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Anti-racism in UK higher education

Minto Felix

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Contents

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Minto Felix is a doctoral student investigating research culture in Indian higher education at the University of Oxford Department of Education. Minto is also Manager at Nous Group, an international management consultancy, and works extensively with universities and other organisations to advance racial equity. minto.felix@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

UK universities have amplified their efforts in recent years to advance anti-racism and racial equity. This Working Paper explores the efforts of institutions to both repair historical and current injustices and introduces a framework through which universities are tackling racial disparities. The framework considers the ambition of institutions through their strategic and leadership responses; initiatives and activities that seek to reshape the delivery of education and research; and actions to foster inclusive cultures and behaviours. Despite positive progress and examples of good work, there is a long road to travel. Major issues include improving the representation of staff of colour in senior academic positions, increasing the representation of students of colour particularly at higher tariff universities and in reducing awarding gaps, accelerating the efforts to decolonise research, and fostering greater compassion and intercultural understanding within the culture of universities. Anti-racism initiatives in UK higher education must move beyond performative gestures to champion measures and initiatives that are bold and consider issues of intersectionality more rigorously.

Keywords: anti-racism, leadership and governance, organisational culture, decolonising curriculum, research

Introduction

In the wake of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, and in response to sustained student activism and staff concern, UK universities have amplified their efforts in recent years to advance anti-racism and racial equity. Scholar and activist Ibram Kendi (2019) argues that there is a clear choice between being racist – in other words, contributing to a view that regards and treats different races as inherently unequal – or anti-racist, dismantling these structures, attitudes, and policies. There is no middle ground. This stance goes beyond the aspirations of diversity, equity, and inclusion to a more explicit commitment towards advancing racial equity and in eliminating disparities between students and staff of different ethnicities.

The remains an urgent need to drive change. Bhopal (2018) challenges the idea that despite efforts to position Britain as the image of a post-racial society, vast inequalities persist between white, black and minority ethnic communities, including in higher education. Within higher education, Bhopal (2018) asserts, in addition to overt disparities in relation to representation and outcomes, experiences of racism are 'subtle, covert and nuanced,' where those from ethnic minorities are considered as outsiders to protect the space traditionally reserve for the white middle class. This is reinforced by Ashe and Nazroo's work (2016) who highlight the fallacy surrounding the notion of meritocracy against a landscape where students and staff from minority ethnic communities experience systematic marginalisation despite their capabilities.

Redressing the overt and covert, enduring and live experiences of racism require an institutional lens. Defined in a variety of ways, a frequently used definition of institutional racism is:

> 'The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people' (MacPherson, 1999, p.49)

This Working Paper explores the efforts of institutions to both repair historical and current injustices and introduces a framework through which universities are tackling racial disparities. The framework considers the ambition of institutions through their strategic and leadership responses; initiatives and activities that seek to reshape the delivery of education and research; and actions to foster inclusive cultures and behaviours. This paper draws on recent examples of practice from institutions throughout, and critically appraises their efforts in realising and sustaining racial equity.

Re-examining the past

Approaches to advance anti-racism focus on both addressing live issues facing students and staff of today, while seeking to confront and reconcile with complicated histories. While live issues include disparities in student attainment and outcomes, experiences of racial harassment, and inequities in the representation of researchers from the Global South, historical challenges relate to links between institutions and the slave trade (Universities UK, 2019; Equity and Human Rights Commission, 2019, Liverpool, L). The University of Manchester (2022) has recently conducted and published research into its historic links with slavery by critically re-examining the contributions of well-known donors and their ongoing impact on present-day education and research activities. These new understandings have led to tangible changes, including updating signage on campus through to the development of new teaching programmes, such as a module exploring the legacy of slavery and colonialism at the university as well as external-facing activities such as the university supporting Manchester City Council's own inquiry into the city's past.

Grappling with these past histories has provided more than understanding to some institutions; in some instances, it has also provided the impetus to correct injustices and seek healing. Jesus College, Cambridge (2021) returned a Benin Bronze to Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments. Through its Legacy Slavery Working Party, the College was able to gather and reflect on evidence that showed the statue was looted directly from the Court of Benin during the British expedition of 1897 and was given to the College in 1905 by the father of a student.

