AdvanceHE

Race Equality Charter Review

Executive Summary

The full report can be accessed at:
www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/race-equality-charter-review

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1   Introduction

Background to the review

Persistent racial inequalities relating to students and staff in higher education (HE) highlight the need for the Race Equality Charter (REC) and its continued improvement, These include the gap between the proportions of white and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students attaining good degrees (1st or 2:1) and the underrepresentation of BAME staff at senior levels of institutions[1], in addition to the negative experiences of BAME students and staff in HE, which are documented by a long line of research[2].

The REC was established in 2015 by the Equality Challenge Unit (which later became part of Advance HE) with the aim to improve the representation, progression and success of BAME staff and students within HE. The REC provides a framework and evidence-based methodology for systematically identifying racial inequalities and actions to address them.

Advance HE made a commitment to review and evaluate the impact of REC four years on from its launch, in two phases. This report presents key findings from phase two of the review, which evaluated the REC process and its impact on race equality within member institutions. In particular, it aimed to:

+ explore the experiences of REC members at different stages of their REC journey

+ establish a baseline for future reviews of the impact and value of REC on enhancing race equality in member institutions

+ identify any areas where REC processes or practice should be improved.

Methodology

The approach taken centred on a combination of two distinct types of evaluation:

1   An **impact evaluation**: focusing on the overall effect of REC in meeting its aim to improve the representation, progression and success of BAME staff and students in HE. The impact evaluation compared change on a range of indicators within institutions that received a bronze REC award in 2015 or 2016, supplemented with qualitative research with BAME staff in two of these institutions.

2   A **process evaluation**: focusing on the extent to which REC is being delivered as intended, how it operates and achieves its impact. The process evaluation included a survey of all REC members and those preparing to join, in addition to interviews to gather perspectives from REC senior leaders; Patrons; panellists; Higher Education Race Action Group members involved in REC; and Advance HE staff leading and managing REC.

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1   Advance HE. (2020). Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2020.

2   For example, Rollock, N. (2019). Staying Power: The career experiences and strategies of UK Black female professors. University and College Union.

2 Key Findings: Process Evaluation

Becoming a REC member

+ the drivers for REC membership rated as most important were concern about the lack of progression of BAME academic and/or research staff, the BAME degree awarding gap and the lack of BAME representation at senior levels in the institution

+ primary barriers to becoming a REC member relate to resourcing REC participation, insufficient willingness or confidence to talk openly about race and how racism manifests within the institution, a lack of financial incentives or mandate to undertake REC, and the perceived high workload of REC

+ institutions commonly undertake significant pre-membership work to overcome any challenges they face and prepare for REC. Participants thought that having greater access to Advance HE support *prior* to REC membership would be highly beneficial.

Resourcing REC

+ there is wide variation in approaches to resourcing REC across institutions

+ almost an equal proportion of institutions had dedicated staff resource in place for REC as did not have dedicated staff (though with formal allocation of REC work). The majority with dedicated resource had more than the recommended 0.5 FTE

+ it is common for institutions to make use of external resource and expertise.

Self-assessment process and preparing submissions

Overall, while recognising the considerable workload involved, there was consensus among interview participants that the self-assessment process provides a structured approach and a robust evidence base to guide an institution's race equality work.

Self-assessment teams (SATs)

+ the biggest challenge regarding SATs was achieving the wide representation required while maintaining an effective group. Several participants also highlighted the challenge of including BAME people while not over-burdening them with REC work

+ effective chairing, pragmatic or flexible approaches to SAT composition and working group structures were reported as having positive results.

Data requirements

+ survey respondents felt the REC data requirements have a range of benefits, especially enabling differentiation of the issues affecting different ethnic groups. There is a need for a greater focus on intersectionality within the requirements

+ the data requirements were found to be somewhat or moderately difficult by the vast majority of respondents. Suggestions for what would help included an online application system, data templates/tools and more guidance

+ both the REC survey and undertaking focus groups were found to be useful by the majority of respondents. However, there were criticisms of the survey design.

Action plans

+ the most challenging aspects of action planning were identifying how an action plan's progress and impact will be measured and identifying appropriate actions that will help to address racial inequalities identified through the self-assessment

+ gaining buy-in to actions from those in positions of power was also a challenge, a lack of which sometimes resulted in a watering-down of actions.

