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## Background

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Amongst the current events in the media, the everyday struggles that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people face are being highlighted and brought to public attention. Since the tragic murder of George Floyd, streets have been filled with protesters demanding that both attitudes and actions towards minorities in all aspects of life are addressed.

We don't have to look beyond our own sector to realise that BAME people are still at a major disadvantage in places of work and life more generally. There are structural issues within higher education system that needed to be addressed prior to the coronavirus pandemic, and there are many new issues arising as a result of this, that place BAME staff and students at a disproportionate disadvantage.

Although the term BAME is used within this briefing note to signify staff and students of non-white descent (including dual-heritage individuals) who share protected characteristics, it is important to note that the term itself is problematic due to interpretations of the term being negative and othering. Those who identify as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic, and those not part of the majority within the UK, are also placed under one collective term simply because they share a protective characteristic, consequently disallowing the separation of diverse races and cultures which have evident disparities especially when exploring racial inequalities within HE. We also make the distinction here between BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethic, which this paper focuses on) and BME (Black Minority Ethnic). There are also differences to note in the experiences of Home/EU BAME students and BAME students from other countries, which we acknowledge but do not cover in this briefing.

In this briefing note, racial inequalities in Higher Education (HE) are discussed using the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI)'s report, Universities UK (UUK)'s #ClosingTheGap, the Equality Human Rights Commission (EHRC) 'Tackling racial harassment: universities challenge report', and attendance at UUK's 'Tackling racial harassment' Conference, thus providing conversation and insight on this complex, but vitally important topic for the sector.

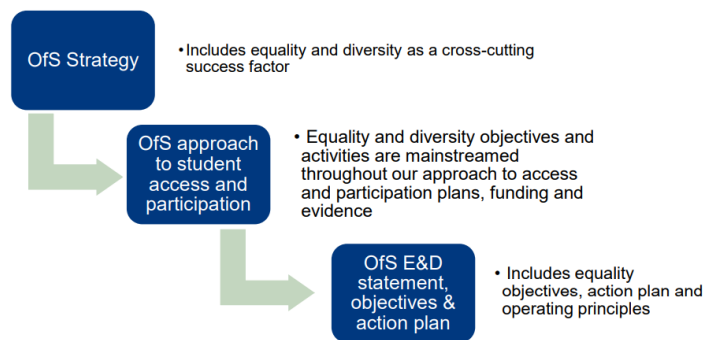
# Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act sets public sector bodies a duty, termed Public Sector Equality Duty, to remove instances of discrimination whilst enhancing equality and collaboration between those who share protected characteristics (including race and religious beliefs) and those who do not. Equality and diversity within HE has been shown 'due regard' through widespread acknowledgement, institutional self-assessments and Positive Action (PA) towards those with protected characteristics.

PA employs positive discrimination against those who do not have a protected characteristic if those with protected characteristics are disadvantaged in comparison, such as having low participation in specific environments or activities and/or having specific needs. Within HE, examples of PA are institutions having specific scholarships and bursaries for BAME students, or specific encouragement for individuals with protected characteristics to apply for vacancies.

Employing influences from the Equality Act 2010, the Office for Students (OfS) produced Equality and Diversity Objectives for Higher Education for 2018-2022. (Figure 1).

Figure 1: OfS framework for implementing equality and diversity actions



Equality and diversity is integral to all four objectives of the OfS:

We aim to ensure that...			Office for Students
every student, whatever their background,	has a fulfilling experience of higher education	that enriches their lives and careers.	
<b>Participation</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>	
<b>Objective 1</b> All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.	<b>Objective 2</b> All students, from all backgrounds, receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure.	<b>Objective 3</b> All students, from all backgrounds, are able to progress into employment, further study, and fulfilling lives, and their qualifications hold their value over time.	
<b>Value for money</b>			
<b>Objective 4</b> All students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money.			

