

# Understanding Structural Racism in UK Higher Education: an introduction

Advance HE

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## Introduction

Advance HE supports higher education to achieve its full potential. Equality and inclusion for all staff and students is a necessary part of this. With the sector placing renewed focus on racial inequalities and tackling racism, our '[Tackling Structural Race Inequality in Higher Education](#)' thematic work aims to provide stimulus discussion, tools and resources.

This brief introduction aims to build members' foundational knowledge by highlighting some key questions and thinking; but it cannot capture the full richness and nuance of the scholarship, activism and experiences within higher education. We invite readers to use this for signposting to other discussions, and to explore the understandings within their own institutions and communities.

While some of the content will be transferable to other contexts, this publication focuses on Higher Education in the UK. For further resources and activities see [our website](#).

### [Key Terms](#)

### [Structural Racism and HE](#)

### [Tackling Structural Race Inequality](#)

## Key terms

### What do we mean by 'race' and 'racism'?

Terminology around 'race' is complex, and subject to debate and change; and Higher Education operates within these varied legal, national, academic and cultural understandings. Most scholars now understand 'race' as an idea which is socially constructed (certain societies created and reiterated the idea of 'racialising' people into certain groups, categories and even hierarchies). Higher education had a key role historically in contributing to these ideas, including the false notion of 'race science' (see eg UCL: 2020; Saini 2019).

The lasting impact of 'race', racialisation and racism however are very real. In law, the UK Equality Act 2010 (England, Wales and Scotland) prohibits certain forms of discrimination and harassment in relation to the characteristics of 'race'. In the Act, 'race' is understood to refer to colour, nationality, and ethnic or national origins. Some identities may also be protected both as religious and ethnic groups (eg Jewish people).

There are similar understandings in the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. However, internationally jurisdictions may consider 'race' in different ways, framing protections against discrimination in relation to (for example) indigenous or first nations identity, language minority, migration background, or physical features. Some countries do not permit data collection or categorisation of characteristics in this way, while in the UK data about 'race' (as 'ethnicity' or 'nationality'), is often routinely collected and used by institutions in equality work, particularly across the public sector.

**“Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff and students are not a homogenous group. People from different ethnic backgrounds have different experiences of and outcomes from/within higher education, and that complexity needs to be considered in analysing data and developing actions...Individuals have multiple identities, and the intersection of those different identities should be considered wherever possible.”**

**Race Equality Charter Principles**

Language around individual and group ‘racialised’ identities is also complex; changing with time, contexts, purpose, and whether someone is using a term about themselves or about others. For example, in UK work around ‘race’ equality, you may see different terms to reference different groups and identities, particularly in grouping diverse identities together, such as:

- + ‘BAME’ (Black, Asian and Minority/ minoritised ethnicity) or BME (Black and Minority/minoritised ethnicity)
- + PoC or People of Colour
- + Black (as a political collective)
- + Global Majority(ethnicity)
- + Gypsy, Roma, or Traveller (sometimes ‘GRT’)
- + ‘White’ or ‘White majority/minority’.

These collective terms sit alongside a variety of other identities relating to national, religious or ethnic backgrounds. These terms are not always welcomed or used by all those they seek to describe. While some groupings have been used to identify and challenge racism, there may be difficult histories to particular words and labels, and as to who has power to categorise other’s experiences and identities.

‘**Racism**’ has varied definitions, but many agree it ultimately refers to harms (including issues of discrimination, oppression, and marginalisation) relating to ‘race’. Many theorists and activists use a definition of ‘racism’ which includes ‘prejudice plus power’ to reflect how racism operates in societal structures (see discussion in Song 2014, or Eddo-Lodge 2017). Racism is a wider term than only illegal acts (see below).

“Racism is therefore not about objective measurable physical and social characteristics, but about relationships of domination and subordination.”

Bhavnani, R, Mirza, H S, Meeto, V: 2005

See also:

- + Advance HE Tackling Structural Race Inequality in Higher Education’ Strand 1 webinar and Strand 2 podcasts  
[www.advance-he.ac.uk/membership/advance-he-membership-benefits/tackling-structural-race-inequality-higher-education](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/membership/advance-he-membership-benefits/tackling-structural-race-inequality-higher-education)
- + Race Equality Colloquium: Critical approaches to race data in higher education  
[www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/calendar/race-equality-colloquium-critical-approaches-race-data-higher-education](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/calendar/race-equality-colloquium-critical-approaches-race-data-higher-education)
- + EHRC: Race Discrimination  
[www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/race-discrimination](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/race-discrimination)
- + Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: Racial equality [www.equalityni.org/Race](http://www.equalityni.org/Race)

## What do we mean by 'structural racism' or 'structural race inequality'?

“Racial inequalities are not necessarily overt, isolated incidents. Racism is an everyday facet of UK society and racial inequalities manifest themselves in everyday situations, processes and behaviours.”

