



## **Decolonising From The Ground Up:**

Racialised students' perspectives to decolonise the curriculum and practices in the Department of Geography, King's College London

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## FOREWORD BY THE DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY EDI COMMITTEE

This consultation came into being in the summer of 2020 following the horrific murder of George Floyd, Breona Taylor and others in the United States. As the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName anti-racism protests erupted around the world, the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Committee in the Department of Geography felt we needed to do something active to address the concerns around structural racism, state violence and white supremacy that were and are just as endemic in the United Kingdom, rather than relying on words. In 2019, a study conducted by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission found that experiences of racial harassment were widespread among students and staff in universities in England, Scotland and Wales. Almost a quarter of students from an ethnic minority background reported experiences of racial harassment since starting their course and over half of staff discussed incidents of being ignored or excluded as a result of their race (EHRC, 2019).

King's College London is just as implicated as every other university in the United Kingdom. As Professor 'Funmi Olonisakin, Vice-President and Vice-Principal (International) and chair of the Race Equality Leadership and Action Group at King's noted in the *Times Higher Education* in June 2020: 'Doing nothing is not an option. And doing too little incurs the wrath of our communities. We as academics and institutions must stand up to be counted.'<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, she called for 'unlearning racism and embracing diversity' in all its forms through structural change at King's and beyond. Prof Olonisakin identified a range of ways forward including acknowledging historical legacies of injustice around colonialism and slavery and how these are also embedded in current intersectionalities around racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and poverty. She also noted how fair representation among staff and leadership is key as are 'diversified pedagogical practices' and 'systematic de-hierarchising of identities in assessing progress on tackling inequality'.

As a Department of Geography, and specifically as the EDI Committee, we made an email statement to all our students and staff. However, we were also keen to do more than make empty promises around our need to address racism in all its forms without doing anything concrete. Prompted by a discussion with one of our PhD students who was rightly angry that King's Geography had very few British racialised (see below on this term) postgraduate research students, we agreed to fund a consultation on racism and decolonising the curriculum in the department. This was to include speaking with undergraduate, masters and PhD students and was conducted by PhD students who were themselves from racialised backgrounds. The result is the current report. Alongside this consultation was a department-wide workshop held in July 2020 on 'Anti racism, anti blackness and decolonising the curriculum' with presentations by Majed Akhter, Jasmin Arciero, Nirad Abrol, Rosa Heimer and Cathy McIlwaine (and chaired by Daniel Schillereff). This workshop reflected on what an 'anti-racism' strategy might compromise and was very well-attended by staff and students.

It is important to note that this work is part of wider efforts to embed EDI into how the department functions. This was directly linked with the submission of a successful Athena SWAN bronze award in 2019 with preparations beginning of 2018. On submission of the Athena SWAN which included an extensive Action Plan. While the bronze submission focused on gender, we were, and continue to be, very keen to identify and address racial and ethnic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/universities-can-and-should-do-much-more-address-systemic-racism> (accessed 17 March 2021)

disparities wherever possible. In our submission, for example, we note: ‘we also acknowledge the need to develop greater inclusivity among our student body, and that our staff profile does not mirror our student profile in gender or ethnicity’ (Athena SWAN Bronze, 2019: 9). This is reflected in the fact that in 2018/19, 33% of our undergraduate students identified as ‘Black and Minority Ethnic’ (BAME), but only 9% of masters and 18% of our PhD students. This clearly indicates an urgent need to work on the postgraduate pipelines. Examples of our student-facing action points include ensuring that there is a gender and ethnic balance in all student facing Marketing’ (action 5.30). For PhD students, ‘workshops and training for PGR students will address female/intersectional role models’ (Action 5.24). In relation to staff diversity, Action 5.5. notes the need to develop an improved data capture and analysis system for HR recruitment systems allowing for the gender and ethnicity of applicants to be recorded and evaluated. We also note that our Faculty (Social Science and Public Policy) launched its EDI strategy in December 2020, with clear plans of action across six workstreams including ‘Inclusive culture’, ‘Decolonisation of the curriculum’ and ‘BAME attainment’.

As noted above, the current report outlines the findings from the consultation carried out on racism and decolonising the curriculum. The aim was to identify examples and instances of racism, both overt and covert in terms of departmental culture and curriculum development, and to reflect on these in productive ways. While the numbers included in the consultation are small (14 students in total), every view is treated as important. Indeed, racialised voices are more likely to be overlooked. Given that we were extremely keen that the consultation was a learning process, we have reflected on the issues raised throughout the document. We identify where we have already instituted changes to address problems and issues, and also to note where we need to develop further. In some cases, there has been a time-lag between the situations reported and the changes subsequently made, which we note.

There is much work to be done in terms of departmental practices and culture. This will depend in part on structural and systemic change in how the university as an institution functions, not to mention wider society. Some issues and recommendations are out of the control of the department, yet transformation must start somewhere, and we need to think creatively about how we can bring about positive changes. The work starts now, and we have woven into this report examples of actions taken and planned by the Department to address the concerns and recommendations. Progress and outcomes must be monitored on an annual basis. Finally, we would like to thank Rosa and Nirali for conducting this work in such a dedicated manner and producing such an illuminating and engaging report.

**Cathy McIlwaine (founding EDI Committee Chair) and Daniel Schillereff (current EDI Committee Chair)**

**September 2021**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings of a consultation that was designed to seek perspectives on decolonising the curriculum and practices, and was undertaken with students in the Geography Department who identify within the spectrum of Black, Asian or other ethnically minoritised groups Black<sup>2</sup>. A total of 14 students from Undergraduate, Postgraduate Taught, and Postgraduate Research programmes participated in the process. The consultation was conducted over the summer of 2020. Student inputs were invited through an open call and facilitated through a mix of focused group discussions and semi-structured interviews that were conducted virtually. The summary below describes the key findings of the consultation and presents a list of actions that will help address some of the issues raised. These actions were directly and indirectly suggested by the students.

Given that the report was conducted as a learning process for the department, a series of reflections have been included in relation to specific points of concern in relation to what has already been implemented in order to address these or specific action plans to do so in the future.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Students identified a persisting Western bias<sup>3</sup> across a range of knowledge domains, as well as in data sources, methodologies, research ethics and teaching practices at the department.
- Students found reading lists in most modules to be predominantly white, anglophone and male, with a marked absence of feminist geographical perspectives. Certain pedagogical approaches, such as that of ‘diversifying’ through case-studies, were often found to work counter-productively to reinforce the Western gaze and colonial/racial power relations. For students from the Global South, the case study approach was often considered to reinforce that ‘we’ are ‘objects’ to be studied through Western theories and taught by ‘white men’ (whilst comparatively, nobody studies white communities or the ‘North’ in that way).
- Students also pointed to a lack of critical engagement with Black Marxist, decolonial and anti-colonial radical and contemporary postcolonial theoretical perspectives within the teaching and learning environment.
- Fundamentally, student insights underscore the need to both critically deconstruct existing modules and teaching practices, and move from ‘diversifying or internationalising’ the curriculum to truly ‘decolonising’ by meaningfully engaging with ‘pluriversal perspectives’<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> We use the terms ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’ (BAME) or ‘Black, Asian and other ethnically minoritised’, as commonly used in the UK to refer to non-white populations. We do acknowledge that these are umbrella terms far from perfect, which subsumes vastly different realities and experiences of racialisation. We also interchangeably refer to ‘BAME’ students as ‘racialised students’, meaning that they are racialised as non-white. This is to emphasise racialisation as an on-going process, instead of treating racial identities as fixed and universal constructs.

<sup>3</sup> We use ‘Western/Colonial bias’ to refer to the tendency to overemphasize worldviews, authors, and productions from the West, often treated explicitly or implicitly as superior or universal in detriment of non-Western ones.

<sup>4</sup> The notion of the ‘pluriverse’ is rooted in the Zapatists’ assertion that another world is possible, a world that fits many worlds. We refer to ‘pluriversal perspectives’ as a means to embrace non-Western theories, epistemologies and ontologies horizontally, in themselves, not as add-ons. Recognising with it the need to de-

- Students' inputs highlight how the demographic disparity in academic staff in the department, with its marked under representation of BAME academic staff (especially Black women), can compromise both teaching as well as their overall higher education experience.
- BAME staff are a crucial interface for racialised students seeking personal and academic support, and their presence fosters a sense of belonging and confidence in the higher education environment for many racialised students.
- The persisting structural issues in access to higher education in the UK for BAME students is mirrored and reflected in the striking under-representation of Black British students at the geography department, especially at PGR level, where high educational costs, institutional racism and stigma associated with geography as a viable career option significantly discourage the participation of students from BAME communities.
- Students' insights also very evocatively capture how racialised students continue to experience isolation, racism and microaggression at the department both within the classroom and outside it.
- Language barriers continue to pose challenges for some students in engaging with classroom teaching practices, grappling with academic demands and in broader socialisation within the department.
- Students more generally perceived the geography department as open to dialogue and responsive to individual cases if and when they are escalated. However, the department currently lacks a structured mechanism and institutionalised process for both identifying and addressing issues.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To decolonise the curriculum and teaching practices

It is critical to recognise that efforts to decolonise the curriculum have to be accompanied by efforts to decolonise teaching practices and structures. Across the various academic programmes, it is imperative that both are reviewed and reflected upon to:

- a) address the persistence of Eurocentric intellectual traditions, epistemologies and methods, where addressing colonial legacies meaningfully is not just about making a one-off mention, but a continuing effort of connecting the past and present throughout the teaching process.
- b) engage meaningfully with pluriversal perspectives and theories to expand horizons
- c) strengthen critical thinking that can both challenge/complement the canon and help students to identify bias.

The department must urgently build academic expertise that is reflective of the needs of racialised students and communities (e.g. Black geographies, geographies of race, decolonial geographies). The department must also strengthen teaching and expertise in critical methodologies, including alternative methodologies such as embodied, participatory, arts-based methodologies. Across the different knowledge domains, there should be greater emphasis on ethics and symmetry in knowledge production by doing research in non-extractive ways, building more horizontal relationships and acknowledging them.

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center or marginalise Western knowledges, which are currently hierarchically positioned as universal, rather than spatially situated ones.

### **To address sustained and structural racial inequalities**

The department should make use of targeted recruitment action to hire more BAME academic staff, particularly Black women, at all teaching levels and across programmes<sup>5</sup>. In order to structurally address the under representation of Black British students in particular, the department should extend and intensify outreach in deprived schools to encourage BAME students from poorer backgrounds into universities, and make funding available for BAME students through targeted scholarships at PGT and PGR levels. The PGT and PGR admission process offers an opportunity to rethink how current systems can be restructured to focus less on grades and more on practices, student's experiences and references. Advice sessions and/or mentoring support should be offered for aspiring PGT and PGR students, particularly targeting racialised students from working class backgrounds as a means to address the progression pipeline. It is as important to recognise that addressing students' negative experiences at undergraduate level will play a facilitative role in their choice and desire to pursue higher education. Lastly, the department should make efforts to periodically collect and publish more detailed demographic data on race and ethnicity among staff and students, so that progress in improving representation of Black people in the department can be more transparently monitored.

