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Revitalising race equality policy? Assessing the impact of the Race Equality Charter Mark for British universities

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Revitalising race equality policy? Assessing the impact of the Race Equality Charter Mark for British universities

The Race Equality Charter (REC) was introduced in 2014 as a national policy initiative that aims to support UK universities in developing cultural and systemic changes to promote race equality for Black and minority ethnic (BME) staff and students. Drawing on quantitative data, we locate the REC within a complex picture of undergraduate student diversity and significant attainment gaps between white students and Black and ethnic minority groups. Utilising qualitative interviews and observations to further explore the questions our quantitative analysis raises, we show that the REC is not perceived as a significant vehicle for progressing race equality work in award-holding institutions. Rather, it is mostly applied as an enhancement tool to help shape and sustain existing race equality initiatives that produce incremental change. This, we argue, suggests the REC's intention to inspire race equality approaches that favour institutional strategic planning at the highest level, is yet to be realised.

Key words: Race equality policy; student attainment; higher education; Race Equality Charter

Introduction

Universities have long represented themselves as meritocratic institutions that promote equality of opportunity. In recent years the sector has come under increasing pressure to address the role it plays in reproducing persistent racial disparities amongst its staff and students. In Britain, a number of high-profile national student-led campaigns and interventions in the mid-2010s grew out of concerns related to discipline, pedagogy and the lack of representation of BME staff and students within British universities. These included, *Why is my Curriculum White?* in 2014 and *Rhodes Must Fall Oxford* (RMFO) in 2015, inspired by its antecedent and sister-movement at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

In addition to these campaigns there have been ongoing concerns about the experiences of everyday racism on campus, as highlighted, for example, in a report by the Equality and Human Rights Commission¹ (EHRC) (EHRC, 2019). In 2017, the UK government published its Race Disparity Audit (Cabinet Office 2017), further highlighting racial disparities in university student admissions, progression and attainment by ethnic group. While there has been ongoing concern over racial inequity in admissions to universities, in recent years, there has been more focus on continuing inequalities across the student lifecycle, particularly on differences in attainment and employability. These issues have become particularly pertinent for the sector, given the changing ethnic demographics of higher education (HE) in Britain, where participation amongst BME students is higher than for their White British peers² yet they leave with lower grades. In 2018/19 the gap in attainment of a “good degree”³ between white and BME students was 13.4 percentage points. The gap between white and Black students was notably higher at 22.6 percentage points. In an increasingly marketised system, attainment gaps have been placed high on the agenda of the Office for Students (OfS), the sector regulator, who want to ensure *all* students are receiving “value-for-money and... protection” (Hall 2018: 114). The OfS now requires HE institutions in England to report on their degree attainment by ethnicity as part of their “access and participation” planning exercise in which universities agree targets with the regulator to improve equality of opportunity amongst their (UK-domiciled) undergraduate body. Within this, the OfS have adopted a national target to eliminate the attainment gap between white and Black students, designating it a ‘Key Performance Measure’ for

¹ Britain’s national equality body established by the Equality Act 2006, it replaced the three existing equality organisations; the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) and the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC).

² <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/8042> [accessed 09/10/20].

³ A “good degree” refers to a 2:1 or 1st class honours.

universities, in recognition of the explicit inequities this group experiences relative to other BME students in HE.⁴

Unequal outcomes for staff of colour in universities are also a concern for the sector. They are more likely to leave HE and are starkly underrepresented at the highest academic contract levels (Equality Challenge Unit, ECU, 2017). Given that undergraduate BME students rarely progress through to postgraduate research, very few people of colour are coming through the system to change this bleak picture (ECU 2018). This “broken pipeline” is particularly stark for Black students. From 2016/17 to 2018/19, of the 19, 868 PhD funded studentships awarded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI)⁵ research councils collectively, just 245 (or 1.2%) were given to Black or Black Mixed students (Williams et al. 2019: 3).

The Race Equality Charter (REC) emerged in 2014, overseen by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU)⁶ as part of an official policy response to racial inequalities. As yet however, comparatively few institutions have taken up the Charter (as of January 2021 the number of award holders is 17)⁷ and comparatively little is known about its practice and effectiveness in challenging racial inequality in the sector. This study examines how the REC is being operationalised within institutions and what value this new national framework might have for the sector’s race equality agenda.

⁴ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/asures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-degree-outcomes-1sts-or-21s-between-white-students-and-black-students/>. The OfS definition of ‘Black’ is based on the student’s self-declared ethnicity at time of registration. ‘Black’ as a broad ethnic category includes students who identify as Black Caribbean, Black African and Black Other.

⁵ UKRI “is by far the UK’s largest postgraduate funder” (Williams et al, 2019: 3).

⁶ The ECU is a registered charity in the UK which works to promote the diversity and equality of staff and students in UK HE. In 2018 it merged into the newly formed Advance HE.

⁷ In the REC process, institutions first register as members and then work towards award status (currently a Bronze award is the highest award available), with the expectation that this is renewed within three years.

