

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Racial harassment and discrimination in higher education, HC 88

Wednesday 18 May 2022

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Elliot Colburn; Caroline Dinenage; Carolyn Harris; Kim Johnson; Anum Qaisar; Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

Questions 1 - 30

Witnesses

I: Dr Arun Verma, Head of the Race Equality Charter, Advance HE; Larissa Kennedy, President, National Union of Students; Professor David Richardson, Chair of Universities UK's advisory group on tackling racial harassment in higher education; Professor Nicola Rollock, Professor of Social Policy & Race, King's College, London.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Arun Verma, Larissa Kennedy, Professor David Richardson and Professor Nicola Rollock.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to this afternoon's meeting of the Women and Equalities Committee and our evidence session into racial harassment and discrimination in higher education. Can I thank our witnesses for coming along to give evidence? Committee members will ask you questions in turn, hopefully they will always make it clear which witness they are addressing their question to, but if at any point any of you wish to come in, please do just indicate by raising your hand and we will make sure that you are brought in on that point.

Can I just start with a question both to Nicola Rollock and Larissa Kennedy please, about the lived experiences of both university staff and students when it comes to racial harassment, and the impact that it has on them? We have seen some very stark figures about the numbers of people coming forward to give evidence about their experiences. Can I start with you please, Nicola?

Professor Nicola Rollock: Good afternoon and thank you. We should start off by being clear that when we talk about racial harassment and discrimination, we are talking about racism. There are two main forms of racism that are useful to hold on to as we have the discussion this afternoon: there are overt forms of racism—racist name calling, racist jokes. These are explicit, and we saw a number of these described at length in the EHRC report. But there are also more subtle forms of racism, covert forms where race might not be named explicitly, but it is still a salient factor, which we describe as everyday forms of racism that would include racial microaggressions, for example.

It is important to hold on to that distinction, but when we look at universities across the piece, we know that they struggle to identify and log the prevalence of incidents of racism on their campuses. Obviously, that is even more the case when it comes to everyday forms of racism. Why are those distinctions important? Because when it comes to everyday forms of racism, as a society we are not very good at understanding what it looks like in practice, and indeed addressing it.

To help put this into some context, I will share with the committee some examples from my own research, looking at the career experiences of black female professors. I have been concerned for some time about how few black female professors there are in the UK. When I did this research, I drew on data provided in an Advance HE report, a statistical report that was published in 2018, at which point there were just 30 black female professors across the entire UK, out of overall professoriates of just over 19,000. The reason I decided to—

Q2 Chair: Can I ask you a question on that? I would be really interested to know if you have the same breakdown of women. You have highlighted a



shocking statistic of 30 female black professors. How many female professors are there out of those 19,000?

Professor Nicola Rollock: In terms of white female professors, there were around 3,500 at that time. We are looking at 2018 data when 1.9% of black female scholars were professors. When we take that same equation and hold it for white female counterparts, 5.8% of white female scholars were professors, so we can see there is some difference in terms of the numbers and the representation.

The reason that I decided to look at black female professors is because the number has been quite consistently small. If I can just zoom in on the data and break it down just a little bit more, those 30 professors break down as 25 UK black female scholars and then five non-UK. I spoke to 20 of the 25 UK scholars, and I can just give some bullet points of their feedback, which was that they were constantly overlooked for promotion. The nature of feedback on unsuccessful applications was inconsistent and unhelpful. By way of example, one professor shared with me that earlier on in her career when she had asked for feedback on an application, she was simply told she had a typo on her application. When we are looking to support colleagues to progress, we would look for more substantive details than that.

Undermining, stereotyping, and passive bullying is commonplace. Heads of department are often seen as a barrier to progression. Indeed, this should be of no surprise, given that this sits in line with the findings from the Race at Work survey carried out by Business in the Community a few years prior to my own research, which found that line managers often act as a barrier to opportunities and progression of black and minority ethnic colleagues, contributions in meetings being overlooked, and the sense of everything being a battle.

Just to give an example of that, one colleague shared with me in the course of the research how she delayed applying for professorship by approximately 10 years. She knew that she was of professorial level, but she waited. Why did she wait? She waited because she wanted to ensure that she had three book manuscripts, which are one of the criteria for professorships, having manuscripts and publications. She wanted to ensure she had three, even though she had seen white colleagues appointed with just one manuscript, and indeed none. She wanted to minimise the possibility that her own application would be overlooked, and then finally having to take a step backwards in the career ladder in order to progress.

When I spoke to colleagues, one of the respondents—who I have called Lorraine for the purposes of today—described the consequences. To your question, Chair, she said that, “Black female scholars burn out, or they are so stressed because there is some type of employment tribunal case, they suffer from cancer or mental ill-health.” In her own situation, she described having seen a therapist for a number of years. The online higher education blog “Wonky”, having read my research, came to the



following position. They said that these experiences and types of incidents create an exhausting double bind, to either process one's own emotional response so as to avoid being labelled angry or irrational, traits we know to be commonly assigned to black women, or to redouble one's efforts to perform, to prove oneself worthy of one's position in the teeth of the covert scepticism of peers.

If we look at the data today, there are now 40 black female professors and, lest we rejoice, we will zoom in on that a little bit more closely. When we break that down, it has gone up in each category by five, so there are 30 UK black female professors and 10 non-UK, but the proportion of black academics who are professors remains the same, at 2%.

Q3 **Chair:** The overall number of professors has gone up?

Professor Nicola Rollock: The number of professors has gone up across the piece, there are now around 22,000, but those low figures, the underrepresentation remains—

Q4 **Chair:** Can I just ask, is there a particular area of study or programme where it is better or worse? When you are talking about 40 it is very difficult to get any sort of picture, is it not?

Professor Nicola Rollock: To your point, it is very difficult to get a picture, but if I may, Chair, I would just like to highlight some key points around their experiences, and experiences of colleagues of colour more broadly. I have several points to make to the Committee today, but I believe the most pressing concern is that when it comes to debates around everyday racism it is trivialised beyond all belief across all segments of society, but in pockets of the media in particular. I want to be clear that we are not talking about a single isolated incident. These women and other colleagues across the sector have been and continue to be subjected to what we are talking about, which are sets of systematic behaviours that serve to undermine and exclude colleagues of colour over a period of time.

In other contexts that would be described as bullying or abuse, but because the topic is one of racism, it is relegated to the side-lines. Just to finish my point, I am often approached by colleagues both within higher education and outside who, knowing what I do for a living, approach me, asking for advice and help. I was approached by a colleague who was then a professional member of staff at a university in the UK, who described having been subjected to a set of experiences or events at their institution at the hand of their employer which was so upsetting, traumatic and shocking that it led them to consider taking their own life.

I just want to be absolutely clear that when we are talking about everyday racism, we are not talking about, as is sometimes described, the odd raising of an eyebrow or the odd slight. We are talking about



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systematic, ongoing, undermining and patronising behaviour that comes under the banner of everyday racism.

