Tackling racial harassment in higher education
Executive summary

In the past few months alone, **the Covid-19 pandicmic and the Black Lives Matter movement have shone a stark light on the racial inequalities** that exist throughout all sections of UK society, including within higher education. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report, _Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged_, published a year ago, drew attention to racial harassment and its prevalence in our universities. 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. These developments reinforce the need to act now.

Drawing on existing evidence, including UUK's own research, this guidance provides a solutions-focused call for action to universities – working with the entire university community – to address racial harassment and make our universities safe places to work and study. To support this, recommendations are put forward to support universities in delivering long-term change in institutional culture and behaviours. The guidance forms part of UUK's ongoing programme of work to support the sector in addressing harassment in all forms, building on the strategic framework, _Changing the culture_.

By addressing this agenda, universities have a significant opportunity to lead the way in driving cultural change, not only for our own community but for the benefit of wider society, as we shape the minds and attitudes of the next generation. With a community of 2.3 million students and 429,000 staff, this can have a far-reaching, positive impact beyond universities to local communities and the workplace, and across society as a whole.

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 of culture and policy reform to tackle racism and racial inequalities of all forms.
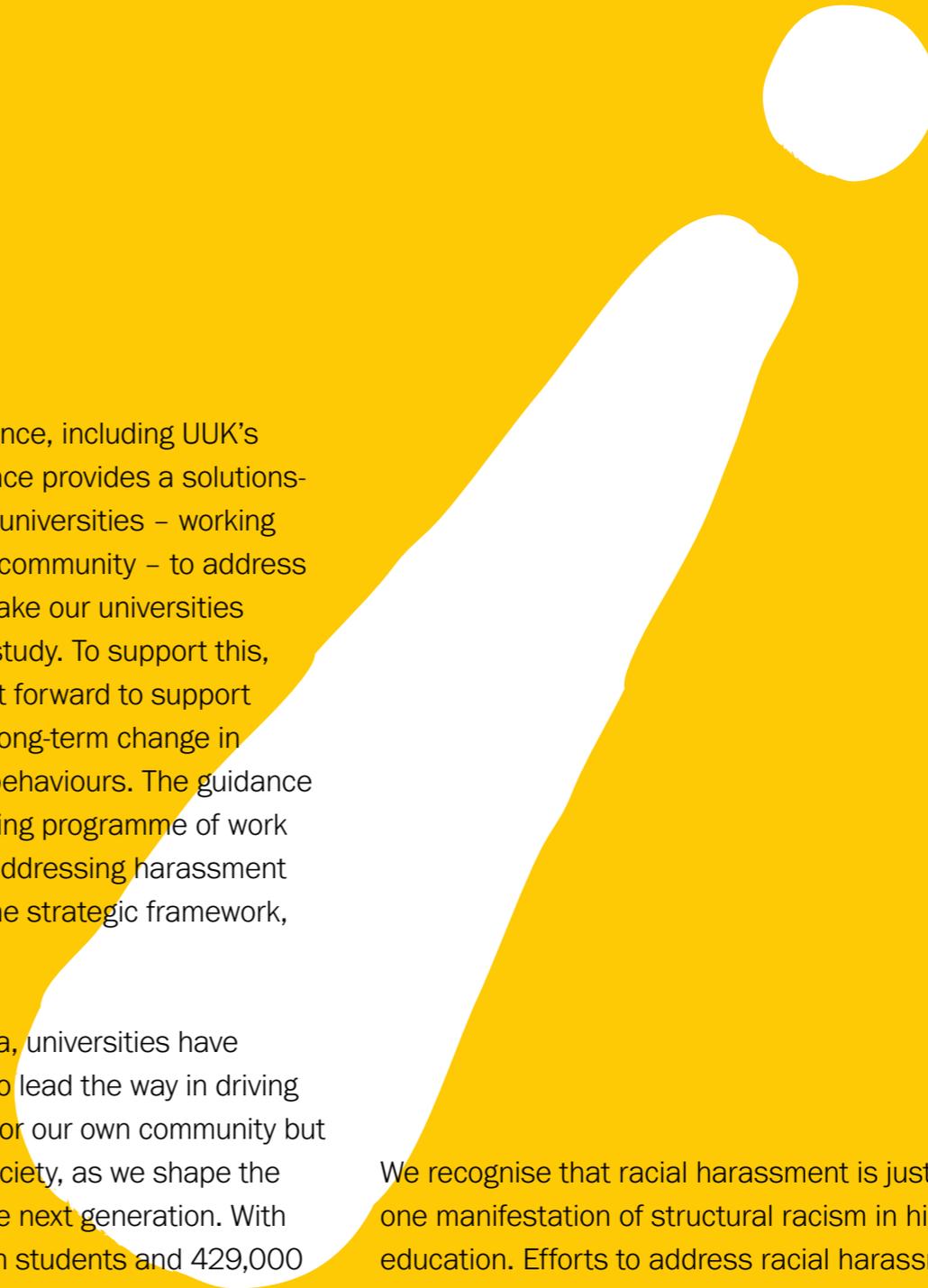
About the guidance