Existing empirical evaluations of the REC suggest it results in few tangible outcomes for BME staff and students (Bhopal and Pitkin 2020). However, there is little substantive analysis of the REC's relationship to one key metric, attainment. Given that attainment is one of REC's main areas, has been a central issue for policy initiatives for some time and is one of the starkest examples of how universities produce outcomes which are patterned by ethnicity (Alexander and Shankley 2020), we investigate the relationship between attainment gaps and REC award status to further scrutinise the claim that REC has no bearing on outcomes for BME students. We utilise the most recent and comprehensive quantitative data on English HE providers drawn from the OfS Access and Participation data sets which cover the academic years 2014/5 to 2018/19. We show that REC Bronze Award holders had lower than average attainment gaps around the time REC was introduced in 2014/15 but that their rate of progress in reducing these has been no faster than that for non-award holders. We also show that the most progress on attainment has been made in the context of the white/Black gap in universities in or near London where student diversity is greatest, irrespective of REC status.

Taking into consideration that award-holders were already sector-leaders in relation to attainment outcomes, we are especially interested in exploring the value of REC as an additive tool which can focus and energise existing practice in the race equality space. Further, how do the dynamics of institutions, such as those in London experiencing substantial racial change, shape how the REC is taken up and then later prioritised within a university? While it has been suggested that institutions engage with the REC to serve the interests of white senior leadership, create the illusion of race equality and provide universities with a competitive edge that will appeal to the diversity of the HE market (Bhopal and Pitkin 2020), we argue that the REC does not yet have this much status across the sector and functions as an enhancement tool rather than a paradigm shift for race equality

in HE. Utilising interviews and observations, we explore how the REC maps onto existing institutional cultures of Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) in universities and influences the work of staff operating within these networks who have the remit to drive race equality initiatives at the local level. We examine what the REC reveals about the way EDI work is actioned, or not, within a university setting and unpack how it might shape everyday cultures of communication and consultation. Finally, we critically consider how REC's requirement for institutional-level applications are handled within a devolved university setting which tends to favour pockets of intervention over holistic institutional strategy. We ask, for example, how REC action plans, are applied and sustained within this context.

A mixed-methods approach

Institutional ethnography is a mode of inquiry that allows the researcher to trace both what people say they do and what they do in practice. As a method it can include the analysis of documentation, interviews and observations. This study draws on the ideas and methods of institutional ethnography by using the latter two qualitative methods as a vantage point to examine institutional processes and provide context to the quantitative data we present. The paper draws upon data collected from twenty-two individuals from seven English universities and Advance HE⁸ in 2019. To take part in the study participants had to be a member of staff in a university or related institution doing work related to ethnic inequality in HE. All of the participating universities have a REC Bronze award,⁹ except one which is a member institution working towards Bronze status. There were 14 women and 8 men in the sample. Fourteen participants were from universities in the 24-strong Russell Group of research-

⁸ Advance HE was formed in 2018, combining the Equality Challenge Unit, Leadership Foundation and Higher Education Academy. It has a remit to support EDI, leadership and effective governance, and teaching and learning across the sector.

⁹ Currently, this is the lowest available entry level award that precedes Silver and Gold. At present no university has achieved Silver or Gold.

intensive institutions which tend to attract the best qualified students. Seven were from other institutions and 1 person from Advance HE. Nine participants were White British, 7 Black Caribbean/African, 5 British Asian, and 1 Mixed White and Black African. Most of the participants were involved in their institution's REC self-assessment team (SAT) and had varied roles including: institutional equality and diversity management, data analysis, academic teaching and research, senior professional service management, software development, and some were solely employed to coordinate the REC application. Participants were recruited through networks of professional contacts and using publicly available information. They were contacted via email with details about the research and sent a participant information sheet with further information. Once they had read this document, and consented to the appropriate ethical research processes, face-to-face audio-recorded interviews were arranged.

Observations of the BME staff network, a widening participation working group, and EDI committee meetings at senior and faculty level were conducted at one university, and a participant observation of the national REC member and award-holder network meeting took place.¹⁰ Fieldnotes were taken to keep a record of conversations. These observations aimed to supplement the interview data and provide analysis of the organisation "in action" (Walby 2007: 1012). Whilst it was important to analyse the individual circumstances and anecdotes of participants, we wanted to examine the networks they are part of and the pathways they have to navigate through a university to action EDI initiatives. In a similar vein to Ahmed (2007b), the REC was "followed" in an effort to unpack how its purpose and message is passed along, taken up and communicated within a university setting. This approach uncovered personal stories, whilst drawing attention to how individuals are positioned within

¹⁰ We note the possibility that our presence as onlookers may have altered how conversations around the sensitive topic of race equality were handled.

the ruling relations of their institution, and what governs their capacity to act as advocates of race equality (Walby 2007). Therefore, interviewees were asked to draw upon their individual experiences in their roles but prompted to consider how those might be shaped by institutional processes (DeVault & McCoy, 2006).

A brief history of race equality in UK Higher Education

The role of HE in promoting equality and diversity, especially with regards to social class and students, is not new. Universities have historically been seen as a lever for social mobility. Originating from concerns about elitism in HE, in 1963 the Robbins Report recommended mass expansion of HE to transform it into a more democratised, meritocratic system available to anybody who qualified, regardless of socio-economic background (Kettley 2007). Whilst at that time, “an elite 5% of young people” were attending university (Alexander and Arday, 2015: 4), by 1999 a New Labour government was announcing a bold ten-year target to get 50% of 18-30 year olds into HE, with a view to reducing the social class gap in university entries (Deem and Morley 2006; Lunt 2008). Campaigns and initiatives to reduce gender inequities in HE had been central to equal opportunities policies since at least the 1970s (Jones 2006; Deem and Morley 2006; Tzanakou and Pearce 2019). In 1999 this work was formalised through the Athena Project. Funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)¹¹ and the Royal Society, gender equality gained “respectability and status” as the Athena Project began providing “grants to institutions for projects and networks aimed at advancing the representation of women in science, technology, engineering, medicine and mathematics (STEMM)” (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019: 1195). In 2005, this became the Athena SWAN charter.

