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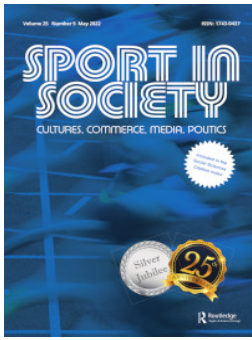
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# 'And Now, No Word from Our Sponsors': Yorkshire cricket, the Azeem Rafiq controversy and the silence of the University

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## ABSTRACT

In 2021 Yorkshire County Cricket Club found itself at the centre of international media attention when a former player, Azeem Rafiq, spoke about the racism he had endured at the Club. When an investigation verified Rafiq's account, all the Club's sponsors, including Leeds Beckett University, ended their partnerships. Racism in sport is not new, nor is racism in higher education, nor is racism in Yorkshire; what this incident does is to bring these dimensions of racism together and ask important questions about the ways in which they overlap. Two themes emerged from interviews with individuals connected, in different ways, to the University. The first is the University's muted response to this incident, a silence that was mirrored across other Leeds-based academic and sporting institutions. A second emergent theme is the absence of academic staff from minority ethnic backgrounds working in university sports departments and researching racism in sport.

## KEYWORDS

Higher education; institutional racism; cricket; professional sport; university branding

*I can't believe what you say, because I see what you do.*

James Baldwin 1966.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Towards the end of 2021 Yorkshire County Cricket Club found itself at the centre of international media attention after one of its former players, Azeem Rafiq, spoke about his experiences of systemic racism at the Club. After an 11-month investigation a heavily redacted report found there was a culture of racism at the Club and that Rafiq had experienced racial discrimination. The racism was initially dismissed as 'banter' and the Club proposed that 'no further action' was warranted (Mohdin 2021). However, when the report was published in full, all the Club's sponsors and partners, including Leeds Beckett University, sought to distance themselves from the Club which had quickly become a 'toxic brand'. Racism in sport is nothing new, nor is racism in higher education, nor is racism in the city of Leeds; what this incident does is to bring these dimensions of racism together and generate a series of critical questions about the ways in which they overlap.

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This paper unpacks the relationship between a university and a professional sports club. The aim of the paper is to assess the role and responsibility of Leeds Beckett University (LBU), and its School of Sport, in relation to the racism Rafiq experienced, and to consider why the University entered into a partnership knowing there was a significant problem of racism at the Club and in the sport. After making a solitary announcement in which they partially distanced themselves from the Club, the University went silent; this was a mystery given their close links with the Club and its longstanding expertise in researching racism in sport.

This article has three objectives; the first is to review the relationship between higher education institutions (HEIs) and professional sports clubs. The second objective is to consider reasons for the silence that emanated from the University and the city's other major institutions. Immediately after the Azeem Rafiq incident entered the public arena, there was a brief flurry of press releases/statements from the Club's sponsors that typically condemned racism and sought to distance themselves from the Club. The third, wider, objective is to assess why so much of the research on racism in sport is being undertaken by White academics.

At the outset it is necessary to address the issue of researcher positionality. I declare a personal interest in that I work for the University in question, although I was not directly involved in the events discussed here. When I initially mentioned to my colleagues my proposed study, I was repeatedly advised to '*be careful*' as this was a topic that was '*too close to home*'. When Rafiq first openly spoke about his experiences of racism in September 2020, most university campuses in the UK were 'closed' due to the Covid-19 pandemic with academic staff teaching remotely. When the report, commissioned by the Yorkshire Club, was published 11 months later, staff were slowly returning to campus to teach, but they were still primarily working from home; as a result, there were very few opportunities to talk with colleagues about the incident. However, as is noted later in the paper, some staff did contact the University's Vice Chancellor to ask about the university's position. The paper begins with a brief outline of racism in sport and in higher education, before discussing the growth in partnerships between HEIs and professional sport in the UK. I then explain the methodological stage, followed by a discussion structured around two of the emergent themes: the first being how the incident was viewed primarily as an exercise in brand management; the second being an assessment of why much of the academic research on racism in sport continues to be undertaken by White academics.

