Finding Queer Community and Seeking Role Models:
Alexia's story

Alexia is a physics student at Imperial from a middle class British Asian background. Her overall experience at university was very positive, particularly finding a supportive queer community through a LGBTQ+ student society. While she had a strong sense of belonging at the College, she did discuss the challenges of being a woman in physics and the lack of role models, particularly Asian women in senior roles, which impacted whether or not she imagined a future for herself in physics.

At the start of university, Alexia lived in student accommodation on campus and shared a room with another student. While she was initially nervous about sharing a room and fitting in, she was matched with another student with similar interests and felt extremely supported by hall seniors (undergraduate students in 2nd year or above, who live in halls and organise social events and provide support to 1st year students). Alexia enthusiastically participated in her accommodation's social life alongside multiple student societies, finding friends with similar interests beyond her degree programme. Over time Alexia's sense of belonging increased at the College, particularly through a LGBTQ+ student society. Alexia described an event with other queer society members:

> "…talking about what was going on in our lives and coming out and things like that. That was a really nice experience for me to hear other people talk about experiences so freely like that."

This was particularly important to Alexia as she was not 'out' at home to her parents and had only come out to a few friends at school, describing her home and school environments as more "conservative". This was a common experience for other queer students we interviewed, whereby inclusive LGBTQ+ spaces at university were particularly significant spaces of belonging.

In terms of her academic experience, Alexia described starting her classes in the first year as "a bit scary because everyone else seemed so much smarter than [she] was." This knocked her confidence during the transition to university because:

> "There were a few people that stood out and really tried to show off in a way, which was a humbling thing... also daunting and it makes you not want to speak out in future… You know that you'll not shine as bright as them."

Over time Alexia felt more confident, allowing herself to learn from other people and seek out support from her peers when experiencing academic challenges. She did feel a strong sense of belonging to her course but did raise issues around the gender ratio of staff and students in physics. The lack of representation of Asian women in senior roles in physics impacted how she saw her future in physics. Alexia explained that it felt like:

> "…being a professor is for men and white old men. That might be because all our lecturers this year were white old men… I would love to break the mould, but in time like this it doesn't seem like it's… it is possible but not likely".

Additionally, Alexia mentioned experiences of racial microaggressions at university, but she described them as pale in comparison to the regular racist comments from strangers in her hometown. Despite the lack of role models in physics and broader gendered and racialised barriers, Alexia was able to thrive at university through finding supportive friends, a queer community, and other spaces around campus in which she felt a strong sense of belonging.