

Spotlight on Equality in Pharmacy

Is enough being achieved on equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education and pharmacy?



Written by Ella Sloane, Trinity College Dublin

In June of 2020, Irish Pharmacy News published an article written by Aaron Koay documenting personal experiences of racism during experiential work placement and College settings shared by his fellow pharmacy students. One student described feeling alienated after an inappropriate comment was directed towards them by a lecturer, whilst others reported being actively overlooked on placement as patients displayed a clear preference to be served by their “white co-worker”. The prevalence of microaggressions was also highlighted, with one student recounting patients expressing shock at their fluency in English.

Koay’s article addressed the commonly felt discomfort that so often prevents students from reporting such instances, instilled by their obligation to “Put the Patient First”. He firmly concluded that “one should never underestimate the difference a supportive environment can make”.

Darragh O’Loughlin, Secretary General of the Irish Pharmacy Union, showed his support for Koay’s concerns in a Hot Press article in July 2020, stating that “Pharmacists and other health professionals, like all workers, are entitled to practise their profession and live their lives free from harassment, aggression and abusive or threatening behaviour.”

Over one year later, the question remains whether any tangible changes have been made by the authorities in the pharmacy sector and beyond in Ireland to combat racism and protect students in Higher Education. Important developments in Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policy are visible not only at a College level, as evident through the creation of initiatives such as the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum Project, but also nationally, for example the anonymous “Speak Out” reporting platform. Trinity News reached out to Professor Lorraine Leeson, Associate Vice Provost for EDI, to gain more insight into the policies and programmes that have been implemented to address the issues raised by Koay, and racism at a wider level at Trinity.

Professor Leeson outlined progress that has been made in this area since her appointment in September 2021, stating that “There has been a pronounced focus on work to address the many inequalities existing in the higher education sector across Ireland and here in Trinity”. Leeson explained that the new College strategy has been informed by a combination of legal obligations, recent European research and European policy and is cognisant of national developments and policies. Some prominent new initiatives include “EDI in HE”, a free online certified training course for staff that went live in August 2021 which all staff sitting on interview panels in

Trinity are required to complete. The programme consists of four modules including “Meeting the Needs of Diverse Students in Teaching and Learning Settings” and “Putting Policy into Practice”. Within these, staff are provided with tools such as best practice tips on how to foster equality in teaching and learning and directions on how to do an equality impact assessment. Furthermore, the “Speak Out” portal, which went live in November, provides a space to anonymously report experiences of racism and harassment. An online training session, “Let’s Talk About Race in the Higher Education Sector”, which will be free to all Trinity students and staff, is also due to be launched in January 2022.

The establishment of a new Racial and Ethnic Equality Working Group last year and the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum project, which focuses on embedding the principles of diversity, equality

and inclusion across all curricula in Trinity and encourages input from students and staff alike, indicate that efforts have been made to enact positive changes at a College level. For example, the Trinity Inclusive Curriculum project offers an optional 20 hour module for staff on how to make their teaching and learning practices inclusive for students from all backgrounds and of all abilities. Professor Leeson also touched on the value of equality charters adopted by Trinity such as the Athena Swan charter, and recent research by the Royal Irish Academy signposting specific actions and commitment needed by the Higher Education sector.

Further development at a College level can be seen in the establishment of the Faculty of Health Sciences EDI group, who held their first meeting in September 2021. Koay is currently the student co-chair for this group which was set up soon after his article gained traction.



He explains that his role within the group is to “ensure student representation and inclusion in EDI initiatives and provide constructive input by drawing on [his] lived experience”. Despite it being relatively new, Koay outlines some of the group’s work to date including the exploration of “EDI training specific to health sciences, drawing on academics with expertise and experience in this area”. The group is working on how to reconcile different policies and pathways around reporting bullying and harassment across schools in the faculty and clinical placement establishments. The faculty administrator, Lena Doherty, also shares that one of their main aims for 2022 is to develop a series of EDI themed events/ talks across Health Sciences.

Leeson acknowledges that whilst these positive changes have been made, we still have far to go and the College still faces challenges, such as a “lack of robust and up to date data on race and ethnicity from students and staff here in College”. She concludes that “there is work to do to collect and collate this information and the EDI Office is working closely with TCD HR and

other relevant stakeholders across the College to build a stronger data-driven evidence base for the work of the Associate Vice Provost for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion’s (AVPEDI) Office”. A Trinity News article written by Eliza Meller in 2020 delved into this issue of collating data in order to truly understand the extent of racism in College and tackle the problem, highlighting definite room for improvement in Trinity’s reporting systems in particular. The article discussed how a lack of awareness of the report systems in place - which inevitably led to underreporting - fed into the narrative that racism is not a prevalent issue in Trinity, especially when combined with a lack of collated data. Meller also interviewed students who expressed confusion as to which of the “14 different offices and support groups” they should turn to when reporting instances of racism in Trinity. This feedback raises the concern of quantity over quality and is certainly an area in which AVPEDI’s Office should consider developing, perhaps working to create a centralised and well-advertised system, as well as building the “stronger data driven evidence base” which Leeson acknowledges is crucial.

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Trinity News also received a collective response on behalf of Trinity School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, University College Cork (UCC) School of Pharmacy, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) School of Pharmacy and Biomolecular Sciences and the Affiliation for Pharmacy Practice Experiential Learning (APPEL). APPEL expressed their concern at the reports that some students may not have felt comfortable reporting instances of racism and shared some steps they have since taken to address this matter such as updating their student handbooks to highlight the support services available, as well as introducing students’ pre-placement workshops to highlight that their Practice Educators and the Operations team are available to support students with any issues they encounter while on placement. They offered their assurances to pharmacy students who have encountered racism stating that “For any student reading this article, we would like to clearly state that you will never be treated negatively or not taken seriously for reporting discrimination or concerns around discrimination to APPEL.”

APPEL acknowledges that whilst ensuring students know how to report or seek support for any discrimination issues during their placement is important, steps must also be taken “to protect against this happening and empower trainers to support students who might experience discrimination”. Such actions included holding a webinar in November 2020 with the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR) on “Building an Inclusive Pharmacy”, which all APPEL trainers were

invited to attend. Overall, APPEL, in conjunction with the Heads of School, have made efforts to address issues surrounding EDI in experiential work placement and promise their commitment to “a positive and inclusive environment where all our students can reach their full potential.”

In response to a call for comment on the issues raised by Koay’s article, the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI) indicated their expectation of “superintendent and supervising pharmacists to take appropriate action if any staff member, or student, is subjected to discrimination while carrying out their role in a pharmacy”. They added that the PSI “welcomes work that the Schools of Pharmacy have and are doing to enhance the available supports, information and education for the prevention and handling of racism or any discrimination.”

Since the publication of Aaron Koay’s article, there has been an evident willingness to engage with issues of racism that students from ethnic minorities encounter both on work placement and within College settings more broadly. Although it is a continuous battle that needs to be fought, the work to date from national pharmacy organisations and higher education institutions indicates clear progress towards positive change in EDI policy. Hopefully many more developments in this ever expanding area of policymaking in the higher education sector await us in the new year.

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