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## Education Guardian weekly

# Official denial

As a Manchester doctor accuses his university of institutional racism, Lee Elliot Major wonders whether academia is the last bastion of the white old boys' network

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[The Guardian](#)

Dr Aneez Esmail has clashed with the authorities before. Eight years ago he and a fellow GP were arrested by the police and charged with making fraudulent job applications. The motive for their crimes? A piece of seminal research.

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- ▶ They had sent pairs of identical job applications for a series of hospital posts, one with an English name, the other with an Asian name. Although both fictional applicants had the same medical experience and qualifications, the English applicants were shortlisted twice as often as the Asian candidates. Esmail and his colleague were cleared of the charges, and the results were eventually published in the British Medical Journal, providing the first documented evidence of discrimination in the NHS.

Exposing discrimination as an academic is one thing; experiencing it, however, is another. Now Esmail is taking out an official grievance with his current employers, the University of Manchester. If he is unhappy with the outcome, then he will request an employment tribunal.

Until recently head of the university's school of primary care, he believes that he is a victim of institutional racism. "I do think that as an organisation, Manchester University, like so many British universities, is institutionally racist. I do not say this lightly, but there are many things that have happened to me and that I have observed which suggest to me that there is a problem with racism," he says. "Ask how many people from ethnic minorities are in senior positions in the university. One of the results of all this is that the sort of work that I do on racism is devalued in that it is not considered important."

He is part of the front line of senior black academics struggling to break into the upper ranks of UK universities for the first time. You might think that the rarefied environment of academe is a million miles from the laddish excesses of football clubs, the canteen culture of police stations, or even the closely guarded cliques of the legal and medical professions. Yet racial tensions are simmering in university common rooms. Ministers are privately shocked that there is not one black academic in the three top ranking positions of any university. And the findings of a survey on discrimination in the academic workplace by the main lecturers' union is deemed so sensitive that it has remained up to now under lock and key.

Esmail's complaint centres around a submission made by the university last year to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Meaningless to most outside the lofty confines of the ivory towers, RAE submissions are life and death in the academic world. Academic reputations and careers are won or lost on the research ratings.

Much to his dismay, Esmail discovered that he was not being entered as part of Manchester's submission to the assessment. For a highly successful academic, the exclusion represented a crushing blow for future promotion and career prospects. The Manchester school submitted not more than 60% of its staff, a low proportion compared with the majority of departments submitted by the top research universities. But many of those not submitted will have been staff without much of a research record. To be labelled "research inactive" is a heavy handicap in the job market. Esmail's academic CV is impressive by any measure: several articles in prestigious journals such as the BMJ, a visiting professorship at Harvard, several stints advising ministers, and most recently an advisory role on the Shipman inquiry. Esmail also felt that it was a snub to the field of research on racism in the medical profession.

The university said that Esmail's research was not included because it was judged not to be of international standing.

Manchester University declined to comment on an individual case but said an independent panel of international referees assessed all individuals to be considered for return. "Using these findings and the judgement of senior academic staff within the university, all individuals to be considered for return in this Unit of Assessment were ranked in order. In order to maximise the university's RAE score in this Unit of Assessment, a strategic cut-off point was identified in the rankings to include only those individuals consistently rated as being of international standing. Staff who fell below this cut-off point were not returned in the submission."

The university also said: "The University of Manchester recognises racism and institutional racism as issues. It continually reviews all of its policies to comply with both the spirit and the detail of the law and is actively looking at the duties placed upon it by the amended Race Relations Act."

Three international academic referees assessed Esmail's papers for the university. A Dutch referee judged the work to be of international standing. A US professor said that the work had been presented in a way that limited its international impact; and another US academic ruled that the work was relevant only to the UK and South Asia, and therefore not of international standing. Esmail was told about the assessments but was not given an opportunity to challenge them, nor was he told about the background information that was given to them. Four professors in Manchester then assessed the papers and decided that they were not of international standard; the decision was made to exclude him from the submission. Esmail was not given the opportunity to challenge the basis on which the decision was made as there is no appeals procedure.

Dismay turned to despair when Esmail heard about government plans to create an electronic doomsday book of research - a database listing all the 50,000 academics and 200,000 papers submitted by universities to the assessment. The database will be the official showcase of academic expertise in the UK. Esmail says: "The fact that I was not returned means that I will not be part of this important database, but more importantly, all the work that I have done on racism in the profession will be completely ignored."