### **To create an environment that centres racialised experiences of belonging**

It is important that the department continues its efforts at creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for incoming BAME and migrant students through thoughtful social activities that foster a sense of community and collegiality.<sup>6</sup> Introducing department level PGR training and more structured research domains will help integrate new cohorts and create a sense of belonging to the department and the discipline. The department should actively think about new modules and/or seminar series that facilitate more open conversations amongst students and staff on geographies/histories of race, gender, post/de-coloniality and social difference. The department should also consider offering language support at departmental level, and build capacities of staff, including GTAs to engage with students with language difficulties. Equally, the need of the hour is to cultivate and hone staff capacities, skills and sensibilities to handle social/racial tensions within the classroom and in all teaching environments. It is vital that teaching staff complete training on how to handle sensitive discussions, and also participate in discussion sessions/workshops such as the recently introduced "Conversations about Race" workshops - this should be an ongoing dialogue and a continuing process of learning/unlearning.

The department has taken some important first steps in the past few years in addressing some of the issues, and as a result of which there have been perceptible improvements in a some areas. However, the findings indicate that there is clearly much more ground to be charted. Most importantly, the department must create a structured response and redressal mechanism for students to flag, share and seek support regarding experiences

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<sup>5</sup> The Equality Act 2010 allows for positive action (or affirmative action) in recruitment in order to improve outcomes for a disadvantaged group (on grounds of their protected characteristics). As such, under national equality law it is within HR frameworks to carry out a targeted recruitment where candidates race and gender (e.g. being a Black woman) is considered a requirement as part of the job specification.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the department has taken due cognizance of the exclusionary effects of alcohol-centric cultures of socialisation. As a result of the collective efforts of the HoD, EDI committee and the UG Geography Society, this is now addressed explicitly in the department's code of conduct (as of 2019).



of micro-aggression and racism. This should be aimed at creating a system of accountability for the actions, practices or attitudes within the department that reinforce colonial legacies and/or discriminate, isolate or invisibilise lived experiences of BAME students. The department is urged to institutionalise and appropriately budget the implementation of an annual consultation, such as this current one, conducted by and with racialised students at all levels (with peer-researchers at UG, PGT and PGR levels) as a means to capture, consolidate and analyse ongoing challenges.

## **ACTIONS TAKEN AND PLANNED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY**

This section, written by Cathy and Daniel, outlines some of the ways in which our Department have sought and plan to address the concerns raised by our students in this consultation. Some actions were already in the pipeline or have been implemented in response to early scoping work, led by the EDI Committee and colleagues across the Department, with demonstrably positive outcomes. We are clear that a continuous, transparent and proactive approach is vital.

### **To decolonise the curriculum and teaching practices**

There have been frequent and deep discussions across the Department about ways in which our content and teaching practices can be diversified. We have organised a number of relevant initiatives in recent months, including an ‘anti-racism and decolonising the curriculum’ workshop, events and outputs during Black History Month 2020 well as funding Rosa and Nirali to conduct this important work. Teaching staff have been encouraged to diversify reading lists in a number of ways, with positive examples rolled out for 2020-21, and a review of the demographics of authors across all modules is currently underway. A new Year 3 module will launch in 2021-22 titled “Empire, Nature and Development”, and aims to explicitly and critically explore the historical and political geographies of empire as they shape the interactions between environment and uneven development.

Research-led teaching will inevitably mean module content, case studies and readings reflect where in the world our colleagues conduct research. Dissertation projects offer all our undergraduate and postgraduate taught students the opportunity to work on locally and globally-situated topics, challenge Western ontologies and use non-traditional methods. The calibre of submissions each year and recognition in external awards attests to positive outcomes for students from under-represented backgrounds. We will work with the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Boards of Studies and all academic staff to identify ways to incorporate more diverse, localised datasets and highlight best practice to ensure case studies are not overly simplified or reinforce Western perspectives.

### **To create an environment that centres racialised experiences of belonging**

We have a diverse undergraduate cohort but this declines dramatically at the PGT and PGR levels. This is a serious pipeline issue that, unfortunately, is reflected across UK universities. It is clear that we must work harder to ensure all students feel equally comfortable and welcome into our classrooms and other Departmental events. This includes raising awareness amongst our students and staff about what constitutes a



microaggression. We introduced for the first time in September 2020 a series of induction events across UGT, PGT and PGR that stress inclusivity and belonging. The EDI Committee revised the Departmental Code of Conduct in March 2020, and rolling out more diversified social events (that, for example, de-centre alcohol) is part of this. The GeogSoc have very much followed suit. Various College-level initiatives are also underway to improve diversity within the pipeline, including dedicated funding streams and proactive recruitment and applicant support, and this feeds into Point 3.

### **To address sustained and structural racial inequalities**

We absolutely recognise that the staff body in Geography does not reflect the wonderful diversity of our student cohorts. Furthermore, diversity across many axes (including ethnicity and gender) decreases up the pyramid from undergraduate to professor, highlighting systemic problems within the academic pipeline. This is, sadly, the most challenging to tackle as a Department in isolation. The College [Race Equality Plan 2020-24](#) includes “Attracting, Appointing & Investing in Talent” and a number of new BAME-dedicated scholarships and funding opportunities now exist at the College and School level.

As a Department we conducted a comprehensive review of our staff recruitment practices during 2020-21 and delivering on our Athena SWAN Bronze Award action should bring positive outcomes. We also note the Faculty EDI Committee has a workstream on inclusive recruitment. The Department has increased the amount of information shared about career pathways through the JetStream student newsletter, regular (online) careers events and running information sessions on the PhD application process. We aim to expand and tailor these events and we will work to further diversify the guest speakers and panellists we welcome to the Department for workshops, seminars and guest lectures, especially as Zoom and Teams open new doors.

## INTRODUCTION

The call to decolonise education is not new and neither is it rooted in and exclusive to the Global North. However, in recent years campaigns to decolonise higher education has gained traction in the UK following the spark of the 2015 **Rhodes Must Fall** student movement in South Africa, with students at the University of Cape Town protesting to demand the removal of a statue that commemorates the imperialist and racist Cecil Rhodes, and more broadly, to decolonise the university. The campaign received global attention, inspiring a wider student movement to decolonise higher education not only in South Africa but also across universities in the Global North. For example, the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford's campaign called for a public reckoning with its colonial legacies and decolonising the curriculum campaigns across various others UK universities.

Inspired by this movement, since 2015 the UK National Union of Student has been running '**Why is My Curriculum White?**'<sup>7</sup> and **#LiberateMyDegree**<sup>8</sup> as their two flagship campaigns, which seek to challenge '*Eurocentric domination and lack of diversity in curricula across UK universities*'. At King's, we have also seen the creation of a student-led **Decolonise KCL Initiative** which aims "*to challenge the structural inequalities that exist at Kings, and to start conversations that centre around race and the legacy of colonialism within departments and KCL more generally, ensuring that the voices of people of colour are heard*"<sup>9</sup>.

The recent global rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, in the summer 2020, has contributed immensely to revitalising the call for decolonisation in various spheres of life, including in higher education institutions. The need for decolonising efforts to move in conjunction with a deeper recognition of institutional racism and anti-Blackness has been laid bare by this wider movement. Racism understood as rooted in colonialism and on-going coloniality<sup>10</sup> must be recognised in its nuances as it creates hierarchies of humanity between variously racialised groups and their intersecting identities. These more severely and specifically impact Black lives in every social aspect, including in access, production and validation of knowledge.

This requires an institutional commitment from higher education institutions/departments to address these realities in a significant way, beyond 'performative' statements and tokenistic initiatives. It is in this context, and upon students' demands for meaningful action, that this consultation has been commissioned by the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) committee<sup>11</sup> in the Geography Department. As two PhD researchers who are politically and academically committed to decolonial, anti-racist and Black liberation struggles but who are also two non-Black women of colour (mixed-race Brazilian and Indian origins), we have aimed to remain critical of our own positionality and attentive in capturing the complexities and realities of those whose experiences may in many ways relate to but also significantly differ from ours.

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/why-is-my-curriculum-white-decolonising-the-academy>

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/liberatemydegree>

<sup>9</sup> See <https://kcl.community/decolonise-kcl>

<sup>10</sup> Quijano, Anibal. 'Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America'. *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580900015002005>.

<sup>11</sup> The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee was established in September 2019 to replace the Athena SWAN Committee which was set-up in September 2018 in order to prepare a bronze submission (which was submitted in April 2019 and awarded in September 2019).

In structuring and carrying out this consultation we have been guided by an understanding of ‘decolonising’ which entails an acknowledgment and reconsideration of two interrelated historical/geographical realities. Firstly, recognition that British/Western Universities have historically been implicated in colonialism and continue to reproduce coloniality at different levels (e.g. sustaining racialised gendered hierarchies of humanity in knowledge production and validation). And secondly, acknowledgment of how coloniality is reflected as institutionalised racism and anti-Blackness embedded in university structures, departments, student admission and assessments, hiring and promotion processes, pay gap, curriculum, pedagogical practices, research and so on. As eloquently explained by Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nişancıoğlu (2018, 6)<sup>12</sup>:

*“The fall of formal empires did little to change the logic of Western universities. Calls around ‘decolonising the curriculum’ have shown how the content of university knowledge remains principally governed by the West for the West. Disciplinary divisions, theoretical models and Eurocentric histories continue to provide intellectual materials that reproduce and justify colonial hierarchies. Subject of Western scholarship are enduringly pale, male (and often stale); where people of colour do appear, they are all too often tokenistically represented, spoken on behalf of, or reduced to objects of scholarship. Products of university research are still strategically deployed in the pursuit of imperial projects conducted by Western states and firms in former colonies. These imperial projects – past and new – remain central to the financing of higher education in the West.”*

At a department level, this meant we needed to start by reckoning with the specific ways in which the above applies to Geographical research, curriculum and teaching within our department. The specific aims of this consultation are intimately linked to that – to evaluate the particular ways in which the departmental structures, processes, curriculum and teaching practices may be reproducing colonial biases and ultimately sustaining various forms of institutionalised racism. In line with Riveira Cusicanqui’s<sup>13</sup> assertion that it is not possible to decolonise knowledges without decolonising practice, it became clear that efforts to decolonise the curriculum must be accompanied by efforts to decolonise teaching practices and structures. The decision to centre the experiences and perspectives of racialised students was guided not only by practical reasons in relation to the limited scope of this consultation, but also by the belief that decolonising efforts should be led by and accountable to those most impacted by coloniality: Black, indigenous and other racialised/former colonised people<sup>14</sup>. By ‘racialised students’ we mean students who are racialised as non-white. We use this term as a means to emphasise racialisation as an on-going process, in contrast with treating racial identities as fixed and universal constructs. This is used interchangeably with ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’ (BAME) or ‘Black and minoritised’, as commonly referred to non-white populations in the UK. We do acknowledge, however, that these are umbrella terms far from perfect, which subsumes vastly different realities and experiences of racialisation.

The consultation has revealed the persistence in the curricula and in teaching practices of Eurocentric intellectual methods and traditions within modules, with students interviewed regretting their learning being narrowly confined to Western scholarship, mostly white and male. More than ‘diversifying’ reading lists, they have suggested a need for a curricula that more

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<sup>12</sup> Decolonising the university. Pluto Press.

