Disrupting competitive learning environments: Prisha's story

Prisha is a physics student at Imperial, she is a British working-class student from a South-East Asian background. Her approach to studying physics was an inspiring mix of work-life balance and an openness to learning from others rather than being afraid to ask questions. This approach helped to disrupt the often competitive and sometimes dismissive atmosphere from other students, and meant she was able to ask for help when she needed it. She described "a culture at Imperial where you don't admit that you're lost. You don't admit that you don't know something because we have a sense of pride that we got this far, and we are clever". This made her question whether or not she belonged, particularly because she had a very negative experience during her first week at university:

> "I had a lab partner who was explaining something to someone else and when I asked him to repeat it, he was like, oh, you wouldn't understand it. And that completely shattered my confidence when it came to labs."

Prisha sensed there were discriminatory gendered, raced, and classed undertones to the comments, with the student assuming she did not understand. This contributed to her **imposter syndrome** and particularly due to this happening at the very start of her degree during the **transition to university**. Prisha also discussed the prevalence of **mansplaining** - "it's kind of like a meme or a joke that men over explain something to women because they don't think they understand" – and feeling sexually objectified by other students, sometimes in very racialised ways. She discussed how being working class and first generation affected her confidence at university. Prisha's response to these **microaggressions** from other students and the competitive atmosphere changed over time; she would confront students if they made disparaging comments and felt more confident in her belonging:

> "I deserved to be in position as much as anyone else and I worked so hard to get here, that it's like no one can really tell me that I won't understand something or I won't fit here. Or make me feel like that, because I won't let them."

While she initially focused on making friends in student accommodation, towards the end of her first year she found a group of friends from similar backgrounds on her course with whom she started to feel a **sense of belonging**:

> "They came from state schools, they're also ethnic minorities. I think they had a much better understanding of how I felt in terms of being around people who may seem to be a lot smarter than you, or you don't really feel like you belong with. And in that sense, we started to belong with each other."

This demonstrates the importance of meeting other students from similar backgrounds, which helped Prisha as she continued her degree. She made more friends from other backgrounds, got involved in a student society, and tried to maintain a balance between studying and socialising and asking for help when she needed it. Prisha accessed mental health support and counselling from the university to manage depression and was open with her friends and peers about this, advocating taking "the stigma out of it". This characterised Prisha overall approach to her degree, being open, friendly, collaborative, and challenging competitive learning environments with a vulnerable openness and self-acceptance. While her individual response helped disrupt exclusionary and competitive academic cultures, these need to be more proactively disrupted by teaching staff and with a broader institutional approach, rather than being the responsibility of individual students.