- Q5 **Chair:** I might come back to the issue of microaggressions in a minute. You focus your work on women, so I might as well. Can I ask, is one of the problems that black female academics get so—I hate to say this word—used to microaggressions, to everyday racism, that they find it harder to identify, because it is so commonplace it then becomes hard to report, and it is only more overt examples that are reported?

Professor Nicola Rollock: The challenge is really on the part of the institution and line managers and colleagues in understanding what this everyday racism is. I was very clear in making that distinction at the beginning, obviously they overlap, but everyday forms of racism are easy to excuse, and to be seen as one-off trivialities which are easy to ignore. But my point is that when you are subjected to this over a period of time, it can get missed, so I would say that the issue is not so much a concern on the part of colleagues of colour about reporting, it is about the faith in the system, in that it is going to be understood and dealt with appropriately.

- Q6 **Chair:** Thank you, and I really appreciate your detailed answer. I am very conscious that we are going to be a bit pressed for time, and I do not want anyone to feel they have not had the opportunity to give us full answers. Can I turn to you please, Larissa? We have heard from the academic perspective; would you like to give us the student view on my original question?

Larissa Kennedy: Absolutely, and I want to thank Professor Rollock for outlining what happens to staff because there are so many synergies with the experiences of black, brown and racialised students. When we think about racial harassment that students experience in higher education, it is really important to look at the wealth of statistical evidence that there is before us, dating all the way back to the NUS's Race for Equality report back in 2011. Year after year, cohort after cohort of students have divulged these quite harrowing and very traumatic experiences, and yet it still seems that the burden of proof to illuminate these problems with racism in higher education still sits with black, brown and racialised students.

Just to bring us back to some of the statistics that we know, most recently we saw the Living Black at University report from earlier this year, which found that more than half of black students reported that they had been victims of racism while in their accommodation, mostly these are interpersonal interactions between student communities. This was not created by the pandemic, but was exposed and exacerbated by a pandemic situation, where students were in some cases almost forced into bubbles of interaction with students that they had never met before. Of course, that was an incredibly hard time for students experiencing racism in their home settings whilst at university. But as well as accommodation and housing settings we also see the issue of anti-black



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policing and securitisation on our campuses being incredibly prevalent. We saw a number of high-profile cases during the pandemic, particularly the case in Manchester of Zac Adan, who experienced anti-black policing on his campus. We continue to see black students disproportionately carded, asked for ID, on their campuses. There is a lack of statistics in this area, but this is something on which, anecdotally, we consistently receive information from our members.

Looking to other pieces of research. The EHRC report in 2019 found that, "24% of ethnic minority students had experienced some form of racial harassment", and "Around one in 20 students said they had left their studies because of racial harassment.". This is the dire level of experiences that we are talking about, such that students are unable to continue their studies in that setting.

Going even further back, if we look at the Muslim students' experiences survey the NUS conducted in 2018, we saw that around 79% of respondents who had experienced abuse or crime believe that this was motivated by prejudice relating to their Muslim identity. Similarly, back in 2017 the NUS's Jewish students' experiences survey saw that of those who have experienced crime, 66% believed that these incidents were motivated by the perpetrator's prejudice towards them based on their Jewish belief.

There is heaps of evidence that continues to go back where students are divulging these traumatic experiences, telling us what is happening on our campuses and in our communities, and yet it feels as though there has been little to no change in the reality of the lived experiences for black, brown and racialised students.

Chair, you asked us about the lived experiences of these students, and, frankly, I cannot talk about the experiences of racial harassment without seeing this as inherently intertwined with the other experiences of racism that take place on our campuses. When we look at things like the BAME attainment gap and the fact that at the time of the NUS UK report that was 13% between BAME students and their white counterparts, widening to 18% when we look at black students and white students respectively. We see the ways that this manifests, and we have to look at the underlying causes of this relating to the lack of black academics and staff, as Professor Rollock referred to. But also thinking about the fact that these staff are disproportionately casualised, and so the interactions with these staff members are, of course, strained because of that. We also have to recognise that those—

Q7 Chair: Can I just pick up on that, what did you mean by disproportionately casualised?

Larissa Kennedy: Yes, I can confirm that there are a higher number of black and brown members of staff who experience casualisation because of the way that the academic system is set up in the UK. There are far more white professors and academics who are on a career track that



enables them to have a stable income, knowing that they are going to be at the institution in the long term. But because of their career stage, there are a lot more of those black professionals on lower pay grades who are not yet professors, who have not yet reached that stability in their career path. Those are particularly black postgraduates who teach students, and who are often doing unpaid and unrecognised pastoral care work in fact, for black and brown students. That is something that my peers and I personally have experienced, and also something that the NUS is constantly told about, when often underpaid and under-represented black early-stage academics, or PhD students who teach are doing that face-to-face work on the ground with students, filling the gap where there is also a lack of black mental health professionals on our campuses. When students are experiencing things like racial harassment or other forms of racism at their institutions, these are the build-ups of pressure that we see, because of the under-representation in these spaces.

Chair: Can I just bring Carolyn Harris in, who has a question for you on that.

Q8 **Carolyn Harris:** Larissa, I want to be specific about antisemitism.

Larissa Kennedy: Yes.

Q9 **Carolyn Harris:** I want to take you back to an incident in March this year where a rapper who has made antisemitic remarks was due to play at the National Union of Students Conference. When the Jewish students made an approach to say how disappointed they were in this, they were told originally that he was not playing at the NUS Conference, but actually at the Liberation Conference but that, if the Jewish pupils or Jewish students who were going to be attending were not comfortable with him, they could segregate themselves away in an area which had been designated for disabled people.

I understand that Lowkey pulled out of both conferences, but that aside, was that the right tone to take with the Jewish students, to tell them that they should segregate themselves from someone they felt was antisemitic?

Larissa Kennedy: To be absolutely clear, that was not said. There is an ongoing investigation which I really hope will look into this and bring to light the realities of what was said. Fundamentally we have been very open to scrutiny, a complete open book when it comes to launching this investigation swiftly and wanting to work proactively with the Union of Jewish Students to move forward into this investigation. We think it is incredibly important, as the NUS have always said, be it student unions, in universities, on our campuses or in our communities, we want to see, when marginalised students raise issues, that they are addressed swiftly and without hesitation.

That is exactly what we are doing at NUS, and we really welcome the scrutiny we have received and the continued consultation with the Union



of Jewish Students to ensure that this investigation does what it needs to do, but also to centre the voices of those who have experienced harm over the past month and a half. That is the direction that we are headed in. Of course, I do not want to say too much about the investigation itself so as not to jeopardise that process, but I really welcome the question, and it is important to be able to set facts in this space, but also to allow the investigation to do so.

