

# An Institutionally Racist Lockdown Policy

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*For Christians across the world, Christmas is a time for families and friends to come together and revel in their importance to one another. Similarly, for Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and some Buddhists, Diwali represents a celebration of the relationships between family and friends. The importance of each celebration for their respective cultural groups cannot be overstated. The connotation of family in both Christmas and Diwali is particularly of note given research has consistently shown the significance of family and friends for the mental health and wellbeing of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup>*

The UK Government's recent announcement of new national restrictions mentions that university students "should only return home at the end of term for Christmas".<sup>2</sup> Diwali occurs before Christmas and, more importantly, during term time. In effect, the UK Government has just forbidden a large proportion of minority ethnic university students from returning home in order for Christmas not to be affected. This seems to have been done without much thought about the impact this would have on an already marginalised community. The worst thing about this is that it was entirely avoidable. The government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies advised a 2-week circuit break in early October, 2020, and warned of the impact on minority ethnic communities if this advice was ignored.<sup>3</sup> Their advice, of course, went unheeded.

This is just another example of the institutionally racist remarks and policies that have typified the UK Government's approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, following the publication of the higher COVID-19 mortality rate in black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, a government official in the UK claimed that BAME individuals are "not taking the pandemic seriously" and suggested they are to blame for the spread of COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> This suggests an unwillingness to accept or inability to appreciate the concept of institutional racism. For the sake of clarity, institutional racism is formally defined as "the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people".<sup>5</sup>

Controlling COVID-19 is critical, but we must not accept or tolerate policies that aim to do this through racist mechanisms. A more culturally aware policy than the one currently championed by the government is for universities to build timetables that enable visits home and self-isolation time. Another strategy would be to advocate for universities to provide online education only this term, and to switch from practical, in-person sessions to content amenable for online teaching, even if that content was due to be taught in later terms. We must develop policy that limits the spread of COVID-19, allows university

students to have an education, and enables families to come together for culturally meaningful events.

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## Notes

1 Bandyopadhyay S, Georgiou I, Baykeens B, et al. Medical students' mood adversely affected by COVID-19 pandemic: an interim analysis from the SPICE-19 prospective cohort study of 2075 medical students and interim foundation doctors. Research Square 2020; published online July 7. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-40503/v1> (preprint).

2 UK Government. New national restrictions from 5 November. Oct 31, 2020. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/new-national-restrictions-from-5-november#going-to-school-college-and-university> (accessed Nov 1, 2020).

3 Sample I. Covid: ministers ignored Sage advice to impose lockdown or face catastrophe. Oct 13, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/12/ministers-rejected-four-out-five-proposals-from-sage-to-avert-covid-second-wave> (accessed Nov 1, 2020).

4 Braddick I. Tory MP Craig Whittaker claims Muslims and BAME community 'not taking pandemic seriously'. July 31, 2020. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/mp-craig-whittaker-muslim-community-not-taking-pandemic-seriously-a4513571.html> (accessed Sept 13, 2020).

5 Macpherson W. The Stephen Lawrence inquiry: report of an inquiry. London: Home Office, 1999.

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