The guidance was developed by an advisory group, chaired by Professor David Richardson, Vice-Chancellor of the University of East Anglia. The advisory group was supported by staff and student panels, with members drawn exclusively from Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups to ensure due prominence was given to the voices of those with lived experience of racial harassment. External expert advisers were also consulted to add further scrutiny and challenge to the guidance and recommendations. UUK is profoundly grateful to all those involved for their time, expertise and invaluable contributions to this guidance.

The guidance applies to all members of the university, although we recognise that minority ethnic staff and students are not a homogenous group, and have a wide range of experiences, identities and needs. We therefore take an intersectional approach in exploring issues and developing solutions.

As well as enhancing an understanding of racial harassment and racial microaggressions, the guidance is informed by case studies and examples of emerging practice from across the sector. We hope these will provide a valuable resource for others to draw on.

Nature and scale of racial harassment

Regular, national data on the nature, scale and prevalence of racial harassment in higher education is not available and, as in wider society, many incidents of harassment go unreported. However, the EHRC inquiry provides a valuable base to support the sector's understanding of the nature of harassment experienced by staff and students. A summary of findings is available in Chapter 2 of the full guidance and the full EHRC report is available from the EHRC in *Tackling racial harassment: universities challenged*.

In summary, almost a quarter of students from minority ethnic backgrounds reported experiencing racial harassment. Over half of staff who had experienced racial harassment described incidents of being ignored or excluded because of their race, and nearly a third had experienced racist name-calling, insults and jokes. Both staff and students reported regular experience of microaggressions (ie, subtle, less 'overt' forms of racism). Racial harassment occurred in a wide variety of settings and from multiple harassers.

The impacts of racial harassment on both students and staff were severe, affecting mental health, educational outcomes and career progression. Negative mental health consequences such as depression and anxiety were widely reported, with 8% of students who had experienced racial harassment reporting that they had felt suicidal. Similar impacts were found among staff. Around one in 20 students also stated that they had left their course, and three in 20 members of staff had left their job, as a result of racial harassment.
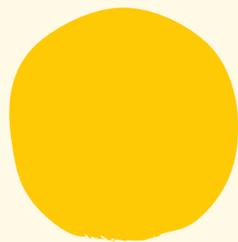
Steps to prevent and respond to racial harassment

This guidance identifies common issues and barriers to addressing racial harassment. These issues are presented alongside suggested solutions within the five strategic pillars of UUK's Changing the Culture framework. It is important that these areas are considered together: a multi-faceted approach will be necessary to bring about effective change.

"this is what happens: self-doubt. You start questioning your sanity; your competence"[1]

Theme 1

Culture

Culture is about people and **the way they behave and respond to others**, to events and to the environment, or, put simply, 'the way we do things around here.'[2] Having a culture that actively opposes harassment and bullying and supports good relations requires the creation of safe and open cultures where inclusion and diversity are encouraged, and dignity and respect are practised.

A university's culture is shaped by all of its members, and building cultures of cohesion and respect is everyone's responsibility. However, effective cultural change occurs when those in positions of leadership lead by example, including encouraging and enabling change across the institution. Having accountability vested in an individual who occupies a senior position is important due to their influence over decision-making, allocation of resources and embedding a culture where racial harassment is not tolerated.