Q10 Elliot Colburn: But Larissa, this is not the first time that the NUS has been accused of antisemitism. The NUS's association with antisemitism goes right back to the beginning. In the 70's the NUS's attempt to link Zionism and racism saw Jewish societies banned from campuses. In 2005, three NUS officials resigned, saying that the NUS was turning a blind eye to racism. In 2016 the Home Affairs Committee called the President a racist and institutionally antisemitic. We have heard about Lowkey, and now the Union of Jewish Students have said that your successor is someone that they have big concerns about when it comes to dealing with antisemitism. I appreciate what you said about having an inquiry, but an inquiry has been held before. In 2005, there was an inquiry held by the NUS into antisemitism, but nothing seems to have changed, so what faith can Jewish students have that this time it is actually going to mean something and bring around structural change from what they are experiencing?

Larissa Kennedy: We are really proud that this time we are working in close collaboration with the Union of Jewish Students to ensure that the voices of Jewish students are centred in this work and that we are in a space to centre the voices of those who have been harmed. It is really crucial that we continue to go back to that.

One of the demands that came from the Union of Jewish Students was to launch this independent external investigation, and, as such, we did that incredibly swiftly, within days of receiving the open letter, and the one complaint that we did receive we did that, and we actioned that without hesitation. We are looking forward to this inquiry and have opened ourselves up even more than was asked of us because we believe that any change that we need to see has to be a commitment to real transformative change which reckons with the structural issues here.

As National President, I do deeply regret that we are at this point, but I also really welcome that we are able to kick off this work that is truly about transformative change. From NUS's long-standing history of championing anti-racism in education, it is abundantly clear that all structures across the organisations and institutions that we operate in reify and reproduce racism in all of its forms. It requires ongoing commitment to concerted and transformative action to reckon with the fact that the structures of racism that exist do then influence our spaces, because we do not exist in a vacuum.

All of our institutions and organisations that we operate in are microcosms of a racist world, which is why it is so important that we



continue to be open to scrutiny, that we are ready to listen and learn from the voices of marginalised communities, and that when issues arise, that transformative action is taken in order to rebuild that trust with affected communities. That is something that we are doing unequivocally, in collaboration with the Union of Jewish Students, and we continue to welcome the scrutiny and the opportunity to change.

Elliot Colburn: I might have some more questions later, Chair, but thank you.

- Q11 **Caroline Dinénage:** Can I just pop in on top of that? Thank you, Larissa, I am listening very carefully to what you are saying, which gives me a lot of confidence about your approach. But—I hate the word but because it seems to undermine everything that I have just said before that—however, up until this point, when you have spoken about all the very valid and concerning issues, you have spoken a lot about anecdotal reports of what has been happening in student accommodation, for example. But when you talk about the antisemitism issue, you talk about how we are now doing an official inquiry. Anecdotally, do you feel that there is a disparity between different minorities, a sort of hierarchy of marginalised groups within the student body?

Larissa Kennedy: If I may speak plainly, a lot of students and young people talk about the fact that there is no “Oppression Olympics”, which is quite an interesting phrase to use in this setting, but we are incredibly serious about the fact that we do not hierarchise marginalised groups. In fact, one of the things that we consistently go back to as a national union is the fact that we recognise one another’s liberation as bound up with each other. When we are fighting for justice and liberation and when we are doing this work, there is no way to separate our liberation from one another’s. That is really important to me as a black woman and feminist, which is how I identify. These are things that are indivisibly important from the politics of the work we do around decolonisation, equality and justice, which is the very foundation of what NUS does.

We have just turned 100, and the founding phrase of our founder was that “If students are co-operating today, then there is surely hope for tomorrow”. In going back to that we recognise that there is no basis for that cooperation unless we are able to go into any allegations with humility, the willingness to listen and learn, and, as I have said, to take transformative action, just to make sure that we are consistent in all groups and marginalised communities having access to feeling welcome, but also empowered by NUS. It is not enough to just have these empty platitudes that give us a kind of “level playing field”, so to speak, it has to go further than that. That is what I am hoping that we will do by broadening this inquiry and looking into NUS more structurally, beyond the allegations we have received. We have the opportunity to actually do better and do more to make that really transformative for all marginalised communities at NUS, and take forward a strategy around holistic anti-racism.



Q12 **Chair:** Thank you. Nicola, Larissa has spoken very passionately about transformational change, are you seeing that in the university institutions themselves?

Professor Nicola Rollock: You said you wanted short responses, the short answer is, not at the pace that we would like. I spoke earlier about a member of staff who had considered killing themselves, which should be a cause of alarm not just for this Committee, but actually more broadly for the universities, society and the Government. If we are committed to debating the issue of a levelling up agenda, then that has to take consideration of the very real barriers that are in the way of some groups achieving success at the highest levels.

Universities are not taking it seriously, some are trying to, but I think they are also at risk of, if I can use a slightly academic phrase, hyper scrutiny from some quarters if they do try to make moves to that end. We are in the unfortunate position that racism, and certainly everyday forms of racism are not widely appreciated and understood, and also have been disparaged by some quarters of the Government and media. There are segments of black and minority ethnic groups who feel dismayed and disappointed that their experiences are not being heard, which in turn places a pressure on universities, who are trying to balance this tightrope between what might be a government position on the issues, and what their black and minority ethnic staff and indeed students are also saying.

Q13 **Chair:** When you highlighted microaggressions in everyday racism, as indeed did the Equality and Human Rights Commission, what are universities doing to tackle that and what more should they be doing? How can they change the culture so that everyday racism simply does not happen?

Professor Nicola Rollock: In the first instance it requires an understanding of what it is and what it looks like in practice. We do see some universities who have introduced schemes such as Report and Support and other report mechanisms, but I have to say these are mainly targeted at students, because we know that universities are understandably concerned about ensuring the interests of their students are met because they are logged annually, through the National Student Survey and other means such as Bums on Seats. But where I would say there is a considerable gap is in logging carefully, and in a detailed way, the experiences of their black and minority ethnic staff on these issues.

There is a considerable gap in terms of our knowledge base in this area. There are two key areas I would like to highlight, one is the role of human resources—called different things in different places nowadays—and the role that they play in taking forward this agenda, and whether they do that with a serious and committed mind. Secondly, and I know the Committee has examined this as an issue in previous sessions, the ways in which universities make use of NDAs. To be clear here, NDAs which have been both agreed and signed, but also those which have been



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dismissed and not signed. Whether signed or not, I would like to see greater transparency in the way that universities make use of NDAs and having them monitored by ethnic group and also by the theme of the offending act in the NDA.

Chair: Thank you. David, did you want to come in on that?

Professor David Richardson: If I may please, yes. I just thought this might be a moment for me to come in because you were specifically asking about what universities are doing and the pace of change. So, if you are okay, I can say a few words about that from the perspective of a university vice chancellor.