Esmail's worst fears were realised when he recently applied for a post at another university; he didn't get the job, and one of the major deciding factors was his non-return in the RAE.

A case for racism? There is no evidence or allegations that academics purposefully or overtly discriminated against Esmail because of the colour of his skin or the nature of his work. After all, the academic profession puts its trust in, and indeed prides itself on, the "peer review system", whereby anonymous academics are trusted to make judgements over job or grant applications, basing their decisions purely on the academic strength of the proposals.

Yet Esmail's argument is that it is this tradition of informal trust and lack of accountability that makes academe such a potential breeding ground for the kind of institutional racism described by the Macpherson report into the Metropolitan police, where an organisation through unwitting prejudice, ignorance or stereotyping disadvantages minority ethnic people. It is not simply the way individuals are treated - certain types of research are more highly valued than others, reflecting the social values of the existing academic elite. Research into racism, for example, is often not treated as important as other topics. In universities the panels of "objective" referees are dominated by white middle-class middle-aged males, sharing the same values, attitudes and social circles.

Dr Gargi Bhattacharya, a lecturer in cultural politics and religion at the University of Birmingham and the chair of the Association of University Teachers' equal opportunities panel,

says: "Universities still retain a whiff of the old world - either your face fits or it doesn't. The well modulated tones of the senior common room may never break out into open abuse - but you will get the message. The route to career development remains mysterious, decided by who you know and where you go, rather than any more transparent process. Predictably, this all serves to solidify existing social barriers. Women get a poor deal, class still shapes your destiny, and black and ethnic minority people remain outside the inner circle. Despite a veneer of good manners, universities continue to pursue employment practices that would evoke outrage elsewhere. Entrenched discrimination forms part of this quiet and bumbling tradition. No harm meant, but plenty done."

Esmail's dissatisfaction is not a solitary tale. Complaints of racism in higher education are on the increase. The Commission for Racial Equality last month, for example, decided to support Dr Chinasa Anya in an employment tribunal over his claims that Oxford University discriminated against him when turning down his application to be a post-doctoral research assistant in the department of materials. The university has been involved with three other court cases over allegations of racial discrimination. It disputes all the allegations.

Last year the London Institute, which contains five of the most prestigious art and design colleges in the UK, paid a large out-of-court settlement to a former student, Brian Moore, who had claimed that tutors on his film course engineered his removal because he was involved in a series of disputes about racism.

Alarmingly, the student population is also becoming segregated on racial lines, the latest official figures show. Students from ethnic minority backgrounds make up less than 4% of intakes at many old traditional universities. Yet they make up more than 12 times this proportion - more than half of student enrolments - at North London, Westminster, Thames Valley, South Bank and other new universities.

Two years ago the damning but largely ignored Modood report found that while 6.5% of academics are "not-white", a figure mirroring the national average, the proportion plummets further up the academic career ladder. About one in five ethnic minority respondents reported they had personally experienced discrimination in job applications, or in promotion, and had experienced racial harassment from staff or students. A third of universities did not have a racial equality policy.

There are some rays of hope. The Race Relations Amendment Act places a positive duty on universities and other public institutions to promote race equality. Draft codes of practice promise to provide detailed specifications for challenging institutional racism. The Cabinet Office meanwhile is carrying out an inquiry into the participation of ethnic minority people in the academic workforce. And a new equality challenge unit has been set up by vice-chancellors.

Esmail's has already taken his grievance to the vice-chancellor and the university insists that it has assessed his work fairly. It may be that the university is found to have been fair in its assessment of his work. But Esmail's focus on allegedly discriminatory procedures, rather than individuals, reflects a wider concern that universities should become more open and accountable. Esmail says: "I think that the biggest problem with the higher education sector is that of denial. It was the same problem when I first started exposing racism in the medical profession. It was only when the profession and its institutions accepted that there was a problem of racial discrimination that we began to make progress in combating it. The problem with the academic sector is that they just can't accept that there is a problem like racism - perhaps they think that academics are above it all. I beg to differ."

Have you experienced racism? Can universities improve their equal opportunity procedures? Mail your comments to  
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