

Tackling racial harassment in higher education

Progress since 2020



Contents

Foreword by Professor Charles Egbu	2
Executive summary	4
What are students' experiences of racial harassment?	11
Culture	13
Whole-institution response	18
Prevention	23
Response	33
Evaluation	38
Annexe A: Universities UK Racial Harassment Advisory Group members	42



Foreword by Professor Charles Egbu



[WATCH ON YOUTUBE: PROFESSOR CHARLES EGBU'S FOREWORD](#)

We know that racial harassment is a serious problem in our universities, as in society, that needs addressing.

In 2020, UUK published guidance on tackling racial harassment in higher education, putting out a call to the sector for urgent action.

I am pleased to introduce the evaluation of UUK's tackling racial harassment guidance, which I have overseen as chair of the project's expert advisory group.

Two and a half years ago, after the original guidance's publication, we are setting out the findings of our engagement with universities, staff and students about the sector's progress in this area.

What we have found is that the recommendations of the original guidance were strong, and in following them, universities have made progress in many areas in their efforts to tackle racial harassment, including publishing strategies and working with staff and students with lived experience of racial harassment.

Polling commissioned by UUK also suggests that Black, Asian and minority ethnic students have increased confidence in university reporting processes, compared with 2019.

However, we know that universities are at different stages of this work and that progress has not been uniform. It is essential that all universities take action to tackle racial harassment – that we continue to step up and maintain focus on this issue, even as we are faced with competing priorities and pressures.

We also know that students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups are still experiencing racial harassment in their places of study. Polling commissioned by UUK found that a quarter of students from an ethnic minority background had experienced some form of racial harassment. For Black students, this figure increases to 45%. This is not acceptable, and we must work together to make change.

Racism is not a problem that people from minoritised ethnic groups should have to face alone. It is a problem the whole university community needs to be responsible for, with strong leadership from the vice-chancellor or principal.

In this publication, we have set out some further actions for universities to take, which build on the experiences and examples of others. I invite my colleagues from across the sector to use this as an opportunity for self-reflection – to re-affirm their commitment to tackling racial harassment, and to consider where they might move forward and make progress in their work to ensure that Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff and students feel safe and included on our campuses.

Professor Charles Egbu

Vice-Chancellor, Leeds Trinity University

Chair of Universities UK's Racial Harassment Advisory Group

Executive summary

In November 2020 we published Tackling racial harassment in higher education, a set of recommendations designed to decisively tackle racial harassment¹ as part of efforts to address racial inequality in UK higher education.

We committed to carrying out a review to evaluate the impact of this guidance and identify areas for further improvement. This report sets out the findings of the review.

Findings

We have found examples where universities have made significant progress towards our recommendations. We have also identified common barriers to tackling racial harassment, and found that there is more that can be done by university leaders, their teams and the wider higher education sector to make further progress in this area.

We note also that progress is likely to be variable across the sector and will not always be linear, and encourage those who may be finding tackling racial harassment more challenging to reflect on and learn from the findings of this report.

Recommendations

This report does not supersede our 2020 report, and our review suggests that the recommendations we set out in 2020, and expanded on in our follow-up guidance on tackling antisemitism and anti-Muslim hate, still stand.

With this report, we reaffirm our commitment to the recommendations, and urge university leaders to continue to drive this work and draw on others' experiences to further the progress they have made so far in tackling racial harassment.

¹ As defined by the Equality Act 2010, harassment is unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic (including race) that has the 'purpose or effect' of either violating dignity, or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment. For further information, please see the Annexes of our November 2020 report.

What's changed since 2020?

Many university leaders have demonstrated their commitment to tackling racial harassment, particularly since the 2019 report [Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged](#) by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the Covid-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter movement shining a light on the racial inequalities that exist in all sections of UK society, including in higher education.

We have identified instances of senior leaders taking ownership for tackling racial harassment and increased their understanding of race and racism. Some universities have devised and published strategies to tackle racial harassment, and open conversations about racism and racial harassment have been facilitated across the country.

Universities' work to tackle racial harassment has been informed by staff and students with lived experience of racial harassment, as well as collaboration with local partners. We have identified instances of improvements made to reporting and complaints processes, and training on racism and racial harassment has been designed and delivered at many universities. Our student polling also suggests an increased level of confidence in reporting processes.

How can universities make more progress in tackling racial harassment?

We know that universities are at different stages in meeting the recommendations set out in our 2020 report. It is vital that universities maintain their focus on tackling racial harassment and making our universities safe places to work and study for everyone.

The sector cannot reach its full potential unless it benefits from the talents of the whole population, and individuals from all ethnic backgrounds can benefit equally from the opportunities it provides.

To drive forward further progress, senior leaders at universities now need to:

- **Ensure work to tackle racial harassment is informed by internal and external expertise in this area**, including learning from emerging practice and guidance (including that outlined in this evaluation), academic experts at their university and collaborating with others.
- **Ensure that there is accountability for making progress in tackling racial harassment within the university** and that success is clearly defined and understood.

- **Work with staff and students with lived experience of racial harassment on meaningful participation and co-production**, ensuring the purpose of this work is clear and that the wellbeing of staff and students with lived experience is prioritised.
- **Communicate the university's evidence and resulting approach to racial harassment clearly to staff and students**, including on reporting channels and level of progress made in tackling racial harassment.
- **Review and continuously improve the training offered to staff and students**, ensuring it is reaching the whole student population and relevant staff members, and that it is meaningful, with space for reflection.

Suggested practical actions to achieve these goals are set out in the report alongside case studies.

Universities can use the publication of this report as an opportunity to carry out a light-touch review of progress in tackling racial harassment at their own institution and consider setting success measures for the next two to three years. When setting actions and success measures, universities should consider who is responsible for this work and ensure that lines of responsibility and accountability are clear.

We recognise that racial harassment is just one manifestation of structural racism in higher education. Efforts to address racial harassment must take place alongside a wider programme to tackle racism and racial inequalities of all forms, including consideration of intersectionality.

Working as a sector to implement recommendations

It's vital that the sector remains focused on tackling racial harassment and that Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff and students feel safe and included on our campuses.

To make this a reality, UUK commits to supporting [Advance HE's](#) work on race equality, so that the sector has the capacity, guidance and expertise necessary to deliver meaningful change in implementing these recommendations.

Advance HE's remit as a sector agency includes supporting institutions in advancing equality, diversity and inclusion, with a strategic focus on race equality that complements the recommendations in this report. This includes running the [Race Equality Charter \(REC\)](#) on behalf of the sector.

Over the coming months, Advance HE will update the REC, and will also publish guidance on freedom of speech and equality charters, to support institutions with meeting their obligations in this area.

About Advance HE

Advance HE's role includes running the [Race Equality Charter \(REC\)](#) on behalf of the sector.

The REC is a framework that providers may voluntarily adopt to support them as they work to tackle and reduce racial inequalities, harassment and discrimination in their institutions. Advance HE has strengthened support available through the REC, providing dedicated expertise, resources, events and networking opportunities to facilitate the sharing of effective practice.

Advance HE also offers a range of training and e-learning courses, leadership development programmes, statistical reports and consultancy focused on race equality, which universities can use in developing a whole organisation approach to race equality, including:

- building greater understanding of race equality in HE continuing to drive progress in reducing the awarding gap
- tackling harassment and discrimination
- building representation across the pipelines for leadership and governance

Our research

We engaged with the higher education sector on tackling racial harassment between October 2022 and March 2023, including through:

- an online survey of universities to examine what progress had been made since our first report was published in November 2020, with 25 responses from university senior leaders with responsibility for tackling racial harassment
- a focus group with university senior leaders with responsibility for tackling racial harassment
- a focus group with university staff members with lived experience of racial harassment
- a focus group with students with lived experience of racial harassment
- input from UUK's Student Policy Network of vice-chancellors

We also commissioned polling of 828 students on their experiences of racial harassment, repeating the polling carried out by EHRC in 2019.

Our work was supported by input from an advisory group chaired by Professor Charles Egbu, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds Trinity University. We are also grateful for the support of Professor David Richardson, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of East Anglia.

