

White academia: will the Race Equality Charter make a difference?

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There are some hard numbers behind diversity in academia. There are currently only 70 black professors in the UK; of these, only 17 of are female. As part of ongoing efforts to address these disappointing numbers, the Race Equality Charter mark was recently introduced by the Equality Challenge Unit. But will it make academia more diverse? [Kalwant Bhopal](#) explains how the process works and writes that, while it is too early to say whether it will have an impact, the Charter is undoubtedly a step in the right direction.



Inclusive policy making in higher education appears to be a success story – at least on the face of it. The Equalities Act, introduced in 2010, brought together all previous anti-discrimination laws – such as the Equal Pay Act, Sex Discrimination Act and Race Relations Act amongst others – and provided a basic framework against direct and indirect discrimination. The Act also introduced a number of ‘protected characteristics’ such as race, religion, gender reassignment and sexual orientation.

The Race Equality Charter

Focussing on academia, the first attempt for more diversity was through the Athena SWAN Charter which was introduced in 2005 by the Equality Challenge Unit, with its purpose being the advancement of women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. Institutions are awarded a bronze or silver award depending on how they can evidence progress of women in these areas. The [Race Equality Charter](#) works in a similar way but focusses on race diversity, and covers academic staff; professional and support staff; student progression and attainment; and diversity in the curriculum. The Charter is underpinned by five key principles:

- that racism is part of everyday life and racial inequalities manifest themselves in everyday situations, processes and behaviours;
- that individuals from all ethnic backgrounds should benefit equally from the opportunities available to them;
- that solutions to racial inequality should have a long-term impact through institutional culture change;
- that those from minority ethnic backgrounds are not a homogenous group and such complexity must be recognised when exploring race equality;
- and that intersectional identities should be considered when discussing race equality.



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But why is the Charter necessary? Whilst there has been a significant [increase](#) in the numbers of Black and minority ethnic (BME) students attending higher education institutions, there is [recent evidence](#) to suggest that the numbers fall at post-graduate level. More specifically, although a total of 22.5 per cent of first year undergraduates are from minority ethnic backgrounds, this number decreases to 19.2 per cent for first year post-graduate students. But the staff body is nowhere near as diverse as the student make-up. BME academics are less likely to be in senior decision-making roles compared to their white colleagues; 8.5 per cent of white staff compared to 6.4 per cent of BME staff are in such roles and they are also more likely to be on fixed term contracts. And of the 14,315 professors in the UK only 70 are Black, and shockingly only 17 of these are female, while there are only 20 deputy or pro vice-chancellors who are BME compared to the 530 of the majority who are white (for data see [here](#)).

In light of these numbers, it is hardly surprising that our [recent research](#), funded by the Equality Challenge Unit, found that BME academics are more likely to want to leave the UK for overseas higher education. In exploring BME academic flight from UK higher education, our research consisted of 1,200 survey questionnaires and 41 in-depth interviews with respondents who defined themselves as BME. We were particularly interested in exploring the extent to which UK academics considered moving overseas and whether there were differences in these responses by ethnicity, as well as analysing what push and pull factors contributed to this.

Unsurprisingly, BME academics were more likely to consider a move to an overseas higher education institution compared to their white colleagues. Racism was a factor was mentioned by many of our respondents. Many also acknowledged that countries such as the US valued the study of race and ethnicity more than the UK and indeed acknowledged that the importance of race equality and the value of having a diverse group of academic staff was given a higher priority there than in the UK. Many BME academics reported experiences of subtle, covert and nuanced racism in the white space of the academy. We suggest that:

There is a systematic perception that race equality is not being prioritised within the sector, which is representative of the culture that is pushing BME academics away, and preventing them from returning. Ensuring that race equality is prioritised within the sector in a meaningful way is not easy, but is the first step to instigating systemic, long-term culture change.

Clearly we need to do more but the Race Equality Charter mark is a move in the right direction. It is however, far too early to tell if it will make a difference to the inclusion of BME staff and students in higher education. Put bluntly, if it is tied to funding (as the Athena SWAN charter is) then many universities will surely sign up to it – and it has taken 10 years to see the impact of Athena SWAN Charter.

But if universities are serious in addressing race inequality, signing up to the Race Equality Charter will demonstrate this and it will be a springboard to enable more BME staff to be promoted to senior decision-making roles, such as professors, pro vice-chancellors and chancellors. By having BME representation at senior levels, it is only then that we can move towards an agenda that prioritises social justice and inclusion in higher education.

About the Author

Kalwant Bhopal is Professor of Education and Social Justice at the University of Southampton. A full list of her publications is available [here](#).