## **Racism, cricket, and higher education**

Sport is premised on competition and mirrors neoliberal ideology, values, and structures (Andrews and Silk 2018; Coakley 2011; Collins 2013; Lavalette 2013; Pearlman 2012; Zirin 2010, 2013). Previous studies have shown there is a significant problem of casual, institutional and systemic racism within British sport (Back, Crabbe, and Solomos 2001; Burdsey 2013, 2020; Campbell 2016; Carrington 2010; Carrington and McDonald 2001; Garland and Rowe 2001; Hylton 2008; Long and Spracklen 2010; Kilvington 2016; Kilvington and Price 2017). These academic studies have been complemented by research commissioned by sporting and anti-racist organisations including Kick It Out, Sporting Equals, Sport England, and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

The Carnegie School of Sport based in Leeds Beckett (formerly Metropolitan) University has a strong track record of researching racism in sport. Long et al. (1997) study on black and ethnic minorities participation in cricket in Yorkshire was followed by two PhD students whose studies focused on cricket, race and racism. Ben Carrington's PhD and subsequent research (Carrington 1999, 2002, 2004, 2007) has made a significant contribution to understanding race and racism in sport. Tom Fletcher's PhD was also focused on cricket and explored how race and racism were understood and experienced by British Asian men in the region. Fletcher (2011:17) reported '*that racial prejudice and discrimination, not to mention inaccurate and essentialized cultural stereotypes of British Asian cricketers, remain(ed) firmly and routinely embedded in aspects of the sport at all levels*'. Fletcher (2012) also presented evidence which showed that although there were more British Asians playing cricket within the structure of YCCC and across leagues in the county, '*cultural and institutionalised forms of racism continue(d) to be intrinsic to the sport*' (227). Ratna, Lawrence, and Partington (2016), also based in the School of Sport, argued that strategies aimed at engaging those with British Pakistani Muslim heritage needed to move beyond the superficial and tokenistic. Leeds Beckett academics also contributed to Bramham and Wagg's (2009) edited collection on sport, leisure, and culture in Leeds, with Carrington (2009), Ratna (2009) and Spracklen (2009) writing about race, racism and the city.

Of particular relevance here are the two LBU reports which focused on cricket and ethnicity in Yorkshire (Fletcher et al. 2014; Hylton et al. 2015). The 2014 report, prepared for the ECB, interviewed players and coaches from South Asian backgrounds in Leeds/Bradford and London. The report found the existence of de facto separate structures which acted to exclude individuals from minority ethnic communities. The researchers found there were very few players or coaches from British South Asian communities who could act as role models and a perception that '*County coaching is for whites and roles are protected by gatekeepers*' (Fletcher et al. 2014, 33). Focusing on barriers to South Asian cricket players' entry and progression in coaching, the report made 12 recommendations including the proactive recognition of white privilege, and that more South Asians needed to be seen in decision making positions. Significantly, given the nature of the abuse levelled at Rafiq, the report recommended improving coach education including the provision of '*cultural diversity and equality training for all coaches to increase sensitivity to important cultural and religious differences*' (iv). The 2015 report, prepared for the Yorkshire Cricket Foundation, focused on those playing informally organised cricket in the Leeds/Bradford conurbation. This report also made a series of recommendations to both Yorkshire Cricket and the ECB, many of which were premised on promoting a more inclusive culture and welcoming environment for those with South Asian heritage. Elements of the recommendations from these two reports can be seen in the ECB's South Asian engagement action plan (ECB 2018; see also Fletcher 2021). Collectively, this body of work shows that the School (formerly Faculty) of Sport at Leeds Beckett University was a centre for the study of racism in cricket. Despite this research showing there was a deeply embedded culture of racism in cricket in Yorkshire, the University was seemingly unaware of any of this when it entered and maintained its partnership with Yorkshire County Cricket Club.

In many ways, the racism in professional sport described in the studies above is repeated in higher education. Educational sociologists have extensively documented how racism exists throughout the education system, and how different ethnic minority groups have different educational experiences (intersecting with class and gender). The emergence of

the Black Lives Matter protests have engendered long overdue debates on ‘Why isn’t my professor Black?’, ‘Why is my curriculum so White?’, what ‘decolonising the curriculum’ entails, and what it means to be an ‘anti-racist’ university (Ackah 2021). One explanation for the limited number of Black Professors and Black football managers is because education and sport, like many other British structures, are institutionally racist.