Recommendations

As a result of our engagement, we are reaffirming our commitment to the [recommendations for tackling racial harassment set out in our November 2020 report](#).

We recognise universities are at different stages of implementing each recommendation and we ask that universities consider these recommendations as they progress their work to tackle racial harassment.

Sampling

We have engaged with a diverse range of universities, staff members and students across the UK, and have made every effort to ensure our work is as representative as possible. We are very grateful to the stakeholders who took part in our research for their candid and open responses.

However, we recognise the biases that can arise from self-selected engagement in research of this kind, which does not include evidence from across the whole sector.

We note also that our survey received a relatively low number of responses (25) and that engagement with this work was on a voluntary basis and therefore represents a self-selecting sample of universities. Engagement through focus groups helped us to pinpoint the extent to which the views of staff members and students reflected the findings of the survey.

Our student polling had 828 respondents and has been weighted using data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to ensure findings are representative of the whole student population.

Report outline

Our report provides an overview of polling data on students' experiences of racial harassment, followed by five short chapters focused on each of the strategic pillars of UUK's Changing the culture [framework](#).

These are:

- 1. Culture:** about people and the way they behave and respond to others, to events and to their environment
- 2. Whole-institution response:** about embedding work across the whole university
- 3. Prevention:** about actions to prevent incidents of racial harassment
- 4. Response:** about how universities respond when incidents of racial harassment do occur
- 5. Evaluation and sharing good practice**

Each chapter considers progress that has been made by the sector since our November 2020 report and sets out some of the ongoing barriers to tackling racial harassment in higher education.

In each chapter, we have suggested practical recommendations to overcoming these barriers and linked to case studies from our members. Our findings have been informed by our university survey and engagement with staff and students, as well as polling of students on their experiences of racial harassment.

Definitions

We acknowledge the challenges in using homogenising language, such as 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)', and ethnicities have been disaggregated into smaller groups where possible. We recommend that universities disaggregate student ethnicity data where student populations allow for this.

We also acknowledge the limitations of using terms such as 'with lived experience' and are aware of varying opinions on the usefulness of these terms. A glossary of terms can be found in our [original guidance](#).

The wider context

The legal and sector context for tackling racial harassment is set out in our [original guidance](#). Since then, there have been several developments in the wider legal and sector landscape, including:

- publication of the [Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan](#), which requires all education institutions in Wales to tackle institutional racism with a whole-institution approach
- development of the [Anti-Racist Curriculum Project](#) by QAA Scotland and Advance HE
- publication of [Race Law Reform: Priorities for Change](#) by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland
- publication of the Office for Students (OfS)' [Statement of expectations](#) to prevent and address harassment and sexual misconduct, and publication of a [consultation](#) on plans for a new condition of registration on harassment and sexual misconduct for English universities and colleges
- publication of UUK's [Closing the gap: three years on](#), a review of the progress universities have made in closing the ethnicity degree awarding gap since 2019
- publication of UUK guidance on [tackling antisemitism](#) and [tackling Islamophobia](#)
- an ongoing update to the [Race Equality Charter](#)
- the passing of the [Higher Education \(Freedom of Speech\) Act](#), which strengthens universities' duties around promoting freedom of speech and academic freedom

What are students' experiences of racial harassment?

We commissioned IFF Research to poll students on their experiences of racial harassment at university.

[TAKE A LOOK AT THE FULL STUDENT SURVEY RESULTS](#)

Notes on the data

The polling took place during the 2021–22 academic year and was a repeat of polling commissioned by EHRC in 2019 as part of their [Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged](#) report.

There were 828 respondents in total. For analysis, data has been weighted using Higher Education Statistics Agency data on ethnicity, level of study and gender to ensure results are representative of the whole student body.

Summary

The polling found that almost a quarter (24%) of students from an ethnic minority background had experienced some form of racial harassment. This is the same proportion as in the 2019 version of this polling, commissioned by EHRC. For Black students, this figure rises to 45%, which is an increase from 29% in 2019.

Over one in 10 (12%) students said that they had personally experienced racial harassment since the start of the 2021–22 academic year, and just over half (55%) of these said they had experienced it multiple times.

Types of racial harassment

The most prevalent form of racial harassment was racist name calling, insults or 'jokes', experienced by more than half (55%) of polled students who had

experienced racial harassment. This was followed by derogatory comments or behaviour, experienced by 38% of students who had experienced racial harassment, and being ignored or excluded from conversation or group activities, experienced by 31% of students who had experienced racial harassment.

Reporting

Four in 10 students (42%) who experienced racial harassment in the 2021–22 academic year reported it to their university. This is an increase of 9% from the 2019 polling.

Barriers

The most common barrier to reporting cited by students was a lack of confidence that the incident would be addressed (37%). This was also the most common barrier cited in the 2019 EHRC report, although this was cited by almost half of those who experienced racial harassment in 2018–19 (46%).

Emotional effects of racial harassment

We also know that experiencing racial harassment can have significant negative impacts on individuals. Students surveyed were asked how they felt as a result of being racially harassed.

The emotions cited most by students who had experienced racial harassment in the 2021–22 academic year were upset (45%) and vulnerable (31%). 29% of students said they felt depressed and 29% said they felt angry. 4% had felt suicidal.

Culture

In our 2020 report, we provided two recommendations focused on culture:

Recommendation 1

‘Vice-chancellors, principals and senior leaders are recommended to afford priority status to tackling racial harassment, and to demonstrate this visibly through taking ownership, responsibility, accountability and oversight for tackling it. It is recommended that this is supported by engaging with those with lived experiences of racial harassment, by dedicating specific resources to its eradication, and engaging with governing bodies or university courts.’

Recommendation 2

‘Work with the entire university community, including students’ unions, trades unions and staff networks, to understand the impact of racial harassment on campus. Ensure that the voices of students and staff from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds with lived experience of racial harassment are given due prominence, and be clear that tackling these issues is everyone’s responsibility and should not fall to a minority of colleagues.’

Related findings

Providing effective leadership

Our survey results suggest that since November 2020, senior leaders have increased their understanding of racial harassment, and have taken more responsibility for tackling it. Our survey is a self-selecting sample as a voluntary exercise, so results may not be reflective of the whole sector.

Almost all (92%) respondents to our survey told us that their vice-chancellor or principal had made a public acknowledgement that racism and racial harassment negatively impact staff and students, and that racial harassment will not be tolerated.

Staff members who participated in our focus group also felt that their senior leaders were very committed, and that having a clear commitment from senior leaders was a useful starting point.

Almost nine in 10 (88%) respondents to our survey told us that there was a senior individual accountable for work to tackle racial harassment at their university, most commonly a deputy vice-chancellor or deputy principal.

For example, Cardiff University's deputy vice-chancellor has overall responsibility for this area of work, and oversees the university's new EDI hub team.

READ MORE: CARDIFF UNIVERSITY'S WHOLE INSTITUTION APPROACH TO ANTI-RACISM

High proportions of respondents told us that their senior leaders have been on training related to racial harassment in the past two years. **67% of respondents said their vice-chancellor or principal had been on training related to racial harassment,** and 86% said that other members of their executive or senior management team had been on training.

84% of respondents told us that their university board and/or executive had made a commitment to zero tolerance of racial harassment, including 40% implementing this since November 2020. All respondents told us that their university had designated space within formal governance and reporting structures to discuss racism and racial harassment.

All respondents told us that they had analysed the ethnic representation of their governing body or court, and 88% told us that their governing body or court receives regular reporting on commitments to tackling racial harassment. Almost all (92%) respondents told us that their university has dedicated staff time and/or financial resource to initiatives designed to address racism and racial harassment.

We asked respondents to our survey about the impact of senior leaders demonstrating ownership and responsibility for tackling racial harassment.

Although several respondents noted that it was too early to fully understand the impact of this, or that work to understand impact was still in progress, respondents reported a range of positive impacts including:

- raised awareness, profile and openness about racial harassment
- improvements in training offered to staff and students
- additional staffing and resources being allocated to this work
- increase in number of staff joining BAME staff networks or equivalent

- increase in number of staff sharing their ethnicity as part of HR data
- review of processes

Engaging with staff and students

Respondents to our survey reported very high levels of engagement with staff and students on the issue of racial harassment, including high levels of regular, sustained engagement (as opposed to one off or 'ad hoc' engagement). This includes very high levels of engagement with trade unions, staff networks, students' unions, and academic staff researching issues of race, racism and racial harassment. Students who participated in our focus groups highlighted that they had had paid opportunities to engage with this work.