First of all, everything that we have heard from Nicola and Larissa is unfortunately very much the experience of students and staff at UK universities. I have acknowledged that and gone on the record calling out the way universities are perpetuating structural racism. Some people criticise me for doing that, but I felt we needed to acknowledge it, and not keep collecting data and asking the question, "Is this really what students and staff are experiencing?", and particularly the covert racism and the everyday racism that Nicola was talking about.

My students are telling me this when I have student breakfasts, lunches and suppers with them, so I really felt that we needed to lead a call for action for vice chancellors and governing bodies to actually own this problem and start to bring about change. That is one of the reasons why, with Universities UK, we led a group to produce guidance for the sector on just how to go about doing this and making it very clear that we needed to work at pace. I did not want people to collect more evidence, I wanted people to take an anti-racist approach.

Self-evidently, you can look at me and see straightaway that I do not have the lived experience of racism or racial harassment, but I can lead change at my institution, and try to lead change across the sector. We brought together people who have the lived experience to form the group that was going to produce the guidance, and it was also informed by student and staff panels, and we published the guidance back in 2020. A key point is that vice chancellors have to make this a priority and they have to resource it, and their governing bodies have to ask the questions about how progress is being made.

We need to educate, and we need people to understand what covert racism is, what everyday racism is, and that is important. We need to have programmes of work across all of our schools of study that take into account the stories of those with the lived experience, which means that we have to work in partnership. We need to not help staff in terms of the issues around promotion that we have just heard about. It is not about helping them over the barriers that Nicola correctly identified, it is about removing those barriers and working proactively to do that, and all of those recommendations are in the report.



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I want to see that change happen quickly, and we are getting together a group again, bringing colleagues from the sector with the lived experience of different universities to assess progress two years on—that work is underway at the moment—and we will keep asking that question. I have attended governing bodies of other universities to explain to them and try to help them understand what racism looks like, and the sorts of work that they need to be overseeing, to ensure that their institution does take this seriously and does resource this. I have a number of groups operating in my university, which are actually co-chaired by those with the lived experience, to help us to navigate through this.

But a key point is that this is a whole institution problem, all of us own it, it is about the whole community whether you have experienced racism, have a lived experience of racism or not. We cannot leave this as a problem for those who are experiencing everyday racism. We all have to own it together, and that is what I am trying to encourage universities to do. Self-evidently, one indication of institutional racism is the fact that unfortunately the vast majority of UK vice chancellors are white and do not have that lived experience. I very much hope that situation will change, but because of the barriers that need to be removed identified by Nicola, that is going to take time.

For the moment it is up to those without the lived experience to accept their responsibility and lead that culture change, working in partnership with staff and students. I am trying to get that message out, and I do want to see culture change at pace.

Chair: Thank you. Kim Johnson.

Q14 Kim Johnson: Good afternoon panel, I have a couple of questions on progress in tackling racial harassment, the first question to you, Arun. We know that we have had a plethora of reports and recommendations dating back, including the recent response to the highly discredited CRED report. My question to you is, how would you describe the rate of progress since all of those reports?

Dr Arun Verma: Thank you for the question. I guess one of the ways to respond to this is really thinking about the role of the Race Equality Charter in the higher education sector, and how it is working. The Race Equality Charter was co-created across the sector in 2015, based on five core principles. Principle one is the most pertinent and reflects on what has been discussed already, which indicates that racial inequalities are a significant issue within higher education. "Racial inequalities are not necessarily overt, isolated incidences. Racism is an everyday facet of UK society, and racial inequalities manifest themselves in everyday situations, processes and behaviours". That was a principle that was set and designed with the sector in 2015. When we recently did some engagement in consultation with our membership, which currently stands at 96 members across the UK, it was found that these principles are still as valid today as they were in 2015. When we are looking at the



progress, just in terms of the principles of the Race Equality Charter and how it is serving the sector, we know that this is still a pertinent issue.

In thinking about progress in terms of the data and evidence, what is quite clear is the complexity around racial disparities in the higher education sector. David, Nicola and Larissa have talked about different complexities in the way in which racial disparities are impacting on outcomes, for example the awarding gap. The disadvantages of ethnicity awarding gaps in UK higher education report in 2019/2020, the white, black, Asian and minority ethnic awarding gap highlighted that there was a 9.9 percentage point difference between white and black students in their awards. This awarding gap has persisted at least since Advance HE's first statistical report in 2005. In terms of that kind of progress, it has not been at enough pace in some ways, as has been echoed by Nicola.

In terms of Advance HE's equality and higher education statistical report 2021, it is still noted that inequalities persist among white and black, Asian and minority ethnic staff members in UK higher education, with lower proportions of black, Asian and minority ethnic staff than white staff on open-ended permanent contracts, in senior management positions, in professorial roles and on higher salary bands.

Interestingly, when we are looking even above, or at someone in the governors of higher education, nine out of 10 governing board members were white, and just 5.4% of HE governors were identified as disabled. When we refer back to the Living Black at University report by Unite earlier this year, and just adding on to what Larissa's evidence showed as well, only 43% of the black students surveyed feel a sense of belonging in their accommodation, compared with 61% of white students. When looking at our Student Academic Experience Survey published with the Higher Education Policy Institute, they indicate similar sentiments about belonging, which contributes to only 48% of black, Asian and minority ethnic students saying they would choose the same course and university again, compared to 62% of white students, in terms of attainment, and also in terms of going back to that awarding up issue.

When we are talking about the progress being made and think about the conception of the Race Equality Charter in 2015, there has been little progress in terms of the data and what is being reflected from the formation of the charter in 2015 to date. We are still seeing this perpetuation of awarding gaps and different kinds of disparities in lived experiences, but also in terms of the outcomes that staff and students are facing across an institutional system and sector.

- Q15 **Kim Johnson:** Can I just ask you a supplementary question please, Arun, in terms of the charter? Do you see the charter as mainly a box-ticking exercise, so a university can say they have it, to make them look good, but they are not actually doing the level of work that is required to undertake the level of change required in terms of the issues just raised, particularly in terms of the awarding gap?



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Dr Arun Verma: Thank you for that question. In terms of the way in which the Race Equality Charter works, I understand from the sector there is some kind of native mysticism around the processes of the charter. One of things to be mindful of when we are talking about this service is that it is underpinned by these five core principles in the framework. As part of that framework, there are criteria that lead to a Bronze or Silver Award. The Bronze Award represents the foundation of one institution to tackle racial inequalities and disparities across their entire institution, and a Silver Award lends itself to understanding the impact, involvement and accountability of the application, and the institution's progress as well.

One of the things to note is that the requirements of the Race Equality Charter are filled with extensive amounts of evidence around student and staff pipeline data and with the formation of a self-assessment team, which is something that is similar to other charters, particularly Athena Swan for example. It engages wide staff and students to have difficult conversations about their own data, their pipeline data, which is often incomplete and has gaps, to help inform the actions that they can make. We currently have 22 institutions at Bronze Award level, out of the 96 members of the Race Equality Charter. We are saying that those institutions have the foundations to tackle racial harassment in the long term. As part of the requirements of the charter, we are looking at sustainable long-term changes and culture changes to the institution.

