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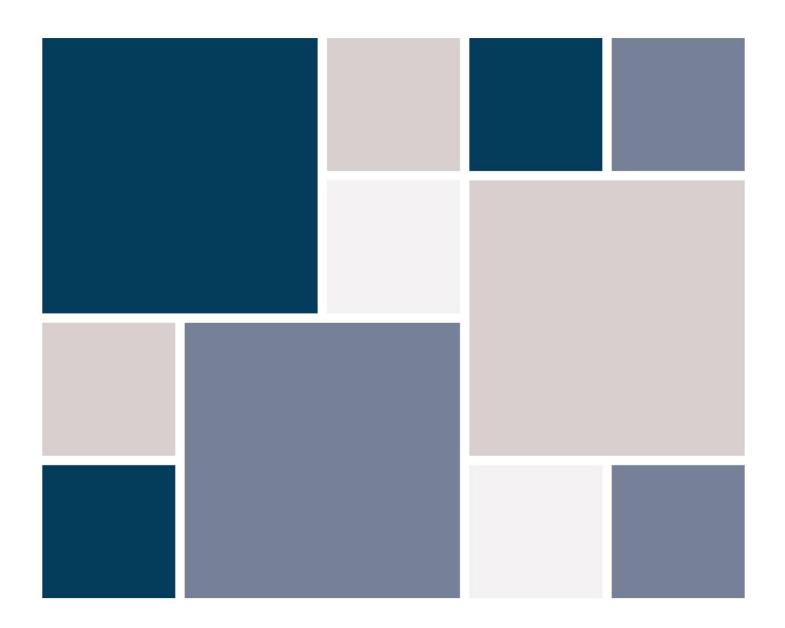
Briefing Paper

Change Starts Now: Making HEIs Racially Inclusive

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SUMS is a membership-based higher education consultancy, a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation that provides expert consulting to universities across all professional service areas. Recently, we have been talking to university leaders about creating racially inclusive HEIs.

Against the backdrop of the tragic death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests, many universities issued statements supporting the movement. However, students and staff are eager to see concrete actions to create more racially inclusive universities. At SUMS, we are passionate about this issue and wanted to host an event focused on how these statements could translate into positive action.

Here, SUMS Principal Consultants Helen Baird and Jeannette Strachan share insights from their research and the event.

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Background

However uncomfortable it is - and it is uncomfortable - we need to talk about race. As a sector, we must acknowledge that we have so far failed to make universities racially inclusive for students and staff. Fewer than 1% of our professors are black (HESA, 2018/19) and universities employ just 25 black women as professors (Rollock, February 2019). Black students are still under-represented at our most prestigious universities and they have lower retention rates across the sector than any other ethnic group. There is a clear attainment gap between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, and their white counter parts achieving a first or upper second class degree - this gap is widest between white and black students. At the same time, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has concluded that racial harassment is a common occurrence in UK universities.

Against the backdrop of the tragic death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests, many universities issued statements supporting the movement. However, students and staff are eager to see concrete actions to create more racially inclusive universities. At SUMS, we are passionate about this issue and wanted to host an event focused on how these statements could translate into positive action.

SUMS convened an outstanding panel of experts in the field who have successfully driven tangible change at their institutions. Our panel members were:

- The Chair, **Professor Zoe Radnor**, Vice President (Strategy and Planning, Diversity and Inclusion) at City, University of London
- **Professor Udy Archibong**, Professor of Diversity at the University of Bradford
- **Kevin Coutinho**, Athena Swan (Equality and Diversity) Manager at UCL
- **Dr Zainab Khan**, PVC Outcomes and Inclusion at London Metropolitan University
- **Professor Sarah Sharples**, PVC Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and People at the University of Nottingham
- **Hillary Gyebi-Ababio**, Vice President (Higher Education) at NUS.

The webinar was recorded and can be viewed here. However, for convenience and to reach a wider audience we have also summarised the key points from the event in this short briefing paper.

Effective Practice in Supporting Students

Several key themes emerged in how universities should best support students:

1. Firstly, there was a powerful call to action by Hillary Gyebi-Ababio, Vice President (Higher Education) at NUS. Hillary explained ***the importance of tackling racism at its root*** or the change will not be effective. She described the commitments made by universities in March this year as "great and ambitious", but she warned that universities must now demonstrate that they have heeded what they have seen and been told. Hillary stressed that the consequences of universities not taking action to follow up on their supportive statements is that students will never again trust them to bring in sustainable, long-term meaningful change. A key theme of the webinar was that universities said that they were listening in March, now they need to act on what they heard.