¹¹ HEFCE was responsible for distributing public money for research and teaching to colleges and universities until 2018 when it closed and became the newly formed OfS.

Equality of opportunity, specifically with regards to race, was put more firmly on the national agenda through the early 2000s following the inquiry led by Sir William Macpherson into the Metropolitan Police's gross (mis)handling of the investigation into the racist murder of the Black South London teenager Stephen Lawrence. The Macpherson Report, published in 1999, stated that "institutional racism" had played a significant part in the flawed investigation (Cohen 2019). This led to the creation of the new Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 (RRA 2000), which put a statutory duty on all public bodies to actively "promote race equality". It was around the formation of the RRA 2000 that the ECU was established in 2001, out of the previous Commission on University Career Opportunity (CUCO). Advancing on the scope of CUCO, the ECU received "enhanced resources", and a Race Equality Scheme was soon set up by HEFCE to support universities to comply with the RRA 2000 (Deem and Morley 2006: 188). Race equality policy was high on the agenda around the turn of the millennium, with many higher education institutions (HEIs) rushing to put mechanisms in place to adhere to these new requirements. One of the first specific duties was to "prepare a written statement" with race equality policies and action plans (Ahmed 2007b: 592). The admissions and progress of students, in addition to recruitment and progression of staff by racial group, was also expected to be monitored and published, with assessments made regarding the impact of institutional policies on different racial groups.

However, the plethora of written documents outlining institutions' commitment to achieving race equality objectives were criticised by some as amounting to paper without practice (Ahmed 2007b), insofar as universities appeared to be rewarded for their writing rather than their work. Furthermore, the emergent diversity discourse contained in such race equality documents seemed to have replaced more radical vocabularies of anti-racism and social justice (Ahmed & Swan, 2006: 96). Whereas the etymology of the latter phrases could be traced back to political movements which emphasised the structural racisms in British

society, diversity discourse is seen to be “organisationally driven”, entering the university as management speak (Jones, 2006: 150). These critiques were corroborated by early evaluations of the race equality policies which wrote them off as “performative” documents, based on misunderstandings of equality, diversity and equity (Ahmed 2007b; Jones 2006). In 2003, a survey commissioned by HEFCE “found that more than a third of HEIs were ‘seriously deficient’ in meeting the requirements” of the RRA 2000 (Pilkington, 2013: 226).

By 2007, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) had merged into the EHRC and later, the RRA 2000 was replaced by the Equalities Act 2010, diminishing the previous legislation specific to race and downgrading race equality protection (Cohen 2019). The recent uptake of unconscious bias training by many universities to address issues around race further exemplifies a shift away from the usage of institutional racism as a policy framework. By design, unconscious bias training focuses upon individual prejudices, that are understood to be the result of natural, involuntary cognitive processes (Tate and Page 2018). It supports people to consider their unintended individual racial biases, without a structural analysis of how these are reproduced and maintained (Joseph-Salisbury 2019). At best, the palatability of unconscious bias training is simply “a way to seek easy solutions for complex problems” (Applebaum, 2019: 140). At worst, it functions as a “technology of racialised governmentality” that encourages white ignorance (and complicity) in the reproduction of unequal power relations (Tate & Page 2018: 143).

Despite some of these shortcomings, through the 2000s it was becoming clear that the earlier widening participation agenda of New Labour was working. One unintended consequence of the original policy focus was a growing population of students of colour. In 2003/4 they made up 14.9% of university students, by 2009/10, this had grown to 18.1% (ECU 2018: 118). Despite this growth it was far from the case that BME students and staff were receiving adequate protection from the RRA 2000. This became explicitly clear as

equality policy turned away from focusing on access, towards a closer consideration of outcomes and performance. Questions started to be asked about which universities BME students were attending and what happened to them once they entered.¹² Increasingly, attention was directed towards student attainment, where significant gaps between white and BME students were found to exist *even* when “the majority of factors which we would expect to have an impact” on outcomes were controlled for (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007: 3). These attainment gaps have persisted over time. In a study of English universities, the Office for Statistics found that after controlling for prior attainment, gender and age, there remains a 17 percentage point gap between white and Black students and a 10 percentage point gap between white and Asian students in the proportion obtaining a good undergraduate degree.¹³

Enter the Race Equality Charter

Building on the existing gender equality charter, Athena SWAN, the REC entered the sector at this critical moment when evidence of racial inequalities was growing. Rolled out in 2014 by ECU, it explicitly named *race* rather than *diversity* in its title, signalling an attempt to engage in more critical vocabularies and move away from the aforementioned, palatable diversity speak. The REC was initially conceived of as a framework that institutions could use to identify racial inequalities that were unique to their organisation and reflect on how these should be tackled effectively. Unlike Athena SWAN, which can be awarded to both departments and institutions, the REC was pitched at an institutional level to encourage universities to address their problems using strategic interventions aimed at long-term cultural change. Recent evaluations of Kingston University’s flagship value-added approach to address its attainment gaps notes why an institutional approach was adopted precisely in

¹² BME students are concentrated in “new” post-1992 universities. Former polytechnics granted university status in 1992.