What we can say around the Race Equality Charter membership is that those with the Bronze Award are on that journey and starting quite early on in some ways, and the impact of such activities in this particular space is yet to be learned and evidenced. We do have some evaluation, one in a Phase One report that was led by Nicola and also through an independent review, to start to understand some of the processes and impact of the charter to date.

Professor Nicola Rollock: Just a very brief point in response to the member's question. This also speaks to the point that David made, that unfortunately, we are in a situation where, in terms of moving forward on this agenda, we rely too much on individual goodwill and commitment of senior leaders, which I think is wholly unacceptable.

Also to your point, there actually there have been a number of reports, reviews and inquiries and so on around the subject, and actually I am unclear as to the levers or the consequences to institutions for not advancing this issue more seriously. To underscore my previous point, yes, in relation to students, but also quite fundamentally in relation to academic and professional staff. To finish my point, there is a very important conversation to be had around levers or consequences, but my question and reflection to myself is, what are the existing mechanisms that concern higher education institutions, or where do they galvanise resources and time and energy?



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It is usually around the Research Excellence Framework because that is attached to money; it is the NFS because that is attached to judgments and then student selection. It is about funding and grants more broadly and internationalisation, so broadening reach to other countries. If we are to move forward in a meaningful way I see it as necessary, but—some colleagues may see this as controversial—then we have to consider the levers that are going to actually encourage or perhaps force change, and we are not just dependent on goodwill, more reports or individual commitments.

Kim Johnson: Thank you, Nicola. David, did you want to come in on that point?

Professor David Richardson: Yes, if I may, first of all just for the panel's benefit, I am co-chairing the Race Equality Charter Governance Committee, with my co-chair, who has the lived experience of racism and racial harassment. We are now trying to review just how we can assess the degree to which the REC does help universities make progress. The REC is relatively young, and this is an important moment to take stock of that and see where we can improve its usefulness for institutes in tackling these problems.

In terms of levers, if university leaders and governing bodies look at their conditions of registration with the OFS, in broad terms those conditions of registration are that we need to provide an educational environment that provides equal opportunity for students of all backgrounds, socioeconomic or race, at our institutions. The lever is actually there, but there is clear evidence that that we are not meeting this condition, and I am really trying to get university leaders to take this on board. I know OFS is considering whether to strengthen that lever, as it reviews the situation going forward.

We know that historically we have some inequities that are ingrained in our institutions, because picking up some of the points that Arun made, it has been 15 years or longer that there has been a 20% degree-awarding gap at institutions, and in that time that awarding gap has not diminished. We need to take the time to really address those covert issues that are impacting on students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds leading to those degree-awarding gaps. Some of the experiences that my students at the UEA have do impact on their mental health and well-being; I know that because they have told me about it. That will then impact on their performance, whether they even complete the degree programme, which comes back to the real need to go through and identify what all those issues are, in a way that we have not done in the previous 15 years or so, and the Race Equality Charter can help us to do that.

But if we want to bring about culture change, I am not interested in charters that are just tick-boxes, I genuinely want universities to embrace them because we can help bring about that culture change.



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- Q16 **Kim Johnson:** Thanks for your response to that question, David, but the fact that there has been so little change over many years would suggest that there is deeply entrenched institutional racism that needs to be acknowledged and dealt with.

Professor David Richardson: Yes.

- Q17 **Kim Johnson:** But another question though, in terms of your report, I just wanted to know whether there were any elements of the report that the Government did not agree with and if so, what were they?

Professor David Richardson: First of all, I have been very clear in that report and to the vice chancellors that I have addressed, which is all of the UK's vice chancellors, that there is ingrained institutional racism.

I am not sure that that is accepted throughout Government, or that language is accepted throughout Government, and it is certainly not accepted by some organisations outside of Government. My belief is that it is true, and actually I am not trying to suppress debate from people who have a different view to that and have alternative explanations for degree-awarding gaps. My view is that we need to move on from that debate and actually progress with dismantling that institutional racism.

There are some who try to explain degree-awarding gaps between say, black and white students on the basis of socioeconomic backgrounds and other factors. But we know that we have actually closed the degree-awarding gap for people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. We can cut that data in different ways, which indicates to us that there are issues that we have to address. For those that perhaps have suggested that I am overstating this, I really do not think I have. My starting point is we have to accept that, not debate it, and then set about dismantling those barriers that our students are experiencing, and our staff in terms of that progression into universities.

Another issue is actually providing a means by which we enable people to progress into post undergraduate higher education, into postgraduate research and post docs, and get on the first steps of those ladders. We see a huge dropout of students from black backgrounds in particular at that stage as well, which could be reflecting the fact that they have had an unsatisfactory university experience. It could be partly due to the degree-awarding gap, which means they do not get a good Honours degree, so they are not actually qualified to progress into that next stage of their studies, for example for doctoral studies. This is another key area that we really need to address, to open up that pipeline in addition to then making sure that we actually support colleagues correctly to help them progress to the higher levels of leadership in universities.

- Q18 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you for that response, David. Larissa, picking up on those issues that David has raised, you shared some really damning data at the beginning of this session on racial harassment in higher education and on campuses. But from your point of view, what evidence have you



seen of any improvement since the EHRC report?

Larissa Kennedy: The troubling thing that I would share with this Committee is that there has been little to no change in the lived experience of black and brown students. While of course we welcome the institutional work going on to tackle racism, the day-to-day experiences of students really have not changed. The problem that we see with things like the Race Equality Charter and with other EDI initiatives that seek to address racism is that they are tinkering at the edges of this issue, rather than grasping at the root of it. When we talk about the work to eliminate racial harassment or manifestations of racism like the attainment gap and the degree-awarding gap and so on, what we are still not seeing is a recognition that this is inherently intertwined with the need to do real de-colonial work.

When we are talking about things like student campaigns that are calling for the eradication of financial ties that UK higher education institutions hold with fossil fuels, the arms trade and other harmful industries that are disproportionately harming people of colour in the Global South, the need to increase the level of recruitment of black, brown and racialised members of staff and the need for more black and brown mental health counsellors and so on, all of these things are bound up with one another because racism is sewn into the fabric of our educational institutions in the UK.

To deal with this at a surface level, to try and kind of manipulate statistics and say that because we have slightly closed the gap during the pandemic we are moving in the right direction is unfathomable to me, because of the gravity of the work needed in this space. We are very concerned at NUS that lots of the work happening in this space is at the surface level. When you see the differential between the conversations being had by vice chancellors, management of universities versus what student officers and the student organisers are saying on the ground, and the things that they are campaigning for, and the ways in which they are seeking to transform our institutions, the vast gap between those different perspectives is cause for concern for us because what it brings to light is that when we are talking about anti-racism in education, there is no common understanding of what we are saying. Some people are talking about adding in mentoring schemes for black students, and other people are talking about really transforming our institutions through an anti-racist lens.