### **University branding and professional sports clubs**

Like professional sport, higher education is increasingly being shaped by neoliberal ideology and practice. Since 1979 the sector has experienced the massification of undergraduate education, a ‘publish or perish’ research culture wherein researchers have to demonstrate the ‘impactfulness’ of their work, an increasing managerial and auditing culture (Research and Teaching Excellence Frameworks, National Student Survey, Office For Students), and a steep increase in tuition fees designed to change students into consumers (Giroux 2014; Maisuria and Cole 2017; Mintz 2021). One of the most visible demonstrations of the commodification of higher education are the national and international league tables (Gibbons, Neumayer, and Perkins 2015; Tight 2000; Gunn and Hill 2008). These tables create competition between universities and purport to rank a university’s ‘worth’ (nationally and globally), at the same time as ‘formaliz[ing] existing power dynamics that further entrench established inequities’ (Shahjahan, Blanco Ramirez, and Andreotti 2017). These league tables have created a (global) marketplace in which a university’s brand becomes very important. In a climate in which student recruitment is a priority, universities need to become more distinctive from each other.

In 1968 the Carnegie College of Physical Education merged with the City of Leeds Training College. In 1992 Leeds Polytechnic became Leeds Metropolitan University which rebranded itself Leeds Beckett University in 2014. In an attempt to make the University distinctive, Simon Lee (its vice-chancellor between 2003 and 2009), spent tens of millions of pounds on improving Headingley stadium (home to the city’s rugby and cricket clubs) and spent millions more on sporting partnerships with these three clubs. As a pioneer in the commercial twinning of the institutions of higher education and professional sports clubs, Lee’s vision was to put sport at the centre of the University on the grounds it would generate increased student numbers. However, questions were asked on what was seen as Lee’s profligate spending of public money, which along with investigations into his management style, led to his resignation in 2009. Heavy funding losses then ensued with the University beginning a costly process of extricating itself from its sporting partnerships (Yorkshire Evening Post 2010).

One of the ways universities distinguish their brand is through association with external partners. Over 20 English and Welsh Universities have sponsored sports stadiums (Greatrix 2018; Matthews 2018), with clubs paid to carry a university’s logo in the hope of raising the visibility of a university and thereby boosting enrolment. Links with sports teams can also generate positive PR opportunities which, in turn, can build a university’s brand. Partnerships with sports teams can facilitate access to guest speakers, and create opportunities for student volunteering, internships and placements with a club. Partnerships can also engender collaborative research projects which benefit a university’s students, as well as the athletes and staff at a club. Sports teams also benefit from access to a university’s sports facilities and specialist sport science equipment. Leeds Beckett University has entered sponsorship deals

with several professional sports clubs and has partnerships with Leeds United FC, Leeds Rhinos Rugby League, Huddersfield Town FC, and Castleford Tigers (LBU n.d.). One of its most high-profile relationships was with Yorkshire County Cricket Club (hereafter, YCCC) with whom they shared stadium facilities, until the University opened a dedicated £45 m sport bio-science building in 2021.

Morgan et al. (2014) have explained how sponsors and sponsees engage in collaborative relationships in the hope they will be mutually beneficial, productive and reciprocal, with trust and commitment essential in maintaining a successful relationship (Chadwick 2002; Farrelly and Quester 2005). If both parties are satisfied with the financial arrangements and the behaviour of the other, then leveraging activities which go beyond the initial agreements can be generated (for example, funded PhDs). Sponsorships are time-based but can be terminated early if one party deems there has been transgressive behaviour (for example, an athlete being caught using illegal drugs, or posting racist comments on social media). Both parties will be aware of the potential for transference of negative associations from sponsee to sponsor, with both parties conscious of their brand (Farrelly 2010; Roberts and Burton 2018; van Rijn, Kristal, and Henseler 2019). When the full report on the racism at YCCC was eventually published the University, along with other sponsors, quickly sought to publicly distance themselves from the Club in order to protect their brand image.

## Timeline

- 2008: Azeem Rafiq (born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1991, migrating to the UK in 2001, and growing up in Barnsley, South Yorkshire), makes his Yorkshire debut aged 17.
- 2010: *LBU and YCCC agree to share a multi-million-pound Pavilion at Headingley Stadium.*
- 2014: *Publication of Fletcher et al. (2014) study, funded by the ECB, focused on South Asian experiences of cricket coaching in Leeds and Bradford.*
- 2014: Azeem Rafiq released from YCCC; spends two years playing league cricket.
- 2015: *Publication of Hylton et al. (2015) report, funded by the ECB and Yorkshire Cricket (Yorkshire County Cricket Club, Yorkshire Cricket Board, Yorkshire Community Foundation), focused on South Asian communities relationship with cricket in the Leeds/Bradford conurbation.*
- 2016: Azeem Rafiq re-joins YCCC.
- 2017: *LBU announces new 5-year partnerships deal with YCCC.*
- 2018: Azeem Rafiq leaves YCCC.
- August 2020: *Freehold of the Carnegie Pavilion (part of the Headingley Stadium) passes to YCCC; Carnegie School of Sport continues to use the Pavilion.*
- September 2020: Azeem Rafiq gives an interview to the website ESPN Cricinfo. He describes how he felt like an ‘outsider’ as a Muslim and states that his experiences of racism at YCCC left him on the brink of suicide. In response to these claims, YCCC appoints a law firm to carry out a full independent investigation.
- 13th August 2021: 11 months after commissioning the investigation, YCCC receives the report but does not release it.
- 19th August: YCCC release a statement in which they state that Azeem Rafiq was ‘the victim of inappropriate behaviour’ and offer him their ‘profound apologies’.



