

Envisioning a gold standard:

Understanding higher
education institutions'
outlook for race equality
policies, practices &
future initiatives

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AUTHOR

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Summary

Advance HE's Race Equality Charter (REC) is subscribed to by 96 institutional members of which 23 have received Bronze REC awards. The REC's mission is to 'improve the representation, experience, progression and success of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) staff and students within higher education' (Advance HE). This study analysed 'action plans' submitted by REC awardees to understand the critical and most common interventions proposed for addressing racism and racial discrimination and inequalities in higher education institutions (HEIs). The study invited equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) champions and race equality leads from a range of institutions. Institutions were categorised by their affiliation or status with the REC into three groups: (i) those with existing Bronze REC status; (ii) institutions that have subscribed to be charter members but have not been awarded REC status yet (this could mean applications are underway or pending); and (iii) institutions that are not named or

not part of the core 92 institutional members currently listed as subscribed members.

The rationale for using this grouping was to understand how interventions are selected and evaluated as being successful at institutions with different levels of commitment to the REC, and to help identify how Action Plans (which are the detailed plans set out to tackle race and racism discrimination and inequalities at the HEI) seek to address issues of intersectionality. One area of investigation was the anticipation and identification of some of the imminent risks of proposing development and infrastructural change that might further create discrimination against one or more groups that identify with the protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010. The aim of this study was to highlight essential issues for envisioning a Gold REC award as there is currently only 'Silver' and 'Bronze' status REC award categories.

1. Introduction

This study considered race, racism and racial equality within UK HEIs. While HEI policies and practices have endured a tumultuous relationship with the issue of race since the post-war immigration and assimilation era, the scholarship embodying resistance has been accretive in nurturing different ideas of racial equality.

For instance, in the early 2000s, critical race theory (CRT) made its way across the Atlantic, bringing the ideology of ‘white supremacy’ into focus (Gillborn, 2005). This was followed by a resurgence in proposals for equality through ‘national identity’ and ‘multiculturalism’ during the late period of New Labour, and more recently by grassroots calls for ‘decolonisation’ of the academy or HEIs.

The changing UK policy landscape over the last decade has been significantly more febrile in its search for universal metrics for racial inequalities, with the recent report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (Race Disparity Unit, 2021) triggering an acrimonious response from scholars and activists alike, because of its tacit disavowal of institutional racism.

Although there has been significant progress in developing balanced institutional frameworks to identify and address barriers to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) staff and students, such as BERA’s Race Equality Policy and Advance HE’s Race Equality Charter (REC), there remains a challenge in agreeing the ‘gold’ standard for tackling racism and other forms of discrimination. Advance HE’s REC provides a framework through which institutions work to identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff and students. Member institutions develop initiatives and solutions for action, and can apply for a Bronze or Silver REC award, depending on their level of progress.

This project aimed to:

1. Investigate how HEIs’ stance on tackling racial disparities for students and staff is influenced by scholarship and the UK policy landscape.
2. Understand the possibilities for, and limitations within, leveraging metrics, statistical evidence, narratives and testimonies of racism and racial inequalities to account for individuals’ multiple attributes, identities and values.

2. Research design

The theoretical frameworks underlying the methods and instruments in this project are CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2008) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). These are well known in race and education theory, and provide the necessary analytical scope and depth to contextualise approaches to racial justice and overlapping areas of marginalisation.

The study received full ethical approval from the University of Roehampton, and took place between November 2021 and August 2022. Data collection had three stages.

2.1 PHASE 1: TOPIC MODELLING

We analysed national reports on race and racism including (i) The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (Race Disparity Unit, 2021); (ii) Facts don't lie - one working class: Race, class and inequalities, Runnymede Trust (Treloar & Begum, 2021); and (iii) the Race Disparity Audit, Cabinet Office (2018). In addition to these reports, we analysed the action plans for HEIs that have been awarded REC status. The aim of this analysis was to identify the main themes resulting from interventions to address discrimination, racism and racial inequalities through HEIs.

2.2 PHASE 2: SURVEY

Using the themes derived from phase 1, we created a series of intersectional scenarios including one or more

of the protected characteristics (race, gender, age, disability, religion, and sexual orientation). The study excluded characteristics that referred to marriage/civil partnership and being pregnant or on maternity leave, as the scenarios were constructed for more commonplace generic scenarios which would have been challenging in this activity to construct for these characteristics. We presented these scenarios to those working in HEIs (targeting EDI champions/leaders and those with an interest in EDI). Participants were asked to make choices for each scenario based on how they thought senior leadership at their institution would respond versus how they themselves would respond if they had the authority and responsibility to do so. Participants were given the freedom to suggest options and to comment on their choices.