Race Equality Charter First Principle

Racism manifests itself in different forms. While definitions vary, these groupings may be helpful:

- + There is **personal racism**, where individuals have prejudices, ideas and beliefs about different ethnic or racialised groups, often attributing superiority to one group over another. It can manifest itself as overt or covert ways eg harassment and hate crime, bias, stereotyping, or more subtle microaggressions (Sue et al 2007)
- + There is **institutional racism**, where racism is embedded in policies and practices of an institution (for example, in recruitment and promotion; in complaints and disciplinary proceedings; in environments or practices). Institutional racism routinely leads to differential opportunities and outcomes for different ethnic groups. The concept of institutional racism has a long history in US black political activism (Phillips, 2011). In the UK, the 'Macpherson Report' (1999) into the murder of Stephen Lawrence in particular brought this understanding into wider society, and made recommendations for change to varied public bodies and in education.
- + **Systemic** or **structural racism** are often used interchangeably, though the former is sometimes used with a narrower focus. **Structural** racism refers to the systems and structures in which the policies and practices are located, interacting with institutional culture, environment, curriculum, and other 'norms', and compounded by wider external history, culture and systemic privilege that perpetuate 'race' inequality.

Race inequality work may fail to result in meaningful change when those leading the work do not consider the multiple forms that racism can take, or acknowledge that they are often interdependent (eg personal 'racism' does not operate in a vacuum):

“There is some recognition in public thinking that racism is an institutionalised problem, ie embedded into policies, procedures and operations, especially as seen in policing. But public thinking is more attuned to racism in terms of personal animosity, including name-calling and physical attacks. Campaigners think institutions are important. More than this, they tend to think of racism not simply as institutional but as systemic, ie delivered by the interactions of multiple institutions, laws, customs and ideas.”

Lingayah, S, Blackmore, E, and Sanderson, B: 2020

## Is structural racism the same as racial harassment or racial discrimination?

Structural race inequality – or structural racism – is a broad concept, beyond specific legally prohibited acts of harassment, discrimination, and hate crime (which vary by jurisdiction). Tackling racial harassment and hate crime (including Antisemitism, Islamophobia and xenophobia) remains urgent and important work (EHRC 2019; UUK 2020), involving issues such as prevention, reporting routes, and enhanced response and support.

**“Racial harassment is a common experience for a wide range of students and staff at universities across England, Scotland and Wales... The higher education sector does not fully understand racial harassment and university staff lack confidence in dealing with race issues.”**

**EHRC: 2019**

Specific racist acts, decisions or processes (by an individual or institution) may be understood as a manifestation of structural racism: something that is enabled, allowed, or not properly dealt with because of wider issues of structures of power. Tackling harassment and hate crime in isolation may be less effective if institutional and structural factors aren't considered – see for example, work on institutional complaint and expectations of fair and effective outcomes (Ahmed 2012; 2018; EHRC 2019).

# Structural Racism and Higher Education

## Is structural racism present in higher education?

“[It] is clear that racism exists in society at a macro-level and so by logical application, it must exist in each institution to some degree – no university is immune from the society in which it is located.”

**Loke: 2019**

“[U]niversities are institutionally racist spaces that have had a historic role in producing the knowledge that racism is based on.”

**Andrews: 2018**

“Why is my University White?”

**UCL student campaign from 2014**

Racial inequalities (in both experience and outcomes) can be seen throughout the higher education system. These include, but are not limited to, racial inequities in:

- + award, retention and success in undergraduate degrees (UUK and NUS 2019; Advance HE 2020; Singh 2011)
- + progression to postgraduate research (Advance HE 2020; Williams et al 2019)
- + experience of harassment and hate crime (eg EHRC 2019; UUK 2019; UCU 2016; NUS 2012)
- + underrepresentation of staff in certain job-types, contract-types, disciplines, and levels of seniority (Advance HE 2020), different racialized experiences of professional progression and recognition and award (Rollock 2019; Gabriel and Tate 2017; Alexander and Arday eds 2015; Bhopal 2014)
- + experiences and representation in relation to learning, curriculum and research (NUS and UUK 2018; Arday et al 2020; Liyanage 2020)
- + different experiences of ‘othering’, belonging and safety (Arday and Mirza, eds 2018; Johnson and Joseph Salisbury 2018, Shilliam 2015).

