Introduction: Racial Justice Work in Higher Education in 2023

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This collection of essays follows on from the 2021 RACE.ED event "Racial Equity Work in the University and Beyond: The Race Equality Charter in Context", which explored what racial equality means in higher education and was organized following publication of the report of a large-scale review of the Race Equality Charter.[1] Advance HE's Race Equality Charter (REC) is a UK wide programme that began in 2016 aiming to improve the representation, progression and success of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff and students[2] within higher education. REC is one tool for addressing racial injustice in higher education institutions[3].

At the University of Edinburgh, REC membership inspired the establishment of the Edinburgh Race Equality Network. Among other findings, the review of the REC found evidence of a prevailing anti-Blackness in universities, wherein outcomes for other minority ethnic groups seemed to have improved due to REC efforts while in some institutions the outcomes for Black staff and students had remained the same or worsened. Moreover, evidence suggested that siloed efforts toward race equality on the one hand, and gender equality on the other (e.g. through the Athena Swan Charter) had, predictably, failed to address the specific experiences of Black women and other women of colour.

The REC review involved speaking with equality and diversity practitioners tasked with leading racial justice work in their institutions, from across the UK. These practitioners, often from racially minoritized backgrounds, are frequently isolated in their institutions, lacking institutional seniority, support or resources to

make the changes required. Often, they sit uncomfortably within university HR teams which can be resistant to making procedural changes that might enable better representation and outcomes for staff and students of colour. Race equality practitioners work with academics, other professional services staff, and students on racial justice efforts, who themselves are often isolated and do not have their racial justice work properly recognized or remunerated. Yet, during the time the REC review research was conducted, renewed mobilization of racial justice movements in the light of the murder of George Floyd had seen universities across the UK make public statements condemning the murder and committing themselves to renewed racial justice efforts, such as this one from the University of Edinburgh[4]. These statements remained promissory notes to many antiracist academics and activists at the time, given perceived lack of real commitments explaining the slow pace of change (though at the University of Edinburgh important new efforts in this area are underway[5]). Race equality practitioners often shared this scepticism and cynicism, but some were also hopeful that these statements might lead to concrete improvements, for instance in allocation of resources to racial justice work.

We are now two years on from the event and three years on from these renewed mobilizations. This collection asks an important contextual question—what, if anything, have universities done to progress racial justice in the meantime? The same questions as presented at the 2021 event continue to motivate this collection, and remain relevant as ever amidst growing conversations in this area[6].

What should racial justice and "decolonization" efforts by universities comprise of? What are the obstacles to achieving racial justice in universities? How can we ensure that racial equity work specifically addresses anti-Blackness and achieves outcomes for Black staff and students as well as other students and staff of colour? How can racial equity work be undertaken in an intersectional way? How can universities engage people from across the institution, and develop a better understanding of race and structural racism in the institution's particular context? What institutional initiatives are happening in the sector, and what are they achieving?

The context for racial equity work in universities has changed in more ways than one since 2020. Indeed, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK saw a dramatic rise in often violent hate crime committed against the East Asian community. Many within the community saw these actions as part of a collective scapegoating of anyone who was perceived as "Chinese", for the emergence of the pandemic. However, such racist attacks on said community should not be isolated wholly to this period. Scholars such as Stan Neal[7] have demonstrated how the spread of the British imperial project to Southern China, and most of Southeast Asia, brought about racialized "knowledge" about Chinese people as a whole, namely that they were economically useful as a source of cheap labour.

Within the context of the neoliberal university that sees Chinese students as invaluable sources of income, what is the moral responsibility of the university in first, ensuring the safety of its students, and its role in educating its student polity on the historical specificity of racism targeted toward Asians within the context of British colonialism?

Moreover, the higher education sector can be riven with conflict about not only increasing neoliberalization, but also equity efforts more broadly. A backlash politics against recognizing a plurality of equality claims, sometimes called "culture wars", has bolstered the visibility and power of (often aligned) antagonists with media and policy platforms, and which has included the UK government. In many respects, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill is a culmination of these agendas, specifically in seeking to sanction HEI institutions where they deny platforms to protagonists to promote these agendas within the activities of the university life[8]. Further, and as Holmwood documents in this collection, the mobilization of anti-terrorism legislation to target Muslim university students, crosses a new Rubicon in the relationship between UK HEIs and the Westminster government.

In some respects, the growing power of this agenda is seen in the case of Advance HE itself, which has been subject to controversy[9] because of its regression on trans inclusion efforts, represented by its platforming of a speaker with known transphobic views to the exclusion of any trans speakers at its 2022 conference on

gender equality in HE, and its "backsliding" from good practice in equality and diversity data collection. The essays presented here address some of the above questions and more.

Sarah Gordon's piece is on experiences of Black students and academics in HE, often an experience of "*working twice as hard for half as much*." Her honest intervention highlights the isolation that many Black students and academics confront, such as the disconnect between their racial identities and what "academics" are expected to look and act like. rashné limki's insightful intervention on "EDI as a punchline", argues "diversity work is largely perceived, and often undertaken, as a means of embellishing reality; of saying the 'right' words and showing the 'right' images" without tackling the structural reasons why racialized academics and students may have negative experiences in these same institutional contexts. Succinctly put by Parise

Carmichael-Murphy in her essay, the straightforward question is, "why are universities leaving our pleas for equity on read?" Universities who engage in "trending" political discussions, such as #BlackLivesMatter, do so in ways that are pragmatic and serve a broader corporate purpose. Despite seemingly providing a safe space for students and academics of colour to talk about experiences of inequality, there is no guarantee that these stories are heard openly, without forceful silence afterward. A good example of barriers hindering open and connected dialogues between universities and racialized people is Prevent, the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy and its role in policing academic freedom in HE. John Holmwood's essay sheds light on an aspect of the problematic scaffolding of HE, and how that affects individuals of colour on a micro-level. Drawing on Advance HE's recent student academic experience survey, Holmwood points out simply that "free speech" or "academic freedom" is not experienced homogeneously across student and academic bodies. Further, we see how other forms of discourse that challenge the "status quo", like Black Lives Matter, Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion, are also deemed as "extremist" by the UK government.

So where do we go from here? Having tools such as the Race Equality Charter (REC), may be helpful to move the conversation forward. Arun Verma highlights REC's usefulness in addressing structural inequalities that emerge from existing systems of race, gender, and class, because it allows an interrogation of these same inequalities and power dynamics. Yet, there remain some challenges for REC that impede achieving substantive equity in HE. Paul Ian Campbell argues that the Charter at present cannot account for and respond to the heterogeneous ways in which different ethnic groups experience barriers in HE, where "exclusions in education are more acute for stakeholders who are British Black African or African Caribbean heritage." Campbell encourages analyses of these experiences that can account for the multifarious ways in which race operates in social contexts and for these analyses to be more qualitative in nature. HE institutions need to go beyond "procedural change" and implement "cultural change" as well. The importance of social networks to inclusion means that institutions will have to grapple with ameliorating their white-European, middle/upper-class, and masculine mono-cultures.