- 10th September: YCCC release report findings and recommendations. They do not release the full report for legal reasons ‘in relation to privacy law and defamation’. The report acknowledges that Azeem Rafiq has a case. The chairman of YCCC issues a full apology on behalf of the Club - but also states it is not going to do anything further.
- Early October: Azeem Rafiq finally receives a copy of the (heavily redacted) report.
- 1st November: *LBU VC writes a letter to YCCC.*
- 4th November: *LBU VC emails all University staff.*
- 4th November: YCCC’s primary commercial sponsor (Emerald, a Yorkshire-based publisher) end their association. Other sponsors (Nike, Yorkshire Tea; Anchor Butter, and LBU) all end their association. ECB suspends planned international cricket events at YCCC.
- 19th Nov: Azeem Rafiq appears before the Government’s DCMS Committee; Chairman Of YCCC resigns; Lord Kamlesh Patel, a Kenyan-born, Bradford-based former social worker and academic, appointed as new chairman of YCCC.
- December: YCCC dismiss 16 coaching and medical staff.
- May 2022: *Still no comment from Carnegie School of Sport, its Centre For Social Justice In Sport And Society or the Research Centre for Sport Coaching.*

The racism experienced by Rafiq at YCCC was initially described as ‘banter’. However, in the DCMS inquiry, what constituted ‘banter’ and the capacity of this ‘banter’ to marginalise minorities was described as institutional racism. In his witness statement Rafiq recounted examples of racist language, including the racist ‘P’ word, derogatory and negative stereotyping of players from ethnic minority backgrounds, and situations where Muslim players were forced to drink alcohol despite this being against their religious beliefs and values. Repeated examples of racial harassment and bullying by senior players were cited, including the most high-profile player at the Club complaining that there were ‘*too many of you lot* (players with South Asian heritage), *we need to do something about it*’ (quoted in DCMS 2021).

This timeline shows how the University’s relationship with the Club developed at the same time as studies were repeatedly showing there was a problem of racism within Yorkshire cricket. However, the University was seemingly unaware of this, or perhaps they were aware of it, but unwilling to let it negatively influence what was a high-profile partnership. Given that much of this research had been conducted by its own staff and PhD students, the University could have been more cognisant of the findings and more cautious in their dealings with the Club. Despite the findings of the 2014 and 2015 reports, the University chose to continue what was presumably an important partnership, not least in terms of helping to brand the University.

## Method

When I initially spoke with colleagues about my intention to research the role of the University in the Rafiq ‘race row’, I was warned I should not research this issue or, at best, to ‘*tread very carefully*’. When I asked why, I was told this issue was ‘*too close to home*’ and that the University (as my employer) might not look favourably on being studied. They pointed to various examples where universities had disciplined staff who they deemed had



brought the institution into disrepute.<sup>2</sup> I acknowledged this might be a possibility, along with the fact that I approached it from the position of unalloyed privilege (White, able-bodied, cis, hetro, male, classed, and on a permanent, full-time contract<sup>3</sup>), working in an environment designed by and for, and populated, by people who not only ‘look like me’ but who are structurally positioned like me (Dabiri 2022).

In order to address the research aim and objectives, I approached personal contacts who could offer an informed insight on the University’s response. While some individuals immediately agreed to participate, others declined. Despite assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, some participants asked for the interview not to be recorded as they were concerned that if their words were used directly, they would be identifiable. A decision has been made not to provide specific information on those interviewed; however, some details are necessary. All those interviewed were currently working, or had previously worked, at Leeds Beckett or at another University. The respondents were either Black, Brown or White and would be recognised as experts in the issues discussed in this paper. I am reluctant to give any further details because ‘we all swim in the same part of the sea’ and whilst it might be claimed that university managers are collegiate, cooperative and generous, this is not always the case (Ahmed 2021; Dumitrescu 2019; Hall 2016; Holmwood 2010; Smyth 2017). It was important that the participants’ confidentiality was fully respected in order for them to be open in their discussions with me. Honouring the original assurances of confidentiality has meant that all comments have been rendered anonymous and unidentifiable.