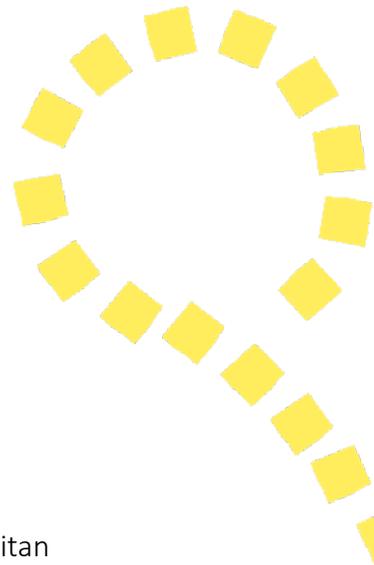
For example, in partnership with the students' union, Manchester Metropolitan University recruits a team of BAME ambassadors each year, who provide consultation and feedback on key areas of development for the university.

[READ MORE: MANCHESTER METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY'S BAME AMBASSADORS](#)

All respondents said that their university was engaging with their students' union about racial harassment, with 60% saying that this was regular and sustained. Almost all (96%) of respondents said they were also doing other student engagement outside of the students' union.

92% of respondents said they were engaging with trade unions, with just over half (52%) saying that this was regular, sustained engagement. 96% of respondents said they were engaging with staff networks, with 84% saying that this was regular, sustained engagement.

We asked respondents to our survey about how their university had communicated their commitment to tackling racial harassment to staff and students. The method most frequently mentioned was through publications such as strategies, commitments or statements. Respondents also referred to all staff emails and videos and holding events to raise awareness of racial harassment and university efforts to tackle it.



Our survey results suggest that some senior leaders have made progress in committing to tackling racial harassment, increasing their understanding of it, and engaging with staff and students with lived experience of racial harassment.

However, it is vital that this commitment is embedded throughout the whole university and results in tangible actions that are visible to staff and students, and that it remains an ongoing priority.

Barriers

Embedding commitment throughout the whole university

Our focus groups with senior staff with responsibility for tackling racial harassment, staff with lived experience of racial harassment, and students with lived experience of racial harassment, highlighted that although senior leaders had clearly demonstrated commitment to tackling racial harassment, this does not always translate to a university-wide commitment or action.

All groups highlighted difficulties in work being ‘cascaded’ down university structures which, combined with time or resource pressures, could lead to a lack of tangible change. There is a risk of work not ‘meeting in the middle’ between senior leader commitment and staff and student representatives.

Universities should ensure that they are taking a whole-institution approach to mitigate this, including senior leaders ensuring that they have visibility of and take responsibility for how racial harassment is being tackled at all levels of the institution. Staff at ‘middle management’ level should be supported to tackle racial harassment and understand what agency they have to undertake this work and how it fits within their individual remits.

Lack of tangible change

Our survey and focus groups showed that many universities are engaging with staff and students with lived experience of racial harassment, but focus group participants felt that this did not always lead to tangible actions or that the changes made were made obvious to them.

Staff and students who we spoke to felt that the right structures need to be in place to ensure change is made following senior leadership commitment, such as incorporating the voices of those with lived experience of racial harassment into decision making.

Representation and inclusion at senior levels

Although our survey results indicate that some universities have started to take steps to increase the ethnic diversity of their senior leadership (including governing bodies or courts), students and staff we engaged with felt that the lack of representation and inclusion at senior levels was a barrier to making progress in tackling racial harassment.

Pressures on resource and prioritisation

Respondents to our survey and participants in our focus groups both highlighted pressures due to the many priorities that senior leaders are juggling. Even within the equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) space, participants felt that universities' commitment to race equity work could become 'lost' among other priorities.

Practical actions

Practical actions to tackle these barriers include:

- **Acknowledge its existence at the university**, including understanding data on prevalence.
- **Apply for the Race Equality Charter**, which senior staff members highlighted as helpful for accountability and making change.
- **Ensure that language used around racial harassment and racism is clear and explicit**, and not sanitised as part of general EDI work.
- **Go beyond a public statement on a zero-tolerance approach to racial harassment** by actively communicating with staff and students about progress made in tackling racial harassment.
- **Reflect on activities to tackle racial harassment** to ensure they will generate change (as opposed to being performative).
- **Ensure that policies and procedures in areas such as recruitment are being followed and embedded** in all areas of the university.
- **Offer education and training on racism, structural racism and racial harassment to staff beyond senior leadership**, and make clear to staff that tackling racial harassment is part of everyone's responsibilities.
- **Refer to external guidance** such as the [Committee of University Chairs' guidance for chairs and governing bodies on tackling harassment and sexual misconduct](#) and the [#CombatMisconduct toolkit for vice-chancellors](#).

Whole-institution response

In our 2020 report, we provided two recommendations focused on whole-institution response:

Recommendation 3

‘Universities should develop a strategy for addressing racial harassment, ensuring this is embedded consistently throughout all areas of the institution and informed by decision-makers across the university. Clear success measures should be identified and progress regularly reviewed by senior leaders and the governing body.’

Recommendation 4

‘Regularly review policies and procedures to understand possible biases or increased potential for racial harassment. Increase racial and cultural competence and awareness of the impact of racial harassment and racial microaggressions throughout the university’s services, including in wellbeing, counselling, disability support and careers services.’

Related findings

Strategies and success measures

Our survey findings indicate that, although many universities who responded to our survey have developed strategies for tackling racial harassment, some universities are still in the process of developing these strategies. In particular, we found that many universities who responded to our survey have not yet identified success measures for this work.

68% of respondents told us that their university had developed an institution-wide strategy for addressing racial inequalities including racial harassment, including 40% who said that this had been done since November 2020.

However, over a quarter (28%) of respondents said that their university had not yet developed an institution-wide strategy but is planning to do so. 56% of respondents told us that their university’s strategy for tackling racial harassment

included success measures and/or targets. 28% said that their university had not yet identified success measures and/or targets but planned to do so.

We asked respondents to our survey about what the success measures and/or targets included in their university's strategy to tackle racial harassment are. These fell into three broad categories:

1. **operational**, referring to the delivery of certain activities, eg communications campaigns, training
2. **attitudinal change**, eg increased confidence, raised awareness, staff being clear about behavioural expectations
3. **statistical targets for staff and/or students**, eg increasing diversity of staff recruited, closing degree awarding gaps, improving continuation and progression to employment for BAME students, improving staff and student survey responses

Several respondents also referred to success measures being devised as part of work on the Race Equality Charter. Senior staff members that we spoke to also highlighted the Race Equality Charter as a useful starting point for strategies to tackle racial harassment and a helpful mechanism for making change.

However, students who participated in our focus groups felt that there was generally a low level of student awareness of strategies to tackle racial harassment, except among students who are involved in related work at the university.

Policies and procedures

Survey findings indicate that the universities who responded to our survey have made progress in some areas of reviewing policies and procedures more than others, and that there is more to do to embed a flexible but consistent approach.

Just over half (52%) of respondents to our survey told us that their university had reviewed institution-wide and departmental racial harassment policies to ensure they were consistent across the university, with a further 32% saying that this had not yet been done but was planned.

Over three quarters (76%) of respondents told us that their university had ensured that students and staff are aware of how to report incidents of harassment and receive support from the university. However, only 40% of respondents reported that their universities had developed clear policies for the treatment of staff and students visiting partner institutions, working or studying abroad under the university's harassment policies and code of conduct, and only 12% said their

university had reviewed the harassment policies of potential partners as part of the partner approval process.

All respondents of our survey reported the collection and sharing of protected characteristics data for at least some university procedures, the most common being recruitment (92%) followed by career progression (80%).

