



School of Life Sciences
The University of Warwick
Gibbit Hill Road
Coventry, CV4 7AL
United Kingdom

9 June 2020

Professor Lorenzo Frigerio
Head of School of Life Sciences
The University of Warwick

Dear Professor,

Let me first thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I am a Ph.D student in your department. I love our department; I am proud to represent it and I feel it is generally a good working environment. However, as a person of colour, I am more attune to the systemic racism that is present within the department and the University as a whole. This institutionalised prejudice, as I am sure you are aware, is now becoming apparent across all forms of life, highlighted even more intensely due to the current global pandemic.

I am sad to say that while I have not myself been subject to direct racism, I have witnessed and felt racism within our department. The most disturbing incident was when I heard a senior academic casually and loudly exclaiming how "there are too many zhings and zhangs for my liking", referring to researchers of Chinese origin in the department. This happened in a lab, on a normal day, during peak hours. What was shocking was the complete disregard to the many BAME students and researchers present within that lab, and how the said academic felt confident enough to feel as if they were above the law. I am sure you agree that such behaviour has no place within any realm of society, and more pertinently, within the academic institution you lead.

I am highlighting the above incident, which I hope to be an exceptional circumstance, to demonstrate to you that there is racism and prejudice circulating within the corridors of our department. This is apparent in the nonchalant attitude of the perpetrator, the humoured response of his colleague, the comment itself and my belief that any action I could have taken to report it would have resulted in little to no change. The reason I did not act, is the same reason I remain anonymous in this communication; for fear of repercussions from a system that is already stacked against my favour. This feeling of apathy is compounded by the fact that every day I come to work, I am made acutely aware of the underrepresentation of people that look like me, in positions that I aspire to one day occupy.

I have had a great belief in the meritocratic nature of this country. My parents came here and worked hard to provide me and my siblings with a good education. I held this belief strong and even turned a blind eye towards events like that I described above, in the unrelenting hope that hard work will always be rewarded. In the last two weeks however, I have become even more aware of the colour of my skin. It has come to my realisation that despite how hard I work or how many papers I publish, the system is rigged against me. Despite all of this, I am one of the lucky ones as I somehow managed to secure a Ph.D. position, while many talented students of colour fail to do so. However, I sometimes question whether my success was only due to a sympathetic ethnic minority Professor, providing me with an otherwise unavailable opportunity.

What pains me even more is that this underrepresentation of BAME students in academia could be solved at a departmental level, with the correct will to action. As the Head of School, you have the opportunity to

ensure that our department is different and create systematic changes that provide greater and wider opportunities for all. It needs to be realised that a hastily put together email or tweet in response to a crisis or plastering a black face on an open day poster will not suffice any longer. For these reasons, please allow me to outline some suggestions on how you can take the lead in creating the fundamental shifts in perspective and change of action that is so eminently required.

Firstly, a new statement from the Head of School, acknowledging the short comings of the previous statement as clearly highlighted by Kristyna Rysava in her email response, is required. This statement should be used as a springboard to open a dialogue and a process to create real and lasting change. This is an opportunity for the Head of the School of Life Science and our department as a whole to lead by example and demonstrate the level of action that is required through-out the University of Warwick. It need not be said that your decisions surrounding this matter could be the greatest legacy of your tenure.

Looking forward to the possibility of an improved statement, here is a brief list of what the department could communicate to provide better support and implement real and lasting change. It maybe more appropriate to communicate a date defined promise of these items in an official statement, with a follow up report to be published in the coming months. This would be vital in restoring trust.

- A direct acknowledgment of the pain felt by any Warwick community members (within and outside the department), especially the Black community members, at police killings of Black individuals.
- A specific list of the University's SI/Equality objectives for 2020-2024, including any progress that has already been made by the department in achieving these aims.
- A direct acknowledgment of the present state of institutional racism present within the department and the need to do more, through the publishing of the numbers of BAME faculty, staff and students within the department. Numbers should be itemized per race/ethnicity and not grouped as BAME, to further highlight the underrepresentation of black people. [This is key, and I believe is the first step towards lasting change]
- A commitment to instituting mandatory and more thorough implicit bias or inclusion training for faculty, staff, and students.
- The commissioning of a review of how the department intends to direct both its research resources and undergraduate teaching to combat institutional racism present both in the department and in the wider university community. [It is here where the department must lead by example].
- Information on where Warwick students, faculty, and staff can find short-term resources for their wellbeing.

We find ourselves at a unique juncture in history, and you are in a unique position to catalyse systemic transformation, not least due to your gender and the colour of your skin. Such language and the call for change I outlined may seem disproportionate or exaggerated. Indeed, if you decide to act, you will undoubtedly feel doubt and anxiety. You may even encounter resistance. Such pressures may tempt you towards self-preservation and the preservation of a system that has served you well. In these moments, I beg you to question, if not now, when? If not me, who? For these are the same questions that prompted me to write this letter; albeit anonymously.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours Sincerely,

Anonymous Student of Colour,

Under your care

University of Warwick