Seven unstructured interviews were arranged with individuals both within and external to the University, the content of which was directed by the individual participants. Some of the exchanges took place over email. Although the interviews were unstructured, conversation often alighted on Azeem Rafiq’s speaking out, the response of the Club, and then the response of the university. Discussions then typically focused on the wider issues of racism in sport and in wider society. Three of the interviews were recorded; when the interviews were not recorded notes were made during and after the conversation. Participants were offered the opportunity to review a draft of the paper. In order to protect the identity of the participants, in the following discussion, biographical details of the respondent are not shown. Ethical approval for the research was secured.

## Discussion

This section focuses on the issues that emerged in the course of the unstructured, open ended interviews. We began by discussing the VCs statement and, what was described by one participant as, ‘the silence of the university’ – a silence which extended to the city’s other major institutions. I discuss the participants’ views that this silence was a missed opportunity by the University to position and promote itself as an anti-racist university. In the second part of this section I explore the claims that researching racism in sport has primarily been undertaken by White academics and that academics from minority ethnic communities are notably absent.

### The University’s statement

The starting point of the interviews was to review the University’s position which was expressed in a statement written by the University’s Vice Chancellor, Professor Peter Slee.<sup>4</sup> The statement remains the only public comment made by the University on the issue.

Elements of the public statement were incorporated into an email that was sent to all University staff. The Vice Chancellor (VC) explained how he had been contacted by University staff asking about the University's response given its partnership with the Club. The VC referred to the University's anti-racism statement, before explaining that he had written to the CEO of YCCC requesting the LBU logo be removed from all YCCC marketing materials. The VC then referred to his public statement,

The university is pausing all currently planned activity with YCCC with immediate effect. There is no current financial sponsorship arrangement between the university and the club, and the university logo has been removed from the club website at our request.

Our future relationship with YCCC will depend on what emerges from the ECB review and the evidence of meaningful change that the club commits to, to end racism. If it can do this, as we are seeking to do ourselves, then we would hope we can work together on a partnership that plays a positive role in our community in the future. We will continue to maintain a dialogue with the club about its approach to this issue (quoted in Burn 2021).

The VC then explained that the University would continue its relationship with the Club through its Carnegie School of Sport. Strength and conditioning support would continue to be provided to the women's team. The University would also continue its work with the Yorkshire Cricket Foundation, the Club's charitable arm to develop grassroots cricket. Finally, the University would continue to support the first team squad in their pre-season fitness preparations.

This statement is interesting because it shows how the University states a desire to publicly distance itself from the Club, but at the same time wanting to remain connected to the Club. One of those interviewed suggested that the University's response was a model illustration of a corporate sponsor seeking to distance itself when a partner became publicly 'toxic'. Only when the report was finally made public did the University leadership team feel that the Club had become so tarnished there was no option but to distance itself. However, as the final part of the statement demonstrates, at the same time as publicly distancing itself from the Club, the University maintained its links with the Club. This led one of those interviewed to say that *'reading this [statement] shows they are not serious ... wanting to continue to work with them even though they say they are cutting their ties with them'*.

The singular statement from the University on what had become an international news story led one respondent to describe this as *'the silence of the university'* and a *'poorly executed attempt at damage control and brand management'*. On a purely commercial basis, this silence was described as a *'missed opportunity'* for the University to position itself as an *'anti-racist'* university.

*You'd have thought they would have been all over this ... ok, there was a short press release, but I didn't see anything else ... do you think they weren't commenting because it was a bit too close to home?*

The interviewee then ruefully noted that *'maybe they (the University) was staying quiet because they don't want to be scrutinised, given how they haven't got many Black staff'*. The interviewee reflected on the lack of staff from minority ethnic communities working in the School of Sport, a situation repeated across sports departments across the UK, and across much of higher education. In response to the question as to *'Why isn't my professor Black?'* one response is because the education system is structurally and systemically racist.