<sup>13</sup> Riveira Cusicanqui, Silvia. ‘Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization’. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111, no. 1 (2012): 95–109. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-1472612>.

<sup>14</sup> See Esson, James, Patricia Noxolo, Richard Baxter, Patricia Daley, and Margaret Byron. 2017. ‘The 2017 RGS-IBG Chair’s Theme: Decolonising Geographical Knowledges, or Reproducing Coloniality?’ *Area* 49 (3): 384–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12371>.

meaningfully engages with 'pluriversal' perspectives and develops an internal critical gaze towards the canon. The notion of the 'pluriverse' is rooted in the Zapatistas' assertion that another world is possible, a world that fits many worlds. We refer to 'pluriversal perspectives' as a means to embrace non-Western theories, epistemologies and ontologies horizontally, in themselves, not as add-ons. Recognising with it the need to de-centre or marginalise Western knowledges, which currently tend to be hierarchically positioned as universal, rather than spatially situated ones.

Students consulted have also thrown into sharp relief the nature and extent of underrepresentation of BAME communities at the department, both at student and academic staff level, and how this continues to affect the higher education experience. A lot of ground needs to be charted in order to cultivate a learning environment that truly centres rather than further marginalises the experiences of racialised students studying in the department. Further, as the insights reveal, racialised students continue to experience isolation, racism and microaggression at the department both within the classroom and outside it.

This report concludes with a series of recommendations underpinned by the student discussions and direct inputs. The first set of recommendations concern steps to decolonise the curriculum and teaching practices. This is followed by measures to create an environment that centres racialised experiences of belonging; and actions to address sustained and structured racial inequities. With no pretence to be a quick solution, these are, however, practical steps which we hope will be taken by the department to meaningfully respond to students' concerns and move us closer to decolonisation. As we move forward, it remains important to preserve the uncomfortable character of decolonisation, instead of looking for an easy fix and reconciliation. We must embrace decolonising as an on-going, unfinished and unsettling project whilst resisting any tendencies for it to become a white, colonial, and/or institutional '*move to innocence*', or a '*metaphor*'<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. 2012. 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor'. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (1).

## METHODOLOGY

This consultation aimed to understand students' experiences of racism, anti-Blackness and perceptions on teaching and curriculum colonial biases. As such, a methodological choice was made to focus on those most affected, that is, racialised students and students from the Global South. The only participating criteria in the consultation was to be a student at Undergraduate, Postgraduate Taught, or Postgraduate Research levels from the Geography Department who identifies within the spectrum of Black, Asian or other ethnically minoritised group.

In following this rationale, the (critical) positionality of the PhD researchers conducting this consultation was also an important factor to be considered. We are both racialised women from the Global South (Brazil and India), with a history of engagement with and interest in decolonial/postcolonial perspectives and feminisms from the South. In reflection on the process, we find that our specific positionality together with our explicit confidentiality commitment were helpful to create a safer environment for participants to more comfortably disclose deeply personal experiences and views which could otherwise be considered 'controversial', particularly in white dominated spaces. Our position as both BAME researchers but also students was also useful in recruiting participants and keeping them engaged throughout the interviews and focus groups, since we could often relate with their experience and could very intuitively follow up on questions. The latter was particularly evident when recruiting and consulting other PGR students, which therefore makes a case for the importance of BAME peer-researchers at all student levels to ensure a more robust participation and engagement in the future, if a similar consultation is to be repeated.

In order to recruit students for the consultation an open call was shared via mailing lists to all students in the Geography department. Interested participants were asked to directly e-mail the researcher who then followed up with details to schedule an interview or focus group. Participation was completely voluntary and given the recruitment occurred during summer term, the level of response was low. To ensure a higher level of participation at PGR level, we followed up with targeted e-mails and messages to some of our colleagues who we thought could be interested in sharing their experiences.

The methodology used was qualitative, involving a mix of semi-structured interviews and focus groups all conducted via Zoom over the summer of 2020. A total of 6 interviews (1h/2h each) and 3 focus group discussions (2h/3h each) were conducted with a total of 14 students. These were recorded on Zoom and then selectively transcribed into notes. Interviews and focus group scripts were adapted for each student level but following a similar thematic structure which then allowed for a content and thematic analysis mixing and comparing all groups.

The findings presented in this report are not meant to be treated as a systematic review of the Geography Department processes, practices and modules nor claim to be representative of the experiences and views of all racialized students from the department. They do, however, provide a glimpse into some of the issues which felt problematic by various racialized students depending on their intersecting experiences and engagement with certain modules. Some of those were suggested to be recurrent, whilst others may refer to specific incidents. In either case, they were felt strongly enough for students to want to voice them out and want them to be taken seriously.

Expressions of interest in response to our open call was overwhelming from women, although we guaranteed certain level of participation from men at PGR level through targeted contact. At the PGR level, there was no representation of Black students in the consultation which

potentially compromises our findings but is also reflective of the near absence of Black PGR students in the Geography Department<sup>16</sup>. Four undergraduate students engaged in the consultation, two 1<sup>st</sup> year BA students, one 3<sup>rd</sup> year BA, and a BSc student who had already graduated. They were all women, two identified as Black British (one of whom also identified as a practicing Muslim), one as mixed-race Muslim and one as British-Indian. At PGT level, we interviewed two women. One who identified as a Muslim of North African origin (MA in Geopolitics); and another one from the Philippines (MSc in Disasters, Adaptation and Development).

The largest number of students participating in the consultation were PGR, a total of eight. Three of them were male, two Physical Geography PGR from South Korea and China, and one Human Geography PGR from India (upper caste origin). The remaining five were all women, one Physical Geography PGR identified as mixed-race (white-South East Asian), and four Human Geography PGRs. These identified as Indian (upper caste origin); East Asian; British-Asian; and mixed-race Latin American. All of them, except two, had experience as a GTA in the Geography Department.

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<sup>16</sup> There is no official data on the exact number of Black PGR students in the department. This is because of the way in which demographic data is collected under the term 'BAME'. This is problematic exactly because it may at times give the impression that racial diversity is improving, when in fact, this may be true predominantly for a specific racialised group (e.g. Asians), whilst masquerading the extreme underrepresentation of other groups (e.g. Black people). Please note that this information is collected for undergraduate (e.g. BAME is disaggregated).

## CONSULTATION FINDINGS

### I. Decolonising the curriculum and teaching practices

#### 1.1 Decolonising the curriculum

##### Biased reading lists: overwhelmingly white, anglophone and male

UG and PGR students broadly concurred that reading lists in the courses they attended or taught on as teaching assistants, were predominantly white, anglophone and male.

A PGR student who was also a GTA, felt that reading lists for UG core courses were comprised quite significantly of works by King's academics, which in itself is very white. A PGT student found very few scholars from the Global South elevated as primary authors in the reading lists of modules in her programme. At the same time, two UG students appreciated those modules where the lecturers had made the effort to include diverse scholarship and discussed their relevance.

*"[...] I think it's important that lecturers include other scholars, and women writers and tell the students why. Not like be explicit [with an intention solely to diversify the reading list]... that would be [wrong], but instead, talk about what kind of perspective these scholars were bringing."* (Mixed race/Black British woman, BSc student)

Attention was further drawn to the fact that even where reading lists included non-Western scholars, the scholars themselves tended to be those working within Western, anglophone academia, and rarely included scholars who were based and writing from their own countries. Notably, students shared that feminist geographical perspectives were absent/introduced very late, and made their way largely through white female authorship.

#### Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography

- A Department-wide workshop on 'Anti-racism, anti blackness and decolonising the curriculum' was held in July 2020. This involved student and staff presentations and discussions and reflections on what an 'anti-racism' strategy might comprise. The need to review and diversify reading lists was identified as an important action that could be explored immediately.
- Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) funding was allocated for this review
- A new Year 3 undergraduate module has been approved by the Undergraduate Board of Studies entitled "Empire, Nature and Development". It aims to explicitly and critically explore the historical and political geographies of empire as they shape the interactions between environment and uneven development.
- We note that all researchers inevitably assign reading about their own research, creating an inherent bias. A review of the demographics of authors across all module reading lists is currently being conducted by a GTA. Results will be presented at a staff meeting in May 2021.
- Working with the Education Lead (Bruce Malamud), the module syllabus template for the 2020-21 academic year was amended to explicitly prompt convenors to reflect on the diversity and scope of reading lists.
- A number reading lists were changed for 2020-21 have been diversified. For example, the third-year module, Gender and Development in the Global South has always included a majority female authorship with a large number of authors from the global South. This



is not surprising given the subject matter. However, great effort was made in 2020/21 academic year to ensure that women from the global South, based in the region were included in the reading lists. One week is dedicated to postcolonial and decolonial feminism and another to different feminisms from across the global South (including work by Nadja Al Ali, Amelia Sa'ar, Amelia, Chandra Mohanty, Maria Lugones, Sofia Zaragocin, Ángela Ixkic Bastian Duarte, R. Aída Hernández Castillo, Pat Mohammed, Alicia, C Decker and Gabeba Baderoon, Oyeronke Oyewumi and others). This also included reference to popular readings as well as academic work (eg. Gargallo, Francesca, 2015 "Las filósofas mexicanas: que las hay, las hay", blog post, July 3). All topics actively aim to include authors from the global South. The issue of feminist publishing from the global South is actively discussed through the article on Power, knowledge and the politics of gender in the Global South by Peace Medie and Alice Kang (2018)

- The reading list for Year 3 module 'Global Climate Change: Past, Present & Future' was also heavily revised for 2020-21. This is a physical geography module, an area of the discipline that has seen even less reflection on the lack of racialised voices and its colonial roots. Women scholars are now much more prominent, comprising 42% of the authorship, and there is some representation from scholars from Latin America. The module also now explores issues around gender and energy. We acknowledge the urgency by which more Black authors and researchers from the Global South must be incorporated into physical geography classes.

#### Counter-productiveness of the case study approach

Students across the three programme levels shared crucial insights on how the use of case studies can reinforce the Western gaze and contribute to feelings of othering and even experiences of microaggression for racialised students. For students from the Global South, the case study approach was considered to reinforce that 'we' are 'objects' to be studied through Western theories and taught by 'white men' (whilst comparatively, nobody studies white communities or the 'North' in that way).

Students shared that case studies could also contribute to a strong association and limiting of certain issues to certain regions. Certain issues or themes (e.g. conflict or corruption) when discussed in relation to specific regions in the world can potentially create the perception that these issues are 'other people's issues'. Moreover, as a PGT student shared, in situations where some students may have existing biases about certain communities or regions, case studies can serve to further legitimise them. Equally, case studies run the risk of perpetuating an impression that they represent the complete reality of a particular group and place. For racialised students whose ancestry or personal experiences were associated with case study regions, the awareness that reality was actually much more complex than that captured and discussed through the particular case further contributed to a sense of discomfort regarding this pedagogical tool. Some reported having been made acutely self-conscious, leading to self-doubt, disengagement and even loss of confidence in interacting with other students on the topic. A UG student shared how a class discussion on a case study from an African country (where she had spent several years) made her uncomfortable but hesitant to challenge given self-awareness about being part of the minority and fear her view would be dismissed.

