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Widening participation and diversity in polar environments: taster day for school students

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Representation of BIPOC (black, indigenous people of colour) people in geoscience is severely lacking, and is most apparent in polar sciences. Despite representing 16% of the UK population, only 3% of polar scientist are BIPOC¹. Polar sciences have a poor history of inclusivity, with examples of research being dominated by white males until as late as 1960, when the first British female scientist conducted research in Antarctica. Underrepresentation is apparent from undergraduate level to research staff. In the UK, black people account for 1.2% of research staff, despite making up 3.4% of the UK population². Similar statistics appear for research students, where 6.5% of black people who begin research, discontinue before graduating, compared with only 3.8% of white students². A 2018 study by Bernard and Cooperdock suggests that increased diversity benefits scientific advancements greatly, as different life experiences often spark unique approaches to research³. If we want to broaden the ethnic and racial range in polar science, we need to increase involvement in polar sciences from school age students by encouraging them to pursue further education on polar and environmental sciences.

This free event, taking place on 31st March, is firmly grounded in widening participation and engaging with school children who may not have considered a career in polar science. We will be working with diverse schools in Surrey and West London to bring 13-14 and 16-17 year old students to discuss careers in polar science. These two age groups were selected as they represent pivotal points in education where students select option courses, and begin to consider further study and future careers. The day will involve talks from various diverse polar scientists, including speakers from BAS, SPRI, University of Reading and Cambridge. Having a role model to identify with is key to fostering a sense of belonging in the science community. Therefore, we have invited speakers from a range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, which we hope the students will identify with and will be able to envisage themselves having a career in polar science. This will be followed by a computer based exercise working through Antarctica focused StoryMaps developed both by AntarcticGlaciers.org and specifically for this event.

The event is a part of the Diversity in Polar Science initiative funded by UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) Polar Regions Department, and will be hosted by Royal Holloway, University of London's geography department.

References

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