There was nothing in the VCs statement which identified how long the University had been in partnership with YCCC, including the period when Rafiq had been subjected to racist abuse. It might have been claimed that this racist culture was not known about; however, the two research studies conducted by LBU's own staff which identified there were significant levels of racism within cricket within Yorkshire were already in the public domain. The silence of the University is problematic; what was perhaps more revealing was the total silence emanating from the Carnegie School of Sport and its two research centres.

Whilst institutionally the University was silent, a number of individual academics were commenting on the incident, on social media platform, television news, and in newspaper articles. Some participants mentioned that they had received requests for interview, but did not seek permission for, nor were asked/required by the University to have 'approval'. This was viewed positively by those interviewed as it indicated there was no University policy which prevented them from commenting. On occasion, some media requests came into the University's communication team, and were passed on to academics with the advice that they could offer their personal opinion, but could not comment on the University's behalf. If they were asked about the University's position, they were told to refer the interviewer to the VC's statement.

I was made aware that some staff had written a commentary, intended for the university's website, which offered a personal and theoretically informed critical assessment of the events. My understanding is that this commentary was forwarded 'for approval' (as it was intended for publication on the University's website) but then 'disappeared'. I do not know why a decision was made not to publish the commentary, nor who made this decision, but there might have been a wish not to (further) distress an important partner of the School and University. The absence of staff commenting on this incident could be an indication of low morale and a fear of raising 'their heads above the parapet', given the University had experienced two periods of redundancy in the preceding two years.

One of those interviewed described the silence of the University, the Carnegie School of Sport (CSS), the Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society, and the Research Centre for Sport Coaching as '*embarrassing*'. Respondents were quick to point out the extensive coverage that had been given to an ex-student and former Leeds Rugby League captain's charity run, which the University and CSS had extensively reported across its social media platforms, keen to exploit what was seen as a '*feelgood news story*'. One of those interviewed said they had not seen any comment from the CSS in relation to the Rafiq incident: '*normally they are all over sports stories, proper evangelising, but suddenly they didn't have anything to say – come on!*'. It might have been that the CSS had been told by university managers not to comment, and that there was 'nothing to add' to the University's initial, and only, statement. Similar to the view that the University had 'missed an opportunity', the CSS also chose not to publicly position itself as anti-racist and express its condemnation of the treatment Rafiq had received. The absence of any comment from the School of Sport was seen as reflecting poorly on the school. Similarly, there was no comment from the School's Centre for Social Justice in Sport and Society or its Research Centre for Sport Coaching.

Again, there was a level of puzzlement amongst those interviewed as to why no statements were forthcoming. This silence, when contrasted with the usual public engagement in 'all-things-sport' was '*pretty poor optics – at best*'. There was an evident reluctance to engage with the difficult issue of institutional racism, and a suggestion was made that this might require the University and School to be more diligent (including reading their staff's own

research), before entering into a partnership with a professional sports organisation. This lack of due diligence and the willingness to suspend critical faculties is an example of what Coakley (2015) has described as the 'Great Sport Myth' which proposes that sport does not need critical examination.

### **The silence of the city**

The silence of the University echoed across the city and region. One of those interviewed thought there might have been a coordinated policy to not speak about the incident; 'why' they questioned 'were so few of the city's major institutions willing to speak out about it?' Following up their claim that the city's institutions had been silent, I searched for statements made by Leeds-based organisations (using a well-known search engine). Whilst Leeds City Council did issue a short press release about the incident (Leeds City Council 2021), I could not find any statement issued by the city's three largest sports clubs, Leeds United FC, Leeds Tykes Rugby Union FC, or Leeds Rhinos Rugby League FC (although the latter did comment on the stadium's change of name, after the lead sponsor ended its sponsorship). The two other universities in the city, Leeds University and Leeds Trinity University, also offered no comment.

This silence reflects badly on the city and region. Racism is not unique to Leeds, or Yorkshire, but there is a deep history in which South Asian Muslims have historically been positioned as outsiders since their arrival from South East Asia in the 1970s (Manzoor-Khan 2021). The region's relatively high Muslim population has amplified far-right sentiment with the wider region accommodating various far right, virulently anti-Muslim, ultra-nationalist groups, one of whose members murdered a local MP in 2016 (Townsend 2016). Between 1968 and 1992, YCCC maintained a policy that only Yorkshire-born cricketers could play for the county team; this de facto 'Whites only' policy prevented many South Asian cricketers playing for the county, with the first British-Asian eventually playing for Yorkshire in 2003. Racism, including Islamophobia, was also evident in sections of the city's football supporters throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Burdsey 2010; Clavane 2013; Thomas 2010; Williams 2001). Perhaps we should not expect the city's Universities and sporting institutions not to reflect this deeply ingrained racism. By not speaking out more loudly against the racism experienced by Rafiq and what was a culture of denial at YCCC, the city's major sporting and educational institutions could be viewed as 'acting normally' in perpetuating normative whiteness, a tacit admission that the racism directed at Rafiq neither unconscious nor unintentional.