*"There were several things I disagreed with. But then I would think...is it just me, am I being over protective? Because it wasn't as if they were wrong. And because it would just be me in the class [feeling that way], should I say anything? would anyone listen*

*or care, or should I just move on from this topic?"* (Mixed race/Black British woman, BSc Student)

While it is acknowledged that some lecturers may successfully handle discussions of case studies with due complexity and sensitivity, the case study format can often have spill-over effects in post-lecture discussions at student level. These could potentially lead to micro-aggressions, turning a curriculum issue into a social issue. A student elaborated on this by citing an example.

*"[...]the self-determination of Palestinians, it's an issue never taught or learned without emotion. The professor maybe teaches history and context, but in conversations that flow after, I have had students frame it as 'this is your dispute, it's your issue'. To be honest, I am Muslim, I am not Palestinian, I am not even Arab. Am I invested in this issue? yes, probably I am, but I felt the language very often being like a personalised attack."* (Mixed-race Muslim woman PGT student)

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- Pedagogically, case studies are used to challenge the representation of places and peoples as homogenous. It seems that for some staff and students, this may have been become confused. As part of the Reading List review, the EDI Committee will put together a check-list of good practice on the use of case studies to ensure that they are not 'weaponised' or used to simplify a topic or issue in a given region.

#### **Persisting Western bias and low engagement with non-Western perspectives**

Students offered several insights on the dominance/persistence of Western experience and intellectual traditions within their learning experience at the department. As highlighted in the sections above, the lack of engagement with Black Marxist, decolonial and anti-colonial radical thought has fostered a perception that class is the dominant signifier of persistent inequalities - to the detriment of race. A PGR student expressed special disappointment with how some modules on critical urban theory were being taught, where she expected the 'already white critical and left' canonical texts to have been put in dialogue with Black radical thought and postcolonial conceptions in a more complementary and meaningful way. Another PGR student also stressed the importance of making students and teaching staff more familiar with emerging voices, political agency, methodologies and epistemological perspectives that are both challenging and rejuvenating existing critical theories in the contemporary moment.

Further, with an overt focus on Africa and with much lesser attention to Black lives in other geographies of the world, students felt that current teaching at the department was perceived as failing to incorporate a truly historical perspective. In particular, this related to the different ways in which Black experiences and spatialities are constituted in the intersection of race, imperialism, capitalism and migration. This was expressed by a PGT student by saying:

*"I think in terms of Black and brown, I felt that our education of Black experience was very much about Africa, and the diversity of Black people was very much restricted. Not even appreciating that there are other continents that have Black people, or why Black people live in those continents, which links back to slavery and those kinds of things."* (Mixed-race Muslim woman PGT student)

Although some UG students felt geography was generally good in providing historical context and encouraging critical analysis, a first year BA student felt frustrated at the ways in which colonialism was being taught – largely by prioritising Western authors and perspectives.

*“The way British empire was taught was quite biased, it was quite focused on the British side of thinking, it could have been better”* (British Indian woman, BA student).

In fact, most BAME students expressed discontent with the way history had been taught to them so far, even in their respective countries. They acknowledged it as a possible contributing factor for not being able to recognise or be mindful of racist, discriminatory or micro-aggressive behaviour either when they faced it from others or became complicit, even if unconsciously.

Over the course of their three year programme, UG students felt that engagement with non-Western perspectives was uneven across the years and across modules. First year UG students felt their core courses were generally centred on Western perspectives, whilst a 3<sup>rd</sup> year BA student noticed that the engagement with non-Western perspectives varied largely from module to module. For her, the first and second year most modules tended to have a stronger Western bias, although in year three there were some modules where a broader perspective was offered. They thought that whilst non-Western perspectives were included in more obviously diverse modules, such as those on themes of gender, geopolitics or development; social and urban geography related modules tended to be more Western biased.

At PGT level, students generally felt that while colonial biases were often acknowledged, there was not much effort toward opening up to other theoretical approaches, or encouraging alternative methodologies to foster critical thinking and exploration. In several modules, the way of ‘diversifying’ the curriculum remained via case studies.

*“In terms of geopolitics, the main ones are German, French, British...deeply rooted in colonial power. This was talked about, and we understood why they yielded the power they had. That was addressed, but more contemporary geopolitics views aren’t included.”*  
(Mixed-race Muslim woman PGT student)

A physical geography PGR student felt that in his personal experience, introduction of non-Western perspectives tended to depend on who was teaching the module, so a BAME lecturer was more likely to bring in contextualisation and theoretical perspective from a non-Western location. More generally, PGR students felt that courses remained quite Western-centred and very limited in the way they critically recognise colonial legacies of the field. As one of them highlighted, to critically recognise colonial legacies meaningfully it is important to keep coming back to it and acknowledging the connection between past and present instead of simply making a one-off mention.

The Western bias was identified across a range of knowledge domains, as well as data sources, methodologies, research ethics and teaching practices. For example, a policy-oriented module was considered to overly focus on the UK systems, which was thought to be ‘*another way of colonizing*’. Similarly, some interesting student observations illuminated quite sharply how data sources and collection methods can also serve to reinforce imbalances in geographical representation and knowledge claims. A Physical Geography PGR, felt that from a remote sensing perspective there was a need for a less biased presentation of data sources. Although data sources and algorithms used are driven by open access to data sets, which for the most part is from NASA and the European Space Agency, more effort could be done to introduce the various satellites from other countries which are slowly becoming more established. At the same time, whilst most case studies and fieldwork in physical geography were said to be based in non-Western countries, there was very limited acknowledgement and use of local data-sets and of locals who enabled the work.

The lack of diversity in the curriculum also impacted students’ confidence or desire to explore/examine alternative perspectives and positions in their own work, such as through assessments and essays. For example, a BSc student expressed that there was a tendency among students to select topics and produce assignments in consideration of the tutor’s expectations

and curation of reading lists, and many felt discouraged to explore alternate contexts, geographies or theoretical standpoints in relation to their essay themes.

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- The focus on Africa reflects the research interests of academic colleagues developing modules (modules are research-led in the Department). Colleagues work all over the world, including South Asia (India and Pakistan), Latin America (Brazil, Colombia) and China. There are evidently more opportunities for teaching staff to use examples and cases from many parts of the world. This will be raised with the Undergraduate (UBOS) and Postgraduate Board Of Studies (UBOS) Committees to explore how content could be further diversified and to share best practice.
- There are opportunities for physical geography colleagues to engage in different ways with more diverse and more localised data sets in a range of countries and contexts from the global South. This will be raised with the UBOS and PBOS Committees.
- The policy module is designed to focus primarily on UK policy. This is so that students can focus on the context where they are studying (the UK) and where the majority will, initially at least, aim to develop careers. In 2020/21, the final workshop with policy-makers was broadened to include international perspectives. This included a presentation on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) in relation to two projects from India, Nepal and Kenya, and another on the role of BAME and Latin American communities in London in challenging urban regeneration.
- UG Students are encouraged to think globally and challenge Western ontologies in terms of their final year independent dissertation research (Independent Geographical Study). Every year, students work in a wide range of location and globally-situated topics. In 2019/20, the places where students worked included Somaliland, Singapore, Bangladesh, Colombia, China and India. Several used feminist methodologies and were conceptualised within non-Western framings. Many students from racialised backgrounds also researched their own heritage and cultures (for example, on gender and generation among Sri Lankans in London and the legal status of young migrants in London). An undergraduate published their dissertation on Muslim inclusivity at University as a Briefing Note and another, which explored Black British women's relationship with gentrification was commended by the RGS-IGB Race, Culture and Equality Working Group.
- Similarly, PGT students develop their dissertations on a range of topics situated and conceptually framed within non-Western settings. In 2018/19 and 2019/20, these included China, the Philippines, Colombia, Mexico, India, Macau, among many others.

### **Limited methodological training**

When asked about being introduced to alternative methodologies or having a critical view on traditional methodologies students said they felt the teaching of research methods and methodologies in the department needed to be significantly improved. They thought that methods were introduced superficially without depth to understand different approaches or alternative methodologies. In particular, a third year BA student regretted she only came to understand the concept of '*positionality*' in her last year and based on her own initiative whilst doing research for her dissertation. It is important to recognise that developing critical thinking in methodology such as attention to positionality not just enables students to undertake their own research better, but can also contribute to nuancing both students' and staff's

understanding and perception of unconscious bias in everyday social interactions within the classroom and outside it.

Students expressed discontent not just with the quality of methods and methodology training at the department, but also highlighted the need to contemporise and broaden methodological imagination. For example, a PGR student highlighted the importance of introducing alternative methodological contributions (such as embodied, participatory, arts-based methodologies), which are not just very exciting and innovative, but also have great potential for better engaging non-white students.

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- Methods teaching at university level is notoriously difficult to deliver. The challenges are arguably even greater in a Geography department because we use a huge range of methods in our work that need to be covered, from the arts-based and participatory to lab-based work to remote-sensing. Student engagement with methods training is also traditionally very challenging. Every year, the department revises its methods delivery, but non-attendance is a perennial problem.
- The first-year module Geography in Action showcases the research of approximately 28 members of academic staff every year (from GTAs to professors). This introduces students to themes and methodologies across the range of the discipline. Examples from 2020/21 include the following: Hydro-environmental impacts of marine renewable energy using a simple assessment model of the potential for eutrophication in the Severn estuary; using mobile phones for data collection (ARCGIS AppSurvey 123); the platform economy and big data (analysing Uber and Taxi data in New York City and Airbnb in London, Barcelona, and Boston); morality, sexuality and the city using walking methods (and self-guided audios); soundscape ecology and acoustic monitoring using AudioMoths to monitor sounds in the landscape; ecological impact analysis using leaf trait analysis; mapping institutional landscapes in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain using Digimap; understanding Latin London through arts and activism.
- Beyond introductions to these multiple methods in Geography in Action, there are opportunities to embed more innovative methods teaching into methods modules, especially in first and second year. This will be discussed with UBOS and PBOS. Relevant Year 2 modules are due for substantial revision in 2021/22 anyway.

#### **1.2 Decolonising teaching practices**

##### **Unawareness about racism and racialising behaviour**

Some students felt there was certain level of racial awareness among at least some of the staff and student cohort in the Geography department, however, the majority felt this was not enough. In particular, some students reported problematic racial dynamics and comments reproduced by some lecturers and/or students.

For example, at a departmental/staff level, a Black-British BA student reported feeling shocked by her lecturer's comments referring to a house in Africa, saying: "*you'd be very surprised that their houses are much cleaner than our houses*". For her, this reflected a racist tendency to imply that Africans are generally assumed to be savages or primitives. In fact, similar concerns have also been raised in relation to the neo-colonial framing of Global South countries in events hosted by KCL PhD students-led research domain Intrepid Explorers. The description of a recent talk by an academic staff member, hosted by them, commenced with –"*It's easy to*

*imagine sub-Saharan Africa as endless savannah, lush-jungle and traditional villages” and ended with the line “From early-morning pre walk Safaris to standing ankle-deep in sewage, the delights and despairs of seeing the many textures of urban Africa”. This is simply, and disturbingly, another stark reminder that the colonial Western gaze and its implicit power relations remain embedded and continue to endure in the academic environment of the department.*

A Latin American PGR also mentioned feeling frustrated by the lack of awareness from several lecturers who repeatedly refer to the US as ‘America’. This use of language reinforces US supremacy (since America should rather refer to the whole continent), and makes Latin American students feel invisibilised. In particular, she stressed that it felt tiring for Latin American students to have to constantly raise this point.