2. Our speakers discussed successful diversity programmes covering student support, graduate outcomes, and the attainment gap. ***The common factor in all these programmes is they were all co-designed and created with students***. Several of our speakers explained that a blanket approach to student services does not work because the needs and experiences of different groups of students are so varied. Accordingly, some universities are providing opportunities for new forms of wellbeing support such as culturally appropriate counselling. In addition, it is crucially important to offer closed sessions for black students to meet in an environment where they feel safe to discuss

their experiences of racism. For instance, a student at Bristol University created Black Men and Black Women Talk as a space for black students to talk about their life experiences and interpretations of them. This is resourced and paid for by the University.

3. Another area which needs to be addressed is graduate outcomes. Dr Zainab Khan explained that labour market statistics demonstrate that BAME graduates are less likely to secure graduate level employment than their white counterparts. BAME graduates are also likely to experience a race related pay gap immediately on entry into the workplace. The Equity Programme at UWE was established to boost pay and career attainments for BAME students. It is a positive action programme which is all about *providing additional support to BAME students to overcome disadvantage and barriers*. Co-designed with black and ethnic minority students, the programme has several different strands: coaching, mentoring, networking, and enterprise skills. From the outset, there was a commitment to being radical and to avoid a paternalistic deficit handling of students. The Equity Programme has won several awards, but more importantly BAME students attribute the programme with keeping them engaged with their studies and creating strong friendship groups.

4. Our speakers also emphasised *the importance of an inclusive curriculum for student retention, progression, and attainment.* Both Kingston University's Inclusive Curriculum Framework and De Montfort University's Universal Design for Learning have led the way for the sector in demonstrating the positive impact of inclusive practice. Closing the attainment gap is an absolute priority for London Metropolitan University, which has piloted an Education for Social Justice strategy - again developed with their students. This will be rolled out across the institution next year. Critical race theory will be embedded in all degree programmes, and graduates will emerge as ambassadors and change makers around equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI). All students will receive inclusivity training and will learn about the specific inequalities facing London as a city and as a community.

5. Finally, BAME students are underrepresented at doctoral level and this impacts on the pipeline for BAME academics. Whilst BAME students make up over 25% of first year undergraduate students at one end of the academic pipeline, 92% of professors are white. To address this issue, some universities are *proactively offering funded PhD studentships and postgraduate scholarships to BAME students*. Leicester University is offering these and City, University of London is also looking into the most effective way of offering studentships to black PhD students. The Office for Students and Research England have recently launched a new £8 million funding competition to improve access to, and participation in, postgraduate research study (PGR) for BAME students.

Effective Practice in Supporting Staff

Our speakers also described several programmes of work designed to make universities more racially inclusive for staff. For instance, Professor Zoe Radnor explained that City, University of London is preparing an application for Advance HE's Race Equality Charter and that the University's executive team is accountable for delivering an action plan to tackle racism and race inequality. Last year, City also launched a reciprocal mentoring scheme. Under this arrangement, a BAME member of staff is paired with a member of the executive team so that they can inform and challenge each other on their experience as a BAME member of staff and senior leader. The aim is to ***enable senior leaders to develop a better understanding of the lived experience of BAME staff at the University***, and conversely it allows BAME staff to support their own development learning about the complexities of senior management in higher education.

City is also collaborating with London Metropolitan University for rounds of reciprocal mentoring and intends to set up a white anti-racist group for conversations around whiteness, privilege and allyship to better support BAME staff and students. This will be a safe space to explore how to be a strong ally and how best to use positions of privilege to support change. Finally, the university has also set up a Let's Talk about Race hub, which has a range of online and printed materials about different aspects of race equality and a series of short videos about participants' experiences of the Reciprocal Mentoring Scheme.