Armed with this understanding, the College made the decision to return this object of historical, cultural, and religious significance to the Nigerian people, providing an alternative response to the widely held view that stolen art cannot be returned. These actions have reverberations beyond higher education to other civic and cultural institutions such as the British Museum who continue to face pressure to return some 900 artefacts to the former kingdom of Benin (Goddard, 2022).

In reflecting upon the ways that universities have made sense of their past, it is also worth acknowledging that the consciousness of anti-racism in UK higher education has amplified over several decades. It has been argued by many that the advent of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000) and the requirement of higher education providers to develop race equality policies and action plans from 2002 led to little change. However, these issues have been galvanised in more recent years by the energy of the student-led 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign to decolonise higher education in 2015 and again, by the intensity and international outcry of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. This most recent global event has prompted many higher education institutions to re-evaluate their ways of working in a serious fashion. On the ground, universities have also engaged in a range of listening exercises and the sharing of testimonials to create space for their own communities to engage in these issues and in the experiences of their fellow colleagues and peers.

Remaking the present

The gradual unfurling of knowledge about race and race-related inequities means that the pursuit of anti-racism in higher education is ever evolving. On some matters, such as ensuring campuses are welcoming to students and staff of culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds, and that there are appropriate channels to report incidents of racial harassment, there have been many widespread, positive developments. One such example is the introduction of the Report and Support system across many UK universities, which provides students and staff with the means to either report complaints anonymously or contact an advisor to seek formal action to take place (School of Oriental and Asian Studies, 2021). In these instances,

the end goal of safe and secure university environments is one that is clearly defined, shared, and pursued by members of the university community.

Other matters, such as efforts to decolonise the curriculum can bring about division of opinion, with those that believe this notion can be powerful in disrupting the 'superiority' of Western knowledge over other bodies of knowledge. Some are of the view that to decolonise knowledge is to re-racialise knowledge and the pursuit of decolonisation ignores other forms of inequality in knowledge creation. Further, the 'decolonise' terminology is considered to serve a specific purpose and scholar-activists are increasingly concerned that it is used as a 'catch-all' term. As observed by Mignolo and Walsh (2018), to decolonise cannot be an abstract universal. It must be answered by looking at other W questions: "Who is doing it, where, why, and how?"

In addition to prompting changes to ways of working and processes within institutions, anti-racism efforts within some UK universities are also concerned with influencing practice more widely – at the level of sector, or society at large. For instance, the University of Kent (2022) expresses an ambition to advocate for antiracism locally, nationally, and globally, through developing a distinct research community focused on intersectional research justice among other initiatives. Elsewhere, the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (2022) has articulated an ambition to influence industry practice in relation to the representation of performers of colour in creative professions.

Actions and approaches differ institution to institution, though there is an increasing sector wide focus on addressing racial equities in higher education. Both Universities UK (2022a) and the Office for Students have a keen interest in reducing student attainment gaps across institutions and more recently, Universities UK (2022b) have set out key recommendations to tackle racial harassment in the sector. Among these measures includes publicly committing priority status to tackle racial harassment, developing, and introducing reporting systems for incidents, and collecting data on reports of incidents to share regularly with senior staff and students (Universities UK, 2022b). The Office for Students (2022a) has provided funding for a range of projects

to improve black, Asian and minority ethnic students' access to postgraduate research, including developing fair selection models for historically marginalized postgraduate research students and nurturing the capability of black students through mentoring and support networks, as some examples of initiatives.

A framework for action

As reflected by the increasing number of independent reviews, action plans and strategy documents that are developed on these matters, universities' efforts to advance anti-racism is reshaping leadership and governance structures, pedagogical practices, and flows of funding.

Figure 1 provides a high-level framework of the broad types of strategies that exist to advance anti-racism in UK higher education institutions.

Figure 1 - Framework to advance anti-racism in higher education

Below, I explain each of these dimensions in turn, highlighting the ways in which they are practiced and enacted through use of recent examples, and detail associated implications of this work. The examples are drawn from research and practitioner experience:

1. Defining leadership and strategic aspiration

A growing number of UK institutions set out a clear and comprehensive vision for anti-racism. First and foremost, this requires universities to acknowledge past failings and clearly communicate their desire to create a more equitable future.