56% of respondents to our survey told us that their university had taken steps to ensure support services for students and staff are inclusive and informed by an understanding of issues that those from BAME backgrounds are more likely to experience, either themselves, eg through direct employment (44%), or working with an external partner (12%). 16% said they do not currently do this but are exploring the possibility.

Working with local partners

We asked respondents about which local partners their university works with on tackling racial harassment.

Respondents reported high levels of engagement with a range of partners, including:

- local community groups (92%)
- police and local authorities (92%)
- third sector organisations and campaign groups (88%)
- other local universities and colleges (88%)
- private accommodation providers (68%)
- night-time economy venues (64%)

For example, the University of Aberdeen has established an anti-racism roundtable group made up of local partners dedicated to advancing and embedding anti-racism in their organisations.

[READ MORE: UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN'S INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIP WORKING](#)

Barriers

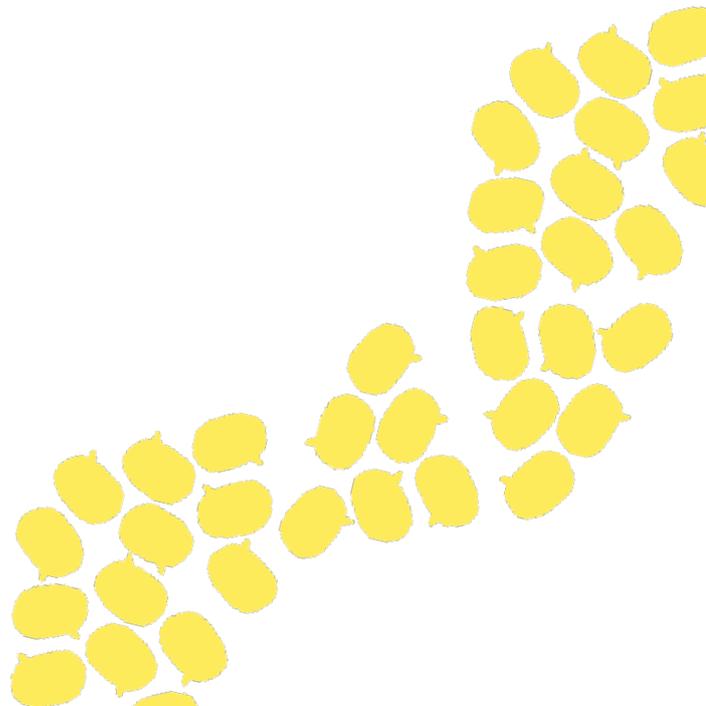
Difficulty identifying success measures

Throughout our engagement with staff and students, difficulty in measuring progress on tackling racial harassment was highlighted. Students who attended our focus groups felt that universities 'defaulted' to measuring the awarding gap, as this is seen as more easily quantifiable.

Universities should consider setting success measures regarding both staff and students. These may include measuring ethnicity data in harassment reports (including disaggregated data), staff and student belonging levels, and recruitment-related indicators. Communicating these success measures and progress against them can also raise awareness of work to tackle racial harassment and demonstrate that progress is being made.

Ensuring strategies are consistent but work in a range of contexts

Respondents to our survey raised university structures as a barrier to this work. This includes complex, large or devolved university structures, eg multiple campuses, devolved faculties as well as the size of universities, meaning that change takes time and ensuring consistency across the whole university is burdensome.



Practical actions

Practical actions to tackle these barriers include:

- **Ensure that strategies to tackle racial inequalities are overseen by a group or committee** and that lines of responsibility are clear, including considering development of a RACI matrix or similar.
- **Report annually** on progress made against success measures.
- **Review policies and procedures to ensure they are agile enough to deal with a wide range of scenarios**, eg staff and students away from the university setting working, researching or studying abroad.
- **Review policies and procedures to ensure they are appropriate for students with different characteristics**, eg commuter students, international students and students on overseas campuses.
- **Ensure work to tackle racial harassment is recognised in relevant strategies and also at the individual level**, eg performance reviews and workload allocations.
- **Develop a theory of change** for this work to help with identifying success measures.
- **Join up with local partners** to work collaboratively to tackle racial harassment.
- **Refer to Unite Students' report, Living Black at university.**

Prevention

In our 2020 report, we provided three recommendations focused on prevention:

Recommendation 5

‘Be confident in holding open conversations about racism and racial harassment across the institution. Define racial harassment, using clear examples of terminology, including microaggressions, and being clear that the impact on the victim is important in determining harassment. Ensure these definitions are widely communicated and understood.’

Recommendation 6

‘Increase staff and students’ understanding of racism, racial harassment and microaggressions and white privilege, through training that is developed from an anti-racist perspective. This should go beyond unconscious bias training. Set targets for completion and carefully evaluate all training activities to ensure they have the desired effect.’

Recommendation 7

‘Ensure that staff and students are aware of expected behaviours online and the sanctions for breaching these, highlighting that incidents will be treated with the same severity as those happening offline. In the light of the Covid-19 pandemic, review the efficacy of university support for online safety and welfare, and how effectively this meets the changing needs of students and staff.’

Related findings

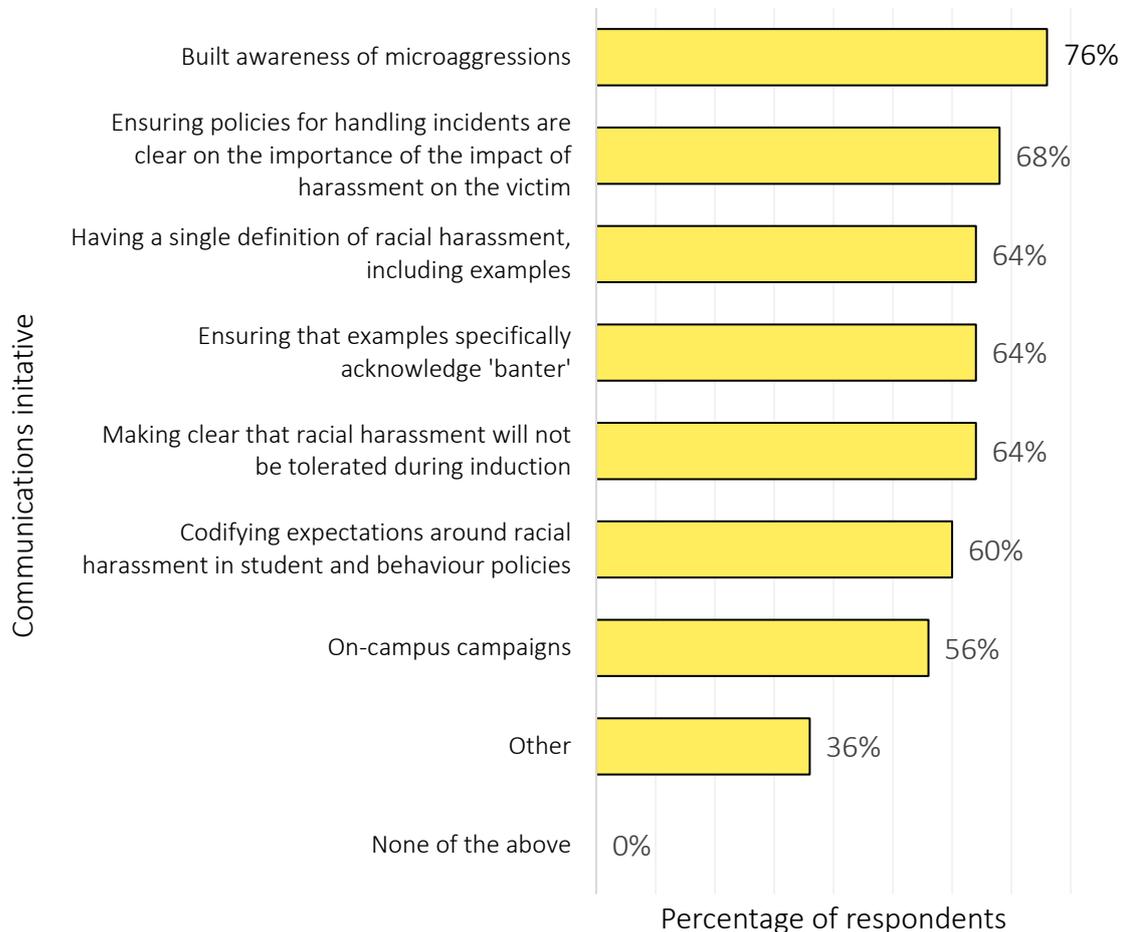
Open conversations and defining racial harassment

Three quarters (76%) of respondents to our survey said that their university had instigated or supported open discussions about racism and racial harassment for staff and students, including 28% implementing this since November 2020.