¹³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/differences-in-student-outcomes/ethnicity/> [accessed 15.04.20]

order to “avoid marginalisation of the activity and a perception that it was just the “baby” of the equality and diversity team” (McDuff *et al.*, 2018: 90). The recognition that race equality initiatives in universities are shown to be successful when issues are explicitly addressed as a whole institutional project and embraced by the very top level of management, is a welcome element of REC’s design. In its current format the charter addresses academic, professional service and support staff, the curriculum, student progression and attainment. Universities are expected to commit to REC’s “guiding principles” when applying for an award. These emphasise the need to understand: the ubiquity of racism in society and its intersectional nature, the differential experiences of inequality across BME groups, the need for cultural change at the institutional level and that everyone should benefit equally from university.

Currently, the REC does not have the same level of sector-wide engagement as Athena SWAN. This is partly related to the fact that Athena SWAN is the more established charter mark but is also due to the announcement in 2011 that National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) funding would be restricted to Athena SWAN award holders (Ovseiko *et al.* 2017). Research councils are yet to make this same commitment in relation to race but increasingly there are demands for this to happen (Williams *et al.*, 2019; Bhopal & Henderson 2019). The business imperative for engaging with Athena SWAN since 2011 is clear and has been reflected in the significant amount of resource directed to it and the high levels of university engagement. Where there are just 17 REC award holders, “70% of higher education providers in the UK have engaged with” Athena SWAN¹⁴ and evidence indicates that where an institution manages the two charter marks together, Athena often takes priority (Bhopal and Henderson 2019).

¹⁴ A 2019 report analysing the effectiveness of Athena SWAN noted there were 164 members, holding 815 awards between them. See: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/new-report-adds-athena-swan-review-evidence-base>.

What does the REC do differently?

Initial evaluations of the REC suggest that it is simply another tool to manage diversity and is being used as a badge of honour by universities to create the illusion of race equality (Bhopal and Pitkin 2020). Bhopal and Pitkin (2020: 534) go on to argue that engagement in the REC is a display of “interest convergence” on the part of white senior management who use it to enhance the reputations of themselves and their institutions whilst leaving the “structural disadvantages faced by BME groups in HEIs” intact. Whilst we recognise that the REC may be co-opted by some institutions as a tool for self-promotion, this perhaps overestimates the significance of the REC to the sector. Although ECU (now Advance HE), has implied that its Equality Charters might increase the competitiveness of universities in the global HE market (Tzanakou and Pearce, 2019: 1197), as noted, the REC has not experienced the same uptake as Athena SWAN. And whilst critiques suggest the REC produces few measurable outcomes for staff and students of colour (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020), it should be borne in mind that in these early stages of the charter, it is enough for a university to be awarded a Bronze for showing *intent* and *aspiration*. As a BME member of staff from Advance HE explained;

There seems to be a lot of urban myth about the REC, and what its requirements are [...] I think [universities] might be surprised at what [...] they could use for a REC submission [...] if you say, 'Through this data collection exercise we realise that we don't have, a, b, and c and we need to organise this.' A strong action would be [...] by 2021, we will have a full data set on this, in this particular area [...] and that is good enough for us, because it shows you are doing something towards advancing race equality.

The REC may therefore yet have to grow and develop to a position where it is perceived to be instrumental, alongside other measures, in leveraging improvement in hard outcomes such as student attainment gaps. The UK government acknowledges the role of REC within its Race Disparity Audit and the actions that need to be taken to reduce racial disparities.¹⁵ Whilst in 2017/18 “fewer than 40% of universities in England referred specifically to BAME student attainment” in their access agreements, OfS have since set BME attainment gaps as a key performance measure for the sector (UUK and NUS, 2019: 9). Within this context, REC can be one of the key national drivers for tackling this disparity. In the following section we explore REC’s relationship to attainment using quantitative data, and consider its status within university settings as a driver for race equality, paying close attention to the importance of student diversity across different institutional contexts. We then go on to closely examine how the REC is being incorporated into EDI infrastructures within universities.

The REC, attainment gaps and student diversity

The REC encourages institutions to work towards a HE system where “individuals from all ethnic backgrounds can benefit equally from the opportunities it affords”.¹⁶ Whilst there is some evidence which indicates that the REC encourages good practice within institutions (Bhopal and Henderson 2019), there is little insight into whether the race equality work being done within universities, is a *direct result* of engagement with the REC. To provide some context for the discussion of how REC is related to student outcomes we focus on one of the key areas of concern, differential attainment across the English HE sector.

¹⁵ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Lords/2019-02-04/HLWS1264/> [accessed 07.04.20]

¹⁶ <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/about-race-equality-charter/> [accessed 7.7.20]

Data from the OfS’ access and participation planning exercise, in which universities set targets to improve the participation and success of disadvantaged groups amongst their undergraduate body are presented in Figure 1. The figure shows the distribution across universities in England of the percentage point gap in the attainment of good degrees between white and BME students. The data refer to UK-domiciled, full-time students who obtained classified undergraduate degrees¹⁷ in 2014/15, around the birth of REC. The figure illustrates that while there is substantial variation in the attainment gap between white and BME students, white students have an advantage in all but one of the 112 HE providers present in the data – and in that sole provider the gap is reported as zero. The highest attainment gap is 45 percentage points. The remainder of the distribution falls largely in the range between 5 and 20 percentage points, corresponding to a median of 15 and a mean of 15.6.