In defining leadership and strategic ambitions, **language can be a powerful tool**. Consider this powerful message from the President of Imperial College London issued in 2020: 'Racism and violence have no place in society. Our spirit of common purpose must prevail, and we must pull together and collaborate as a community to support those who are afraid and mourning and to say: Black Lives Matter (Imperial College London, 2020). The timing and tone of these messages cannot be reduced to performative purposes alone, though they can help strengthen an institution's reputation and strike a positive tone with students and staff. However, messages and statements vary greatly between institutions, and they can tell us something about the values, reflective capacity, and openness in attitude which fuel institution's work. Some are uncomfortable with using language such as 'institutional or systemic racism' for fear of creating angst in being able to recruit prospective students, while others such as Imperial have taken a more open, ongoing dialogue with students and staff. There is no one size fits all approach but in the case of advancing anti-racism in higher education; words matter, words persist, and words should be matched by actions.

A key action within this domain concerns **having a clear strategy** that has the confidence of the university community and which is geared towards driving positive change. Institutions set out targets and goals upon which their efforts can be evaluated, be it in relation to the promotion of staff from historically underrepresented ethnicities or to better reflect the demographics of the wider communities within its student body or to strengthen the overall experience of cohesion experienced by students and staff on campus. Staff and students at the University of Kent (2021) worked together over a period of three months, with independent support, and a governance structure comprising students' unions, professional and academic staff, union representatives among others to co-create the institution's anti-racism

strategy. The result is a detailed action plan that sets out both immediate objectives (e.g., to be achieved over the forthcoming academic year), longer-term priorities and measures of success. Underpinning this action plan are a series of monitoring and communication mechanisms to ensure this work is routinely monitored and evaluated by various members of the university community, most especially members of the senior leadership who have accountability to leading these changes. As with language, a careful scan of institutions' anti-racism strategies reveals that there are nuances in the level of ambition they have for this agenda. While some are concerned about internal operations, others have a more comprehensive ambition that extends to making change across the sector, country or within bodies of disciplinary knowledge.

Delivering these changes requires both institution-wide ownership to advancing anti-racism as well as ensuring there is **dedicated leadership** in the form of senior staff in equity and diversion-focused roles. This is a growing trend in UK higher education. The appointment of senior staff from non-White backgrounds to positions such as Pro Vice-Chancellor (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) at Durham University; Deputy Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion at De Montfort University; and Pro Vice-Chancellor, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at Loughbrough University is important for a few reasons (Durham University, 2022; De Montfort University, 2022a; Loughbrough University, 2022). It elevates issues of diversity and inclusion to the forefront of the institution's leadership agenda. By appointing a staff member of colour to these roles, institutions are signaling the importance of anti-racism ambitions to wider equity and inclusion pursuits. Further, is assumed that these individuals are visible, credible leaders who can invoke the confidence of the wider university community in anti-racism work.

These appointments are a step forward remains the case that there is a **significant underrepresentation of staff of colour in senior academic positions** more generally. Within the STEM field, at senior levels, just 3.5% of Black academic staff hold a Professor post, compared to 6.6% of Asian staff, and 11.9% of white staff (Royal Society, 2021). Further, across the sea of UK universities, most leaders of institutions are overwhelmingly from Anglo-Celtic and European backgrounds. The

challenge for the system remains the need to attract and nurture a more diverse pool of academic leaders and talented researchers across all disciplines and institutions. There is also the related challenge of providing employment security for staff of colour.

At present, there are significant differences in ethnicity in relation to fixed-term contracts: 30% of white staff are on fixed-term academic contracts as compared to 40% of black academic staff and 43% of Asian academic staff (University and College Union, 2021). At a time where casualisation of workers is an endemic challenge for UK higher education, racial inequities persist here as well. Fixed-term and short-term contracts are entrenched into academic practice, particularly as a result of grant-based funding. However, as modelled by the University of Leeds (2022) and others, there is a move to significantly reduce the number of these contracts, and to enable all staff to lead sustainable careers. As is common in other sectors, a growing number of higher education institutions are publishing ethnicity gaps in pay, which provides another lens to scrutinise and improve the underrepresentation of staff of ethnic minorities.