Until we are able to connect A to B we are not going to be able to really reckon with the issues about racism. The fact is that the academy in the UK is the very product of historical enslavement, displacement, colonialism and imperialism, and I say that without hesitation. There is a vast gap in what we are talking about here, that is a gap that students, and particularly black sabbatical officers are hoping to close, to move forward these conversations in a way that is far more holistic and transformative.

Kim Johnson: Thanks Larissa, they are all my questions.

Chair: Bell, did you want to come in?

Q19 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Arun, you spoke about the charter and that the majority of universities are at a bronze level, there does not seem to be much aspiration to move beyond that, if they are going to stay that way. Others have spoken about the particular issue you have with perhaps sanctioning universities when they do not comply, Nicola touched on that. What I want to ask all of you is, are there any regulatory bodies other than the EHRC that could take action on universities to make them comply better with increasing students' and staff's overall experience of equality on campus? I am looking at the recommendations from the EHRC report, which are quite nice, but it seems things that organisations like the NUS have asked for over a course of years. The EHRC is the only regulatory body I know specifically for equalities, but are there any other university and educational regulatory bodies that could enforce action on institutions?

Professor David Richardson: If I may Chair, we are regulated by the Office for Students. As I mentioned earlier, every university has conditions of registration, and it is those conditions relating to providing environments that give all of our students equity of opportunity and prospects of equity of outcomes through which they can regulate us, by assessing whether universities are actually doing that.

In my role of trying to lead change at the universities, I have been on a number of platforms, both in person and virtually during Covid, with colleagues from the Office for Students. As I said earlier, I am aware that they are thinking of strengthening how they can regulate in areas of BAME degree-awarding gaps for example, or if students or staff have experienced harassment.

We also have our access and participation plans, which include addressing BAME degree-awarding gaps, and again that is currently being reviewed by the Office for Students from the Government, to the extent to which universities would be held to account for that.

Q20 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Just finally, and it may be a linked question, in your opinion in particular Larissa and Nicola, would you agree that universities and colleges are abiding by or are meeting the requirements of the equalities legislation, and if they are not, what more needs to be done to make sure that they do that?

Professor Nicola Rollock: Thank you, and this also speaks to David's point, is that the bodies that have just been mentioned do take students as their primary focus. I have been keen to underscore my point, which is that we need to look at the university as a kind of four-walled environment. The student experience is not independent of the experiences of faculty, or indeed the experiences of professional support



staff. There is insufficient attention paid to that, and how those two parties marry together for a collective institutional experience.

In terms of EHRC specifically, Arun referred to some research that I did on behalf of Advance HE where I reviewed successful and unsuccessful applications to the charter. What comes up both from that research and conversations with other HEIs, is that there is a lack of understanding of some of the tenets of the Equality Act, which obviously EHRC is responsible for overseeing, and in particular a failure to understand the difference between positive discrimination and positive action. Obviously, positive discrimination is unlawful, and a failure to understand what positive action looks like in practice. One of the things I would like to see from Advance HE and EHRC is some sector-specific examples around positive action, and how they can be made use of to support the sector more broadly.

My final point is that with the bodies that have been referred to, which include OFS and EHRC, there are questions for some about the extent to which those parties may themselves understand in detail the types of issues that we are discussing today.

Larissa Kennedy: To answer your question, I would not say that UK higher education institutions are meeting their legislative requirements around racism at present. In fact this links to the prior question that you asked, because those regulatory frameworks that have been mentioned are devoid of democratic student leadership. They are not led by students, do not have the mandate of students and in fact are often imposed on students. When we look at the fact that for me personally, at 23 years old I have spent around a quarter of my life fighting racism in further and higher education, and it is very common for my membership, to be students who have continued to fight racism throughout their time in education, and I can speak to the exhaustion of that in another setting. But when students are running campaigns or advocating for things like the anti-oppression training, not just EDI training, talking about the opportunities we have to deal with anti-black policing on our campuses and when students are talking about the fact that they want to see real action in the form of financial reparations, but also resourcing of anti-racist work that students are leading on the ground, when so many suggestions come through on practical ways to strategise around anti-racism in education, we often see that these are the things that are lost in the outputs of anti-racism and not picked up, because of that vacuum of democratic student voice in championing this work. Because as much as we can run campaigns, advocate, lobby and speak to our vice chancellors and management teams of our universities, it is incredibly hard to action that without the democratisation of this work and the democratisation by extension of our universities.

There is a failure to comply with the legislative requirements when it comes to anti-racism, rooted in the lack of capacity for students and their views and practical suggestions around how we grasp at the root of



racism in the higher education system, and the fact that that is almost erased in the structures of our institutions.

- Q21 **Caroline Dinénage:** What I want to explore is really if there are any reasons other than racism that could explain the differences in experience between racially marginalised groups in universities. For example, Nicola, you spoke very powerfully at the beginning about the experience of black female professors and the fact that one of them waited 10 years before applying for her professorship because she had to build that body of evidence. Is that the same for black male professors, what are the statistics around that? To what extent is being a woman, and being a black woman, like a double obstacle for professorship? To what extent is that then almost like a self-perpetuating problem, because women hear the horror stories of others that have gone before them, and then hold back 10 years before making those applications? Do you see what I mean, to what extent is it almost a vicious circle? Is there anything else that could be causing this disparity? I am directing this at Nicola first, and then just so that you can have a think about it Arun, I am coming to you afterwards.

Professor Nicola Rollock: Thank you. The data concerning black men is no more uplifting. It is better than for black women, but there are similar patterns. If it was worse than black women, I would have done my research on black men.

If you look at the 2018 report, there were 90 black male professors. There are different ways we could cut this, but in the interest of time, I will keep it as simple as possible, so 4.5% per cent of black male academics were professors at that time. That number has gone up in the latest report published in 2021, where we have 115 black male professors, and 4.1% of black male scholars are professors, so we can see there is not too much to jump up and down and dance about.

To your point about a vicious circle, it is an interesting question, and I would say that it is incumbent on black scholars, as we are talking about black scholars here, to be honest about their experiences in order to support future generations to be open-minded and strategised from early on. We should not be in a situation where that is required, we should not have to work disproportionately harder than our white counterparts in order to succeed. Indeed, the way they often describe this is that there is a job description that we all share, but if you are a person of colour there is then an additional job description, which does not equal a fair society, that there is an additional burden on those scholars not just to strategise about their own predicament, if you will, but then to have the responsibility, and some of us choose to have that responsibility, but sometimes it is placed upon us by the institutions, to then support up and coming generations. That seems like a disproportionate and unfair burden on those colleagues.