We also asked respondents about how their university had built a common understanding of racial harassment among students and staff, and as shown in Figure 1, universities have taken a range of actions in this area.

FIGURE 1

Which of the following has your university done regarding communications to create a common understanding of racial harassment among students and staff? (Select all that apply)



An example of a university facilitating open conversations is the University of Westminster, including their Westminster Conversations series which consists of one-off seminars, talks, film discussions and conferences to bring together students, staff, activists and members of the public to discuss challenges and opportunities of working intersectionally.

[READ MORE: THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER'S WESTMINSTER CONVERSATIONS SERIES AND BLACK HISTORY YEAR PROGRAMME](#)

We asked respondents about how they have incorporated lived experience of racial harassment into the development and improvement of prevention strategies. Respondents most frequently mentioned consultation and co-creation with staff and students, including through:

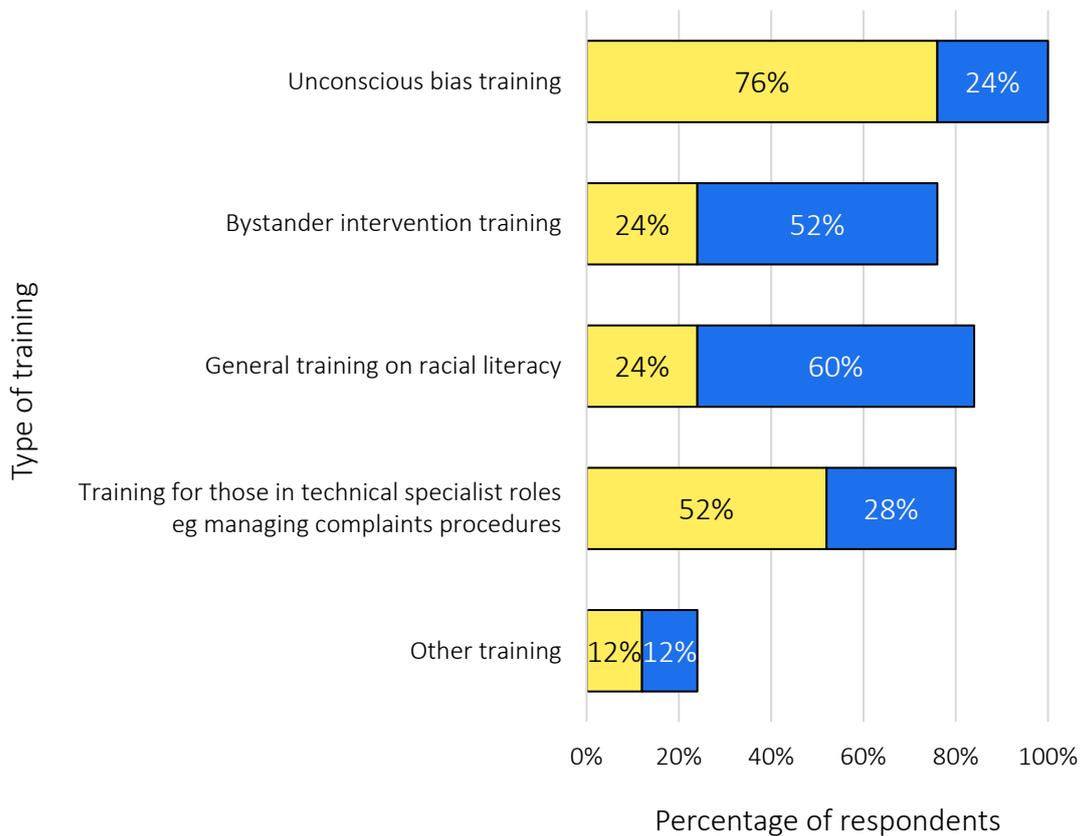
- offering training that is developed and led by those with lived experience of racial harassment
- reciprocal mentoring
- anti-racism campaigns that include staff and students with lived experience of racial harassment
- appointment of BAME student ambassadors
- changes to governance structures to ensure staff with lived experience of racial harassment are involved in decision making where appropriate

Increasing understanding

Our survey findings indicate that a range of training related to racial harassment is available at the universities who responded to our survey. Figure 2 shows that most respondents to our survey told us that a range of training types were available to students and/or staff. The most common of these is unconscious bias training, which all respondents told us was available for staff and/or students.

FIGURE 2

Which of the following types of training are available at your university for staff?

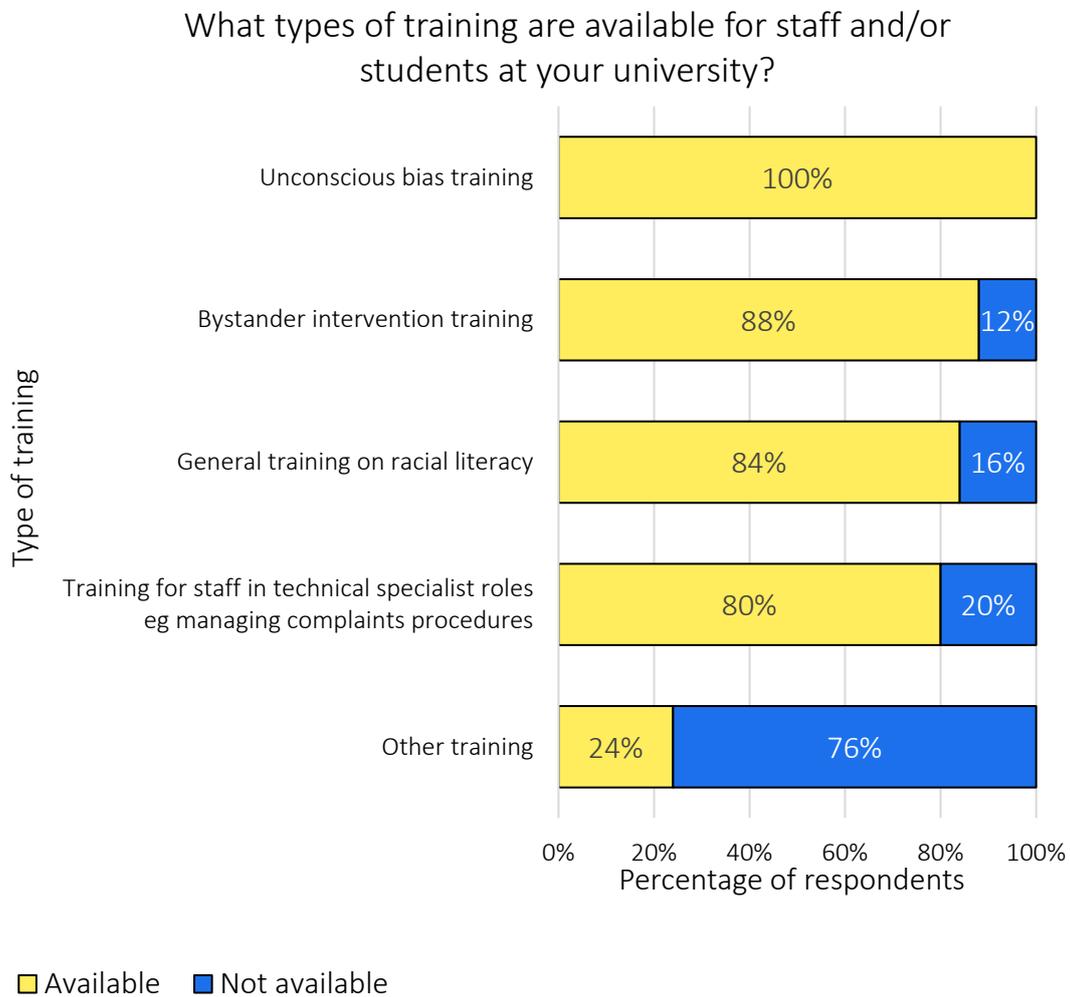


■ Yes, mandatory for at least some staff ■ Yes, optional for staff

(In order from left to right)

