

## **An Open Letter to Principal and Vice-Chancellor Sally Mapstone: Call for Action from the University and Pledge to Diversity Policies**

Dear Principal Mapstone,

We are writing to you as concerned representatives from various associations and Schools within the St Andrews community in response to your latest email on the subject of the murder of George Floyd, and the University's stance on the matter. The purpose of this letter is to urge that active action is taken to ensure that fully-fledged and effective diversity policies are put in place in the University, and to ask that the structure of those policies—*what* they consist of, *who* will be behind their design— is communicated to all students. We are also writing to you to ask that an official apology and pledge to sincere support to BAME students are issued, acknowledging the University's systematic failure to support BAME students and to provide a non-white-centered curriculum and learning experience.

The murder of George Floyd on the 25th of May in Minneapolis is the tip of the iceberg of a process of systematic oppression, denigration and exclusion that has been in the making for centuries. As your last email said, the University has long been "*a part of the establishment and structures which perpetuate discrimination in this and other countries*". The central problem is, however, that the University hasn't stopped playing a role in the mechanisms of discrimination; the University doesn't only have to deal with the "*legacy*" of its past, but to acknowledge how it, both in active and passive ways, continues to support a system that is rooted in the exclusion of black people.

You told all of us that "*fact and argument*" can change the world. We should, therefore, take a look at the facts concerning St Andrews as an institution. The facts, according to the [University's Equality Mainstreaming Interim Report published in April 2019](#), are the following.

### **The current racial make up of the University body**

As of 2018, 199 (86.5%) of the professors were white, yet only 6 (2.6%) were BAME. Despite this, between 2016 and 2018, the number of BAME professors only increased by one, from 5 to 6, while the number of white professors increased from 181 to 199. While 1580 (85.4%) members of your full-time staff were white, only 147 (7.9%) were reported to be BAME. Again, while the number of white full-time staff increased from 1519 in 2016 to 1580 in 2018, the number of BAME full-time staff only increased from 126 to 147. It is interesting to note that the report offers no data regarding the racial-make up of the University's Court, nor of the Heads of School. It seems that the reason for this may be that only white individuals have occupied these positions.

Over the academic year 2018-2019, 3920 (88.8%) of the full-time undergraduate students were reported as being white, while only 436 (9.9%) were reported as being BAME. The fact is that, from the 2016-2017 academic year to the 2018-2019 one, the percentage of BAME

full-time undergraduate students only grew by 1.5%. This statistic was based on those students with a UK domicile, which begs the question of what the real percentage of BAME full-time undergraduate students was— the University report offered no such data. Neither the data regarding racial make-up of the student body nor the data referring to that of professors and full-time staff provides a full account of the picture of racial reality in St Andrews. The division of the categories between white, BAME, and unknown/undisclosed, makes it impossible for those concerned with the situation (which should be all of us) to know exactly how many black, Asian, Arab, Middle-Eastern or Latino students and professors are members of the University. It makes it impossible to know if there is a gender balance among BAME members of the University, if there is LGBT+ representation among BAME professors, staff and students. Putting all BAME under the same category instead of providing individual and specific statistics seems to suggest not that the University truly cares about diversity but, merely, that it cares about reducing the image it historically has had, and continues to have, of being a white-focused, privileged institution. It seems easy for the report to state that the, for instance, 1.5% increase in BAME undergraduate students, is a reason to be proud of. Yet (and leaving aside the fact that a 1.5% increase over the course of three years appears to be significantly low), it does not detail what racial groups benefited from that growth, or whether there has been any change at all to the percentage of black students in St Andrews. How can something be described as a source of pride without fully analyzing if real progress and change have been made?

While the offer rates and subsequent racial make-up of the University may stem from the racial make-up of the applicant pool for universities across the UK, the fact is that the University continues to make a very limited effort to diversify its student and staff body. The strategies described by the same report reflect this.