Timeline and workload

+ the time it took to undertake the self-assessment and prepare a REC submission spanned from less than one year to more than three years. Most took one to two years

+ there were a range of opinions about the workload, including that it is extensive but is needed in order to undertake a robust self-assessment and/or to develop understanding of racism, or that it reduced time for taking action on race equality.

Preparing the REC application

+ more than half of respondents who had previously submitted a REC application found it either moderately or extremely difficult and more than a third found it slightly or somewhat difficult to complete

+ the most frequently challenging sections of the application were – professional and support staff, the action plan and academic staff. Other challenges were the word count and contextual factors, such as the impact of Covid-19.

Award and peer review processes

Award timelines and submission processes

+ the majority of respondents believe three years is sufficient time after joining REC for an institution to make its first submission. However, comments indicated that this is a challenging timescale for many

+ the majority felt that the current three-year award validity period is not sufficient time for an institution to implement the action plan from its successful submission and prepare its next submission. Most suggested it should be five years. However, a common view was the need for interim reporting to Advance HE if the validity period is extended

+ roughly a third felt an online application system would be highly beneficial, especially in regard to reducing workload and standardising data presentation.

Panel review process

+ panellist participants were unanimous in believing that an independent peer review process involving discussion by a mixed group of panellists is important to a robust and credible assessment of submissions

+ some challenges in ensuring robust decision-making were expressed by panellists, such as ensuring everyone's views are heard and the varying knowledge and experience of panellists, and by survey respondents, including the objectivity of the process, whether panellists have sufficient knowledge, the consistency of decision-making and low success rates

+ panellists found that it was a big commitment in terms of time, though worthwhile. It was often a learning and development opportunity

+ the majority of respondents who had previously submitted a REC application were positive about the feedback they had received following their submission.

Achieving REC awards

Success factors

+ the four factors that survey respondents believed were extremely important for success in gaining an award were achieving engagement from senior managers, a focus on achieving long-term institutional cultural change, the acknowledgement of race inequalities in the institution and the robust analysis of the institution's data

+ interview participants mentioned having access to data expertise and getting the submission reviewed by an independent consultant as important to success, while SAT leads mentioned the important role of working groups and of having one or two people taking responsibility for the submission.

Factors contributing to unsuccessful submissions

+ over 60.0% of survey respondents who had been unsuccessful in a prior REC award application rated two factors as very important to their lack of success – problems with action planning and insufficient acknowledgement of race inequalities

+ Advance HE interview participants outlined the following factors:
    — Institutions not understanding the REC principles and the evidence they need to provide to demonstrate they have met the criteria
    — Issues with action plans including – a focus on further analysis, not addressing the issues and/or solutions that reinforce a deficit model
    — EDI leads not having sufficient expertise in race equality.

+ Panellists highlighted the following factors:
    — Not being frank or candid about the issues
    — Presenting data but not analysing why they had the issue
    — Not addressing issues identified in the data
    — Not connecting issues with actions, and actions with success measures.

Improving success at REC

+ the most popular suggestions for improving success at REC were the provision of data analysis tools, good practice resources and increased networking opportunities

+ interview participants suggested provision of additional guidance and training on SMART action planning, requiring action plans to start with the rationale for the action, and on the use of positive action.

3 Key Findings: Impact achieved and progress made

Given that REC formally launched in 2016, impact was not necessarily expected to be seen at this stage. Nevertheless, this review took the opportunity to assess impact along with progress, which also establishes a benchmark for future impact evaluations.

Impact achieved

Impact in institutions which have held awards since 2015/16

Overall, institutional data provided by seven of the impact sample institutions showed impact in some indicators in all of the institutions. Additionally, at least one area of impact was identified by survey respondents from each institution, with 20.0-66.7% feeling that impacts were somewhat or mostly attributable to REC.

Academic staff

+ of the six institutions to provide data, all achieved some impact
    — five saw a small increase in the proportion of BAME staff overall
    — three reported an increase in the proportion of academic staff that is BAME in the department, faculty or school that was least representative at the time of their first submission
    — four reported an increase in the proportion of Professors that is BAME
+ black academic staff have tended to benefit less than other ethnic groups from impacts achieved.

Professional and support staff

+ greater impact was seen in increases to the proportion of Professional and Support staff that is BAME than in the proportion of academic staff that is BAME, with five institutions reporting increases
+ black professional and support staff have not benefitted from impacts achieved compared with other ethnic groups, with notable decreases in representation in the majority of sampled institutions.

