

Reflections on Racial Equality in Higher Education and the Race Equality Charter as a Tool for Change

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In a general sense, we might define racial equality in the academe as the ambition that people whose racial and ethnic backgrounds are directly connected to the global majority, should have an equal opportunity in all areas of Higher Education (HE) to their White peers. Put another way, it is a situation where people of colour are not adversely impacted by systemic, cultural or institutional barriers to the same or similar opportunities, outcomes, remuneration, promotions, sense of belonging, and access that are afforded to White peers *who are in comparable circumstances*. This includes academic, professional-services, estates and catering staff. It also includes students and the communities we serve. Racial inequality then (at a similarly broad and basic level), is the antithesis of this description. It is also the reality for most people of colour in the academe today.¹⁸

There are multiple ways that people of colour experience forms of racial inequity and discrimination in HE in the UK. Yet race inclusion work and interventions in Higher Education Providers (HEPs) over the last decade, have either not been specifically focused on race, or have been bound up within wider and generic Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategies¹⁹. This includes responses that have tended to focus on specific and headline manifestations of race inequity, such as race-based differences in degree outcomes and in rates of satisfaction between domicile students from White and minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as general race-based percentage differences in the recruitment and progression of staff of colour.

This is in part a consequence of methodological approaches, where the lived and every-

day experience of race and racism in the UK are, for example, difficult to measure holistically with quantitative tools, and exist beyond the ontological reach of these methodological approaches²⁰. This is often missed in the kinds of quantitative-based metrics and measurements for success that are typically employed by university leadership and policy makers, such as SMART targets and Key Performance Indicators²¹.

UK universities are also operating under increasing financial pressure, which has been exacerbated by the UK's decision to leave the European Union, the Covid-19 pandemic, rapidly increasing energy costs and global inflation. Eliminating the race award gap is clearly an ethical imperative for some. It is, however, also financially lucrative. It would undoubtedly make any HEP that achieved this, the obvious and primary destination for the majority of (fee paying) students of colour in the UK who, in 2020, accounted for 28.4% of the total student body, according to government statistics²². This has contributed to a situation where currently, most universities appear to be extremely keen to address inequities experienced *by students* from minority ethnic backgrounds, and seemingly less energized to address current, lived, cultural, systemic and historic inequities experienced by staff of colour and by staff of colour from specific raced groups.

The Race Equality Charter and key challenges

Against all this, the Race Equality Charter (REC) has been a useful tool for focusing the attention



of the sector on race inclusion and for enabling HEPs to begin to meaningfully survey and identify processes of racial inequality within their institutions. It has also provided a framework within which to mobilize and evaluate the efficacy of measurable commitments and interventions for change. Advance HE is the body responsible for the development and monitoring of the REC. Their recent evaluative report of universities that have achieved the REC's first stage Bronze Award, demonstrated some of the early efficacy of the REC for positive change for stakeholders in a general sense. It highlights an aggregate reduction in the race award gap and aggregate increases in the recruitment and promotion of staff of colour²³.

The report also advises caution for those tempted to lionize the early racial equality

successes of the REC. It points out that early signs suggest that so far, inclusion is being experienced unevenly by people from specific minority ethnic groups. The extent to which the REC can facilitate equity for all stakeholders from all minority ethnic backgrounds remains unclear, as has its ability to avoid exacerbating inter-ethnic education-based inequities that are typically found in education.

Other inclusion-based programmes and processes have unintentionally contributed to exacerbating inter-ethnic education-based inequities. The Athena Swan initiative, for example, has so far proved to be remarkably successful in improving gender inclusion in a general sense and in relation to certain groups of women. The positive effects of Athena Swan have largely and unevenly been felt by women whose biographies are White and middle class, as Bhopal succinctly surmises: “Many [W]hite, middle-class women have benefited from pressure to address inequality²⁴. But women of colour have still found the door firmly shut in their face²⁵. Since the Athena Swan frame has employed gender as its sole lens of enquiry²⁶, the process has largely been unable to account for inter-ethnic, inter-racial and intersected exclusionary barriers experienced by women of colour, and especially by those experienced by women who are “Black”. These are women whose “gendered experiences... are racialized, and racialized experiences ... are gendered”, and whose experiences of “racism, sexism, and/or forms of discrimination ... uniquely combine the two²⁷”.

Initial data from the REC evaluation points to similar challenges for the REC in relation to accounting for, and responding to, the unique and heterogeneous inter-ethnic barriers experienced by people from specific minority ethnic communities. The review pointed to the emergence of inter-race and -ethnic fissures in the positive effects of the intervention, and that different minority ethnic groups were benefitting from the REC at very different rates²⁸. It also highlighted the presence of what the authors describe as specific “Anti-Black” barriers within their surveyed HEPs²⁹. They proffered that this was one of the key causal factors for why people from “Black”-heritage backgrounds were the group that had so far benefitted the least, if at all, from the intervention or related processes of change brought about by the REC so far.

“Black academic (both UK and non-UK) and Black Professional and Support staff have tended to benefit less from achieved impacts than staff from other ethnic groups, with in fact notable decreases in representation among Black staff as well as UK Black students in some institutions that have held REC awards for the longest...”³⁰.

