasked with appointing a local anti-racist activist for a fixed period.

We draw attention to the University's own equality policy which maintains with respect to staff that "the University will...support career development and progression with the aim of ensuring diverse representation and participation at all levels". In order to action this commitment – which the Policy notes is the responsibility of Heads of Division, Heads of Department and Chairs of Faculty Board – we ask that the University work in collaboration with its BME Staff to address the needs that we have outlined above.

Finally, when Dr Martin Luther King Jr was questioned about the untimeliness of his direct action in Birmingham, he answered from his jail cell that too long had he been told to wait by those who have not suffered the pain of racism. "This 'wait'," Dr King responded, "has almost always meant 'never'," and argued that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." So, we call on the University and the Colleges that make up this 900-year-old august institution of learning to spend no more time creeping towards substantive justice for its BME Staff, students and broader community. Rather this is an opportune moment for the University to take a leadership role, outwardly and inwardly, to make real its commitment, in word and deed, to advance racial justice. The pandemic and the protests have made clear that tangible change is both vitally needed and possible.

We look forward to working more closely and collaboratively with you to make these critical changes, and kindly request a full and considered response for each of the above recommendations by 29 June.

The BME Staff Network  
University of Oxford