Staff recruitment

+ increases in both the proportion of BAME applicants who are shortlisted and the proportion of BAME applicants shortlisted who are appointed, were uneven.

Students

+ greater impact has been achieved in increasing proportions of students that are BAME than that seen with staff
  — six institutions reported an increase in BAME representation among UK undergraduate students overall
  — however, change across ethnic groups was uneven: three institutions reported small decreases in the proportion of UK undergraduate students that is Black
  — there were positive changes to overall representation of BAME students among postgraduate students.

+ the most dramatic changes were seen in the reduction of the degree awarding gap between white and BAME students for 'good degrees' (1st/2:1s). The largest reductions were seen to the gap between white and Black students. However, in two institutions this gap increased.

Other areas of impact

+ other areas in which impact was reported by some institutions included improving representation of BAME people among staff at higher grades; improving representation of BAME people on decision making boards and committees, improving retention of BAME staff, reducing the proportion of BAME staff on fixed term contracts and more equitable promotions processes.

Impacts achieved by more recent award holders

Encouragingly, among respondents from institutions which achieved REC awards in 2018 or later some reported impact in the areas measured (12.1%, n=7).

Progress made within institutions

REC has enabled progress, even among institutions which are not yet award holders:

+ 28 respondents from award holding institutions reported at least one area of progress. The largest proportion reported progress in raising awareness of race inequality in the institution, followed by improving BAME representation among academic staff, and improving BAME representation among Professional and Support staff

+ 23 respondents from institutions which do not yet have awards indicated progress in at least one area. The largest proportion reported progress in raising awareness of race inequality in the institution, followed by gaining an understanding of race equality challenges in their institution.

Barriers and challenges to achieving impact and making progress

+ barriers and challenges to achieving impact and making progress noted by participants included: a lack of commitment, particularly among leadership, a lack of accountability, resistance; difficulties of delivering across the institution, challenges of balancing REC work with Athena SWAN work, insufficient resourcing, lack of buy-in within the institution, concern about overburdening small numbers of BAME staff, employment of a deficit model, and lack of understanding and acknowledgement of structural racism and whiteness, Covid-19, a culture of denial, lack of incentives to implement the action plan, lack of a structure for implementation, fear, competing priorities, a lack of SMART actions and ongoing informal processes in recruitment and promotions which disadvantage BAME staff

+ the limitations of REC data requirements, which do not include a requirement for data to be broken down by other characteristics, including gender, were highlighted by BAME women who participated in the qualitative research, who questioned whether REC is benefiting women (especially Black women) to the same extent as men.

What would help institutions to make progress and achieve impact?

+ regarding what **internal** factors or changes would help their institution to make further progress on REC, the largest proportion of respondents selected greater buy-in to and engagement with race equality across the institution, followed by additional dedicated staff resources for REC, and greater senior-level engagement with and prioritisation of race equality

+ regarding what **external** factors or changes would help their institution to make further progress on REC, the largest proportion of respondents selected good practice resources regarding effective race equality actions and interventions, followed by educational resources relating to the REC principles, and addition of white privilege and power to the REC principles.

4   Priorities for enhancing REC's impact

Just four years after its official launch, REC is already beginning to make a difference and support institutions to succeed. Our findings demonstrate that REC is driving both progress and impact on race equality within institutions. At least one area of impact was identified by survey respondents from each institution which has held a REC award since 2015 or 2016 that participated and institutional data provided by seven of these institutions show impact in at least some indicators. Progress was reported in the survey by institutions at all stages of their REC journey. Disappointingly though, the impact achieved so far by the institutions with REC awards since 2015 or 2016 that participated has not yet reached Black staff and students.

This section sets out the key priorities for enhancing REC's impact arising from this review and related recommendations. The full set of recommendations can be found in the main report.

Securing buy-in and commitment to REC

Emerging as key barriers to success throughout the review were the need for greater senior manager and institutional buy-in, which are vital for ensuring adequate resources for REC and cooperation of managers, staff and students across the whole institution. Advance HE should support this sector to obtain this essential buy-in. Implementing all of the recommendations made by this review and taking a greater strategic lead on race equality in HE will also require sustained commitment and resources within Advance HE.

1   Advance HE should produce a detailed case for racial justice that identifies the drivers and the benefits of addressing racial inequality in the HE sector, and incorporate a requirement for institutions to develop their own case as part of REC participation.