A mixed-race PGR also described being asked to appear in a promotional video for her research group, performing activities that she does not normally do just because she was a woman and mixed race. Even though she recognised the importance to encourage BAME people into higher education, she felt this was a bit ‘tokenistic’ since there was a difference between being exhibitory and being performative or ‘*just for looks*’. She pointed out that although there are quite a few East Asian and Chinese people in physical geography, the dominant demographic is still white. Indeed, Physical Geography students felt that the overrepresentation of white people and the nature of the discipline (less prone to social discussions) contributed to lesser racial awareness among their peers and lecturers.

In particular, Black female BA students thought that in discussions about class and Marxism, the intersecting experiences of BAME students tended to be invisibilised. For example, through students’ remarks implying that class is more relevant than race, without acknowledging the ways in which race and class are interlinked, starting from the experiences of many BAME students who are also working class. There was a general feeling that students tended to silence discussions about race and became defensive, especially when there were attempts to acknowledge racism as a current reality in the UK. In turn, lecturers were said to leave such remarks unchallenged.

The latter similarly raised by a PGR student who also noticed a tendency to privilege class-based analysis in detriment of race, which was seen as often treated in descriptive terms. For her this was symptomatic of a lack of meaningful engagement with decolonial, anti-colonial, and Black Marxist theories that indeed ‘*completely collapses traditional Marxism*’. She considered this to be a fundamental flaw in teaching, particularly around topics such as space, the city, and the right to the city, which in her view is currently being done from a ‘*white perspective*’. More broadly, this was reflected to evidence an urgent need to acquire more solid expertise on race in the department.

Whilst some students felt that lecturers were generally socially aware and made efforts to mitigate social bias and othering in class, some spoke about a need for increased attention to handling of microaggression and racial tensions. At a KCL level, it was also raised that current guidelines on addressing racism are problematically territorial since there is no provision on how to tackle instances of racism perpetrated by KCL students towards students from other institutions. At departmental level, it was noted that whilst there is good will in the department, there continues to be a lack of awareness among students of the existing structures to deal with racism.

*“The leadership in the department right now is an ally. But the structures that KCL has to deal with racism are not always clear to students. Thus, it makes students dependent on allies to help navigate this unknown terrain where power balances are highly skewed.[...] And I think that is the difference. So when there is a crack that emerges, do you have a way to support people where they are aware of their own rights rather than depend on the goodness of strangers?” (PGR in Human Geography)*



At a more interpersonal level, some racially privileged lecturers were perceived to be still grappling to come to terms with their own privilege. This was thought to contribute to a sense of awkwardness which could be potentially acting as a barrier to have an honest confrontation of the reality of racism.

*“If you are an academic or a PhD student with teaching responsibilities and are struggling with your own privilege. If you haven’t quite worked out how you feel, then it’s very difficult to teach. [...] I feel that there needs to be social education, the fact that we are all learning, and you don’t have to feel bad about being in London and have privileges. But what can be done about them. [...] That’s where the awkwardness comes in handling microaggression, where the person handling the situation isn’t quite sure of their own position.”* (Mixed-race Muslim woman, PGT student)

The unintended consequences of this described ‘awkwardness’ in handling racial tension has been evidenced by another PGR student. She described attending a KCL workshop for PGRs where a white lecturer did not know how to mediate tension during a racially charged discussion about the colonial history of ethnography and the need for reflexivity throughout the ethnographic process. On such occasions, respectfully challenging another student’s views resulted in her being cast by a white female PGR as the ‘*angry brown woman*’ who was personally attacking her. As she points out:

*‘It is an example of what happens when you are having quite difficult conversations in the classroom, important conversations. It is a space where we should be allowed to have these conversations but when you don’t have people who are equipped to manage and facilitate the conversation that can be it for [BAME] students, who might say: I’m never going to come back, I’m going to report this or in fact I’ll never going to speak out, or I’ll internalise some of that stuff.’* (British-Asian woman, PGR, Human Geography)

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- The EDI Committee will address the use of racist language and racial micro-aggressions within the Department as a whole. Following two student complaints (one UGT and one PGT), awareness of the existence of the issue of racist language and micro-aggressions has risen, which was reflected in the most recent staff survey. We acknowledge that the number of complaints almost certainly does not capture the actual number of incidents because the majority go unreported. The inherent subtlety of microaggressions means there is rarely scope to take punitive action against perpetrators.
- We can do much more to ensure students and colleagues in Geography understand what constitutes a microaggression. We will do this explicitly, starting with the induction programme for students at UG, PGT and PGR levels in 2021-22, emphasising our zero-tolerance approach. A growing number of Geography staff and students have attended a Conversations About Race workshop during the 2020-21 academic year and racism will be discussed at the staff meeting in May 2021.
- As part of a range of anti-racist initiatives, an online [Unlearning Racism and Becoming Anti-Racist online KEATS discussion forum](#) was launched by the School of Global Affairs.
- The EDI Committee will undertake a review of the Intrepid Explorers initiative from the perspective of propagating stereotypes about countries and cultures of the global South. We will also work with Marketing to ensure we raise the profile of our racialised students, staff and alums whilst avoiding any degree of tokenism.



### *Centring of whiteness and 'perfect' English*

Students at different levels generally suggested that teaching methods / practices across the Department tend to be standardised in ways that fail to take account of BAME particular experiences, whilst benefitting the more privileged students: white, middle class and male. As a BA student put it, these tend to benefit: “*people who have more sense of entitlement to contribute than other students from other backgrounds*” (Black-British woman, BA student).

It was suggested that some lecturers lacked understanding of the reality of non-Western countries and the experiences of non-Western people, leading to attitudes reflecting low empathy towards non-native English speakers, equalising level of English to level of intelligence. In particular, a Latin American PGR felt that assumptions were frequently made in relation to access to certain resources or even access to learning English as a second language:

*“If we have the scholarship is because we have research capacity, doesn't mean that we have a high level of English. But even though I don't have the language doesn't mean I can't be a good researcher. There is this assumption that everyone has to have a high level of English... We need more opportunities to speak.”* (Latin American woman, PGR, Human Geography)

Similarly, PGT students suggested a need to normalise various levels of English proficiency by creating ‘*an environment where even broken English is fine*’, which is the case, for example, in English taught masters in other European countries, such as the Netherlands. Students at all levels, including GTAs, felt that there needed to be more understanding of language differences and how to more fully engage non-native English speakers in the classroom.

*“It's unfortunate that there were instances where lecturers were unable to also fully engage with students given the language barrier, because probably the lecturer is also [thinking] 'how do I actually do this right?'. But even during smaller group discussions or class discussions, some students would not participate and even in smaller group discussions there is a tendency to not try hard enough to engage students who have difficulty in speaking English. There are support facilities, like English classes etc, but it's something that is not as easy to resolve within the classroom.”* (Asian-Filipina woman, PGT student)

Undergraduate students pointed out that language differences should also be accounted for BAME students who grew up bilingual and do not speak English the whole day at home. They may be disadvantaged in the grasping of the language and confidence to speak in public. One of them put it:

*“Teaching methods are very standardised, I don't think fully accounts for people, let say many BAME students have parents or grandparents who aren't fluent or don't speak English, they will probably be more intimidated by having to speak amongst with peers who are fluent in English. I guess that restricts your participation and engagement with your cohort, and causes some confidence issues in speaking so fluently. I think there should be more consideration of students who may be not so fluent and speak with an accent.”* (British-Indian woman, BA student)

They felt that the language barrier together with the fact that many BAME working class students come from more disadvantaged schools contributed to them experiencing more difficulties in understanding reading materials, taking longer to read and make sense of complex papers as well as to write essays. This became an extra challenge for BAME students:

*“Sometimes does take us three, four, five times, and having discussions to fully understand what is going on in that lecture or in that paper. Because the way that the papers and*

*reading materials are written is very complex. And is complex for everyone but we do have this extra challenge". (Black-British woman, BA student)*

It was also explained by BA and PGRs how it is not only about the 'mastery' of the language but also the specificities of accents and slangs, which contribute to BAME students' 'imposter syndrome' and self-awareness. As a result, migrant BAME students but also BAME working class students in particular may become hesitant to engage in discussions.

*"We feel that the way we speak, the cultures that we kind of have, we are not kind of allowed to speak, if that makes sense. And I think is a subconscious thing. Cause you feel like, oh I can't speak as eloquently as them, I can't get my point as sophisticatedly as them." (Black-British Muslim woman, BA student)*

More generally, students at all levels pointed to a lack of non-English sources in modules reading lists. Although there was not much encouragement to make use of non-English sources in their assignments, some students have reportedly done it of their own accord. Some pointed out to the availability of good English translations of seminal works written in other languages and felt that introducing those to modulus would be a useful way to provide more diverse perspectives.

There was a general feeling that more needed to be done to engage with BAME students and encourage active participation. Although it was recognised that lecturers do attend to students who actively seek help, it was pointed out that they tend to overlook others who might not feel confident enough to do so. Smaller seminar groups were regarded by UG students as a good way to encourage less confident students to engage in discussion more actively. Whilst GTAs also thought study café was a good opportunity for BAME students to engage and seek support since they may feel less intimidated in this setting and interacting with GTAs.

Those with GTA teaching experience noticed that UG students who tend to participate and raise their hand the most during seminars tend to be white, particularly if the GTA leading the seminar is also white. They regretted that the GTA training did not provide skills specifically on how to better engage with BAME students who may feel hesitant to participate in group discussions, in particular students whose English is a second language. In turn, there seemed to be a need to better prepare GTAs who are not English native speakers also to teach in a second language, with one of them specifically mentioning having struggled with student interaction given unfamiliarity with culture and lingo.

The recently introduced Diversity Matters training for GTAs (as a pre-requisite for working as a GTA as part of the Athena SWAN action plan) was appreciated as a positive step in fostering GTA abilities to address social/racial tensions in the classroom. However, it was noticed that in some cases the training needed more tailoring to their educational setting in order to be more effective.

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- We plan to adapt and roll-out the BAME mentorship scheme being piloted in GHSM for 2021/22, in conjunction with the GeoSoc programme. This will hopefully help with some of the feelings of being less prepared or disadvantaged.
- The EDI Committee will run a series of focus groups with BAME students on what we can do to make them feel more comfortable asking questions and participating in other ways in our classes.
- We will re-iterate in our Induction presentations and information packs the need for all students to recognise and respect all the ways in which diversity may appear, such as in ways of speaking.

- GTA training will be improved in 2021/22 in relation to race, gender, decolonising, and sexuality.
- Additional English language training is available through the College. We will strive to sign-post these opportunities more prominently in 2021/22. The marking criteria for UG and PGT in relation to the English language requirements will be discussed with the relevant Boards of Study.