### **The absence of Black academics**

It was questioned why there was a consistent pattern of research on racism in sport and on the experiences of minority ethnic communities, but typically without the inclusion of researchers from the communities being researched. The composition of the research team in the first report (Fletcher et al. 2014), comprised five White researchers and one Black researcher. The second report (Hylton et al. 2015) was prepared by one Black researcher and three Whites. [The second report did have an advisory group which contained four people with South Asian heritage, two with Black British heritage, along with six White members]. It is notable that there were no researchers with a South Asian heritage directly

involved in either study. Neither report acknowledged that in studying South Asians experiences of cricket no-one with that heritage was directly involved. I am not seeking to personalise this issue, but rather want to highlight the systemic and structural nature of racism in higher education and the absence of Black and Brown academics working in sports departments.

I am not suggesting that white people cannot do 'good research' on race and racism, and that it is essential to confront whiteness and positionality in sport (Henry 2019; Fletcher 2014; Fletcher and Hylton 2017; King, Leonard, and Kusz 2007; Long and Hylton 2002; McDonald 2012). However, there needs to be more diversity in the academy. Part of effecting change starts at the bottom, with undergraduates, who can progress through to postgraduate study. More work is needed to bring more minority ethnic students in at undergraduate level, then through mentoring/support, recruitment and retention of individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds. However, there is still the sense that, as one interviewee noted the University thinks this 'problem' is individual or cultural and nothing to do with the university structures. One of those interviewed felt that the School of Sport had a history of failing to support/develop its Black staff, with one former PhD student stating that they moved to the USA to progress their career (personal correspondence; see also Sian 2019). While LBU staff have successfully supported ethnic minority students to achieve PhD success, the number involved is very small, when compared to the number of White students graduating with PhDs in sports science. When challenged on this, it was accepted that the School of Sport was not unique in having so few minority ethnic staff, especially those with South Asian heritage, but that this was an issue across the whole of the HE system. The refrain 'nothing about us without us' is apposite here, as is Tao Leigh Goffe's (2022) more provocative claim that 'no amount of citation is going to buttress the argument or hide the fact that you are not the one who should be writing the article, colonizer'.

The term 'institutionalised racism' has been replaced by the unthreatening language of equity, diversity and inclusion. Universities are attempting to address 'institutionalised racism' but often fail to recognise the deep-seated nature of the racism, and the scale of change that is needed.<sup>5</sup> One of those interviewed ruefully anticipated that the University would continue to offer some (online) diversity awareness and 'unconscious bias' training to address individual prejudices and accepted that while the University might appoint individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds into managerial positions, they appear far less willing to recognise the deeply embedded, systemic, structural forms of racism and discrimination that exist in the institution.

The claim that sport, like the academy, is meritocratic is illusory (Dowling and Flintoff 2018; Gillborn 2015; Hylton 2010). The absence of serious anti-racist policies and processes, or an unwillingness to engage with them, means that sport and educational organizations will continue to fail. In the wake of the BLM protests, some education and sports organizations reacted by implemented various equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies. While many of their efforts can be seen as piecemeal and performative (such as statements from an organisation's leadership claiming they are an 'anti-racist' organisation), there needs to be a more genuine commitment to inclusivity, albeit with a recognition that progress is likely to remain painfully slow.

For those seeking to address the inequalities in sport and in education (be these inequalities based on a person's ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class background, physical

or mental health status), one of the most exciting developments has been the engagement with intersectional and transdisciplinary thinking, and Critical Race Theory (CRT). The potential offered by CRT to bring change is one reason it is facing a backlash in both the UK and USA (Weale 2020; Gross 2021). Others have shown the opportunities and challenges CRT presents in sport (Carrington 2010; Hawkins, Carter-Francique, and Cooper 2017; Hylton 2008; 2010; Ratna 2014). The principles of CRT, including the centring of 'race' and racism when examining discrimination in an organisation, its commitment to centering marginalized voices, its commitment to social justice, and its transdisciplinarity, are all defined actions that can help an organisation move towards becoming more inclusive. The current structures and operational procedures of many sporting and educational organisations preserves a status quo of normative whiteness and white privilege. One of CRT's principals is to challenge hegemonic ideologies typically embodied in claims of meritocracy, colour-blindness, objectivity, race neutrality and equal opportunities (Hylton 2008). In seeking to bring change and to address issues of power, representation, and inclusion, Hardiman and Jackson (2007) have proposed how an organisation (for example sporting or educational) can move from being monocultural through to one that is multicultural, then anti-racist, and ultimately becoming an anti-racist multicultural organisation.