2. Transforming education and research practices

The substantial body of work to transform curricula and research practices to reflect a more anti-racist orientation can be consolidated to a set of core questions: who is able to engage? What are the range of topics and perspectives they can engage with? Which perspectives are illuminated and moreover, which of these go unheard? And importantly, how do individuals and groups relate with each other in an equitable and mutually reinforcing manner in the way education and research is carried out, within and across institutions?

A range of structural constraints impact the **enrolment** of students of colour including financial barriers, recruitment biases and limited connections and knowledge to support with applications. The latter is a particular challenge for research degree applicants. These pervasive barriers require systemic reform across the higher education system. In response, there are comprehensive initiatives across the sector to increase the representation of students of colour: scholarships,

anonymised applications, improving pathways from school, mentoring, strengthening the information available about courses and modes of study, so on. This work should continue at a feverish pace.

Individual institutions take different approaches with varying degrees of success. A noteworthy example is the recent £15m investment by London Metropolitan University (2021a) to improve the representation and outcomes for students of colour. Among a suite of initiatives, the funding focuses on diversifying the academic pipeline to focus on early career academics and developing an apprentice lectureship scheme, a novel approach. These initiatives are underpinned by a practice-based research unit, the Centre for Equity and Inclusion, to ensure that the university's approaches to addressing racial disparities continue to be informed and iterated through evidence and self-reflexive practice (London Metropolitan University, 2021b). Such a multifaceted approach is not always evident across all institutions, but should become the norm, rather than an as the exception.

There are also significant disparities in the **outcomes and progression** of students of colour and White students. The sector's regulator has set out a key performance indicator to 'reduce the gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students' (Office for Students, 2022b). In 2020-21, there was a difference of 17.4 percentage points between the proportion of white and black students getting a first of 2:1. As with measures to improve student enrolment, institutions are developing policies and programmes to improve the degree outcomes for students of colour. Though current practice suggests there is no 'silver bullet' to reduce degree-awarding gaps, universities are required by the regulator to develop an access and participation plan to guide their efforts. Institutions such as the University of Winchester are conducting research into the factors which can support an inclusive learning environment and improve the knowledge of 'explained' and 'unexplained' gaps in degree outcomes.

Efforts to decolonise the curriculum or alternatively framed as developing inclusive curriculum is an ongoing endeavour for institutions and academics across UK higher education. Initiatives to decolonise the curriculum focus on texts studied within

14

individual disciplines, the way assessment practices are enacted, the role of students in shaping and contributing to curriculum and building the capacity of educators. For instance, the University of Sussex (2022) has introduced a Decolonising the Curriculum: Literature and Theory of the Global South module, which exposes students to a range of thinkers including Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Achille Mbembe in the study of literature. Though there are different approaches and strategies at work, curricula can only be strengthened by a plurality of voices and perspectives.

Less visible and more urgent is the need to **decolonise research** and the ways by which the creation of knowledge comes to bear. Here, the system should look inward and interrogate the implications of current funding processes administered by UK research councils, and whether these practices enable individual researchers and research teams to cultivate truly equitable research partnerships with their global peers. Or if inadvertently, they perpetuate colonial norms and mentalities in practice. Scholars such as Xin Xu (2019) have carefully documented the uneven level playing field of academic knowledge production and the dominance of the English language in humanities and social science disciplines.

Again, the UK research engine can reflect on its own practices and encourage a greater indigeneity of knowledge production. For those universities, such as the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, that have overseas research units, there are practical difficulties with local research staff experiencing perceived disparities in pay, promotion and pathways to progression as compared with their UK-counterparts (Nous Group, 2021). This has led to the establishment of the Decolonising Global Health initiative, which has been formed by students and staff to deconstruct the way research and knowledge is produced within the field of global health at large and more specifically within the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Decolonising research is both a theoretical and highly practical endeavour that institutions must address if they are to meaningfully advance anti-racism and importantly, nurture new bodies of knowledge.