[Figure 1: Distribution of the Ethnic Attainment Gap 2014/15 insert here]

[Table 1: Attainment Gap and Student Diversity insert here]

Table 1 reports further information about the attainment gap and the ethnic diversity of higher education institutions, and how these vary by engagement with REC¹⁸. The first row shows the average proportion of BME student qualifiers doing classified honours degrees in the year the REC process began while the next three rows illustrate the average attainment gap in that year, the attainment gap five years later (the most recently available) and the change between the two periods. At sector level, there has been a reduction in the average attainment gap between white and BME students. The overall reduction is around 1.2 percentage points in

¹⁷ Thus excluding some medical qualifications.

¹⁸ Note that in table 1 the number of REC bronze award holders is 13 which is lower than the current total of 17. This difference is due to the fact that the OfS dataset we use captures information up to academic year 18/19 and only includes English universities.

the four years between 14/15 and 18/19 or around 0.3 percentage points per year. At that rate of progress it would take another 48 years to eliminate the gap entirely.

There is some evidence that current REC Bronze award holders are those universities who had relatively high proportions of BME students in 2014/5 and that these institutions had lower than average attainment gaps. However it is not the case that the rate of progress has been faster for REC Bronze Award holders compared to those with no REC association. Reflecting the specificities of anti-Black racism, the table also shows the average attainment gap between white and Black students for the same period. The Black attainment gap is much larger compared to that for all BME students however the finding that those with lower gaps in 2014/15 were more likely to subsequently engage with REC remains. There has been more progress (in percentage point terms) in reducing the Black-white gap however it remains high.

Interview data support the idea that REC Bronze award holders have high proportions of BME students and some experience in tackling key race equality issues that impact those students, such as attainment gaps. As noted, there has been significant growth in the number of BME students going to university and they are more likely to attend lower status institutions. James, the head of EDI at a post-1992 university, suggested that changes in the racial make-up of universities like his, could be an important catalyst for engagement with REC.

If you look at who holds the awards [...] it's institutions where race matters to them, for one reason or another [...] we've got large BME populations or are centred in diverse cities. And actually, some of us have a real ethical cause [...] and [here] it's about that access [...] So why would people do it? And this is where I think Athena SWAN is slightly different, because if you look at where the tipping point is to get people engaged, you need a certain number, a certain percentage of people [...] and when you're talking about gender, you're [...] talking about half the population [...] with race, what's the

tipping point for race? Is it when 20% of your students or 20% of your staff are BME? [...] so, all those people in the middle, what's it mean to them [...]?

He went on to say, “I wonder [...] whether it is to do with the business efficacy of doing a charter versus not doing a charter.” In other words, for universities with larger than average numbers of BME students, he suggests there is a clear business case for removing barriers to their progression through initiatives like REC. For James, in an increasingly marketized system, where BME students are your main “consumers”, it pays to support them to get value for their money from their degrees, at the very least through parity in attainment with white peers upon graduation.

[Table 2: Black Attainment Gap insert here]

In addition to studying at post-1992s, BME students make up 48% of all UK students studying in London, which corroborates our own quantitative findings (ECU 2018: 116). Six of the current REC award holders are either London campus universities or are located in the outer edges of the city and the commuter belts. Table 2 separates out these institutions in London and surrounding areas to look at the patterns of attainment gaps. For both the white/BME gap and the white/Black gap institutions in London started out with larger gaps than those in the rest of England but by 2018/9 the pattern had reversed. In other words, London universities with their much higher populations of ethnic minority students, had seen faster progress in reducing attainment gaps. Further interrogation of the data suggests, however, that this was not related to REC membership: institutions in London reduced the average attainment gaps whether members, award holders or yet to engage with REC. Whilst we should be wary of inferring causality on the basis of these patterns and trends, the data are consistent with the idea that the demographic makeup of London universities may have provided a push to action on reducing differential attainment whether done within the REC

framework or not. Ananya, a professor at a Russell Group in a senior EDI role for her faculty, expressed her concern about the demographic of current REC award holders.

Ananya (BME) I think that it also speaks volumes where institutions don't go for the REC [...] particularly outside of London, outside of the main cities, it makes them think that race is not an issue and that's an issue. It means that there's an absence of race consciousness and the understanding that white is also a race, and it operates in all of these ways that we know that it operates. So, it's a problem.

According to Ananya, the demographic of REC institutions reflects a lack of widespread commitment across the sector, especially "outside of London". She warns that when whiteness is naturalised and white people are regarded as non-raced subjects, this can lead to the flawed perception that race is the property of people of colour and racism is a problem for them to resolve (Applebaum, 2019). Or, as in Ananya's example, racial inequality might come to be seen as an organisational issue for institutions with large BME populations similar to hers and James'. It is simplistic to assume that "'whiteness' and 'white people' are one and the same thing" (Gillborn, 2005: 489). Rather, whiteness refers to a set of practices and processes that constitute unspoken forms of domination and governance that characterise the whole sector and work in the interests of people racialised as white (Joseph-Salisbury 2019; Tate and Page 2018). It is precisely these cultural barriers that the REC encourages universities to address, regardless of their ethnic make-up.

Joe, an EDI manager at a London Russell Group university with a similar student demographic to Ananya's, also seemed to suggest that institutions like his, already had some awareness about the need to address racial inequalities. For him, the REC was mostly used as a supporting device for existing work being done across his university.