- Q22 **Caroline Dinénage:** Sorry to interrupt you, do you think that actually the institutions should be strategising on their behalf, that they should be



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thinking, "Look, there is this issue, we need to be going over and above anything we have done before to make sure that there are no barriers, and no perceived barriers either". In fact, that people are mentored and supported to make sure that they are able to achieve these professorships in a timely and successful way. It is not up to the black academic staff to have to pre-empt these obstacles for themselves, surely the academic institutions should be also looking out for them on their behalf.

Professor Nicola Rollock: Yes, I agree that the academic institutions should be looking out, but we find ourselves in a slightly unfortunate situation in that the so-called solutions that institutions come up with are the same, as with the arguments and the interpretation of the problem. This goes to Larissa's earlier point about the understanding of the issues. It is common for institutions to argue that this is a pipeline problem, and it is partly a pipeline, but also the issue is that we are not retaining those staff because their experiences are so awful. There is no point pouring more and more water into a bucket if the bucket is rusty and has holes in it, so the institution has to have responsibility.

But my second part response to that particular question is that institutions do often wheel out schemes such as leadership programmes or mentoring for black and minority ethnic staff, which are tired responses to a beleaguered and ongoing problem. This is not a matter of black and minority ethnic staff needing to have their confidence boosted through mentoring programmes, if you will. It is actually a matter of addressing the barriers at an institutional level, to be clear, both in terms of leadership of the institution, but also in terms of line managers understanding the likely barriers that their staff will face and putting things in place in advance to support them, which is absolutely crucial.

To the final point, if I can read my own handwriting, is there anything else explaining those disparities? I may well get lambasted for this, as my mother would say, but I had a close read of the Inclusive Britain Report, the Government's response to the Sewell Report. I was somewhat heartened by some of the recommendations around higher education, which do focus on providing support to students, although you also need something for staff. Looking at things like improving and supporting subject choice, understanding the difference between high and low tariff universities, understanding issues around employability and graduate outcomes, and ensuring that students have an understanding so they can make an informed choice.

However, to use the word that you used earlier, it is also the case that even if you have that knowledge, what we call cultural capital, you are still disadvantaged in the system. To put that a different way around, we are essentially talking about social mobility, class, and class advantages. Research I have carried out with colleagues from the black middle classes and education shows that they have the cultural resources, the capital, the networks and knowledge, but they still face barriers that are to do



with race. As a society, we like to take solace in the idea that once we have class advantage the problems of racism magically disappear from our shores, but unfortunately that is not the case, and we need to address racism head-on.

Dr Arun Verma: One of the core principles of the Race Equality Charter recognises that all individuals have multiple identities, and the notion that no inequality exists in a silo, but is somewhat interconnected, and that they shape staff and students' experiences, as we have seen from some of the evidence presented already.

One of the core parts of the Race Equality Charter in particular is that it does centre the voice of racially minoritised groups and racism as the central task of analysis for change and action to happen. Having said that, it does also recognise the ways in which racism intersects with other identities and enables institutions to explore that with their data. Most commonly we are seeing a lot of institutions and REC members, for example, looking at the intersection of gender ethnicity because those data seem to be quite well-established in some ways across what we are seeing in the applications.

One of the things it is really important to recognise is that we approached the Race Equality Charter looking at racism as our focus of attention but being cognisant of the fact that other identities can also shape those experiences and disadvantages within their staff and student experience. Some things that we see with the institutions is the recognition of how the developing actions and interventions in light of that evidence, and institutions come to that decision and those actions based on looking at that disaggregated data.

Q23 Caroline Dinenage: That is very helpful, thank you. Very quickly, because I know we are rapidly running out of time, can I ask you to start with the answer to this question, Arun, how do you respond to the argument that university should not take sides on the question of structural racism?

Dr Arun Verma: On how we respond in terms of the Race Equality Charter and Advance HE more broadly, our role in the sector is to provide a convening function so that institutions can have discussion and be able to have that safe and compassionate space to discuss this difficult issue.

The way in which we have approached racism and tackling racism in this sector, we use the lens of racism being a structural inequality, and that is the position we have taken across the sector in our public statements as well. Recognising that racism is complex, multifaceted, covert, overt, a lot of things that compound in different ways on an institutional system. It also compounds in the way in which the sector is responding to tackling racism as well.

One of the core things that we have seen within the Race Equality Charter and with Advance HE's positioning on this as well, is really



recognising that inequalities are interconnected, they are interdependent in some ways, and the Race Equality Charter is really cognisant of that. But it is also recognising in some ways that the charter does not prescribe this approach, we suggest it because we are using our own evidence and evidence from across the sector to inform that, which is how we approach that space. There is something to add in terms of how we convene that discussion.

It is also up to institutions to have spaces to have that safe discussion, and where possible to have that constructive disagreement and debate around this particular issue, because we do recognise there are differences of opinions, and also that some individuals and communities are bought into the idea of structural racism and inequality, and some are more resistant to it in some ways, so our role in the charter and Advance HE is to bring those debates together in this space.

Q24 Caroline Dinenage: Thank you. Larissa, the same question to you please.

Larissa Kennedy: For me and NUS it is unfathomable that there is still a debate over whether or not higher education institutions in the UK should be tackling institutional racism, and should be, as you say, taking sides. The idea that there are sides on racism and whether it is an issue is almost laughable to me. As a black woman navigating these institutions, I do not get to decide whether or not I get called a monkey on my campus, which has happened to me, or whether or not my peers are discriminated against in their experiences through education. When we are talking about racial harassment and racism in education, the level of privilege to see this as a debate is quite shocking to me.

It also strikes me that in reflection on NUS's campaigns and the work we do on decolonisation and so on, often the things that we campaign on at the time are considered niche or controversial at that point, and years later it then becomes commonplace. Talking about sexual harassment in education as an example of that, we have been doing that work for over a decade and before it was commonplace. The idea that today we would talk about whether or not a university should take sides on sexual harassment in higher education, of course sounds ludicrous. For me, this sounds equally ludicrous, and I would hope it does to the Committee as well.

This is the very product of a Government and a society which has held racism in different esteem, and has not been as serious in tackling racism in any of its forms or institutions, much less in higher education. The idea that the lived experiences of black, brown and racialised students should be up for debate is incredibly sad to me. Going back to the countless black, brown and racialised students who give their time, who almost become parts of the attainment gap in trying to fight it, who spend so much of their own personal resources and energy, and so on fighting racism on our campuses and in our communities across the UK, it is really offensive to continue to debate this and put this up for question, or



to act as though this is not real. Going back to the levels of statistical evidence that we have and the number of times that black, brown and racialised students and indeed staff have told their stories about racism, and we continue to talk about whether or not institutions should act. I cannot even find the words to describe how harmful the lens of whether or not, or should we not, feels in that regard.

How many more reports do we need? How many more students need to talk about their suffering? How many more people need to drop out, and we know the disproportionate rates of dropout for black students. How many more people need to experience the degree-awarding gap? How many more people need to be harmed by the use of racist slurs and so on, on our campuses? The list goes on, and so just to reiterate the point, I truly think it unfathomable that we debate the idea that universities should take action on this because, in fact, it is the very duty of UK higher education institutions to take action on racism and to send a message to our broader society that racism has no place, and that we must, of course, stamp it out, through both interpersonal action but also broader institutional and structural action too.