3. Fostering inclusive, respectful cultures and behaviours

Culture is defined in an abundance of ways; it can be simultaneously aspirational, immaterial, and practical, comprising properties such as stories, media, works of arts, and rituals. It is particularly concerned with individual behaviours in a group setting and often framed as persistent patterns of shared values held among individual members in a group (Lee, 2007). Notwithstanding the contested notion of culture, in the case of advancing anti-racism in UK universities, staff and students point to some common principles that are desired in the 'anti-racist culture' of their learning and working environments:

- Individuals of all ethnicities feel safe and able to exchange their life perspectives.
- Inappropriate and discriminatory behaviours are challenged.
- A culture of curiosity and continuous learning about race and ethnicity, recognising that human understanding of these issues evolves daily.
- Training and communications that educate students and staff about the persistent and often, unconscious nature of bias in selection processes through to the design of curriculum.
- Efforts to advance anti-racism is seen as a collective endeavour and not just the responsibility of a few individuals.

There are a wide range of factors which can accelerate or inhibit desired cultures and anti-racist practices. Factors which can enable positive cultures include supportive leaders, dedicated resources, harnessing the experiences of students and staff of colour in designing initiatives, and a clear plan of action to address inequities.

Conversely, the day-to-day experience of students and staff in universities also suggests that the carriage of anti-racism initiatives falls too often on the shoulders of those most directly impacted by these issues. There are instances of 'tokenistic commitment' where staff in leadership positions express their commitment to anti-racism but there is little day-to-day activity to show for their ambitions. This can further undermine the trust and confidence of students and staff of colour within

16

universities. Another significant challenge lies in holding individuals to account when they behave in inappropriate ways, particularly if staff members are in positions of leadership or if they are a researcher that is attracting significant amounts of income. Realising an anti-racist culture in higher education is inextricably linked with issues of power and organisational hierarchy, and requires a vigilant approach to challenging inappropriate behaviour, regardless of who is engaging in that behaviour.

There are many components to how a more inclusive and anti-racist culture in higher education can be realised. The Welcome Trust's work with researchers highlights that though research culture is highly individualised, there are some common goals: diversity is encouraged and celebrated, individual contributions feel valuable and valued, individuals feel safe and secure, time to think is valued (Wellcome Trust, 2022). Through the Wellcome Trust and other sector-led initiatives, there is a growing emphasis on fostering a more inclusive culture for researchers and research teams. In parallel, a growing number of universities are joining the Race Equality Charter, which is a sector-led initiative to achieve long-term institutional cultural change on issues of racial disparities (Advance HE, 2022). Universities are awarded either a Bronze, Silver, or Gold award, based on an assessment of how they are approaching racial equality for professional and support staff; academic staff; in relation to student progression and awarding; and diversity of the curriculum. Universities such as York St. John (2022) have established a self-assessment team, which consists of students and staff who regularly interrogate data about racial diversity and leverage the Race Equality Charter process to introduce specific initiatives and make progress on anti-racism within their institutions. The Race Equality Charter is not intended to be a tick-box exercise; rather provides a framework through which institution can self-reflect on cultural and structural barriers to racial disparities.

From Decolonising De Montfort University (2022b) to mandatory unconscious bias training for all staff, universities are developing and dedicating significant resources that can contribute to dismantling prejudices based on race and ethnicities, and work towards building a more open, inclusive culture. These are positive measures which can only be encouraged. Other initiatives focus on remunerating staff who take on

additional responsibilities to advance anti-racism or establishing cross-institution networks and affinity groups to provide a supportive, safe space for students and staff of colour.

However, to achieve full and enduring racial equity in the culture of UK universities requires consideration of two additional, related issues: **intersectionality** and in particular, the role of **class**. Racial disparities in UK higher education do not exist in a vacuum. The interaction of factors such as gender, class, religion geography, migration, sexual orientation, and gender identity intersect in a multitude of ways to privilege or disadvantage different individuals depending on their characteristics and contexts. Despite the overall expansion in participation in higher education, class inequities reproduce themselves in the disproportionate representation of students from privileged class background in higher-tariff institutions and in the experience of students whilst they are at university (Bolliver, 2018). Bolliver (2018) astutely points out that the students from minority ethnic communities who have recently gained a place in higher education are studying in low-ranking universities with largely students from similar ethnicities, while those students from minority ethnic communities who enter high-ranking universities report experiencing overt forms of racism.