Joe (White British): We're doing [REC] because we care and are passionate about our staff and our students getting the best experience possible. Where there are disparities and differential outcomes,

we want to tackle that. Notably, race and racism are a part of that, so [...] we need to act on issues of race equality [...] The best way for us to do that and [...] understand how to do that, is through the Race Equality Charter. If the Race Equality Charter stopped giving us that, we would move away from it because we know what our issues are, we know what we need to do, it's nice to have the external scrutiny, it's nice to have the accountability and another sort of sounding board to getting that feedback, but our staff and our students consistently tell us what is up. We can progress that without a charter mark.

Many others described the REC using similar language to Joe. It was often perceived of as a useful 'framework', 'mechanism' and 'audit tool' to keep track of existing race equality work. Monique, a BME member of staff working in student success at her Russell Group university, explained how this emerged in her work.

The university is working on attainment gaps [...] creating more inclusive policies around recruitment and stuff like that. So [...] that work is ongoing and not necessarily triggered by the Race Equality Charter but strengthened by it and legitimised by it.

What the interviewees emphasise is that at this stage, the value of the REC lies in its potential to supplement and enhance existing work when applied effectively, rather than stimulate fundamental changes *ab initio* in these universities. Therefore, the next sections turn to consider how the REC is supporting approaches to race equality within universities and shine a light on the everyday challenges that can arise.

Incorporating the processes and principles of the REC into EDI infrastructures

Self-assessment team (SAT)

To prepare for a REC application, universities are required to set up self-assessment teams (SATs) to coordinate the process. Many participants spoke about the incorporation of SATs into the existing EDI committees and groups in their organisation. Participants explained how

the creation of the SAT prompted positive changes but in a number of cases, these were unintended consequences rather than by design. David, a member of the senior management team at a Russell Group university, told of how BME staff were promoted into senior positions as a result of their role on the SAT.

David [White British] What's interesting is some of those people [...] through the SAT [...] our BAME members of staff, took leadership roles [...] it wasn't the deliberate policy but it was a very positive unintended outcome. So, the Vice-Dean for Responsible Leadership in the Faculty of Life [...] was on the SAT and through his work on that he got to know various people then decided to apply for a leadership role [...] not at the Senior Leadership Team level, but in faculties [...] that was an unintended outcome but one of the outcomes we want is to increase the BAME representation at senior staff levels.

At David's institution, the creation of the SAT resulted in the growth of a new network of staff dedicated to tackling race equality at the highest level. This created an environment whereby BME staff were given the confidence and support to pursue promotion, with a remit for EDI work. Others described how the SAT opened up new opportunities in their institution. Below Ananya explains that she was nominated to write her university's public statement on race, which stemmed from conversations being had on her SAT.

[The SAT] forced other kinds of conversations and [...] one of the things that I recommended, was that we talk about having a [public race equality] statement [...] I was told, "Yeah, that's a good idea, go do it" [...] and I think 'cause I can understand what the critiques would be, that statements are just tokenistic, and [...] applied to any institution [...] I was like, "all right, if you're gonna give me this task I'm gonna do it, and, and I'm gonna name whiteness and I'm gonna explicitly point out that race and equality is relational; some people benefit and these are the people that benefit," and name those people [...] if we work backwards, then the trigger moment, the place where I was given the green

light to write this statement, was in the REC [...] the SAT exists and, therefore, these conversations came about.

Given that vocabularies of neutrality have historically characterised higher education's approach to race equality (Ahmed 2007a; López 2003), the potential for the REC, through the SAT, to encourage the development of more critical racial literacies in universities in this way is of particular interest. Ahmed has drawn attention to the limitations of palatable diversity speak, that risks concealing racism by presenting "the university as being anti-racist and even beyond race" (2007b: 606). For Ananya, it was important that race, and whiteness in particular, were named to avoid charges of "tokenism". It was within the context of her SAT that her critical approach was championed.

Consultation and communication - the REC survey

The REC survey is administered as part of the application process to support a university's audit of its existing ethnic inequalities and identify target areas for action plans. Given the lack of opportunities in universities to talk directly and safely about race and racism, the REC survey can provide an opportunity for universities to effectively consult with staff and students on these issues. For some participants, the very introduction of a survey of this nature into their university became a useful tool to reveal the shortcomings in everyday cultures of communication within universities. Below, Zara discusses the challenges with administering the REC survey.

Zara (BME): I was sitting in one of the faculty EDI committee meetings quite early on in the process [...] we were running [...] the [REC] consultation survey, and she said, white female academic, "Oh, I didn't fill it in because I didn't see what I could possibly comment on about the experiences of a BAME person at the university." And they completely missed the point of it. But I think that's what they think [...] it's a you problem and you discuss it, you sort it out and then tell me what to do.

Rather than I want to learn [...] I see there's a problem, but I don't know what it is and I want to learn
[...] I don't know, how do you get those people in the room?

The excerpt demonstrates how *epistemologies of ignorance* can materialise in a university to block meaningful dialogue, reflection and ultimately, engagement with REC at the local level (Mills 1997). Zara's colleague demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding about who qualifies as a racialised subject. Whiteness emerges as the 'status quo' and once again we see how race(isms) in the sector can be presented as a problem for minority staff and students. That said, some universities were able to find ways to use the survey as a real opportunity for learning, reflection and building competencies in racial literacy in order to avoid the scenarios that Zara describes. Below, Joe explains how the survey was administered at his university.