There are many interacting and intersecting forms of inequality which may contribute in part to some or all of these issues (see ‘intersectionality’ below), and all inequalities deserve space to be examined. However, in the above examples, ‘race’, racism and racialisation remain a central factor.

When exploring the causes of inequality in higher education, there is a long history of conversations falling into a ‘deficit’ discourse or model (Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Ladson-Billings 2013), which – as a recent report on differential degree awards notes – has hindered meaningful action:

“[A deficit approach ] focuses on the attributes and characteristics of the student as the main contributing factors for attainment differentials: it assumes students are lacking skills, knowledge or experience..... it does not therefore allow for an examination of societal or institutional structures and the discrimination that exists within them...[O]wnership, accountability and responsibility for the inequalities in attainment similarly are not placed with the institution, only the individual.”

**NUS and UUK: 2018**

Acknowledging structural racism and race inequality exists in the sector helps to explain the wide-ranging, persistent, and interconnected inequalities experienced by so many staff and students (despite small pockets of good practice and increasing willingness to seek change).

“In developing solutions to racial inequalities, it is important that they are aimed at achieving long-term institutional culture change, avoiding a deficit model where solutions are aimed at changing the individual.”

**Race Equality Charter, Principle 3**

## Tackling Structural Race Inequality

### How does a 'structural' understanding support more meaningful action on 'race' equality?

Discussion of structural racism does not 'excuse' institutions, disciplines and departments from action. Institutions may not always be able to control or change all wider structural inequalities: but they work within them. Institutions can consider how to reduce or mitigate harms of replicating these wider cultural, legal and social inequalities.

Crucially, it should not be forgotten that institutions can also perpetuate and compound racial inequalities through decisions made about institutional culture, policy and process. They have power to shape and influence wider structures (for example, through training for a wider range of professions; or through their research informing public policy and discourse).

“[T]here exists a stubborn refusal to acknowledge that academia itself might be complicit in the (re)production of racial injustices, that it does not passively 'reflect' disadvantages already existing in society but actively (re)creates inequalities.”

Warmington, P: 2018

Yet shared understandings of the causes and manifestations of structural racism do not necessarily mean agreement on ways forward. There are a number of different approaches, actions, visions and ways of working to tackle racial inequities across a diverse sector and communities. Below are just some approaches and key sector discussions which particularly recognise and seek to focus on wider structural issues:

- + Transformative change to structures and cultures through actively decolonising, internationalising and/or diversifying curricula and research (Bhambra et al 2018; Arday et al 2021; Tate and Bagguley 2016). This might involve using specific frameworks or toolkits designed to tackle racial inequality in (eg) curriculum, or specific disciplines (McDuff et al 2020; Duhs et al 2019; Jivraj 2020). This could also mean more holistic institutional reviews or action plans, for example through a whole-institution approach (eg SOAS 2017), or through critical and engaged use of sector frameworks such as Advance HE's Race Equality Charter.
- + Affirming a cross-sector shared commitment to anti-racism: focusing on active work to achieve equity, rather than a more passive attempting to 'not be racist'. For example, see the Scotland sector statement on racism and institutional statements on race equity.  
[www.advance-he.ac.uk/tackling-racism-campus-raising-awareness-and-creating-conditions-confident-conversations#declaration](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/tackling-racism-campus-raising-awareness-and-creating-conditions-confident-conversations#declaration)
- + Critical reflection – and sometimes rejection – of traditional 'equality and diversity' policies, mechanisms and approaches which may fail to tackle racial inequality authentically, robustly, or intersectionally (Rollock 2018; Ahmed 2018, 2019; Doharty et al 2020; Tate and Bagguley 2016).

## Using theory for action: four examples

Scholars, activists and policy makers have many different ways of conceptualising, interrogating and approaching 'race' equality and structural racism. Many of these are complementary, and most have been foregrounded and enriched by Black and minoritised ethnicity scholars.