2.3 PHASE 3: FOCUS GROUPS

We ran focus groups with EDI champions/leaders from HEIs. We organised these based on their REC status. Group A comprised REC award holders; Group B comprised members of the charter which had not yet received REC awards; and Group C comprised HEIs which had not subscribed to the REC charter and which were addressing race and racism using university-derived initiatives. These three groups were presented with scenarios to identify perceived investment and impact of the risks taken when addressing intersectionality of race across other protected characteristics.

3. Findings and discussion

The following section summarises the responses and gives some examples of the study findings. This is not a full representation of the analysis. Full details of this study will be presented in a dissemination webinar and journal article.

3.1 THEMES/TOPICS

An analysis of the policy reports and action plans provided a consensus that the main themes are:

1. Top-down approaches about approaches and attitudes to race and racism need to be initiated by senior leadership for changes to take place.
2. Education interventions to train and develop staff awareness and understanding of race and racism are needed across the entire sector.
3. Transparency and clear communication are essential to foster an inclusive environment which credits all parties involved in shaping the policies and culture of HEIs.

3.2 SURVEY

There were 35 responses to the survey from 20 different HEIs in England. Participants were asked to identify the top EDI issues present at their institution. These are summarised as follows:

1. Protected characteristics of sexuality, race and disability were seen as the top three priority issues, followed by gender and religion. Only one candidate identified intersectionality as a key priority issue.
2. Around half of the candidates focused on characteristics of discrimination through the operationalisation of their job or management. This highlighted a significant need for the diversification of senior leadership representation, paying more attention to policies related to promotions; the gender-pay gap; workload allocation; the needs of staff with carer responsibilities; and bullying in the workplace.
3. Only two respondents said that educational content needed to be more diverse and decolonised. This indicates the belief that changing the resources or primary content that is taught

or discussed in HE might lead to a better level of individual awareness and therefore pose a more interpersonal reflective approach to changing one's habits.

3.2.1 Scenario responses

The following examples of the scenario responses highlight issues for consideration.

Example 1: Consider your department has increasingly been making efforts to celebrate the diversity of staff members. However, one year, at the peak of a busy teaching term, the Holy Month of Ramadan is observed during Black History Month.

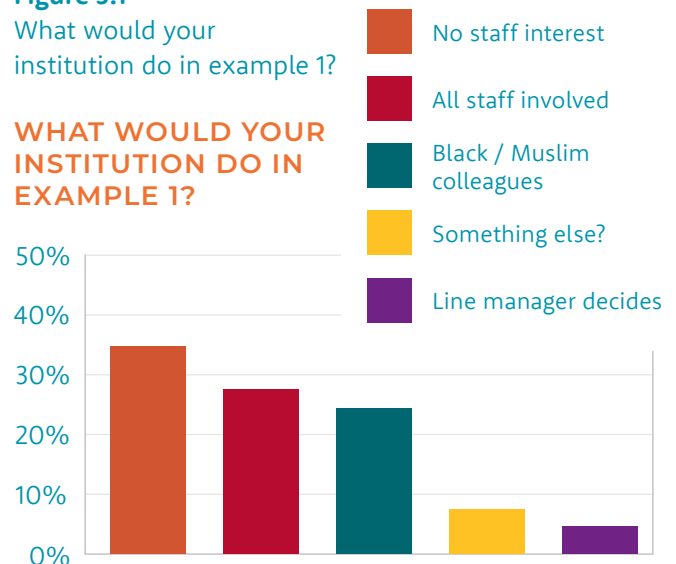
What would your institution do?

Respondents said that there would largely be no interest or motivation from senior leadership in organising events to celebrate the culture and diversity of Black and Muslim colleagues. Some said that the onus of organising such events would fall on staff members who identified as being either Black or Muslim, and that this might further burden those who lead on diversity awareness campaigns. As one responder said, often the same BME staff would be tasked with diversity celebrations as if it were a 'reminder that we made it and are still here'. Others commented under 'something else' that their department had neither Black nor Muslim staff members.

Figure 3.1

What would your institution do in example 1?

