

# Correspondence

## Lab heads: count minority trainees

For scientists of colour, like me, the vocal support of so many in the scientific community in the past few weeks has been a gratifying change from a history of silence and complicity in racism (see *Nature* **559**, 153; 2018).

But words come easy. Pledges to enact changes to combat racism rarely result in action. Indeed, the poor representation of people from minority ethnic groups at higher levels of academia in most countries only exists because of an accretion of overt discrimination and, more commonly, a lack of consciousness of racism among individual mentors and principal investigators.

As part of his pledge to do better, Michael Eisen, editor-in-chief of the journal *eLife* and a geneticist at the University of California, Berkeley, has admitted his own lack of mentorship of Black students during his career (M. B. Eisen *eLife* **9**, e59636; 2020). I call on more leaders in science to examine their actions. Compile data on the career trajectories of your trainees, broken down by ethnicity. Share the aggregate data through social media, your journals and society newsletters, or with your own laboratory members and department.

The acknowledgement of past failings by senior colleagues will go a long way towards demonstrating to scientists from under-represented groups that academia is willing to reform. Lab heads: hold your own feet to the fire. The first step towards change has to be a deeply personal recognition of our own roles in creating and maintaining discriminatory systems.

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## Let minority-ethnic scientists share

Amid the greatest social unrest affecting the United States in decades (see *Nature* <http://doi.org/dx7r>; 2020), the University of Virginia in Charlottesville is currently working towards resuming research after a ten-week COVID-19 shutdown. Asking Black colleagues to carry on without acknowledging their debilitating hurt and anguish struck me, a Mexican American MD/PhD student, as unjust.

With the support of my cell-biology department, I organized and moderated an hour-long online discussion on 1 June. Our main objective was to create a supportive and safe space for people to express their thoughts and feelings.

Black and minority-ethnic people make up roughly 40% of the graduate-programme students and 30% of the department's faculty, postdoctoral trainees and senior research staff. We spoke of the racism we experience inside science as well as outside. Some, like me, had had frightening encounters with police while growing up (see [go.nature.com/3gvumn6](http://go.nature.com/3gvumn6)). Black and minority-ethnic participants said they found the discussions cathartic. White participants said it helped them to better empathize with colleagues facing racism. Several departments in my university's School of Medicine have expressed interest in conducting similar sessions.

Scientific communities across the United States can help by supporting Black colleagues at their institutions in such ways, while driving substantive and systemic change.

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## Reshape economics to boost equality

My university is considering launching a course in the economics of racial justice and inequality, to help students tackle urgent problems such as the disproportionate health and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black, Asian and other minority-ethnic communities in the United Kingdom. These impacts are being underscored by the widespread protests against racist violence around the world that are revealing deep fissures in our societies.

Apart from a few pioneers in the United States, economists generally know little of the systemic barriers that lead to marginalized citizens losing lives and jobs at much higher rates than majority groups. This is in part because of the current lack of pluralism in the curriculum and the topics studied, and limited diversity in terms of people in the field. Furthermore, economists usually make far-reaching assumptions about markets that narrow their analyses.

All this has to change to effect transformation to a more equitable society. An enlightened and engaged economics community needs to train a fresh lens on what comprises meaningful and material support for communities disproportionately affected by years of wage stagnation; income inequality; risks associated with poorly paid, insecure jobs; inadequate housing; criminal injustices – and now a public-health catastrophe.

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## Composite $R$ number hides unequal risk

The reproduction number ( $R$ ) for the COVID-19 virus is being widely used to shape national policies on containment measures in the pandemic. I worry that it could become an instrument of discrimination if no consideration is made of the outsized risk that the virus poses for people in many minority groups.

A value of less than one is considered the threshold for relaxing rules. But there are cavernous disparities in case numbers and deaths for people of different ethnicities (see, for example, [go.nature.com/37ffny](http://go.nature.com/37ffny) and M. Webb Hooper *et al. J. Am. Med. Assoc.* <http://doi.org/ggvzqn>; 2020). The blanket application of  $R$  in the context of such population heterogeneities seems questionable. I am concerned that basing policy on a single composite  $R$  could devalue the health needs of certain groups.

I am a medical doctor, not an epidemiologist. But it is incumbent on all of us in science to challenge our society and our peers where practices and models could be prejudicial to certain groups. Often, researchers are at best reticent and at worst dismissive about systemic inequality.

Its impacts were all around us long before COVID-19 – for example, in the paucity of Black people in drug trials (*Nature Med.* **24**, 1779; 2018) and in the fact that US pregnancy-related death rates are three times higher in Black than in white Americans, even after controlling for education and socio-economic status (see [go.nature.com/2abdmqq](http://go.nature.com/2abdmqq)). To correct inequality, we must first recognize and acknowledge it.

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