### **Some of the actions described by the *Equality Outcomes Scheme Action Plan***

The first outcome in the *Equality Outcomes Scheme Action Plan*, is “Making a University that is accessible, and is recognised as encouraging diversity and the appreciation of it in our staff, students and suppliers.” The will for recognition, with all due respect, is not the same as the will for change. The goal shouldn’t be to be *recognized as encouraging diversity*, but to be an institution that *actively* encourages diversity. This underlying belief on the importance of recognition reflects back on the planning of the University’s strategies. As detailed by the action plan, one of the initiatives to attract more BAME applicants was to “publish adverts in BAME media” which was allegedly achieved by “promot[ing] the University as a diversity employer and place of study in the UK wide distributed ‘Diversity Digest Magazine’ (Sep 2017) and in the ‘Windrush Magazine’ (May 2018)”. This is not a policy for structural change, it is a policy for rebranding. It doesn’t identify the reasons why St Andrews as an institution continues to fail to attract and welcome BAME professors, it doesn’t lay out a strategy for remediating race-related issues. It simply assumes that *selling* the idea of diversity will make it become a reality.

Another equality action detailed by the action plan that has been marked as complete is “ensur[ing] that the working, studying and visiting environments are free from bullying or harassment”. This was supposedly achieved by “conduct[ing] an EIA to review Harassment

& Bullying at Work and Study Policy to be inclusive of updated equalities terminology and good practice with feedback from the University". Once again, this is not a policy for change. Conducting *one* assessment to ensure that the University space is free from bullying or harassment not only is not good enough, but pales in face of the fact that the University Discipline Office has a file image of a student stating that he hates black people (using a racial slur instead) and have failed to take any sort of action.

These are only two of the disclosed equality actions on the report, but they portray what appears to be the general trend in the University's strategy towards diversity and equality: a tick-the-boxes approach, rather than a process of deconstructing white-centered practices and assumptions. Even the strategy of mainstreaming/integration and awareness raising (section 5.3), meaning the hosting of diversity events at the University, falls into this approach. Out of 29 diversity events hosted between 2017 and 2019, only 3 were solely centred on race: 1 took place in 2017, 2 of them in 2018. While 6 others were labelled as being related to racial issues, the fact remains that only 3 in a three-year period actually focused on racial issues. Awareness raising is a constant process. It cannot be simply ticked off after some events are hosted. It is deeper than isolated panels and, in institutions such as universities, it necessitates a place in the curriculum.

### **Our concerns over the University curriculum**

A quick scroll through the 2018-2019 academic year undergraduate course catalogues reveals a sharp focus on white and western history, ways of thinking and knowledge production. Only two Arts and Humanities modules for first and second year offered topics that weren't focused on white, western ways of thinking and history: Introduction to Middle Eastern History (MH2002) and Old Testament 1: Torah and Prophets (DI1003). Even at honors level, where more modules seem to deviate from this norm, a large number appear to do so from a white perspective and focus, either by treating Africa as a homogeneous entity, as shown by some International Relations modules (e.g., the *Politics of Africa*), or by studying non-white pieces in relation to what they mean to Europe or the western world, as shown by modules such as the Art History module *The Arts of Africa: Histories, Themes and European Collections*. In other cases, as with Philosophy or Management— which tends to employ organisational case studies referring only to Europe or North America—, the focus is entirely on white ways of thinking. While every module offered should be analyzed in more detail, both in terms of content and teaching style, the fact remains that neither diversity nor critical approaches to subject matters constitute the core of the St Andrews curriculum. The perpetuation of oppressive ideas and practices, with all due respect, is partly driven by curriculums like ours, by those which fail to question ways of knowledge production and subsequent perspectives that have historically been rooted in the exclusion or denigration of the non-white other.

### **Racism as ingrained in the University's culture**

St Andrews, as you yourself continuously reiterate, is more than a university, it is a community. The discriminatory practices present in the academic realm of the institution are mirrored by others in the social realm. Up until around 2014, what was known as *Bongo Ball*,

was hosted was hosted by students at the University where attendees were encouraged to combine black tie with [animal onesies](#), [African themed shirts](#) and [animal print face paint](#). In 2015 *Bongo Ball* changed its name to *Xavier Ball*, but the overall theme remained the same. This event was later [celebrated by the University with posts on social media](#). The ball, which was criticized by members of the student community for being racist, never received official criticism from the University and, to this day, no public apology nor explanation as to why it was allowed to take place have been issued.