### Undergraduate Fieldtrips

UG students' views on fieldtrips as a pedagogical process were broadly positive, and they felt that going to non-Western contexts helped open up their minds and create more awareness. While most students found field trips well contextualised and with well-planned activities, there were some issues of concern in relation to a need for better contextualisation and preparation prior to the trip and acknowledging and handling racism.

In relation to the first year fieldtrip to Spain, a student shared that they were simply given sheets enlisting the methods before the planned activity, while another complained that the supporting literature for the migration activity did not include a single author with migrant experiences. In relation to the fieldtrip to Morocco and India, some students generally felt that field trip preparations could do more to facilitate a more open understanding of the context, which could otherwise at times, feel exoticising.

In a fieldtrip to Hong Kong, a Black-British Muslim BA student felt lecturers were unprepared to deal with instances of racism, during which BAME students, in particular Black students and Muslim women, were targets of racism. She regretted that there was no warning prior to the travel and little acknowledgement and support during trip.

*“Having a conversation and an acknowledgement that we would have been targeted would have been very helpful in a sense. People are afraid of acknowledging stereotypes. I think it is important to acknowledge that they do exist and some people do hold them to be true, someone else is still going to act on these stereotypes and treat you lesser. Understanding that does help, brushing under the carpet does not do anything.”* (British-Black Muslim woman, BA student)

For example, she described that all Muslim women were the only ones to have their temperature checked in the airport, making it quite clear that they were being targeted. Whilst in Hong Kong there were other instances of racism: taxi drivers who would not stop for Muslim students and students of colour; and a student who was hit by a woman whilst trying to buy something at a market store. These events were reported to staff and they responded by telling students to be careful. Some students of colour were also stopped and asked to show their passports to officers who did not want to accept their driving license, even though for white students this had been previously accepted. After learning about it, staff advised them to always carry their passport, however, there was no acknowledgment about the racialising nature of the incident.

*“The staff themselves don't know how to handle this situation and how to make everyone aware of these things. I think they find awkward to talk about these things. I don't think it should be awkward because it does affect people's lives a lot. I feel that is normal, obviously for someone that is not a person of colour they don't understand how it affects people's lives, because they don't experience, they don't see it every day. But when you are someone who is obviously very evidently from somewhere else, it's everyday... people don't understand how this plays on someone's minds.”* (British-Black Muslim woman, BA student)

## Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography

- Cultural and social considerations are in the process of being built into the health and safety assessment for all students and staff in the Department.
- Continued attendance at Conversations about Race workshops should help colleagues feel more comfortable talking about these topics.

### II. Experiences of (un)belonging, alienation and microaggressions

#### 2.1 Lack of racial diversity in the student body

Students from underrepresented backgrounds felt more strongly about the lack of racial diversity in the Geography Department, in particular, Black students at undergraduate level, and British-born BAME at PGR level.<sup>17</sup> Their responses and experiences should therefore be understood in the context of their intersecting identities and significant underrepresentation of Black British students at all levels (in relation to White students but also British-Asians) and British-born BAME at PGR level.

For example, a Black-British Muslim woman (BA student) described feeling alienated in her first days of study and reconsidering whether she wanted to be at KCL since the lack of diversity made her feel there was nobody she could relate to. She felt particularly shocked entering her classroom as it significantly contrasted with the area she grew up in and the school she studied, which were *'very multicultural'*. Another Black-British female BA student explained that although the lack of diversity was striking, she was not surprised by it since it was *'more of the same'*, having studied in a similar school environment. However, she expressed feeling at times **drained**:

*"I personally feel sometimes drained from it, because you are surrounded by people that you kind of feel you need to fit their mould, because they are the majority. You don't feel you can be yourself and it can become quite mentally draining."* (Black-British woman, BA student)

PGT students also felt disappointed at the lack of diversity at KCL more generally, which in their view, significantly differed from the public imagine it projects. The particular ways in which this unfolded into microaggressions made them feel, at times, othered. Such as, for example, having their names mispronounced, realising *"ohhh, I am that person from the Global South"*, or being treated as the spokesperson of their region.

*"A lot of people choose kings as we advertise as cosmopolitan diverse place, that's not what you get. For people who come from villages, even in the UK, that may be disappointing. Even small things like learning how to say a name properly, I mean we do that for complex academic terminology right?"* (Mixed-race Muslim woman, PGT student)

Similarly, at PGR level, it was generally mentioned how the demographic of the department was largely white and male (particularly Physical Geography). Diversity among PhD was seen as mainly due to BAME international students, with a striking absence of Black and British-born BAME PGRs. It was noticed by Indian PGRs that even though Indians are one of the most represented minoritised groups in the department, they are predominantly caste-privileged Indians (Brahmin) – therefore mirroring racial/religious inequalities in India. Several PGRs also

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<sup>17</sup> According to data provided by the department, in the years 2017/18 and 2018/19, BME students accounted for 34% and 33% at UG level, 12% and 9% at PGT level and 9% and 18% at PGR level. However, observational evidence suggests that the percentage of Black students within those numbers is low. In 2018/19, only five Black students were awarded a BA degree (out of 80) by the department, whilst only one was awarded a BSc degree (out of 25).

mentioned that although they felt the Geography department was generally social and welcoming, there was a clear social divide within the PhD cohort between UK nationals / mostly white PGRs on one side and mostly BAME international students on another. Although they felt it was possible for some people to move in between groups, the split was somewhat striking.

The only British-born BAME Geography PGR reported feeling as an outsider within the department which made her purposely limit her engagement. Besides not having met anyone who could more personally relate with her experience and research focus, realising that the only other British person carrying out local research on BAME communities in the department was a white man felt deeply problematic. One of her supervisors is a Black woman in a senior position in another department at KCL, who has recruited a very diverse team for her projects, so the contrast between her cross-department experiences felt particularly disturbing.

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- At undergraduate level, the student body is diverse with 45% of UK-domiciled identifying as BAME (comparable to the figure for the university as a whole). However, the main problem is at PGT and PGR in terms of student numbers. There is clearly a major and serious pipeline issue, as there is throughout many British universities ([see here](#)).
- While the Department has tried to make it as welcoming as possible to the diverse student body, there is clearly more that it can do to ensure all students feel equally comfortable and welcome. This has partly been addressed by the new induction across UG, PGT and PGR which stresses inclusivity. This will, of course, have a lag effect in terms of new students entering the department.
- The Geography Society (GeogSoc) in 2019/20 (led by two racialised students with one sitting on the EDI Committee and assisting with the Athena SWAN bronze submission) made Equality, Diversity and Inclusion their priority and developed a series of excellent initiatives (e.g. around diversified social events de-centring alcohol). This has been continued by the 2020/21 Geography Society (with co-Presidents from racialised backgrounds both sitting on the EDI Committee). These students act as excellent role models for the UG student body.
- The EDI will develop an initiative to improve pronunciation of names. One approach we will explore is the possibility of students uploading recordings of them pronouncing their names to a shared Departmental repository. Staff will also have the option to do this.
- The issue of the 'broken pipeline' from UG to PGR is a serious issue. This is, belatedly, being addressed in British system as a whole and within King's and Geography. In late 2020, the London Arts and Humanities Partnership (LAHP - AHRC) and London Interdisciplinary Social Science (LISS - ESRC) Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) (to which both King's belongs and to which Geographers can apply) appointed Advance He to do an audit and consultation on 'The recruitment, application process and student journey of Black, Asian and minority'. Both partnerships have identified very low numbers of BAME students, especially Black students. For example, the LAHP had only 2.5% Black students, while the LISS had 4% Black and 10% from Asians (for 2017-18, 2018-19 and 2019-20).
- The LAHP made significant changes to the studentship competition in 2019/20 to address EDI issues. These included 'promoting the competition through networks to reach applicants from under-represented groups; changing the order and content of the

application form; changing the assessment criteria and widening the range of people involved in assessment; including unconscious bias in training sessions for assessors; adopting key principles for the studentship competition)' (p.5). They also developed new EDI training for students as well as a new code of conduct for its training, events and other activities.

- A minimum of five studentships across LAHP's open and CDA competitions will be awarded to Home status Black and Global Majority students for entry in October 2021.
- The LISS was recommended to actively address EDI in its studentship competition for 2020/21. This included earmarking 2 studentships specifically for British BAME students for October 2021 entry.
- The Faculty level Centre for Doctoral Studies (which oversees the LAHP and LISS) is also embedding EDI into their work. They are currently researching new studentships with the aim of earmarking some for BAME students.
- The College is launching 4 new studentships specifically for BAME students for 2021-22. Two will be allocated to the Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy (and 2 to Arts and Humanities).

## 2.2 Overt use of alcohol centred activities

The exclusionary nature of the overt focus on alcohol-centred socials was recurrently raised as an issue by students at different levels. In particular, they suggested that it contributed to feelings of alienation and (un)belonging among some BAME students, Muslim and female BAME students in particular. Students' insights reaffirm that the Department's recent initiatives of moving away from alcohol-centric events is a step in the right direction, and that more needs to be done in nurturing open and inclusive culture of socialisation.

For example, a Muslim BA student explained that her first days of class conversations among students mainly revolved around clubbing and drinking. This generated feelings of alienation which were then heightened by a welcoming lecture where the first fresher's event introduced to them was a pub crawl.

*"Obviously that is something that is fun or whatever, but is not very inclusive and not everybody can join in with that. So when you hear this all in the first lecture, all these different things that are going on, you think, oh my god, am I even supposed to be here? Am I going to enjoy the next three years of my life?"* (Black-British Muslim woman, BA student)

At PGR level, a Latin American student also explained how the focus on pubs to socialise and welcome students was not helpful in making her feel connected and build a sense of belonging. In particular, she felt this was not inclusive of culturally diverse ways of forming relations.

*"It is not just about going to a pub, our social relations are different, it is not just about a beer. We always try to incorporate people. In the bar they were always speaking about things that were not interesting to me, I didn't feel that I was part of the group."* (mixed-race Latin American woman, PGR, Human Geography)

Another PGR student also expressed concern over the exclusionary character of the 'drinking culture' within the department. In particular, she thought this was reflective of the academic staff preferred form of socialising - mostly white and male.



*“The drinking culture in the geography department... I drink, but I can certainly see how that would make people that don't drink feel unwelcomed or a sense of unbelonging specifically. We need to run more non-alcohol focused activities. Before we used to have pizza at the end of seminars, even that was not a big step but we could go and eat and not be with a glass in your hands. I do feel that the focus on drinking is probably representative of academic staff and their preferred form of socialising.”* (mixed race / white and Vietnamese woman, PGR in Physical Geography)

Another PGR also suggested after reflecting on her experiences in Singapore, that more could be done to ensure students will not feel excluded from social events depending on their cultural, religious and social habits.