Joe (White British): We did race equality surveys for staff and students [...] we analysed that [...] then came out with a suggestion that, based on focus groups, based on surveys, this is what our staff and students care about [...] what do you want us to do about that? [...] students didn't feel that their curricula addressed issues of race, staff didn't feel that they had opportunities to discuss race and racism in their departments [they] told us that it's very rare that the racism they experience at our institution is violent or explicit [...] but often it is implicit and micro-aggressions [...] death by a thousand paper cuts.

[...] so, understanding as an employer and an educator, what role we can play in helping our people identify micro-aggressions, track and report them, and what action, if any, we can take [?] [...] we always wanted our self-assessment process to be engaging and consultative. [...] people told us that they didn't want it to be a HR response, they preferred a reparative justice response. Sort of the idea of, this is the impact of your actions, this is how I'd like you to change your actions [...] rather than just throwing the book at someone.

This example shows what is to gain when the REC survey is delivered using interactive methods. In Joe's university, the REC survey is used to engage in a dialogue with students and staff in the university that recognises them as experts in their own oppression (Iverson, 2007). Reminiscent of Critical Race Theory methodology, the experiential knowledge of students and staff of colour is centred. They become critical informants and help introduce the theory of everyday racisms – microaggressions – into the conceptual frameworks of institutional policies around race equality. By amplifying their voices, Joe is able to “uncover counterstories” and “amplify” new “sources of knowledge” to inform his practice (ibid: 604).

In addition to opening up opportunities to highlight existing problems, staff and students are able to contribute “reparative justice” solutions. These are responses that seek to make amends for institutional racism through learning and “engaging in a thoroughgoing repair process” (Stanford-Xosei 2018: 309), as opposed to “throwing the book” HR approaches that might prioritise punitive measures at the expense of deeper learning. As part of their reparative approach, the university committed to undertaking a piece of research on the legacies of colonialism. It created a new academic post and recruited students as co-creators to oversee the project. In this example we see how the REC's requirement that universities undertake a survey can force conversations to take place and, if well handled, these processes can contribute towards changing mindsets and behaviours. Contrast this with the OfS access and participation plans that require universities to meet quantitative targets which arguably encourage gaming the numbers, rather than undertaking the hard work of cultural change.

REC action plans and the requirement for institutional approaches

The process of bringing the REC into institutional networks, often shone a light on the communication pathways, chains of command and routes of accountability that constituted

EDI infrastructures. Currently, the REC must be implemented at an institutional level. A participant from Advance HE explained that this structure was intended to promote a “holistic approach” to race equality work which would encourage “institutions [to] bring the work together in a coordinated way”. Despite these good intentions, for many, organising university-level actions proved a difficult task. This was especially the case for staff in very large institutions that had devolved structures, as this Professor and SAT member at a Russell Group institution explained.

Jonathon (BME): So, the targets [...] in the Race Charter they're not translated to the operational unit. So, it's very difficult to say, 'You did not deliver this.' Because the faculty will say, 'This is a university KPI.¹⁹ It's not my KPI.' So, sort of a mismatch. Which is quite different from Athena

SWAN.

In some universities, the institutional level approach of the REC, was at odds with the day-to-day mechanisms for doing race equality work. Chloe, an EDI practitioner with a remit for teaching and learning at a Russell Group university, explained why it was difficult to get her work around inclusive pedagogies into the overarching teaching and learning agenda.

Chloe (BME): having done the sort of work on the ground, and being a practitioner, I was more interested then in trying to make a difference strategically. So, I went out and tried to [...] embed equality and diversity into teaching and learning. But it's hard, because [...] teaching and learning responsibilities are devolved into faculty [...] there isn't very much from policy [...] so everybody does what they want [...] it's all dependent on the dean of the area [...] which is problematic. So I was getting involved with pockets of people, but not really making a difference holistically across the university [...] there was no [...] overarching teaching and learning strategy, that promotes the embedding of equality and decolonising the curriculum [...] no real regulation of such [...] because

¹⁹ Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are measurable values used by universities to monitor and evaluate progress on specific business imperatives.

there's no strategy [...] or anybody really framing some of this work, nobody's interested, and nobody needs to be interested.

Chloe's inability to integrate an EDI strategy for teaching and learning at the highest level are partly the result of the "ruling relations" within her institution (Walby 2007). Chloe's excerpt allows one to visualise the map of interconnections in her organisation and see how these social "relations come to govern those individuals involved" in doing race equality work (ibid: 1013). The devolved structures in her university absolve the most senior teaching and learning committee from *full* responsibility for EDI agendas. Chloe's concerns about the lack of senior support for her work were corroborated during an observation of the most senior EDI group in her university. During the meeting, an organogram was passed around the room depicting where the group sat in relation to teaching and learning, faculty and school level EDI committees, senior management, human resources and so forth. Group members were quick to question the symbolism of the diagram, which had double-ended arrows connecting different boxes to represent communication flows between different committees within the university. One participant suggested the arrow connecting the group to its superordinate teaching and learning committee was not "real". This signified a weak working relationship between the two groups and, at the very least, pointed to the potential lack of influence even the most senior EDI decision-making committees have on the development of teaching and learning strategies. Chloe's difficulty in making wholesale change in her university, not only indicates how fissures in organisational structures can block meaningful work, it highlights the limitations of doing race equality as pockets of good practices at the expense of institutional strategy (McDuff *et al.*, 2018).

An atomised approach to race equality contradicts one of the five guiding principles that underpins the REC which states that solutions to race equality should be "aimed at achieving long-term institutional culture change". Discussions about approaches to action

plans gave some indication of how this principle was translated into practice. Participants tended to be wary of unwieldy action plans that listed a plethora of disjointed initiatives. Sonia, a professor with a senior EDI role at her Russell Group university, described how projects like these could be cherry picked for inclusion in her university's REC application as examples of good practice.