The reality that exclusions in education are more acute for stakeholders who are British Black African or African Caribbean heritage will not come as a surprise for anyone familiar with the history of race and education in Britain³¹. Nor will

the fact that inclusion is experienced unevenly for people from specific minority ethnic groups within HE. The presence of particularly acute manifestations of Islamophobia and anti-Black racism in the Labour party as detailed in the recent Forde report³² reminds us that in the UK, different raced and minority ethnic groups often experience very different and contrasting levels of inclusion in different spaces. In academia, for example, students and academic staff from British East and South Asian communities *who are not of the Islamic faith*, have generally found education to be a less hostile and more welcoming space, and enjoy a more equitable experience to their White peers within the academe, than have other minority ethnic groups, such as those from Black-heritage backgrounds, or people from South Asian communities of the Islamic faith.

To achieve racial equity, university-based race-inclusion interventions need to be significantly more forensic and nuanced in their targeting of, and accounting for, the specific inequities and barriers faced by people from particular communities, in specific disciplines and types and levels of employment. A point not missed by Douglas Oloyede et al.³³

“[Attempts to address] Anti-Blackness – racism against people visibly (or perceived to be) of African descent (Dumas 2015)... will require a specific focus if the inequitable outcomes for Black staff and students...”

Universities must also avoid the temptation to over-rely on positivistic forms of measurement to understand and evaluate the efficacy of raced based interventions.³⁴ For example, percentage driven targets for inclusion tell us something about changes in the number of people employed in any one area of the academe but tell us little about people’s experiences within that space – and thus tell us little about how inclusive that space *is* or *is not*. Put another way, because a HEP might be able to boast having parity in the number of men and women that it employs, for example, this does not mean that female employees do not experience misogyny, glass ceilings, or micro-aggressions within that space. The same is true of any positive-based metrics for measuring race equity in HE.



The point is that to achieve racial equity within the academy requires more than procedural change. It requires cultural change too. As indicated above, one of the key expectations and in turn challenges for HEPs that employ the REC, is (how) to evolve the make-up of their existing faculties from collectives that are predominantly mono-racial (White European), -classed (middle-class) and -gendered (male), to collectives that are much more representative of the racially (and gender) diverse student bodies and “glocal” communities that we serve.

The research on pedagogical and pastoral benefits of achieving a racially representative faculty are clear and tangible. It enables research to move into new grounds and frontiers³⁵, facilitates more authentic learning experiences and inclusive environments, and improves minority ethnic student retention, as well as positively impact on their senses of belonging and well-being. For example, overt racial discrimination is a form of violence that is often, *although not always*, perpetrated by people who are White on people of colour. An overly White faculty means that currently, we have a peculiar situation where students of colour who have been victims of overt racial abuse often have to trust, approach and be “comfortable” disclosing experiences of racialized violence with a person of contact (usually a personal tutor) who shares the same biography as their abuser. As such, a racially diverse faculty is not about front-line politics, activism or positive discrimination (a charge frequently leveled at people in anti-racism work in HE by

those resistant to change). It is about having faculties that are fit for purpose in HEPs that serve a global and multi-racial student body. Moreover, a racially diverse faculty also signals to all within the contemporary student body, that HE is a space for them and where they can be academics of the future.³⁶

Social networks in HE play important roles in the maintenance and reproduction of faculties that are overwhelmingly White. In almost all cases, these social networks or critical masses of powerful academics are whitened spaces and difficult to access or endure for staff of colour. They are decisive for securing work by providing candidates that are positioned within them with advance warning of job opportunities, opportunities to amass the desired and desirable currencies, work-experiences and insider-knowledge to secure employment. Their influence on who is successfully recruited appears to be unabated despite the employment of a plethora of equality and diversity interventions across the sector, which so far have focused solely on the recruitment processes.

Social networks not only provide a pivotal role in who *gets into* academia but for who *gets on* in academia³⁷. For example, being in or outside of these whitened critical masses of academics has a significant impact on the ability to be a part of successful grant capture exercises and research output production. Both are key dimensions in promotion criteria. Additionally, social networks in HE typically consist of powerful gatekeepers, who are often part of progression and

promotion panels – and can determine successful or unsuccessful career trajectories via their ability to vouch for or provide insider information on how to navigate complex promotion processes which, for people of colour on the outside, are processes that are shrouded in mystery and difficult to successfully navigate. Put simply, White social networks within the academy facilitate the upward trajectory of the White talent within them and frustrate the ascension of those on the outside – a position typically occupied by people of colour.

Above all else, this last example reminds us that the processes that often facilitate the consistent reproduction of the racialized and classed status quo in HE that the REC is charged with dismantling, are social and cultural as well as procedural – and arguably more so. Achiev-

ing effective and meaningful cultural change is perhaps the most important and difficult task for any inclusion-based policy or intervention – including the REC. So far, the REC appears to have already enabled some HEPs to make encouraging starts on tackling race inequity within their organizations. Clearly, however, there is still a long way to go before we see meaningful and disaggregated change for people from specific minority ethnic communities. This requires universities to also and explicitly address the thorny issues of cultural and institutionally racialized barriers that shape these sub-cultural education environs, as well as enacting responses to those that manifest in our processes. Only then might HEPs in the UK be places where *all* people of colour *do not* have to work harder for the same lived experiences that are afforded to White peers.