*“[...] a lot of the welcome events were organised around drinks and drinks. At the time, I didn't feel excluded because I was educated in Britain. [...] but then after having gone to Singapore, most of the welcome events happen during the day and it may or may not involve alcoholic drinks, but it will always have halal options [...]”* (East Asian woman, PGR in Human Geography)

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- In 2019, the issue of events revolving around alcoholic drinks as problematic and potentially exclusionary was raised in the staff survey and PhD survey conducted as part of the department's Athena SWAN bronze submission as well as by the UG Geography Society.
- The EDI revised the Departmental Code of Practice (in collaboration with the GeogSoc) in March 2020 to state that all student events must include a range of soft drinks. These changes will take some time to embed.
- The EDI Committee and the Department changed seminar scheduling to entail alternate timings to alternate 4:00-5:00pm and lunchtimes (alternating physical and human geography seminars) (replacing 4:00-5:30pm and 5:15-6:15pm seminars) as of September 2019. The lunchtime seminars are alcohol free and the late afternoon ones offer alcohol and soft drinks.
- GeogSoc have developed more non-alcohol based events. For example, in 2019/20, they developed a Ping Pong event and a 'Pizza hang out'.

### **2.3 Intersectionality of race and class**

At BA and PGR level, it was described how BAME working class students' intersections of race and class may contribute to feelings of alienation, unbelonging and even inferiority. At undergraduate level, the fact that most white students are privately educated, whilst BAME students tend to come from disadvantaged schools, was considered to create a double racial and class divide, making BAME students feel less educated and inferior, reinforcing their often mentioned 'imposter syndrome'.

At PGR level, a student also highlighted that even though she received a scholarship, she still had to work part-time (2/3 days a week) throughout her full-time PhD. Whilst this practically constrained her level of contact and sense of belonging, so did realising that she was one of the few PGRs in this situation – contributing to reinforce a racial/class divide also at this level.

It was also raised how international students were always being reminded that they were high fee paying students and that it was “*not very nice being seen as a cash cow*”. Visa processes were



recalled to be not only extremely bureaucratic but also very costly, which may constrain students in financial need.

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- The EDI Committee will conduct an analysis of the balance of state and privately educated students.
- The EDI Committee and the Department is aware that many, if not the majority, of our students have to work part-time. Staff are advised to deal with this as personal tutors and actively make allowances for this. There is scope for the EDI Committee to remind tutors and supervisors to take this into account in terms of timetabling meetings, etc.

#### **2.4 Migrant students' experiences**

Concerns were raised over the ways in which the department seemed to be failing to create a more welcoming environment for BAME migrant students. It was mentioned that besides induction there is a lack of structures and processes to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion for international PGRs joining the department, in particular migrant students from the Global South, who travel from far and often lack social and support networks in this country.

A Latin American PGR recalled not being introduced to anyone when she first arrived in the department, being left unaware of how everything worked and not being addressed by anyone for weeks, which made her feel very lonely. This same student also witnessed a microaggression which further made her feel othered as a migrant student whose English is a second language. She described an instance where an English PGR told another migrant PGR: "*Speak to me when you can speak English properly*". She felt outraged and confronted the student who started saying it was just a 'joke'. She reported how this episode reinforced her insecurities around language:

*"Because my main concern, why I was maybe shy, is because I never felt my English was good enough to interact with others and when I saw that I thought, I never want to speak with this guy... because my low confidence is enough to have this person telling these kind of things. And my friend said: he is always doing these kind of jokes."* (Latin American woman, PGR, Human Geography)

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- The EDI Committee will explore the possibility of creating a 'buddy system' for new PhD students when they arrive.
- The EDI Committee will examine the creation of a system whereby all students sign-up to the inclusive ethos of the department at induction.
- The new induction process emphasises inclusion and belonging. This needs to be stressed very explicitly moving forward.

## **III. Structural and sustained racial inequities at department level**

### **3.1 The underrepresentation of BAME academic staff within the department**

The disproportionately reduced number of BAME people (Black women in particular) among academic staff within the department – particularly at senior levels, was generally considered

problematic by students at all levels. It was also recognised that within the existing small group of BAME academic staff members, there is an overrepresentation of South Asians, especially Indians, whilst there is a paucity of Black faculty members<sup>18</sup>, which in turn may be further affecting the demographic of students the department attracts and selects. The need to recruit and hire more staff *'who look like us'* and with the relevant expertise has recurrently been raised by students, in particular, Black women and women of colour.

Teaching was considered to be negatively compromised by this demographic disparity. At UG level, white lecturers were considered more likely to reproduce colonial bias whilst BAME lecturers were seen by students as more suitable to teach topics around colonialism - due to their own experiences, history and heritage. At PGT level, the insidious bias of some white lecturers was perceived to be reflected in teaching being problematically catered to a white audience.

*"There was an instance, where in one module the lecturer said that at the end of this module you work with the UN and big organizations, but...make sure you don't mess with the work of the local communities – implying that work done at local level was essentially bad. [...] I wanted to ask him: would the tone of your module change if all your students were [already] practitioners, or if all of them came from the Global South? [...] More than micro aggression, I want to draw attention to the way such modules are taught to actually cater to white students who will eventually work in the global south through big organizations."* (Asian-Filipina woman, PGT student)

It has been raised that both race as well as gender play important roles regarding approachability and confidence in seeking support. It was suggested that BAME students generally feel less comfortable to approach white staff members, in particular white males, as they often felt more intimidated and thought of them as somewhat less approachable. At undergraduate level, some BAME students seemed to be afraid of being perceived by white lecturers as less intelligent, questioned why they were there in the first place, or assumed not to have paid attention to the lectures. As a result, the underrepresentation of BAME academic staff could be having a direct impact in terms of BAME students avoiding reaching out for help and therefore being less likely to benefit from support available. At PGR level, those with GTA experience also noticed that BAME students tended to feel more comfortable approaching GTAs of a similar background and raised concerns in relation to what happens when this is not available given the reduced number of BAME lecturers and GTAs in the department.

For BAME PGRs, the underrepresentation of BAME staff and its consequent lack of relevant BAME expertise reflecting the needs of the community could be having a detrimental effect on recruitment of BAME PGRs but also on BAME PGR supervisory experience within the department. It was considered of extreme importance for BAME PGRs to be able to have at least one BAME supervisor, who they can look up to, feel safer and relate to without having to constantly *'code-switch'*. It was mentioned how the supervisory space can be *'the make or break space'*, where cases of bullying and harassment do/may occur. Ensuring a larger pool to choose from in terms of BAME supervisors was considered to be a possible way of mitigating those racial power relations, however, it was also acknowledged that other important intersectional power dynamics may continue to exist.

*"I look up to my supervisors, and it would really help if I could see someone who looks like me and like, you know, if she can do it, I can do it. [...] In fact, especially I have never thought about it too much until I went to Singapore where maybe more than half the faculty would be mostly East Asian people. [...] I realised that I could be successful. I was*

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<sup>18</sup> There is currently only one Black person employed as an academic staff member in the department.

*lucky enough to have a female East Asian supervisor, it was only then that I knew a person that I could actually look up to.” (East Asian woman, PGR in Human Geography)*

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- As discipline, Geography is under-represented by Black and BAME academic staff. This is recognised by the RGS and in our own department. The EDI Committee is aware that this needs to change. Ideally, the department would like to recruit a member of staff to work on Black geographies. The Department of History recently appointed a Lecturer in Colonial/Postcolonial British History, so there is a precedent. Discussions on a cluster hire have recently been brought to senior management.
- The EDI Committee has conducted a thorough review of our staff recruitment processes from start to finish. This was a key objective of the EDI Committee for 2020-21 and a set of recommendations were produced that have been signed off by HR. The Faculty level EDI Committee also has a workstream on inclusive recruitment, which addresses race.
- The Department can put more effort into the diversity of speakers for seminar series and guest lecturers. The shift to online workshops and events should provide opportunities for more speakers from the global South.
- The college is due to launch the *Harold Moody Fellowships for 2021/22 (as noted in the Academic Strategy for Research 2020/21)*: ‘We will launch the Harold Moody Fellowship scheme, a new fellowship scheme aimed at Black candidates that will support 2 excellent researchers every year in the transition to an academic post. Each fellowship will include funding for 2 years, and fellows will be assigned a mentor to offer advice on research and career development’.

### **3.2 Challenges in pursuing further education in Geography**

The UK higher education reality is of a broken pipeline for BAME students, in particular Black students, with reducing levels of diversity at PGT and further at PGR levels. This is also reflected in the KCL Geography department, where BAME students pointed towards elements that may be contributing to that based on their own experience. In particular, it was suggested that given the attainment gap, admissions’ focus on grades could be further disadvantaging BAME students, who would benefit from a more balanced assessment based on students’ practices, experiences and references. It was also mentioned that the challenges that non-white international and home students experience in pursuing further education could be quite different.

Finance emerged as a central concern for BAME home students, given increased pressure to be financially independent and support their family, which is reportedly linked with certain cultural expectations. For international BAME students, besides financial constraints, visa restrictions, language requirements and the way qualifications from certain countries are differently validated in the UK were also seen as barriers to pursue further education.

There was considered to be more stigma and less awareness about academic options, in particular regarding PhDs, among BAME students and their families. Given that their decisions were often driven by economic pressure, there seemed to be a need for the Department to be more proactive in deconstructing stereotypes and demonstrating how Geography professional and academic careers can be sustainable. A PGT student who also completed her undergraduate in the department shared her experience:

*“There are some courses that have a clear career link. Like medicine or dentistry. On the other hand, it’s like if you have the luxury of pursuing a course purely out of*

*passion, then that is something that indicates a level of privilege in your upbringing, or your education, or maybe just the way you look at the world. [...] So I had to deconstruct this even within my own family, telling them that if I did human geography, I could still become a lawyer.”* (Mixed-race Muslim woman, PGT student)

Affordability and access to scholarships were also perceived as major barriers to accessing further education. At a more structural level, it was suggested that BAME students were more likely to be impacted by the growing financialisation of higher education, wherein the increase in student finance loans leads to dwindling of scholarships. Tackling the lack of targeted scholarships for BAME students, in particular Black women and Muslim students who are reportedly not allowed to take loans, was therefore considered paramount also at department level.

In addition, the lack of formal structures to offer support and advice at departmental level for students considering pursuing a PhD was also seen as symptomatic of the larger issue. Currently, advice was mostly seen to be sought and given in informal ways, therefore depending on students' contacts and confidence to reach out. Hence, a need for more structured provision of information and advice surrounding educational pathways, availability of funding and scholarships was evidenced.

Negative experiences at UG level were also stressed as potentially having a significant impact on BAME students' decision to pursue further studies. The underrepresentation of BAME students and biased in contents at UG level were generally seen as likely to get worse at PGT and PGR level - which could be discouraging BAME students.