The EHRC inquiry found that senior ownership of harassment varies between institutions and this could pose a risk to delivering sustainable, systemic change at both institutional and sector levels. This could have a negative effect on staff and student experiences, the ability to attract and retain minority ethnic talent, and an institution's reputation.

We recommend that senior leaders, including vice-chancellors and principals, demonstrate strong leadership and ownership of activity to address racial harassment. This can be achieved by addressing racial harassment as a strategic priority, embedding it within the institution's mission, providing appropriate oversight of initiatives to address racial harassment, and ensuring adequate resourcing for these initiatives to be effective. On a personal level, we also recommend senior leaders enhance their knowledge and understanding of race and racial literacy as well as the lived experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff and students in their community. Creating a safe space for conversations about racial inequality and committing to becoming allies in dismantling racism, at their institution and more widely, can also improve experiences of inclusion and help to deliver a change in university culture.
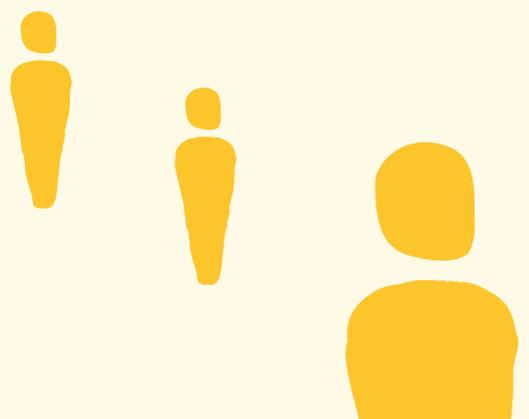
Recommendation 1

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.

It is not only senior managers who need to commit to cultural change. Governing bodies and university courts also have an important role in promoting a positive culture that supports equality, inclusivity and diversity across the institution, including in the governing body's own composition. This can be supported by governing bodies working with and challenging leaders to embed an inclusive culture across the institution, and requesting data on trends and outcomes of racial harassment incidents.

The EHRC's 2019 inquiry found that too often UK universities placed their reputation ahead of the safeguarding and welfare of students and staff suffering racial harassment. This can result in staff and students feeling silenced and losing trust in their institution, and makes it difficult for an institution to understand the scale of racial harassment and the detrimental impact it has. Acknowledging that racial harassment exists, articulating the benefits of addressing it and committing to change are needed if sustainable cultural change is to be achieved.