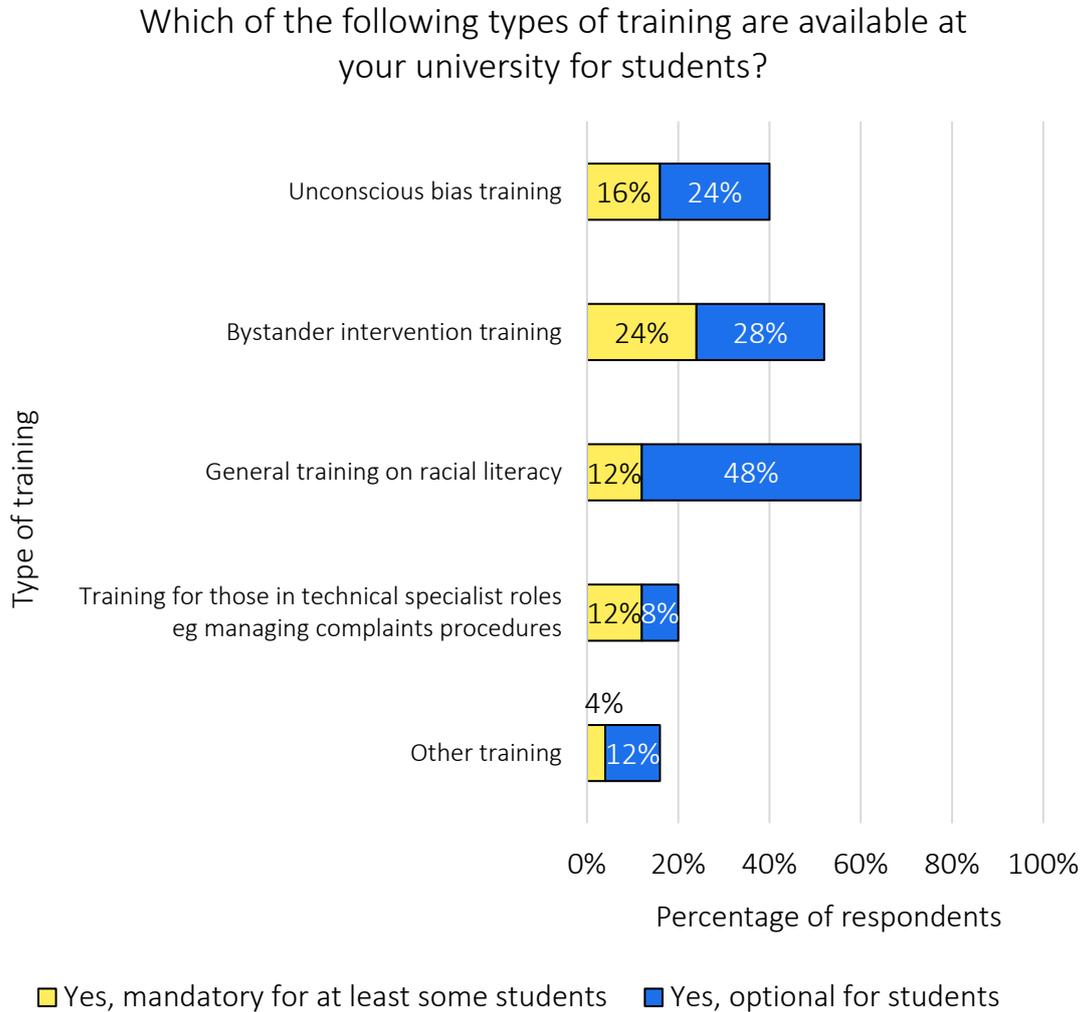
However, as shown in Figure 3, availability for training for staff is higher than for students, and in particular levels of mandatory training are lower for students than for staff.

FIGURE 3



(In order from left to right)

FIGURE 4



(In order from left to right)

Our findings also indicate that there is a range of training available for staff in a variety of roles, but that at many institutions training is planned but not yet offered.

Almost three quarters (72%) of respondents told us that their university has training available for their student wellbeing and counselling staff, with the remaining 28% saying that this is not currently available but is planned.

68% of respondents told us that their university has training available for their HR staff, with the remaining 32% saying that this is not currently available but is planned.

52% of respondents told us that training is available for their university's accommodation management staff, with 36% saying that this is not yet in place but is planned.

52% told us that training is available for their university's security staff and 44% said this is not yet in place but planned.

Many respondents told us that they use expertise to ensure that training activities are developed from an anti-racist standpoint. This includes internal expertise, such as academics working in related areas, staff networks and EDI experts, and external expertise and materials.

For example, the Open University has developed a free, sector-wide anti-racism course written by Black academics in partnership with Santander Universities: Union Black: Britain's Black Cultures and Steps to Anti-Racism.

[READ MORE: THE OPEN UNIVERSITY'S EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION PLAN](#)

Online harassment

Respondents to our survey referenced including online harassment in their universities' policies, either as standalone policies or incorporated into existing harassment policies. Respondents also told us about the ways they had raised awareness of online harassment, including setting behavioural expectations at induction, training and student-facing campaigns.

Barriers

Engaging staff and students beyond those who are already 'bought in'

Participants in both our survey and focus groups described difficulties reaching the wider cohort of staff and students beyond those who are already engaged or 'bought in' to efforts to tackle racial harassment. This can sometimes lead to facilitated conversations taking place with the same people and not reaching wider audiences at the university.

Building trust and confidence of students and staff with lived experience of racial harassment

Respondents to our survey commonly cited building trust and confidence of students and staff as a barrier to work to tackle racial harassment. Respondents recognised that building this trust took time and required demonstrating to staff what actions are being taken.

Lack of shared understanding and confidence discussing race and racism

Staff and students we spoke to felt that there was still a fear of discussing race and racism openly. They highlighted the importance of acknowledging that conversations may be uncomfortable.

They also highlighted the importance of ensuring that everyone at the university has a shared understanding of what racism and racial harassment are, and the university's behavioural expectations.

Burnout

Our survey findings indicate a high level of staff and student engagement in work to tackle racial harassment. Staff and students that we spoke to also reported this and were highly engaged in, and passionate about, work to tackle racial harassment.

However, they also reported high levels of exhaustion from repeatedly advocating for themselves and others with lived experience of racial harassment, and felt that being asked to regurgitate experiences can be traumatising, especially if they felt that engagement would not lead to progress being made.

Making training meaningful

Staff and students told us that they felt that there was a risk of training being a tick box exercise if not ongoing with space for discussion and follow up, particularly online. They stressed the importance of ensuring there are opportunities to return to what has been learnt in training and making training action-focused.

Practical actions

Practical actions to tackle these barriers include:

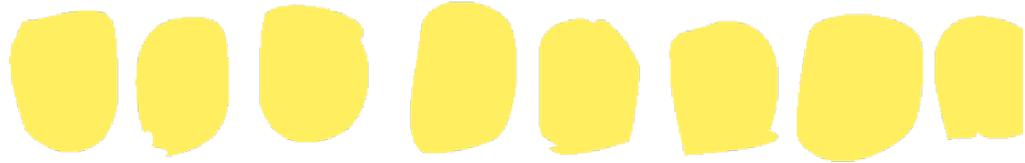
- **Use internal expertise to develop training**, eg academics working in related areas, EDI experts, and consultation with BAME staff and student networks.
- **Use external expertise where needed to fill gaps in internal capabilities**, eg specialist organisations, anti-racism speakers, sharing practice with other universities.
- **When engaging with staff and students with lived experience of racial harassment, ensure that:**
 - the purpose of the engagement is clear
 - the outcomes and changes made as a result of the engagement are communicated to participants
 - participants are appropriately compensated and recognised
- **Prioritise ethics of care for staff and students with lived experience of racial harassment who are working on tackling racial harassment**, including:
 - ensuring that they are adequately supported to make change, including by and with allies
 - ensuring that there is a limited, clear remit for the work and that they are not expected to be responsible for creating solutions
 - ensuring that they are not overloaded with requests from across the university that are assumed to be within their remit
 - providing support such as counselling, and ensuring the availability of support is clearly communicated
 - providing appropriate safeguarding for staff and students who participate in activities, understanding the risks of their involvement.
- **Build in time for discussion and questions to any training related to racial harassment**, including considering offering follow-up sessions for participants to reflect on what they have learnt.
- **Ensure that training is consistent with the university's freedom of speech and academic freedom policies and values.**
- **Consider making training and/or some activities related to racial harassment compulsory and/or embedded into curricula** to help build a shared baseline level of understanding.