Students' views and imaginaries on these issues do not always present a homogeneous view. Drawing on the experience of undergraduate students in STEM disciplines, Wong et al (2020) posits three contemporary student discourses of racisms. This includes the *naïve*, student who do not believe issues of race and racism are relevant in contemporary UK society where prejudice is considered an issue of the past. The authors assert that those who hold this view are mostly White British but some students from minority ethnic backgrounds share this viewpoint. There is also the viewpoint of *bystander*, who readily acknowledge the presence of racism and inequalities but are not prepared to interfere and interject when they are confronted with these experiences. Those that reflect this discourse are often concerned about which positions are politically correct or alternatively, offensive, and best avoided. Another discourse relates to that of the *victim* – not as those who are vulnerable – but individuals who have experienced racism or racial harassment and

injustices. An inclusive, anti-racist culture is not possible without a serious interrogation of the drivers of inequality at individual and systemic lenses.

Learning from others, leading from within

Universities in the UK now have a body of initiatives and documented experiences, coupled with a clear picture of data and evidence to guide their efforts in relation to anti-racism. These approaches can be exchanged and further developed with the experience of other higher education systems globally, though there are limits to what lessons can be learned. Racial inequities and experiences of racial harassment in higher education are encased within wider cultural norms and country-specific structures. Nevertheless, the point is that racism is not an issue that is confined to the UK university system.

Despite differences in the experiences of racism at a country or region-specific level, there may be value in capturing, synthesising and analysing approaches that make a positive difference, and which may have value across country and regional system contexts. The University of Alberta in Canada has devoted significant attention to celebrating the research and scholarship achievement of its Asian professors and in doing so, reaffirmed its commitment against anti-Asian racism (University of Alberta, 2021). In addition to releasing a public report documenting its links to slavery, Harvard University (2022) has announced a $100 million reparation fund to fund new programs and serve as a 'foundation for redress.' Black Lives Matter has reignited a global conversation around racism in higher education that extends from North American institutions through to the experience of students and staff in Indian higher education (Nair, 2021).

The pursuit to advance anti-racism in higher education is not without debate; practitioners within the sector have differing views on which initiatives can have the most amount of positive impact and increasingly, these issues have been weaponised to drive various political agendas of the day. For instance, a recent group of MPs decried the Race Equality Charter as 'egregious wokery,' alleging that it curtails academic freedom on campus and that it is a waste of university funds to

participate in these schemes (Malnick, 2022). Others posit that participation in schemes such as the Race Equality Charter and efforts to advance the representation of students of colour in higher education are in no way inconsistent with the rights of academic freedom for individual academics (Johns, 2022).

Adopting equality charters or implementing the measures within institution's anti-racism action plans is considered to only add to the intellectual and cultural diversity of on university campuses that comes from engaging diverse and underrepresented voices and is seen to be distinct from the capacity of academics to educate and research in a critical and robust manner. The way in which these issues play out day-to-day on campuses are complex and messy. News articles point to controversial speakers being 'cancelled,' while simultaneously, students and staff of colour report feeling a lack of welcome on campus.

These issues remain unresolved and require a continuing effort by all within higher education to examine their duty to equity (recognising decades of structural and historical disadvantage experienced by underrepresented communities) alongside fostering a culture of critical inquiry and reflection. Advancing anti-racism is the responsibility of all within higher education; not just individuals and communities of colour, and not only those formally assigned to engaging in work in this area. It requires everyone to recognise their own power and positionality in relation to matters of race. Everyone has a part to play.

Conclusion

Over the last few years, universities in the UK have made considerable shifts in their orientation towards anti-racism. This paper has explored some of these shifts, as related to curricula, in relation to the outcomes and experience of students and staff, reporting processes for discrimination and harassment, and acknowledging and repairing historical injustices. Yet there is a long road to travel.

Some of these issues have been covered here: improving the representation of staff of colour in senior academic positions, increasing the representation of students of

colour particularly at higher tariff universities, accelerating the efforts to decolonise research and fostering greater compassion and intercultural understanding within the culture of universities. Anti-racism efforts in UK higher education must move beyond performative gestures to champion measures and initiatives that are bold, consider issues of intersectionality and that are underpinned by appropriate resources and systems.

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