Sonia (BME): We need to find mechanisms [...] to evidence it in a way that is not just tick-boxing and not just about, oh, they've got that really great thing that they do in the Faculty of Learning, let's put that one in. And they've got that great thing that they do in Faculty of Knowledge, let's put that one in. And that thing in the School of Life, let's write that.

The examples Sonia references are important initiatives at her university including; student ambassador programmes, mentoring schemes and curriculum development. However, these projects tended to have determinate life spans, were dependent on limited grant funding, relied on the presence of particular people to keep momentum and were not supported by a strategic vision which tied them all together. Furthermore, many seemed to exist prior to the REC, and did not stem from the application. As Jonathan simply put it, "you can make very good progress, but it's very easy to roll back". This staggered approach to race equality is an example of incremental change which is characterised by a series of losses and gains, similar to what Jonathon describes, which can equate to "foot-dragging" on the issues at stake (Delgado 1988: 924). For many, longitudinal change required actions which were sustainable and linked up to institutional priorities. Joe explained how he employed this approach when designing his actions.

Joe (White British): an action plan is as strong as the people and the community that are building it. I've seen some really weak action plans that are kind of fifty pages long and focus on everything from we're gonna change a couple of pictures to be more diverse, to we're gonna completely change how

we recruit. And that kind of scale is like simultaneously micro and macro' it's not strategic [...] and it can be a weak plan in that it's just unmanageable [...] what we've done with our action plan is to work out what's going to have the biggest impact, the quickest, and to focus on those four things based on staff and student consultation. So, we've got four issues that we're targeting over four years that we're gonna change.

He contrasts his university's four goals over four years with the lengthy action plans he perceives as overambitious and unachievable. Zara's experience in another Russell Group university, is a good case in point. Every three years institutions are required to renew their award with Advance HE. This structure is intended to build in accountability by measuring progress against actions. Yet, according to Zara, in its current format the re-assessment process does not go far enough.

Zara (BME): The last REC action plan, probably would tick off about ten percent that was actually [...] followed through [...] and yet we still managed to renew. So, in terms of accountability, I think we can do nothing and still be saying [...] "Well, we're trying."

As the REC coordinator, Zara was well positioned to see that statements "of commitment [do] not commit the institution to anything" (Ahmed, 2007b: 603).

Conclusion

Our mixed-methods approach to analysing the REC provides an original, critical contribution to the evaluation of the initiative. We show that REC engagement was greater in universities with higher proportions of BME students but has not been associated with increased progress for BME students in relation to attainment. Bronze award holders have lower attainment gaps on average than member institutions and non-award holders, but have not reduced these gaps at a faster rate and those same award-holding institutions had smaller gaps prior to their engagement with the REC. This confirms that institutions which have successfully gained REC awards were already sector-leading in relation to student attainment. The picture of

highly diverse institutions engaging more with the attainment agenda is also confirmed by our analysis of London institutions versus those outside the capital. Attainment gaps in London have fallen faster for BME students but also for the specific category of Black students over the period we study, confirming our evidence from interviews of the importance of London to the overall picture of the race agenda and its success in UK HEIs.

By using qualitative methods to explore in greater depth the quantitative findings, we argue that the REC functions as a supplementary framework that can help to shape and sustain existing race equality initiatives within universities. At award-holding universities, the REC appears to have gained a reputation as an enhancement tool that can add legitimacy to existing work, if applied in a meaningful way. We showed how the value of the REC survey, for example, when applied as an interactive method to communicate and consult with BME staff and students can be an effective tool to gather their expert knowledge of institutional racism.

However, beyond this, the REC is yet to inspire the intended long-term strategies for institutional change and the current iteration of the scheme appears to privilege *intent* over *outcome*. Institutions can receive an award for demonstrating their potential or ability to enact stop-start initiatives that have finite funding, staff and time allocated to them which, we have argued, complements existing institutional approaches to race equality that appear to favour incremental change over institutional strategic planning at the highest level. For example, the incorporation of REC action plans into EDI infrastructures illuminated organisational weaknesses present in central university networks that are tasked with approving, auditing and actioning race equality policies within a devolved structure. Therefore, although the REC seeks to get universities to engage in cross-institutional change, it does not yet seem to have the clout to inspire or enforce this within universities that organise their policies at faculty, school and departmental level. This is largely due to the fact that, universities, as autonomous

institutions, can independently decide on the strategy they devise to deliver on their REC goals. Currently, the REC is a public affirmation of the ambition to achieve these goals and an opportunity to mobilise resources within the organisation to make race equality a higher priority amongst many, partly competing, priorities. Advance HE administers the REC as a ‘critical friend’ to the sector, encapsulating an enhancement agenda over a regulatory one. The REC’s political clout and influence within institutions would be improved by the continued foregrounding and endorsement of the initiative by the sector regulator OfS, and government, so that it does not become just another set of compliance requirements.

It appears that for all of the potential that the REC has to foster meaningful change in universities, as a voluntary initiative it currently relies on the goodwill of senior management within universities to prioritise it, allocate the relevant resources to make it successful and recognise it as a central framework for organising race policies at the highest level of the organisation. Whilst it remains this way, the worry is that whereas some universities will excel in their efforts, others will do the bare minimum.

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