- Take a look at our [case study from the University of Wolverhampton](#) for an example of how work to tackle racism can be built into curriculum design.
- **Avoid positioning activities on anti-racism as ‘optional extras’**, eg talks consistently held over lunch breaks, and ensure speakers are compensated appropriately.
- **Use the students’ union for opportunities for independent feedback** from students with lived experience of racial harassment.
- **Use all possible communication channels** to share messages with staff and students.

The Office for Students has recently consulted on introducing a new condition of registration for English universities, which would require mandatory student training on harassment and sexual misconduct. While their final decision is not yet known, English universities may find it particularly helpful to bear this in mind when considering preventative action.

Response

In our 2020 report, we provided four recommendations focused on response:



Recommendation 8

‘Where these do not already exist, universities should develop and introduce clearly defined channels for reporting incidents of racial harassment, including the option for anonymous reporting where possible. Details of the system should be communicated routinely to all staff and students to encourage usage. The provision of appropriate support to the reporting party should be a key consideration in designing reporting systems.’

Recommendation 9

‘Universities should systematically collect data on reports of incidents of racial harassment, including where issues were resolved informally, and take action to respond to emerging trends. This data should be reported to senior members of staff and governing bodies and discussed with partners, including trades unions and students’ unions. Universities should create a centralised mechanism for recording incidents to understand the true extent of the issue and prevent information being held only locally.’

Recommendation 10

‘Universities should review their procedures for handling racial harassment complaints to ensure that these follow sector frameworks and guidance from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) and the EHRC to deliver fair, transparent and equitable outcomes for all parties involved. This should be done in collaboration with staff and students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, trades unions and students’ unions. Gather, analyse and review satisfaction data to ensure procedures remain fit for purpose.’

Related findings

Reporting racial harassment

Our student polling suggests that student confidence in reporting racial harassment has increased.

Four in 10 students (42%) who experienced racial harassment in the 2021–22 academic year reported it to their university, an increase of 9% from the 2019 EHRC polling. Similarly, 43% of students who had witnessed racial harassment in 2021–22 said they had reported it, which is an increase of 16% from the 2018–19 survey.

The most common barrier to reporting cited by students was a lack of confidence that the incident would be addressed (37%). This was also the most common barrier cited in the 2019 EHRC report, although this has decreased since 2018–19, when it was cited by almost half of those who experienced racial harassment (46%).

When students were asked which single barrier was the biggest deterrent to reporting, **22% said that they did not feel able to judge whether the incident was serious enough to report**.

This proportion is very similar to the original EHRC report, which found that 23% of students said this was the most important reason. However, in the EHRC report, the biggest single barrier identified was lacking confidence that the incident would be addressed (24%). The percentage of students saying this was the biggest barrier has decreased to 13% in the 2021–22 survey.

Our survey findings suggest that high proportions of the universities who responded to our survey have reporting processes in place, but that fewer are using data gathered on racial harassment.

Reporting systems

Nearly all respondents to our survey of universities told us that their universities had online reporting tools (96%) and anonymous reporting (92%). Staff we spoke to were positive about the impact of introducing anonymous reporting in terms of increasing number of reports and the quality of information provided in them.

Most respondents also told us that their universities signposted to wellbeing services and third-party support (96%), and provided information on who will see the report, how it will be used and next steps (88%).

Just over half (56%) of respondents said that their university had a single reporting system, and 60% told us that their university had the option to report incidents that have been informally resolved.

Almost all (96%) universities told us they were working with students' unions to improve awareness of their reporting channels and reiterating messages at key touchpoints such as inductions (96%).

Students who participated in our focus groups also highlighted the importance of communicating about reporting channels at key touchpoints, such as during induction, and doing this through a variety of communication channels.

Gathering data

A third (68%) of respondents to our survey told us that their university has established a centralised approach to collecting, recording and storing data on incidents of racial harassment, including 36% having done this since November 2020. 8% said that they have not yet done this but are planning to do so. Of the 24% of respondents who said 'other', most respondents reported this work as in progress, for example reviews of processes, security systems and approaches to staff data.

The University of Leicester regularly monitors reporting of incidents of harassment to help it develop an understanding of racial harassment at the university, including highlighting outcomes and any specific concerns in areas of the university.

READ MORE: THE UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER'S TOGETHER AGAINST HARASSMENT INITIATIVE

We asked respondents whether their university's approach included collecting data on protected characteristics. **72% of respondents told us their university collects data on protected characteristics**, half (36% of overall respondents) of which have implemented this since November 2020.

Respondents were also asked about how their university gathers and uses data on racial harassment. **Just over half (56%) said their university conducted regular surveys of staff and students**. Lower proportions said that their university had established data sharing protocols (28%) or released summaries of actions taken in response to complaints of racial harassment (24%).

Respondents to our survey indicated high levels of engagement with external guidance for reviewing complaints procedures, including [Acas codes of practice](#), [EHRC](#)

sexual harassment and harassment at work guidance and UUK and Pinsent Masons guidance on how to handle alleged student misconduct.

Just over half (56%) of respondents told us that their university gathers, analyses and reviews satisfaction data to ensure their procedures remain fit for purpose.

Almost a third (32%) said they have not done this yet but plan to do so.

Barriers

Reporting mechanisms taking time to establish

Focus group participants and survey participants both highlighted the time needed to establish new reporting systems, especially for staff. Reporting systems have developed in complex ways over time and therefore reviewing and refining them is time-consuming and can be a slow process.

Student confidence in reporting systems

Although our student polling indicates an increase in student confidence in reporting systems, there is still a way to go. Students we spoke to felt that students are still distrustful of reporting processes. This may not just reflect the reporting process itself but the wider experience of being racialised at university and feeling they are not taken seriously. Staff we spoke to also identified that not being sure when they can let students know outcomes of investigations is a barrier to confidence in reporting systems.

Staff confidence in reporting systems

Staff members who participated in our focus groups felt that levels of staff confidence in reporting systems remain low and that negative experiences with reporting incidents of racial harassment can have a significant impact on staff members, including feelings of belonging to the university and level of comfort at work.

Clearly communicating reporting routes

Staff and students were clear about the importance and benefits of having multiple ways to report incidents. However, their opinions on how these were communicated were mixed, with some participants feeling that this was not always clearly

communicated. Making various reporting routes to staff and students clear and accessible was identified as a priority.

Practical actions

Practical actions to tackle these barriers include:

- **Lead reviews of reporting systems with the participation of staff and students from racially minoritised backgrounds**, including to inform how changes are communicated.
- **Refer to UUK's guidance on sharing personal data in harassment cases.**
- **Develop hypothetical case studies and user journeys to demystify and destigmatise reporting processes**, and help staff and students understand what would happen to a report.
- **Ensure that reporting systems centre the needs of students and staff members** who have experienced racial harassment.
- **Consider how best data collected as part of reporting processes can be used**, eg establishing data sharing protocols with local authorities or police, releasing summaries of actions taken in response to complaints of racial harassment.
- **Refer to external guidance**, such as:
 - [Acas Codes of practice](#)
 - [EHRC sexual harassment and harassment at work guidance](#)
 - [UUK-Pinsent Masons guidance on handling alleged student misconduct](#)
 - [Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education framework for handling student complaints](#)
 - [Scottish Public Services Ombudsman framework](#)
- **Ensure that appropriate support is available for students and staff going through complaints procedures**, eg BAME counsellors.