WHAT WOULD YOUR INSTITUTION DO IN EXAMPLE 1?



What would you do?

Most respondents answered that if the decision to organise celebrations was left to them they would involve 'all staff' in the process. Two respondents said that the line manager should decide because it would not be realistic to arrange celebrations without the line manager's assessment of competing institutional demands. For example, involving staff in celebrations during busy marking periods could be 'distracting from other responsibilities'. These responses raise interesting questions about how staff are expected to strike a balance between the institutional culture versus the organisational functions of the workplace or, phrased differently, to what extent extra-cultural engagement makes a better working environment.

Example 2: A heterosexual white female colleague informs you that a Black female colleague has deliberately touched her hair without her consent. The white colleague attended an EDI training course where there was a discussion about the 'politics of Black/African hair' and an agreement that it was not okay to touch Black hair without consent.

What would your institution's response be to her?

Respondents mostly agreed that any touching without consent is inappropriate or can be considered as harassment. Some said that hair is an 'intimate' feature of the body and, therefore, classed this as inappropriate or unwanted touching. One respondent said that such inappropriate touching between two white women would be classed as a micro-aggression. Micro-aggressions are usually expressed as being experienced by BME groups. However, scholarship suggests that micro-aggressions, especially in scientific disciplines, can be experienced by white women because of being female and as a result of gender discrimination (Camacho & Lord, 2011). If labelled as a 'micro-aggression', such behaviour could be overlooked as an intersectional issue. This raises questions about how race-related concepts may be interpreted when overlapping with other protected characteristics.

Figure 3.2

What would you do in example 1?

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IN EXAMPLE 1?

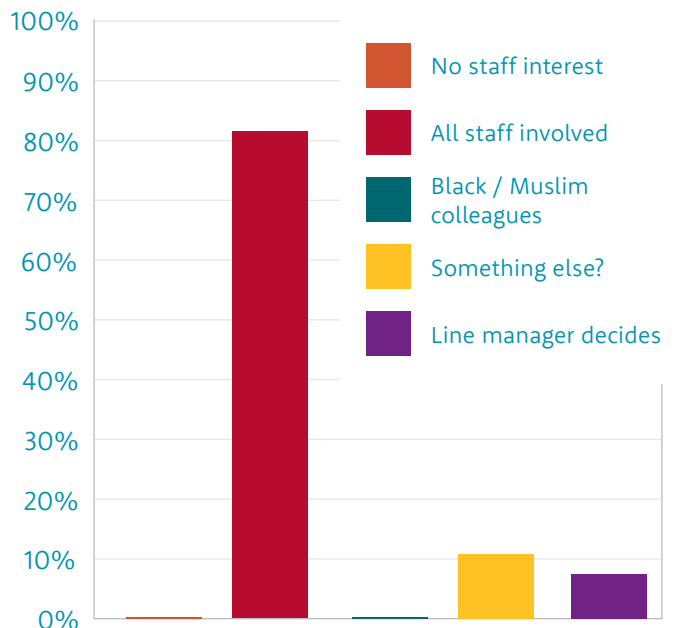
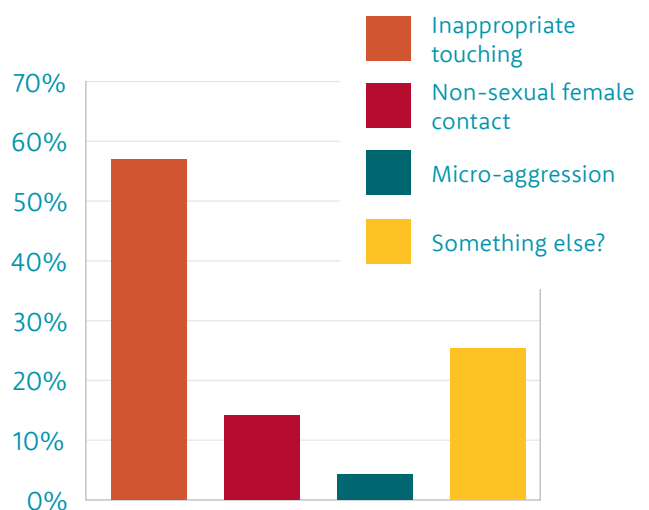


Figure 3.3

What would your institution's (likely) response be to the colleague in example 2?

WHAT WOULD YOUR INSTITUTION'S (LIKELY) RESPONSE BE TO THE COLLEAGUE IN EXAMPLE 2?