It is paramount that the voices of those with lived experience of racial harassment are at the forefront when developing strategies and interventions to address harassment. However, racial harassment is not only the problem of those who have experienced it, but a problem for the whole university community. The whole community must own the challenge together, led by the vice-chancellor or principal. This avoids the undue burden and emotional labour being placed on those with lived experience of harassment.
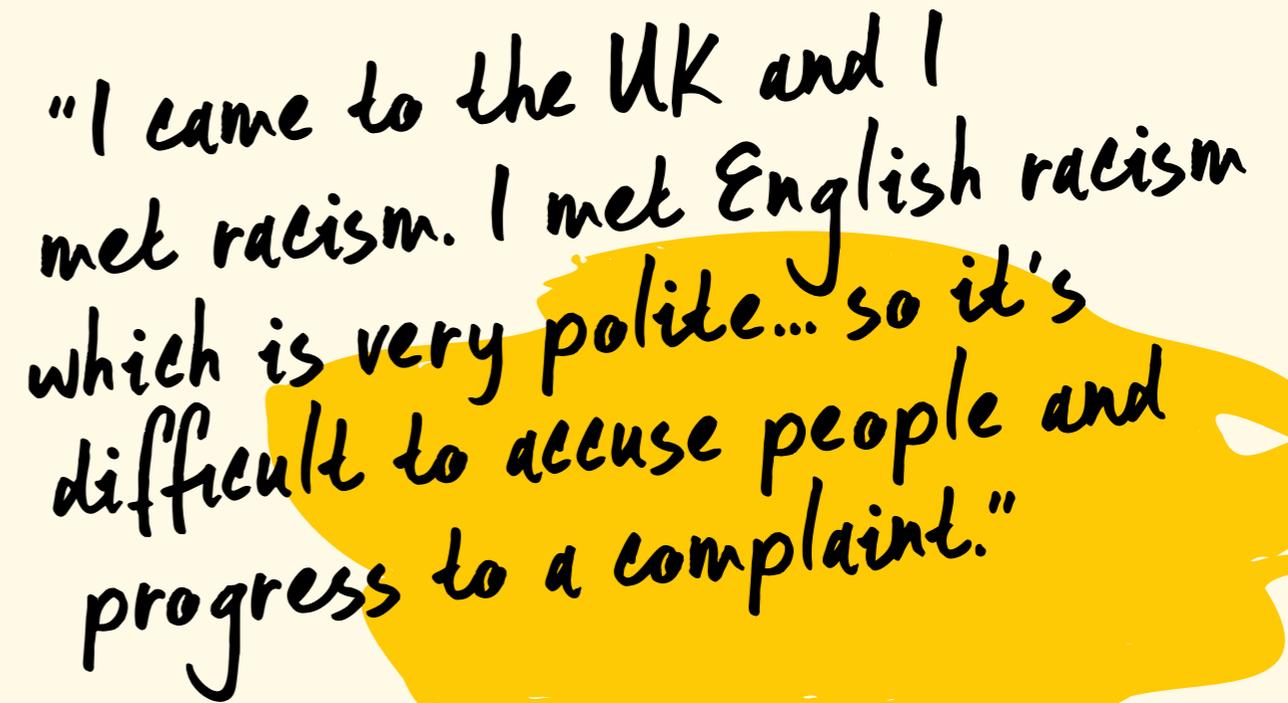
"I came to the UK and I met racism. I met English racism which is very polite... so it's difficult to accuse people and progress to a complaint."

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.

Theme 2
Whole-institution response

To address an issue as pervasive as racism and to effect cultural change, **it is crucial that a whole-university approach be adopted**. Having a strategy for addressing racial harassment and an effective governance structure is essential in setting the foundation for this work.

Embedding activities to address harassment within an institution's governance systems, structures and policies will support the sustainability of initiatives and maintain their place on the institutional agenda. Taking this approach is also likely to improve the consistency of response across an institution and help withstand changes in personnel.

We recommend that a whole-institution approach includes:

- reviewing policies and procedures to guard against the potential for bias in policies or the way they are implemented: this is particularly important in areas such as recruitment, performance management and assessment of students' work

- ensuring policies to address racial harassment are fully integrated in, and aligned to, the institution's broader policy framework to avoid duplication and confusion

- ensuring that any response is flexible to deal with a wide range of scenarios, such as staff and students who are away from the university setting, including those working, researching or studying abroad

- ensuring that university services for staff and students, such as those for wellbeing, counselling and careers, are aware of the impact that harassment can have on mental health and wellbeing and that delivery of services is sensitive to the needs of different groups

- improving representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff across the institution, including at senior levels

- reviewing how to create an inclusive, welcoming community and culture by ensuring more diverse curricula

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.

"There are times where you visibly weigh up the consequences of challenging and confronting such ignorant comments. This internal conflict undermines and erodes confidence, as you begin to observe this erosion reflecting back as you observe yourself in the mirror." [3]

The EHRC inquiry and UUK's own research **highlight a lack of understanding of what constitutes racial harassment, and low levels of confidence when discussing issues of race**. In view of this, the guidance places an emphasis on education and improving racial literacy.

This can be supported by:

- creating open spaces for conversations about race to take place

- providing examples of racial harassment and clarifying what is and is not acceptable behaviour, and by embedding behavioural expectations and the sanctions for breaching these in policies and codes of conduct

- engaging with staff and students to define terminology, including examples of microaggressions, and working with students' unions and trades unions to raise awareness of harassment and microaggressions through campaigns

- addressing the issue of 'banter' by acknowledging that if an incident is perceived as racist by the victim, then it should be treated as such, irrespective of the intention of the harasser

- developing training opportunities from an anti-racist standpoint and encapsulating concepts of white privilege, fragility and allyship, and intersectionality, as well as implementing bystander training to support staff members and students to call out racism

- engaging with those with lived experience of racial harassment to ensure that interventions reflect their needs and experiences

- evaluating prevention activities to ensure that interventions are fit for purpose and support a cycle of continuous improvement

Theme 3

Prevention

"...on the surface they appear to be tiny, almost insignificant episodes but they wear you down"[4]

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.