Q25 Caroline Dinénage: That was very articulate and brilliant, and I can take it as read that everything you have just said equally applies to antisemitism?

Larissa Kennedy: Of course, without question.

Caroline Dinénage: Thank you.

Q26 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Just a quick question, and hopefully with a very quick answer from all of you. Following on from Caroline's question, how much is that still a debate in your discussions around this subject? We will start with yourself, Arun.

Dr Arun Verma: The issue of structural racism?

Q27 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: The issue that universities should not take sides. I agree very much with what Larissa says, I was just wondering how much in your discussions in this work is there still very much a debate, that universities should not take sides, is it still a commonplace discussion?

Dr Arun Verma: I do not feel I have the evidence to properly respond to that in particular, but from what I know with the self-assessment teams as part of the charter that I engage with, the charter framework in the institutions, they are having difficult conversations about racial disparities and their data. I cannot say to what extent they talk about structural inequalities, but they do talk about the institutional data that they do have, which is centred around the pipeline and also the surveys that they administer, that we provide as well.

From our perspective, the evidence I can find in response to that question is that our self-assessment teams and the Race Equality Charter members are engaging with the data and the evidence around racial



disparities and outcomes in a very complex and quite difficult way as well, which is engaging wide groups across the entire institution. The makeup and composition of these self-assessment teams represent different faculties, leadership teams and also those of diversity of thought and background as well. But in terms of the actual debate and sides taken on structural inequality, that is probably not the detail I have for you.

Professor Nicola Rollock: Briefly, academics are wonderful at a good intellectual debate, good at theorising and can understand, at least in an intellectual way, that there is an issue. But that is very different from understanding what it means in practice. It is far too commonplace that universities understand it in an intellectual sense but not in an everyday sense, and what sits behind the data that they have.

Professor David Richardson: Maybe I can just recount a little bit about two years ago when I stood up in front of all the vice chancellors and called out institutional racism. I have a very clear view that it does exist, and you have heard all the evidence exactly why we should stop debating it and move on to tackling it quickly, in a very effective way.

But I did engage with my governing body and have been able to establish that they were content with me calling out institutional racism because I do not have a concern, but I think some institutions initially had a concern about what that might mean in reputational terms. I thought that one of the major criticisms I would get from the press would be rightly, "How on earth are you, as the leader of this institution, leading an institution that is institutionally racist?", and I have been the leader of this institution for eight years, so I have to take some responsibility and acknowledge it, and I want to change that.

But actually what I experienced was a lot of pushback from organisations challenging the words that I was using, and questioning whether there really was institutional racism which I am still getting, and as Larissa said, it astonishes me that I do. I could ignore that, I could put my head in the sand and say, "Well, that view will go away", but it is not, and so therefore I do have to create spaces to engage with people who have that view, to try and help them understand what institutional racism looks like, what covert racism looks like and what everyday racism looks like, and explain to them, "This is what we mean by this, and this is what our students and our staff are experiencing." I do not want to have to keep asking people who have had these experiences to keep reliving them, they should not have to and it triggers responses. But unfortunately, on occasions, I do have to try to help to explain to those people who do have influence outside of the university communities to understand what it is we are talking about, why we are talking about it and the way that we talk about it. Some of us have to make the time and create the spaces to do that, as difficult as it can sometimes be.

Q28 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Thank you. Larissa, obviously you gave quite a good



answer before, but is there anything you wanted to add to that?

Larissa Kennedy: Yes, the one thing that I would add is that across higher education there is, at least to some degree, the willingness to talk about racism in education. There may be differing opinions on what that looks like and in practice, but I do also feel that again, there is quite a gap between students who have a widescale and almost universal recognition of institutional racism, and the culture that we exist within, with the political climate that we are in, a Government that co-signs reports that say that institutional racism does not exist, a media climate that often sensationalises stories about racism and how this creates a culture of fear, and almost retreats from anti-racist work in higher education, and the kind of knock-on impact that that has.

We really would call on the Government to be more active in admitting that institutional racism is a problem both within higher education but also beyond it. When we look at things like climate breakdown, when we think about the maternal death rates and racism in health more broadly, racism in housing and so on, it is really important that we see all of these things as intertwined and that we are ready to admit them and then act upon them. Because ultimately it is this culture of fear, and inability to be honest about the ways that racism manifests that puts pressure on higher education to not act in as bold a way as we would wish to. It is possible to get to that space, but right now we are not going as far or as fast as I think students would like.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you. Chair.

Chair: Carolyn Harris.

Q29 **Carolyn Harris:** Arun, what is your assessment of how the Government actually treats racism in education generally, and specifically in higher education?

Dr Arun Verma: I would go back to the evidence in terms of what we can quite clearly see, and probably, from the earlier question as well, since the conception of the Race Equality Charter in 2015 little progress has been made to address or tackle racism in the higher education spaces. We see this with the low levels of representation of black, Asian and minority ethnic staff, when you are looking at the intersection of gender and ethnicity and in terms of the perpetuating and consistent awarding gap as well.

In terms of the Government's responses, that is reflected in that the data has not shifted in any way since at least the conception of the charter in 2015, which is nearly seven years now. To say that there is an opportunity to re-examine some of the institutional data, some of the interventions around this is something that needs to be considered and needs to be more thought out and prioritised in some ways. But we have to be led by our evidence, and what we are seeing is a lack of



progression or change in some of the key gaps and disparities across the sector.

Q30 **Carolyn Harris:** Nicola, have you got a comment to make on that?

Professor Nicola Rollock: My colleagues have spoken to this question, so I will try to be brief. I would like to see the Government show more sophistication in their understanding of racism and the way that it impacts and manifests differently for different racialised groups. This is absolutely crucial and speaks to Larissa's point that we can hardly expect universities to be bold and courageous on the matter, given the wider political climate.

My second point is that I would hope for a Government that does not just echo some of the sentiment and arguments that have been imported from the US around race and racism, but actually has a considered and in-depth understanding of what these issues actually mean, and why they might be useful in helping us understand race and racism. Indeed, as I have often said in other settings, we have means, theories, and debates to help us understand sexism, for example, and it is also necessary for us to have means, and theories to help us understand other forms of inequality, including race. But my principal point is that I would like to see a Government that shows leadership on this issue and can foster a mature and sophisticated engagement with some of the tenets of racism.

Carolyn Harris: Good answer, all my questions were put into one there, thank you very much. That is it, Chair, thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. Can I thank all of our witnesses for your contributions this afternoon, they have been very much appreciated. As ever, if there is anything that you feel we have not asked you or you wish to add in writing, please do not hesitate to do so. That brings the meeting to a close.