Example 3: Consider there are several different EDI development programmes being supported by your institution administered both internally and externally. However, you are limited to participating in only one. Which programme is your senior leadership likely to approve for staff training?

Respondents could choose options from external programmes provided by Advance HE (either focusing on gender through the Aurora programme or on race through the Diversifying Leadership programme). Alternatively, they could choose internal programmes designed by their HEI similarly focusing on either a staff education programme on race (learning about micro-aggressions, white fragility and so on) or a mentorship programme to work with senior colleagues (focusing on career progression).

When asked if senior leadership had to choose **one** programme which might it be, the majority of respondents selected the external Advance HE Aurora programme focusing on gender. However, when asked if they could freely choose **one** programme for their own development, respondents strongly preferred the internal and external programmes focusing on issues related to race or more broadly race education. This raises questions about the extent to which HEIs need to invest in one intervention versus another, and how to assess the balance between development programmes which work across both gender and race.

3.3 FOCUS GROUPS

We held six focus groups comprising 21 participants in total. Participants were grouped by the status of their institution's REC approval. Group A had two HEIs with Bronze status; group B had two HEIs that were members of the charter but which had not yet received REC status; group C had two HEIs comprising academies not listed as members nor subscribers to Advance HE's REC membership. While it was easier to recruit participants for groups A and B, there were many challenges with getting participants for group C. HEIs in group C to some extent had their own EDI policies and action plans, either locally administered or centrally derived from their institution. Some participants said that there were political or financial reasons for not subscribing to the REC charter. However, we noted that HEIs in group B had action plans localised at their university (largely driven by staff initiatives such as BME/BAME staff working groups). While in many of these institutions senior management endorsed the wider university strategies, they did not prioritise the time and finance needed for staff to achieve outcomes. Participants from these HEIs struggled to rationalise which interventions or activities might be most beneficial to invest resources into as it was often unclear what might best support staff and influence mindsets about race and racism in HE.

4. Conclusions and next steps for consideration

The findings suggest that, across HEIs, interventions and action plans are generally designed so that staff are more informed about race and racism and have the skills for dealing with situations that might be challenging and complex. This investment in education and development has four critical areas of focus.

4.1 SENIOR LEADERSHIP/MANAGERS

Respondents strongly suggested that, at vice-chancellor level, there needs to be a visible commitment to equality and an acknowledgement from senior leadership that race and racism can be present within HEIs. However, participants voiced that this acknowledgement is not necessarily complemented by a clear vision of continued course correction in this space to address issues of racism and racial discrimination more openly. For some institutions in which there is less diverse representation in senior leadership, there is a risk to funding and resources that prioritise the inequalities that impact on staff daily. There are questions about the transparency of senior-level commitment. Charter recognition and action plans should not be the stop-gap solution but should mark the beginning of a new and more inclusive culture.

4.2 EDI BADGING

EDI badging is not enough. BME staff are increasingly concerned about tokenistic 'EDI badges'. These are often designated as 'soft leadership' roles for staff in professional services, and mostly for women to perform administrative tasks relating to diverse and inclusive culture. While EDI leaders/champions in this study were clear about what an inclusive and tolerable workplace culture would look like, they struggled to

map the steps towards achieving this, especially in the context of intersectionality, and how to respond to the risk of further marginalisation when promoting inclusivity. There are questions about how EDI roles are given visibility and power to influence decision-making.

4.3 NOW WE KNOW, WHAT NEXT?

One of the challenges for staff, especially those responsible for creating and submitting the REC action plan, was providing a rationale for why some of the initiatives were directed at improving race equality. While one of the most cited actions for promoting race education and integrating staff was a mentorship programme, there was limited evidence about how a mentorship programme would need to be modelled to be most effective. It is possible that initiatives to consolidate the evidence-base for EDI in general will be more pervasive or readily available in the funding landscape, and that HEI stakeholders would be encouraged to embed more evidence-based principles into their action plans.

4.4 THE SILVER-LINING?

The survey and focus groups concentrated on intersectionality. The findings suggest that there is no clear position on how issues of multiple disadvantage or discrimination should be handled. Intersectionality is a central issue pertinent to setting a Gold-level standard. But clear initiatives to de-centre race and gender from contemporary discussions about protected characteristics may be a step forward in Advance HE being able to designate a Silver-level REC award.

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