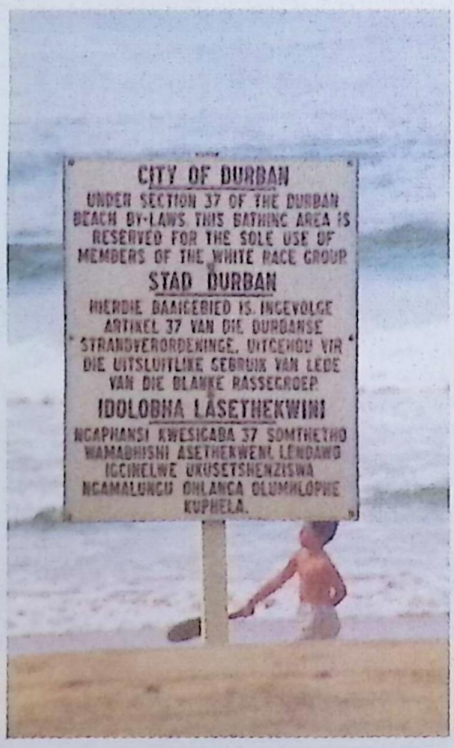
Wearing the Dunce's Cap

FARAH GHUZNAVI

Some months ago, I came across an article featuring the experiences of non-white students at Oxford University, in the UK. Many of them had experienced racism in one form or another, and sometimes in a truly banal form. The degree of ignorance displayed by their peers, in what is widely considered to be one of the most prestigious educational establishments in the world, was striking. Thus, British students who were black were routinely asked which part of Africa they came from - and upon stating that they were British, were asked where they were really from! Clearly, even at places like Oxford, there are still some students who deserve to be standing in the corner wearing the dunce's cap.

Foreign students came in for even more patronising comments. Many were routinely told that their English was "surprisingly good". Something that I find surprising in itself, since English is hardly the most difficult language that most bilinguals speak! Bangla, for example, is a much more complex language. It got worse, of course. A student from Nigeria was even asked whether he spoke "Nigerian"! Not unlike the time that the then American Vice President Dan Quayle went to Latin America and said afterwards how sorry he was that he couldn't address them in their own language because he didn't speak Latin.



Some of the comments from the white Oxford students were incredibly offensive. Thus, students from ethnic minority backgrounds were asked if they sold cocaine (seriously?!) or whether their family reflected "the black stereotype" (presumably another reference to drug use, crime and/or domestic violence). Others were told that Oxford does not "see colour" - which led some of them to ask why that wasn't reflected in the admission statistics! One girl was even told that the only reason she was accepted into the University was because she was black, and fit the diversity criteria.

But of course, such attitudes are less surprising when considered within the wider context of institutional racism. For example, less than half a percent (0.4%) of University professors in the UK are black. If educational authorities can't be trusted to be "colour neutral", how can we expect any better from the students in the institutions that they run?

My own experience as a foreign student at a UK institution of higher learning - in my case, the London School of Economics - proved to me several years ago that a university education was no guarantee against ignorance or prejudice. In fact, when I was doing my undergraduate degree, I had the following conversation with an Australian student. Spoiler alert: I have to confess, I initially thought he was joking(which is why I responded as I did).

Guy: So you are Muslim. How many wives does your father have?

Me: Four, but my mother is the only one that lives in the capital city. The others live in the provinces.

Guy: Wow, so do they all get along? The wives, I mean?

Me: Well, it can get difficult at times - that's why he keeps them all in different places. Anyway, my mother is the only one he has children with. Of course, my brother is their only biological child. I'm adopted.

Guy: Wow, is that difficult for you? I mean, does your brother get treated differently because he's the biological child?

At this point, I couldn't keep a straight face any more, and burst out laughing. He was very offended, saying "Are you kidding me? I asked a perfectly reasonable question. If you are Muslim, your father might have four wives!"

"If my father was the type to have four wives," I responded, in between gasps of laughter, "do you really think he would send his only daughter away to study in London by herself?!"

I would like to believe that such ignorance can be explained away as some form of youthful folly. But even in the workplace, I have encountered similar instances. A German woman who was interning with my office in Bangladesh once complained bitterly