2   Undertake further activity to publicise REC and the benefits of participation.

3   Consider options for increasing 'extrinsic motivators' for REC participation.

4   Deliver further training and engagement with senior leaders on race equality and REC.

5   Formalise and expand pre-membership support for REC, including enhanced guidance and resources, to enable institutions to prepare for embarking on REC.

6   Ensure the necessary resources, strategy and policies are put in place within Advance HE to deliver the recommendations in this review and ensure the sustainability of REC for the future.

Maintaining recent award success rates

Since 2019 there has been a step change in REC success rates, which Advance HE should seek to maintain through enhanced developmental support regarding race equality and the REC, comprehensive guidance and support to improve practice when it comes to developing REC action plans and professionalising the peer review process.

7   Improve the clarity and content of the handbook and other relevant materials to enable REC members to have a full understanding of the framework and the factors that lead to success in tackling race inequalities, including the theoretical and research base that underpins the framework.

8   Create a race equality package for institutions to be able to engage with Advance HE materials, resources, training, support and networking without having to commit to REC.

9   Provide REC members with enhanced consultancy support at the start of their membership, during the self-assessment process, in addition to continuing the scheme offering external review of their submissions.

10 Extend opportunities for REC members, and those planning to join, to network and share practice.

11 Enhance and extend guidance and training opportunities on action planning, especially in relation to the areas of challenge identified in this review.

12 Provide more good practice resources regarding effective race equality actions and interventions, and positive action.

13 Professionalise the peer review process via formal and transparent recruitment of panellists while also developing a panellist training scheme for those with less experience to expand knowledge and develop a pipeline of panellists and chairs.

14 Maintain panel meetings for the assessment of REC submissions to enable the vital discussion element of the assessment, while easing the coordination burden through continuing to innovate and resource delivery appropriately.

Reducing workload and data burden

The review finds that there is no one part or aspect of the REC process that stands out as not necessary or which could be significantly reduced without impacting negatively on the robustness of the process. Therefore, to reduce the burden on those leading REC, the amount of resource made available within institutions to implement REC needs to be increased and reward and recognition for their work enhanced, while SATs should be supported to be as effective as possible. At the same time, Advance HE should reduce the data burden through enhanced support, training, tools and processes.

15 Lead a sector wide conversation about adequate resourcing of race equality work in HE.

16 Enhance guidance on REC resourcing and SAT composition, reward and recognition and efficacy.

17 Update and digitise the handbook and supporting materials, providing additional guidance on all the areas highlighted as areas of need in this report. Provide examples throughout to illustrate requirements and expectations.

18 Aligning with developments for Athena SWAN, provide an online application process to ensure a standardised approach to data as well as any new data resources provided for Athena SWAN that facilitate data access and analysis. In the meantime, provide data templates with guidance and a standard format for data presentation in submissions.

19 Redesign the REC survey with input from experts to address the concerns raised. Additionally, consider the feasibility of Advance HE running the survey.

20 *Either* revise the REC submission deadlines so that there is a six-month period between the two, taking care not to clash with other key dates or busy periods, *or* align with any changes to the Athena SWAN deadlines to provide more deadlines throughout the year.

Enabling greater and more even progress and impact

While REC is beginning to make a difference, the review identified a number of areas where changes to the REC framework and requirements, including greater alignment with Athena SWAN, and enhanced guidance on specific topics could enable institutions to make more progress and achieve more impact on race equality.

21 Provide enhanced guidance as to what structures should be in place post REC award to enable implementation, monitoring and review of action plans.

22 Extend the REC award validity period to five years to provide greater time for implementation of action plans and measurement of change *and* develop a method for interim reporting on progress during the five-year award period to help institutions maintain momentum and check they are on the right track.

23 Consider aligning with any changes to Silver level criteria brought in for Athena SWAN in relation to focusing on significant progress made.

24 Adapt the streamlined Athena SWAN renewals process for REC.

25 Consistently disaggregate and require disaggregation of 'BAME' data by ethnic group.

26 Include a focus on anti-Blackness within the scope of REC, including the introduction of a dedicated REC principle addressing anti-Blackness.

27 Make it a requirement that REC data be broken down by gender, for all levels of award. Develop templates, training and guidance to support institutions to do this analysis.

28 Development of faculty level REC awards to enable progress and impact to be achieved at local level.

29 Include a specific section in the handbook on theory of change and impact evaluation, signposting to existing resources.

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