## Conclusion

The inept handling by Yorkshire CCC of the racism experienced by Azeem Rafiq did, inadvertently, generate a very public examination of racism within cricket. It is the ideological impact that is perhaps the most significant, with public understanding of the racist nature of professional sport far greater than it was before Rafiq spoke out. The fallout has forced the Club and the University to respond. YCCC sacked some staff, replaced the leadership with an individual with minority ethnic heritage and, no doubt, offered some (more?) diversity training for its staff. As a result, it has been granted the ability to host international matches again.<sup>6</sup> It is unclear what the University has learnt from the controversy and if they will be more circumspect in their partnerships with other professional sports clubs.

This paper has highlighted how two studies, conducted by the University's own staff on racism in cricket, reported that coaching roles were protected by White gatekeepers for White coaches and that the system was exclusionary. They also reported that there were significant and powerful barriers that were preventing the progression of players with South Asian heritage from progressing into higher levels of the game. Yet despite knowing this, the University chose to maintain its partnership with the Club. It is not clear why the University continued its link with the Club, specifically, its work with the women's team, the Foundation and the men's first team.

The Rafiq controversy shines a light on the role of the University in partnering with a private, commercial business and suggests an absence of due diligence when considering who to partner with; it is argued here that greater standards should be required of partner organisations. One of those interviewed questioned why, given the findings of the two reports, the University did not, at minimum, insist on better diversity training for the YCCC staff. There needs to be a greater commitment to change and a more serious engagement with equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) work that goes beyond minimum compliance and what are often anodyne EDI public statements.

How can those working in universities advise others to change if we are not doing it ourselves? The university can work through its staffing and through its teaching. All students enrolled on sports-themed degrees need to engage with ‘race’ – ideally transdisciplinary and through engagement with Critical Race Theory and intersectionality. The critical social sciences are essential in undergraduate sport-based courses (a ‘must-have’ and not viewed as optional ‘nice-to-have’). As academics we need to move out of our silos (‘academic trenches’) and build more bridges between disciplines, exploiting the strengths and opportunities that can be generated through collaboration.

As Stuart Hall has noted *‘The university is a critical institution or it is nothing’* - but as has been argued here this criticality is often lacking. More Black academic staff are needed to act as role models, to offer wider perspectives and to create a sense of authenticity when researching and teaching issues relating to ‘race’. This can be achieved through better staff recruitment and retention practices. The UK is a deeply racist society, with both professional sport and universities institutionally racist. While the Azeem Rafiq controversy has (again) exposed the level and nature of racism in sport, racism within universities remains less visible, perhaps unconscious and unintentional, but still there. Before claiming to be an anti-racist university, much more attention needs to be given to identifying and recognising institutional racism and accepting that everyone who works within the University is implicated.

I would like to thank those who were willing to speak with me, and understand the reasons of those who were not. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments which significantly improve the content.

## Notes

1. In an essay written in 1966 on racism in the USA, James Baldwin explains that these words were part of a song he had heard.
2. See the experiences of Sara Ahmed (2021), David Miller (BBC, 2021) and Steve Salita (Kaplan, 2015).
3. In using these markers of identity I am not seeking to essentialise them, and recognise they are not fixed but fluid, contingent and work intersectionally.
4. I could not locate the statement (or a press release) released by the University on its own website. The closest I could come to the statement was extracts which were reported by the media, for example Burn (2021).
5. The lecturers’ trade union, UCU, included the 26% pay gap between White and Black academic staff in its 2021/22 ‘Four Fights’ dispute with employers (see UCU, n.d.)
6. The deep-seated racism at YCCC was revealed itself when the newly appointed chairman stated that some individuals were trying to delay and derail reform at the club claiming that the club was being ‘sacrificed on the altar of Black Lives Matter’ (Sky Sports, 2022).

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