

## Work-Life Balance and Changing Academic Cultures: Avara's story

Avara was a physics student at Imperial, a British Asian disabled man from a working-class background, who was deeply involved in College life, but sometimes struggled to maintain a work-life balance. Between his competitive degree programme and numerous extracurriculars, Avara described feeling "overstretched" at points during his course. However, his involvement in student societies and representing student concerns to the university also provided exciting opportunities and friendships beyond his competitive academic cohort.

At the beginning of university, Avara was excited to be around other students with a passion for physics and he found a strong sense of belonging amongst his cohort. He achieved high marks and pursued lots of extracurriculars, but at points acknowledged that he needed to strike more of a work-life balance. This could be difficult due to the demanding degree programme and competitive academic culture at Imperial which Avara described as:

*"a hindrance at times ... unless you're at the very top of the class, you'll always be comparing yourself to people who have got better grades than you or are achieving these things. And that can demoralise you and make things even worse for you ... a lot of people are just very committed, and that's made a culture where people are just being too competitive."*

His involvement in student societies and activities beyond physics provided alternative social spaces beyond his degree programme, allowing him to enjoy the full spectrum of opportunities on offer at the College and gain perspective on the intensity of the academic side of the university.

Avara described a very positive time at Imperial overall, particularly highlighting the community between staff and students. However, he also raised the issue around the colonial history of the university, described living and working in buildings on campus which had been named after key colonial figures:

*"The whole association with the Empire is quite problematic ... Imperial's history, it's probably one to distance itself from. I think Imperial is maybe starting to do that."*

He acknowledged that there was increasing awareness of these issues at the College (for example, the [Imperial History Dialogue](#)) but advocated for more direct involvement of staff and students as partners in decision making around addressing such history.

Avara advocated for a student partnership model to decision making and changing academic cultures, whether it be around the colonial history of the College and inequalities or broader student concerns around issues like competitive cultures. Avara's enthusiastic participation in all aspects of College life meant that he was taking full advantage of the opportunities available to students beyond their academics. These activities also helped Avara strike a work-life balance, by enjoying social events and pursuits beyond his degree and having multiple spaces of belonging on campus.