### **Actions taken and planned by the Department of Geography**

- The Department has increased the number and breadth of careers-orientated events and these are actively advertised through the JetStream student newsletter. The planned BAME mentorship programme will include guidance on career pathways
- There are also a number of new BAME dedicated studentships and funding opportunities at the College level (details in our response to Section 2.1). The School of Global Affairs is offering two scholarships worth £10,500 for two current undergraduates who wish to study on one of our Master's programmes from September 2021.
- One of our PhD students ran a Study Café session in February 2021 on the PhD application process. We will aim to run more events of this nature in 2021-22.
- It is worth noting that one of the Black Muslim students included in the consultation recently (February 2021) sent the following email about her career choices which are relevant to the points made above:
  - *“The whole dissertation process real changed my life and my perspective on what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go in life. In September 2019, I honestly thought I would apply for teaching positions and end up being a teacher. However, after researching about women for my IGS, I decided not to conform to the most easily available option (albeit teaching is definitely not easy). I found myself very intrigued by the construction/property sector and after further research decided to go for quantity surveying as it seemed the most appealing to me. I just wanted to thank you for both the module and supervision for the IGS as that whole process really changed my life. Also, to continue the legacy I am hoping to do my dissertation on minority ethnic women and their participation in the construction industry in the UK.”*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Building upon the consultation findings, the report now presents a set of recommendations as steps that can be taken to address issues of collegiality as well as those pertaining to curricula and teaching. It is acknowledged that some of the issues cut across scale and can perhaps be only, or better, addressed at the level of higher education or the university. Yet, the findings also identify issues that persist at department level, and how departmental level efforts remain critical to addressing systemic issues of curriculum bias, structural inequalities and institutional racism in higher education. Many of these recommendations were clearly laid out by students as suggestions on how to address issues they raised, whilst others were more indirectly drawn from their discussions.

### I. Decolonising the curriculum and teaching practices

- **The curriculum needs to be reviewed to more meaningfully engage non-Western perspectives and theories, from the conception, through to content, learning and teaching, assessment, to feedback and review.** On the whole, the insights from students point to the need for incorporating more diverse perspectives and theories to complement/challenge the canon and engage with key concepts (e.g. nature, culture, class, territory, etc).
- **Shift away from the case study model, as a means of ‘diversifying’, towards ‘decolonising’, by meaningfully engaging with theoretical conceptions from the Global South/Diaspora.** Reflections on student experiences around the dominance of case studies as a pedagogical practice across modules and disciplines suggest their use is sometimes counterproductive and may reinforce colonial/racial power relations.
- **Readings lists across modules should shift towards the ‘pluriversal’, particularly to tackle the lack of perspectives from Global South authors, non-English resources, Black feminist geographers and women of colour.** This should be done in a meaningful way that takes into account the significant theoretical contributions of these authors, and be critically reflective of their positionality, embodied, geographical and theoretical locations.
- **Strengthen teaching on critically reflecting on traditional methodologies and presenting alternative ones (e.g. embodied, participatory, arts-based methodologies).** Their potential should be recognised in expanding epistemological and theoretical boundaries, but also in encouraging the participation of racialised students.
- **Ensure recruitment priorities involves hiring staff with the above expertise, which is currently lacking in the department.** To implement and incorporate pluriversal perspectives and methodologies in a meaningful manner the appropriate expertise is required, which indicates a case for hiring more staff and drawing on existing skills of GTAs.
- **Consider restructuring modules such as the Practising Social Research module, to better equip students to identify bias and prejudice that could influence the reliability and nature of results.** As a PGT student put it: *The need of the hour was to deconstruct existing modules, rather than make a dash for more teaching.* This requires a critical review of who is teaching, what is being taught and how it is being taught.

- **Within the context of physical science, there must be more emphasis on doing research in non-extractive ways, building more horizontal relationships and acknowledging them.** In particular, undergraduate fieldtrips should draw on existing partnerships more closely, so that the trips can gain more purpose and meaning, with students interacting with ideas from other parts of the world. Field trips must also aim to introduce students to a wider geography of the Global South.
- **Departmental seminars should work in a complementary and facilitative way to engage with theoretical contributions from classic and emerging decolonial, postcolonial and race scholarships.** Particularly so in a context where it may not always be possible for all modules to offer comprehensive exposure to existing and emerging decolonial scholarship on a topic or subject area. PGRs who have expertise on these areas could lead on organising a seminar series, which in turn would give an opportunity for PGRs with this under-utilised knowledge to gain experience on that.
- **Reflection, thinking and action to decolonise the Geography department, its practices, structures, curriculum, and teaching, need to be a continuous process, and not a sporadic intervention.** One of the key takeaways from the consultation and indeed, in ongoing conversations within the student and academic community is that practices and traditions of reinforcing longstanding and even contingent colonial/racial biases within both academic and social discourse need to be meaningfully *recognised*. This means *acknowledgment* through facilitation of open discussions rather than evading or ignoring these issues. Lastly that they need to be *addressed* in a systematic manner through an action agenda and by putting in place structures and feedback mechanisms for students and staff to raise and articulate these issues.
- **The department should institutionalise and appropriately budget the implementation of an annual consultation, such as this current one, conducted by and with racialised students at all levels (with peer-researchers at UG, PGT and PGR levels).** The consultation would be a means to capture, consolidate and analyse ongoing challenges in efforts to decolonise the curriculum and teaching practices, and address BAME students' experiences of racism. This should be periodically shared and deliberated so as to make EDI an ongoing dialogue within the department. The most crucial aspect being the introduction of a system of accountability for the actions, practices or attitudes within the department that reinforce colonial legacies and/or discriminate, isolate or invisibilise lived experiences of BAME students. Through this, initiatives could be consistently evaluated and assessed for their ability to bring about enduring change in the higher education system.

## II. Creating an environment that centres racialised experiences of belonging

- **The department needs to be more creative and thoughtful in welcoming UG, PGT and PGR students through something other than drinking activities.** The coffee morning initiative was said to be a good example of that. It has been mentioned how PGRs have been taking initiative, organising movie nights and WhatsApp groups.
- **Introduce a general PGR geography training organised by the department.** This would not only help towards integrating new PGR cohorts but also to introduce many of those who do not come from a Geography background to the general conceptions in the discipline. This would contribute to a sense of belonging to the department and discipline, and give them more confidence as GTAs. In particular for women of colour



and PGRs whose English is a second language, who may be more likely to experience 'imposter syndrome' when applying to be a GTA.

- **Research domains could be more structured and organised** so that PGRs feel more integrated and have a platform to meet others working on similar subjects.
- **Introduce new modules and/or seminar series** to foster more open conversations amongst students and staff on **geographies/histories of race, gender, post/de-coloniality and social difference**.
- **Extend the Diversity Matters training, which is currently mandatory only for GTAs, to all PGRs.** The department can alternatively conceptualise its own training that is more tailored to the collegial and academic environment.
- **Reinforce modules lecture/seminar format where seminars include small groups of students and are allocated sufficient time for significant discussions.** Small seminar groups are found more effective in encouraging BAME students to develop the confidence and desirability of engaging in classroom discussions and sharing their personal thoughts and ideas. The study café is also considered as a positive initiative in fostering mutual exchanges between UG students and PGR GTAs in a more open and approachable manner.
- **There should be offered English language support at department level for students who are not native speakers.** Varying levels of familiarity and proficiency in English language continue to pose challenges for students in engaging with classroom teaching practices, grappling with academic demands and in broader socialization within the department. While several English courses are offered from KCL to improve language skills, students found these less helpful given there were too many students, little time and the level was inadequate.
- **The department should build capacities, skills and sensibilities of all levels of academic staff to handle social/racial tensions in classroom, including how to engage with students whose English is a second language.** On their part, it is vital that teaching staff complete training on how to handle sensitive discussions, and also participate in discussion sessions/workshops such as the "Conversations about Race" workshops because this is an ongoing dialogue and a continuing process of learning/unlearning.
- Migrant students felt largely well-supported by King's in dealing with visa-related regulations and interfacing with the foreign office. However, the department is often the first point of contact for students seeking assistance with visa regulations and administrative guidelines relating to personal needs such as change in circumstances, maternity leave, change in programme, etc. It is hence important that any advice and guidance offered to the students at the department level is done in a timely and well-informed way, and that students feel supported in navigating the procedures at university level.
- **There should be a structured accountability mechanism at departmental level for students to flag, share and seek support regarding experiences of micro-aggression and racism.** This should be a safe and confidential space offering a route for formal grievance redressal in relation to experiences both within and outside the classroom environment, or any other concerns regarding their experience as racialised students at the department. Such a system could also be tailored to include the needs and concerns of students who can have racialised experiences in employment (e.g. as GTAs or researchers under a KCL project).



**A clear discussion on racism, harassment and bullying as part of the introductory sessions for incoming cohorts is recommended.** Students should be well familiarised with professional codes of conduct and reasonable behaviour, and of their legal rights in the UK education/employment landscape in order to be able to identify and raise instances of racism or microaggression.

### III. Addressing sustained and structural racial inequities

- **The department should make concerted efforts to extend and intensify outreach in deprived schools to encourage BAME students from poorer backgrounds into universities.**
- **There should be organised advisory sessions and/or mentoring support for aspiring PGT and PGR students, particularly targeting racialised students from working class backgrounds as a means to address the progression pipeline.** Offering information about learning/education options and available funding at the department is one way in which the department can set up direct communication channels with aspiring BAME students in a welcoming and humane way. These can also go a long way in breaking down stigma by showing that a professional career in or through Geography can be sustainable.
- **The admission process should take due cognizance of the systemic issues of differential access and opportunities in education for BAME students.** It is suggested that PGT and PGR admission process focus less on grades and more on practices, student's experiences and references.
- **Making funding available for BAME students through targeted scholarships, especially at PGR and PGT level, is crucial.** These should be particularly aimed at tackling underrepresentation of Black students (Black women in particular). While scholarship opportunities do exist for international students, they too could be better targeted at the marginalised communities within those regions.
- **The department should make use of targeted recruitment calls to urgently hire more BAME academic staff (in particular Black women) to match the student body in terms of diversity.**<sup>19</sup> It is, however, imperative that new BAME hire brings in expertise reflective of the needs of the BAME community, which are currently lacking in the department (e.g. Black geographies, geographies of race, decolonial geographies). This would help addressing fear of failure and imposter syndrome experienced by many undergraduate BAME. Equally, addressing BAME negative experiences at UG level is crucial, since those could impact BAME students' decision to pursue further studies. The presence of BAME academic staff functions as a crucial interface through which students seek support for both making sense of, and drawing attention to their personal experiences of discriminatory or exclusionary behaviour, or their struggles in coping in the academic environment. This once again, reinforces the need to expand recruitment of BAME staff at all levels. But it also calls attention to the fact that some students find

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<sup>19</sup> The Equality Act 2010 allows for positive action (or affirmative action) in recruitment in order to improve outcomes for a disadvantage group (on grounds of their protected characteristics). As such, under national equality law it is within HR frameworks to carry out a targeted recruitment where candidates race and gender (e.g. being a Black woman) is considered a requirement as part of a job specification.

BAME staff more approachable not just due to a sense of comfort and familiarity, but also because of a lack of confidence in approaching white (and male) staff.

- **The department should make efforts to periodically collect and publish more detailed demographic data on race and ethnicity among staff and students.** This will help more transparently monitoring progress towards improving the representation of Black people in the department. The currently available demographic data provided by the department divides students between white, 'BME' and non-UK domicile, but do not provide data on specific racial/ethnic groups. This is problematic because it may give the impression that racial diversity is overall improving, when in fact, this may only partially be true, in relation to an specific racialised group (e.g. Asians), whilst masquerading the extreme underrepresentation of other groups (e.g. Black people).