The right to live, work and study safely and without fear of harassment extends to online activities. Universities should already have, or be in the process of developing, policies and practices to support staff and students who have experienced online harassment. However, the rapid move of university services online in response to Covid-19 has heightened the importance of promoting online welfare and safety for all students and staff. This can be supported by setting clear behavioural expectations, backed up by disciplinary policies designed to address behaviour that fails to meet these expectations.

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 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.

Theme 4

Response

Sadly, we know that incidents of racial harassment will occur, and so **staff and students must have confidence that their university will respond fairly, timely and effectively**.

The EHRC revealed evidence of significant under-reporting of racial harassment at universities by both students and staff. In many cases, this was due to a lack of trust in the institution's willingness or ability to respond, as well as concerns that reporting may lead to negative consequences for the reporting party.

Creating a culture that garners trust and confidence that acts of harassment will be dealt with effectively will help with this, combined with clear and accessible reporting mechanisms, including online reporting mechanisms. Exploring the facility to report incidents anonymously should increase the levels of reporting.

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.

Data drives an integrated, organisation-wide approach to understanding the nature and scale of harassment in the university and to inform continuous improvement, so smart data collection and analysis are crucial. Having a centralised approach to collecting and recording data and cross-referencing with other sources of data will help to support this.

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.

Reporting an incident of racial harassment may trigger a complaint and/or disciplinary procedure. The EHRC inquiry detailed a series of concerns relating to handling complaints and investigations. Universities are encouraged to review their complaint, investigation and disciplinary procedures to ensure these are clear and transparent and consistently follow sector frameworks and guidance from the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS) and the EHRC. Working in collaboration with the university community will ensure complaints procedures are fit for purpose and meet the needs of staff and students.

"Plagiarism is taken very seriously, but if someone discriminates against everything you value and they are given a slap on the wrist, it doesn't give you a positive feeling towards the university."

Recommendation 10

Universities should review their procedures for handling racial harassment complaints to ensure that these follow sector frameworks and guidance from 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.

Theme 5

Evaluation and sharing good practice

It is vital that universities ensure steps taken in this area drive improvement and positive change. Ongoing evaluation of measures to prevent and respond to racial harassment, informed by success measures agreed at the outset, will support this and inform a cycle of learning and improvement at both an institutional and sector level.

To drive a cycle of continuous improvement, **evaluation should be an integral and ongoing part of activities to address racial harassment**. Such evaluations should incorporate the views of students and staff who have used processes such as reporting systems alongside quantitative data.

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.

Sharing of good practice is also crucial to support institutions to develop their approaches to tackling racial harassment. UUK has a role to play here and will continue to broker the exchange of knowledge and learning, including dedicating a proportion of its annual harassment conference to addressing racial harassment.

The evaluation of sector-level performance is important to ensure that cultural change is occurring and sector-level guidance remains responsive to emerging issues. UUK will carry out a review to evaluate the impact of the guidance by summer 2022.

"Before I experienced any racism..., I was perfectly fine, I was confident. But because of all the microaggressions and stereotypes I face since wearing a hijab it's caused me to develop anxiety"[5]

Recommendation 12

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

Endnotes

1 Rollock N (2011) 'Unspoken rules of engagement: navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain' International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

2 Furnham A, Gunter B (1993) *Corporate Assessment*

3 Arday J (2018) 'Being Black, Male and Academic: Navigating the White Academy' Dismantling race in higher education

4 Rollock N (2011) 'Unspoken rules of engagement: navigating racial microaggressions in the academic terrain' International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

5 Zaihera Chaudrey, from An everyday dimension of racism: why we need to understand microaggressions, Keele University, available at: https://www.keele.ac.uk/socialinclusion/newsandevents/news/2020/june/microaggressions/race-equality-charter.php

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