The OfS Equality and Diversity objectives challenge the sector to ‘reduce gaps in access, success and progression for students from all backgrounds’ whilst working to reduce the risk of inadequate HE experiences for students and creating an inclusive student culture. The OfS is also focusing on staff diversity and inclusion through personalised training and “the establishment of staff diversity networks”.

With distinctions between the OfS’ delivery of their Equality and Diversity actions (relating to their objectives), and HEI level actions (such as releasing access and participation plans and their link to the Equality Act 2010), the OfS has coincided with sector level recognition of the need to champion diverse voices and equal opportunities for students and staff. The OfS target is for HEIs to eliminate the gap in degree outcomes between white and black students by 2024-25.

## Exploring racial inequalities in HE

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BAME students are more likely to enter higher education than their white counterparts: but are disproportionately likely to find themselves at a university that lies further down the league tables. BAME students are more likely to drop out of university, and those that do graduate find themselves on the wrong side of an attainment gap<sup>1,2</sup>. The recently published graduate outcomes data also shows that black graduates are 10% less likely to enter full time employment than white graduates.

The problems that BAME students face in a university context start with immediate concerns for personal safety. Reported hate crime has increased since 2017 and the student population are the most likely age group to experience this.<sup>3</sup> The recent report from the equality and human rights commission offers statistics about the numbers of students who have been physically attacked, racially harassed, or had to leave or interrupt study as a result of racial harassment.<sup>4</sup> This makes for a particularly chilling read. Even without these threats, BAME students face an academic setting where they are less likely to thrive, with an attainment gap of almost 15%. This is a problem that universities continually struggle to address without apparent success.

More subtle than overt hate crime, BAME students/staff may face microaggressions. These arise when inherent bias that they may be unaware of influence staff or student questions or statements: for instance, singling out BAME students for comment in seminars. Microaggressions are so engrained into society and systems that they often go unnoticed by those who use them however they can also be intentional. To address these, steps need to be taken to readdress bias. The University of Sheffield, for example announced the roll out of training specifically on

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/universities-must-not-forget-about-bame-students-during-this-crisis/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/student-recruitment-retention-and-attainment/degree-attainment-gaps>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/projects/the-underreporting-of-hate-crime-by-university-students-a-mixed-methods-study-to-evaluate-the-perceived-needs-of-students\(bb000e47-d29b-42f6-b983-83ac9ddb585e\).html](https://www.research.manchester.ac.uk/portal/en/projects/the-underreporting-of-hate-crime-by-university-students-a-mixed-methods-study-to-evaluate-the-perceived-needs-of-students(bb000e47-d29b-42f6-b983-83ac9ddb585e).html)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged.pdf>

microaggressions. Though it's also important to note that microaggressions are not only found in classroom teaching but permeate BAME students' wider university experience.

Examples of Racial inequalities are also evident within academic and professional staffing due to the marked pay gap between BAME and non BAME staff lack of BAME employees in HE<sup>5</sup>. 0.6% of UK professors are black and progress is likely to be slow as BAME graduates are less likely than other graduates to undertake PhDs<sup>6</sup>.

Many Universities do not provide clear evidence of equal employment opportunity. The race quality charter set up by AdvanceHE has not been embraced to the same extent as similar initiatives (such as Athena Swan).

Overt examples of racial inequalities in HE are less common than more subtle features engrained within the structures of the sector, and the disciplinary procedures which exist to combat such instances often focus on 'defusing' rather than 'remedying' situations. Although this can protect the reputation of the institution, it leaves BAME staff and students feeling unsupported.

Alongside this, there is the question of universities' civic role, and how taught modules and research contribute to public knowledge and discourse around BAME lives. Universities should ensure that any curriculums set allow for exploration of BAME history, and refrain from historical bias. Resolution of these inherent challenges at an appropriate pace is an important task for universities. A gradual easing out of the attainment gap, or minor changes to incident reporting and culture, in the hope of hearing more voices may not be enough. Institutions need to acknowledge that these problems exist and implement radical changes in response. They should also review methods for reporting and recoding instances of racism, ensuring these are transparent, effective and used (where appropriate). Students should never be at an academic disadvantage to one another, staff should never be less employable than one another, and no one should ever be at risk of hate crime. Universities need to acknowledge that their own BAME communities are at risk of these things and put appropriate measures in place to address this.