Evaluation

In our 2020 report, we provided two recommendations focused on evaluation:

Recommendation 11

‘Institutions should develop robust evaluation measures for their activities to prevent and respond to racial harassment. These should incorporate the experience of staff members and students who have used reporting systems and complaints procedures. Established measures should also be kept under review as changes to circumstances, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, may require new action or changes in approach.’

Recommendation 12

‘UUK will carry out a review to evaluate the impact of this guidance and identify areas for further improvement by summer 2022.’

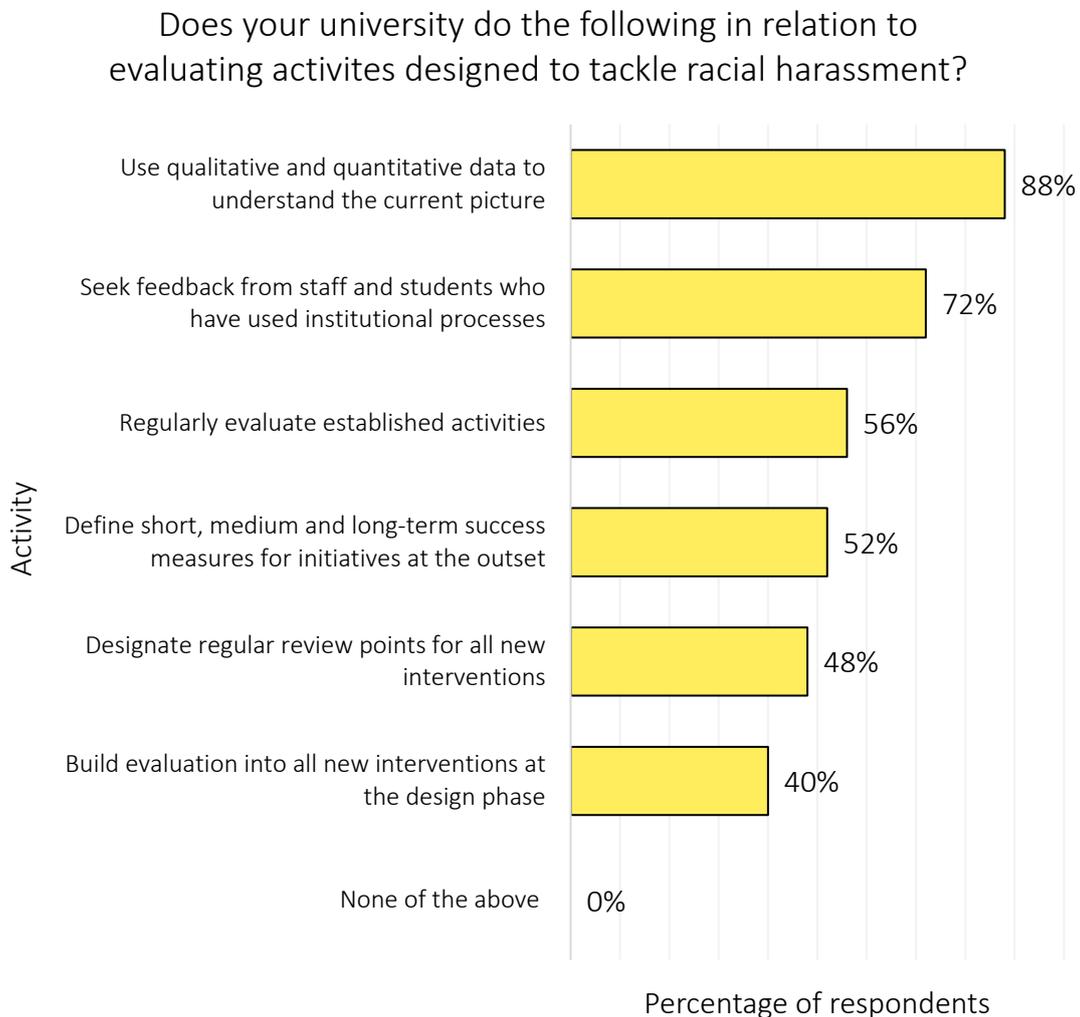
Related findings

Our survey findings suggest a mixed picture on how universities approach evaluation of their activities to tackle racial harassment.

As shown in Figure 5, most respondents reported using qualitative and quantitative data (88%) and student and staff feedback (72%), but fewer told us that their university built evaluation into new interventions and regularly evaluated activities. This suggests that evaluation may not be embedded as part of activity to tackle racial harassment.

These findings echo those of other research (such as the 2022 independent evaluation of the [Office for Students’ statement of expectations](#)), which found that many higher education providers in England struggle with evaluating initiatives related to tackling harassment.

FIGURE 5



The University of East London's Student-Ready University Staff Development Programme aims to support staff in implementing an anti-racist approach to teaching and learning. Evaluation is built into the project through a logic model approach.

READ MORE: THE UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON'S STAFF ANTI-RACISM TRAINING

Staff and students with lived experience of racial harassment that we spoke to as part of our focus groups felt strongly that not enough was being done on evaluation and that they had not had many or any opportunities to give feedback or be involved in evaluation.

Senior staff felt that more guidance and/or case studies in this area would be beneficial, and highlighted the importance of sharing good practice.

Barriers

Not embedding evaluation throughout the institution

Our findings suggest that more needs to be done to embed evaluation throughout universities. Some participants in our focus groups felt there was too much onus on central teams, eg EDI teams, and that responsibility for evaluation should be shared amongst those carrying out activities to tackle racial harassment.

Lack of follow up to feedback

Although staff and students we spoke to did not report extensive involvement in evaluation activities, some of those who had had opportunities to give feedback on universities' initiatives to tackle racial harassment felt that they had not received any follow up to this feedback. This led them to feeling disengaged as they were not able to understand what had happened as a result of their feedback and whether changes had been made.

Demonstrating impact of work to tackle racial harassment

Senior staff members with responsibility for tackling racial harassment highlighted in both our survey and conversations that demonstrating the impact of work to tackle racial harassment can be challenging.

For example, staff we spoke to raised the issue of measuring changes to levels of reporting and difficulty ascertaining what success would be in this area, as lower levels of reporting do not necessarily reflect lower levels of incidents.

Practical actions

Practical actions to tackle these barriers include:

- **Consider collaboration with local partners including other universities and colleges**, eg sharing resources and data.
- **Develop a theory of change** to help develop explicit links between activities to tackle racial harassment and outcomes.
- **Establish how activities will be evaluated during the design phase.**

- **Set key performance indicators (KPIs), key performance questions (KPQs) and/or targets** as part of EDI strategies to help faculties look at their own data and take ownership.
- **Upskill staff through training** to support them to evaluate activities.
- **Use available data**, such as recruitment data, reporting data and academic award data.
- **Communicate with staff and students involved in evaluation** about what changes are made as a result of feedback.
- **Refer to Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO)'s [blog on developing a theory of change](#).**

Annexe A: Universities UK Racial Harassment Advisory Group members

Professor Charles Egbu, Vice-Chancellor, Leeds Trinity University (Chair)

Nehal Bajwa, Vice-President Liberation and Equality, National Union of Students

Professor Nishan Canagarajah, Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester

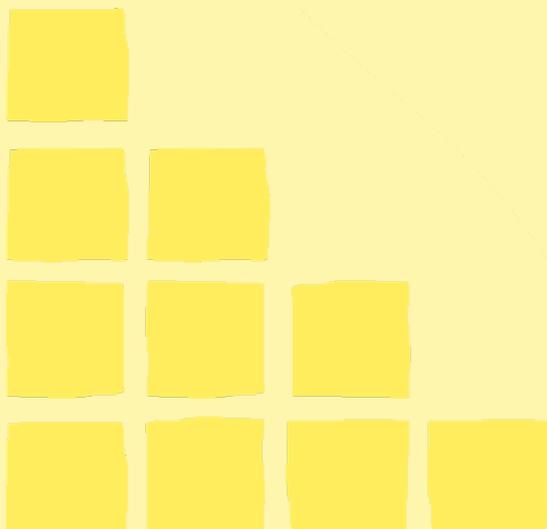
Tara Leach, Senior Adviser, Advance HE

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July 2023

ISBN: 978-1-84036-508-5