Leadership of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Many universities are recognising the crucial importance of diversity and inclusion and of ***taking a whole institution approach***, through ensuring that this key area is represented on the executive team. For example, Professor Sarah Sharples was appointed as Nottingham University's first PVC for Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and People, a senior role at a traditional university because the Vice Chancellor recognised that not enough was being done to further equality, diversity and inclusivity. Sarah highlighted three key principles she feels are important to bring to the leadership of inclusion at a university: ***honesty, engagement and empowerment***. "Traditionally in universities we are used to telling everyone how brilliant we are, we are encouraged to do that, the systems enable us to do that and it is uncomfortable to say that we are not doing well enough". Sarah emphasised the importance of acknowledging that we have not done well enough, as a sector and certainly at Nottingham University.

The data clearly show a significant under representation of black staff in senior roles and a significant degree awarding gap. Sarah stressed the crucial role of the BME staff and student network groups with their honesty and their challenge in helping to drive change. Many initiatives at the University have come from these groups, and it is important that they are maintained and are given credit for their success.

Personal engagement is also important. Sarah highlighted how one particular conversation led her to appreciate that although systems may work as intended, sometimes they may not pick up a reluctance to classify an incident as being racially motivated or identify a systematic

pattern of experiences. Sarah is also very clear that her role is not about delivering EDI for other people, but to support and place demands on others to deliver EDI in all parts of a very large and highly distributed organisation. Finally, Sarah explained that *it is not enough to just NOT be racist*. Instead, our responsibility is to *work proactively to be anti-racist, and to make sure we deliver action that is seen and felt by students and staff impacted by the systematic racism present within our universities*.

Creating an Anti-Racist University

The University of Bradford is highly diverse, with circa 75% of students from a BAME background. Bradford was commended as the [University for Social Inclusion](#) in 2020. However, Professor Udy Archibong explained that there is a recognition that being both diverse and non-racist is still not enough. *A whole-university anti-racist approach is required to address structural and intersectional inequalities, and a 'state of emergency approach' is needed*. As such, the University has adopted an anti-racist stance and has launched initiatives including a decolonisation project to eradicate racism, working alongside the Students' Union. They have aligned their work on tackling racism with that on the Athena Swan Charter and student employability to ensure a whole-systems approach to tackle racial inequality. The *Executive Board Connect* project uses a partnership approach to pair up senior management team members with black students. In this way, senior leaders learn about the lived experience of black students in white spaces. Senior leaders need to have the "cultural humility" to accept they will not have all the solutions. However, black students can help through sharing their lived experiences, and leaders and students can work together to co-create the right solutions to address the challenges which BAME students face at university.

Bradford plans to expand the scheme with BAME students to other leaders in the organisation, for example council members. Another strand of activity will be BAME staff working with executive board members. Critical to the University's success is embedding evaluation throughout all these initiatives to help with its development. The learning partnership approach is also being used to deliver the University's Access and Participation Plan and the aim is that by 2025 there will be specific indicators of success that can be tested on an annual basis.

Sector-Wide Initiatives

Various sector-wide initiatives exist to support the progression of race equality. These include the [Higher Education Race Action Group (HERAG),](#) a network for staff and students interested in advancing race equality in higher education. HERAG has over 400 members and its activities include sharing information, running workshops, lobbying and promoting good practice. Most importantly it is a forum for the exchange of views, thoughts and ideas and to recognise that that this is a sector-wide problem which has to be addressed.

Advance HE's [Race Equality Charter](#) provides universities with a framework through which they can work to identify and self-reflect on institutional barriers standing in the way of BAME staff

and students. It works in a similar way to Athena Swan and other charters by looking at the life cycles of students and staff. The Charter was set up in 2015 and currently has 66 members. However, after 5 years only 15 out of nearly 200 universities hold awards. As one of our speakers, Kevin Coutinho highlighted, this is an issue because it means we do not know how many universities have properly examined the scale of these issues systematically. Universities that are adopting the Charter have made the investment to understand where the problems lie for their institution.

Conclusion

Appropriately, the final words of the webinar were delivered by Hillary on behalf of students. She was clear that everybody has a role to play in overcoming racial inequalities in higher education, whether they are a white ally or a person of colour. She also reminded everyone of the title of the webinar "Change Starts Now". Our speakers highlighted the important and effective change taking place in some parts of the sector, which staff and students have helped to drive. Many universities have now expressed commitments about the need to achieve racial inclusion. It is now time to deliver on those commitments.