## Impact of Current Situation

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These problems would be enough to give anyone cause for concern, without the context of the coronavirus pandemic. However, this has enhanced many existing problems. The shift to online provision and remote contact has adversely affected many people in BAME communities. At a recent OfS event on supporting BAME students, Sara Elkhawad (Welfare and Equality Officer, Newcastle University Student's Union) discussed the roles that societies and clubs play in creating safe spaces and communities for BAME students. Obviously, societies and clubs create space for all students, regardless of skin colour/race, however, these spaces are arguably more important for BAME students. Writing for WonkHE, Gurnam Singh (Associate Professor of Equity of Attainment at

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/oct/15/uk-universities-bme-staff-less-likely-to-hold-top-jobs>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/sep/12/look-at-how-white-the-academy-is-why-bame-students-arent-doing-phds>

Coventry University), details some of the more immediate impacts on BAME communities.<sup>7</sup> These include: increased susceptibility to Covid-19, increased likelihood of bereavement as a result, and increased likelihood of being affected by the financial fallout of the pandemic. This reflects societal structures, which mean BME communities are likely to earn less, and therefore less likely to have access to things such as better healthcare. Similarly, Tahmina Choudhery writes for WonkHE about the issues that surround reopening Universities for BAME communities.<sup>8</sup> These issues are similar to those pointed out by Gurnam Singh – students who are bereaved may need more support and students who may be worse affected by contracting the virus may be more nervous about a return to campus. Compounding these challenges, Tahmina Choudhery argues that students of colour are less likely to have the home technology to participate in digital learning effectively. All these concerns point to the challenges of providing appropriate and effective support for BAME students. Universities should ensure that any decision taken (e.g. online teaching, return to campus) is supported by equality impact assessments underpinned by action to address inequality and racial imbalances.

Steps by universities to address the pandemic must provide the same level of opportunity to BAME and non-BAME students alike. If they don't, then maybe they aren't the right steps.

## Sector Risks

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It is evident that there is racial inequality in UK higher education. This poses substantial risks for providers including:

- A direct financial hit through lost fees due to avoidance and self-exclusion of BAME students
- Reputational risks, negative views and bad press
- An 'opportunity cost' through lost student and staff talent
- Negative effects on student mental health

More broadly, failure to act on racial inequality will reinforce systemic historical barriers, and cause BAME students/staff to have comparatively worse and even less, experiences in the HE sector.

## What can institutions do?

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Throughout recent weeks, universities have been publishing statements on their stance for civil rights and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Such statements have been questioned, and some universities have been accused of performative allyship. While some statements have been

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<sup>7</sup> <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/covid-19-does-discriminate-so-we-should-tackle-its-impact-on-bame-students/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://wonkhe.com/blogs/we-cant-separate-the-issues-of-race-and-reopening-in-universities/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%208%20June&utm\\_content=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%208%20June+CID\\_a298f34fbf571ae973672ef7be83ab2b&utm\\_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm\\_term=reflects%20on%20social%20media%20conversations%20about%20race%20and%20racism%20across%20higher%20education%20following%20the%20killing%20of%20George%20Floyd](https://wonkhe.com/blogs/we-cant-separate-the-issues-of-race-and-reopening-in-universities/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%208%20June&utm_content=Wonkhe%20Mondays%20-%208%20June+CID_a298f34fbf571ae973672ef7be83ab2b&utm_source=Email%20marketing%20software&utm_term=reflects%20on%20social%20media%20conversations%20about%20race%20and%20racism%20across%20higher%20education%20following%20the%20killing%20of%20George%20Floyd)

criticised purely for being vague, or simply for not addressing the issue, others have faced more inquisitive responses. Calls have been made to:

- Include BAME students in decision making
- Avoid tokenism – listen to student and staff concerns and ask for their input
- Tahmina’s article calls for a start to leaders of colours programs
- Listen to the SU and the student voice
- Decolonialise curriculums
- Employ more BAME staff
- Recruit more BAME students and provide them with more support
- Redesign reporting methods, so that students feel safe to report hate crime
- Discuss the culture towards BME communities in the organisation
- Take down statues and rename buildings that celebrate controversial figures.
- Review staff and student recruitment techniques (including looking at positive action statements).
- Increase diverse events ran on campus.