Further, Project Zambia, the University's star volunteering initiative is still active. The structure and message of the project convey a clear focus on what it can deliver to students, rather than to the community it theoretically aims to help. Some of the University's quotes regarding the initiative include labelling it as a ["life-changing opportunity"](#) for student participants, or describing the place where it takes place, Kazemba, as a ["village of poverty"](#). These statements, along with the images used to publicize the project, which fall into the stereotypical portrayal of white aid in the form of young, smiling black children, are only part of the reason why Project Zambia has been criticized for perpetuating issues related to volunteerism and white savior complex. The initiative continues colonial-era practices of treating Africa as Europe's playground, as an empty canvas where individuals can take up roles they wouldn't be allowed to take up in Europe without adequate training (such as teaching). The fact that Zambia was under UK colonial rule until 1964 and that this historical background is not addressed by any of the University's advertisements, further highlights the ideological flaws to the project. The University continues to endorse and publicly applaud this initiative.

There are multiple other examples. The fact that the Assistant Vice-Principal to Diversity is a white woman, and that the equality and diversity co-chairs of the School of Philosophical, Anthropological, and Film Studies are two white men. The fact that there are no compulsory workshops or talks for first years regarding race-related issues and the University's zero tolerance policy. The multiple examples of racism encountered by [present](#) and past students which— due to the lack of an effective mechanism for people to safely report these incidents, of a service to offer support and protection to those who denounce their experiences— repeatedly avoid accountability and repercussions. The fact that while not a single one of the University's rectors has been BAME, Rudyard Kipling continues to be highlighted as one of the University's prominent members without any acknowledgment of his role in crafting colonial and racist literature, such as *The White Man's Burden*.

### **Our disappointment over the University's public response and our call to action**

In your email, you argued that *"statements in themselves will not change the world"*. You may be right, they may not be enough to change the world; but this doesn't mean that they are not necessary. Diversity is not only about inclusion— it is about committed and meaningful support, about the recognition of the pain of others and action for change. Over the past week, before the Black Lives Matter student takeover, the only reference to the murder of George Floyd and the rise in anti-racist protests worldwide by University's social media platforms, specifically its Instagram and Twitter pages, has been the posting of a black square on *Black Out Tuesday*. A black square which sought to show solidarity, but

which, given the lack of a public acknowledgement by the University of the ways in which it continues to support racist structures, simply came across as an example of performative support. The only post published by the University Rector, Srdja Popovic, on his Facebook account regarding the current situation, falls into the same category. A “Racism Has No Place In St Andrews” image, which failed to address the University’s continued part in structural oppression, and which almost felt as a ‘2 for the price of 1’ post, due to its use of the Pride color scheme despite having shown no support towards LGBTQ+ students over Pride Month. This form of performative solidarity is, with all due respect, a form of silencing. In failing to recognize how St Andrews continues to exclude its black students, to admit how the structures in place constitute a form of oppression, these posts and the overwhelming lack of other statements that comes along with them, block out the voices of black students, telling them that their experiences are not true.

Your personal response to the demand for University action, in the form of your latest email to all students, unfortunately embodied the University’s trend of treating this issue without the necessary sensitivity. While we believe your objective was never to offend members of the student body, your use of the sentence “For the most part, you can breathe”, disregarded the connotations and effects this statement could have on those reading your message. To twist the words of a dying man merely to refer to the privilege of being able to attend a good-ranking higher institution is, with no disrespect intended, far from acceptable. For many of us who hoped to find assurance in your words, the sentence instead hit as insensitive and hurtful, as almost demeaning to the problem of police brutality and to the emotional toll that watching or hearing about the brutal murder of a Black man in broad daylight has had on Black students.

You may not be able to change the University’s past, but you can shape its future. You may not be able to support black students who graduated years ago, but you can support black students who still experience the University’s failures. Responding to the current events, to the demand for change that is rising worldwide, is not only about standing on the correct side of History. It’s about doing the right thing *now* for the right reasons, for the people who need it. It is about carrying out the responsibility that you assumed when you became Principal. We urge you to ensure that active action is taken, that fully-fledged diversity policies are put in place. We urge you to send out an apology to BAME, especially black students, for the ways in which the University has fallen short of their commitment to diversity. To pledge sincere and continued support to BAME students. We are asking you, with all due respect, to do the right thing.

Please take this into consideration.

Kindest regards,