

Response to Student Article About Racist and Misogynistic Violence on Campus

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We, the undersigned members of staff and PhD students at the University of Exeter, would like to respond to the account of racist and misogynistic violence that has recently been published by one of our students.

We are horrified to read about the abuse and harassment our student has experienced on campus. We also acknowledge that this is not an isolated case. The account draws attention to wider structural issues that we, as a Department and as a University, need to confront. The hundreds of hateful emails our student received reveal how appeals to “freedom of speech” are abused in order to justify racist and misogynistic violence. To fulfil our duty of care towards our students, we need to take a stand regarding the necessary caveats of freedom of speech. The account also demonstrates flaws in existing support mechanisms and complaint procedures that will prevent others from speaking out about harassment and discrimination. It is our responsibility to address these issues as a matter of urgency, so that we can provide a safe learning environment for our BAME and international students. We are committed to doing this work.

We have the following recommendations for actions on this particular case, for any future incidents, and for more proactive as opposed to reactive reforms: to provide immediate and thorough guidance and support for those targeted throughout the process of investigation; to invest in resources for investigating anonymous hate speech; to put in place wellbeing policies that acknowledge the effects of hate speech on students and staff; if necessary and appropriate, and with consent, to work with police on the behalf of those targeted; to review the increase of far-right rhetoric targeting individuals or groups with protected characteristics on online forums, and to be proactive in shutting them down; to review how shortcomings in reporting processes can contribute to these incidents; and to communicate a decisive stand on far-right extremist speech to the University community at large, which would make clear the University’s values.

It is no coincidence that our student has to endure these attacks at a moment when the forces of hate and intolerance are becoming increasingly emboldened at Exeter. While we appreciate the University’s recent initiatives (the Provost’s Commission and the ‘We Are All Exeter’ campaign), we fear that an atmosphere of hate is still being allowed to flourish here. Indeed, we believe our community has a deeply ingrained

problem with racism that needs to be more openly and fully acknowledged and addressed. Last year, Katie Hopkins' visit to campus emboldened a culture of hatred. We believe the violence our student has experienced has been facilitated in part by a culture of permission, without fear of recrimination. The emails and the physical and sexual harassment referred to in our student's account show a situation that has gone deeply out of control, and the intervention of the University should have been to pre-empt this, rather than to appease what it must consider to be an important part of its demographic on legal grounds.

Racism at the University of Exeter does not always necessarily manifest in terms of overt comments and behaviour (though of course we have seen plenty of this too), but rather in a general lack of self-awareness and understanding regarding white privilege. Our community needs to get better at understanding whiteness as a position of structural advantage, liable to reinforce all sorts of unconscious and damaging assumptions when it comes to the most basic social and pedagogical interactions. Often feeling intimidated, unsupported, and misunderstood by this systemically unreflective environment, it is becoming increasingly commonplace for our BAME and international students and colleagues to express a desire to leave and pursue their studies and careers elsewhere.

As you will have seen, there has been an outpouring of public support for our student. Her account is one of many experiences of racist and misogynistic violence on campus. We feel that this is the moment when explicitly anti-racist values need to cut through any and all anxieties regarding public image and university recruitment. This is not an issue that can be approached in terms of politically neutral "balance," or in terms of merely paying lip-service to inconvenient legislation. For the sake of our increasingly beleaguered and deeply concerned scholarly community, all of us need to take a public, systemically reformist, and unambiguous stand against gathering forces of reaction, hatred, racism, and fascism.

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