Though some of these calls may be met with discussions, Universities should evidence that they are listening to concerns, and need to take steps to discuss these. It’s important that Universities have difficult discussions around these areas, and do not shy away.

Both HEPI and UUK #ClosingTheGap have recently published articles/ reports on racial disparities and inequalities in HE and how HEIs can combat them. HEPI highlight 4 key areas for change; 1) a need for strong leadership, 2) a culture of conversations about race, including racism, 3) the development of inclusive and diverse environments, and 4) understanding “what works”.

Building on this, both HEPI and UUK have suggested specific policy recommendations resulting from the areas for change, which include:

- i) Increased participation in the Race Equality Charter (REC). 62 higher education providers already participate in the Charter, which provides a framework for organisations to reflect on their barriers for BAME staff and students and to develop initiatives to combat such barriers. The Charter provides an opportunity for HEIs to acknowledge and combat racial inequalities. Depending on members progress towards their goals, a tier system of awards is available, and with a possible financial incentive in joining the REC (and similar to the Athena Swan Gender Equality), could result in an increase of participation from more UK HE providers.
- ii) The acknowledgement of differences so conversations about racial inequalities, with a focus on who speaks and who listens, can occur. UUK’s #ClosingTheGap aims to start this conversation.

- iii) Extra support and recognition for BAME staff members who often take on more responsibilities, such as mentoring BAME students. Alongside this, increased support for BAME students such as BAME specific scholarships.
- iv) Reviewing the curriculum to ensure representation, and being open to having difficult conversations about it, to help promote inclusivity for BAME students. Projects such as the 'Embedding Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum' (EEDC) by the Scottish Funding Council are already working with Scottish HEIs commissioning diverse research and creating relatable content for BAME students.
- v) The creation of diverse roles, especially within leadership and managerial level, and important training regarding equality and diversity.
- vi) Focused actions which will make a difference. Although a lot of focus is on Outreach activities and access regarding Widening Participation, further focused action plans need to exist within institutions which are accessible and transparent, and bias training needs to be available.

The EHRC paper on tackling racial inequalities (mentioned above) echoes many of these recommendations, calling for culture led change, and details specific practical actions that Universities can take to address this. However, it is important to note that they acknowledged a missing focus on systemic racism within this report at the UUK conference.

In addition to recruiting more BAME staff, institutions also need to ensure that their working environments allow for equal progression, so that leadership bodies are also diverse, and represent the wider organisation. This is something that should also be echoed within governing bodies, which are traditionally non-diverse.

Education on racial inequalities and EDI practice is also important as there is often a misunderstanding from HEIs of the legality on racial targeting and positive action. The Subject level Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is a possible starting point for HEIs to study, identify and improve their equality and diversity practices alongside institutions engaging in EDI specific audits.

## Conclusions



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Institutions need to have these difficult conversations and need to implement changes. Many Universities are aware of actions they should be taking but have not yet decided on the means to get there. We would suggest that institutions start by taking forward relevant recommendations from the UUK/HEPI/EHRC reports, and by ensuring that BAME staff and students are actively involved in decision making and implementation of these. Following on from this, BAME staff and students should be involved in any other efforts a university may take to improve the experience.

We also suggest that institutions share their good practice with the sector – submitting examples to [supportingBAMEstudents@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:supportingBAMEstudents@officeforstudents.org.uk) while using the other good practices emerging to inform their own work. The OfS is beginning to help, but slowly, and needs sector engagement.

## We can help

For further information on how we can help, including specific EDI audits, or any other aspect of Uniac's internal audit and assurance service please get in touch.

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