

Research Brief

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Supporting cultural change to improve equality and diversity in Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

The UK higher education sector needs a new approach to improve equality and diversity. In September 2015, Business Secretary Sajid Javid asked the representative organisation Universities UK to investigate 'lad culture' and violence against women¹. This followed recent publicity about survey findings on bullying and harassment in higher education². In addition the shortage of academics from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds has been revisited recently in media debates and by the government³. Early in 2016, David Cameron made public statements about the lack of diversity in relation to ethnicity, gender and socio-economic background, amongst students at elite universities⁴.

These conversations are not new and some initiatives have already been implemented to tackle equality and diversity issues. Examples include:

- The Athena Swan charter mark scheme for gender equality
- Widening participation programmes to diversify student recruitment
- Initiatives to increase awareness of potential 'unconscious bias'

It is argued however that these tend to operate at surface level and can actually serve to shut down discussion: the existence of policies and initiatives can be proof enough that institutions are fulfilling their commitments⁵. The persistence of serious equality and diversity issues despite these policies and initiatives suggests there could be deeper cultural issues that are not being addressed.

There is a clear need in the UK higher

This briefing outlines research being conducted by Dr Alison Phipps and Dr Liz McDonnell at Imperial College London with the following aims:

- 1) To describe Imperial's 'institutional culture' and the impact this has on equality and diversity;
- 2) To develop ideas for cultural change.

Through the research on Imperial College's institutional culture Dr Phipps and Dr

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