Below we highlight four current theories, 'lenses' or approaches being used in work to tackle or understand structural racism.

### 1.1.1 Critical Race Theory

“[Critical Race Theory] is a body of scholarship steeped in radical activism that seeks to explore and challenge the prevalence of racial inequality in society. It is based on the understanding that race and racism are the product of social thought and power relations; CRT theorists endeavour to expose the way in which racial inequality is maintained through the operation of structures and assumptions that appear normal and unremarkable.”

Rollock, N and Gillborn, D: 2011

CRT scholarship brings a range of insights, methodologies and critiques to 'race' equality work including (but not limited to) understandings of power relations, how change is effected, and the importance of centring lived experiences of 'race' and racism, including through 'counterstory' or 'counternarrative' (Sólorzano and Yosso: 2002).

See also:

- + Lander, V, and Gillborn, D (2020, October 26). Critical Race Theory: Some clarifications. Leeds Beckett University Blogs. [www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-education/2020/10/critical-race-theory/](http://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/blogs/carnegie-education/2020/10/critical-race-theory/)
- + Ladson-Billings, G (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7–24. [doi.org/10.1080/095183998236863](https://doi.org/10.1080/095183998236863)
- + Rollock, Nicola, and Gillborn, D (2011). Critical Race Theory (CRT). British Educational Research Association online resource. [www.bera.ac.uk/publication/critical-race-theory-crt](http://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/critical-race-theory-crt)

## 1.1.2 Intersectionality

“Intersectionality in and of itself is about naming the unnamed, particularly identifying structures of dominance and inequality.”

Harris and Patton: 2019

Intersectionality is a metaphor, or tool of analysis, which can help to understand how other forms of structural oppression and marginalisation (for example, sexism) interact or reinforce specific forms of racism (Crenshaw 1989;91).

Intersectionality may also explore how racism may impact or manifest differently for different racialized groups (Rollock and Gillborn 2011). For example, intersectional research has shown the specific experiences and challenges of Black women in senior higher education leadership, and how these may be different from women from other ethnic groups (Rollock 2019). These insights can be particularly useful for designing effective and appropriate equality interventions and strategies, and prevent ‘single strand’ work to ‘compete’ for resource and understanding (Bhopal and Henderson 2019).

Crenshaw and other scholars have raised caution about misunderstandings and misuses of intersectionality, and stress the need to focus on using it as a tool for action and change (Crenshaw 2020; Cho et al 2013, Harris and Patton 2018);

See also:

+ Advance HE

[www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/intersectional-approaches-equality-research-and-data](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/intersectional-approaches-equality-research-and-data)

## 1.1.3 Decolonising

Decolonisation – or ‘decolonising’ (as an ongoing practice not a project to be completed) – has a long history and different understandings (particularly in different national contexts). It is a transformational process seeking to critique and reform structures which were built on a foundation of racism, colonialism, and exclusion. Decolonisation has been described as:

“...a struggle to enrich our ways of teaching and learning by listening to the plurality of knowledge of the world. It is about the challenge of relating to difference as an opportunity to enrich our knowledge practices...”

Icaza and Vázquez: 2018

“A way of thinking which....re-situates [colonialism, empire and racism] as key shaping forces of the contemporary world, in a context where their role has been systematically effaced from view.”

Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu: 2018

Caution has been raised about institutions ‘diluting’, misrepresenting or even misappropriating ‘decolonisation’ in their efforts to address race inequality:

“Inspired by student-led movements over the past few years that have challenged the white supremacy and Eurocentrism embedded within HEI, institutions have claimed to ‘decolonise’ pedagogy through a ‘diversification’ of the curriculum. In practice, this often means the tagging on of black or brown authors in the reading list, sometimes as core text but mostly not; perhaps the invitation of BME scholars to speak to the class, often unpaid; introduction of modules ostensibly about black or brown experiences.”

Ono-George: 2019

“Decolonisation is not a metaphor.”

Tuck and Yang: 2012

See also:

- + Arday, J, and Mirza, H (Eds) (2018). Dismantling Race in Higher Education – Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy, Palgrave Macmillan
- + Basra, H, Crofts, M and Towlson, K (2020) Decolonising DMU: creating transformational change [www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/Decolonising-DMU](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/Decolonising-DMU)
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- + Liyanage, M (2020). Miseducation: Decolonising curricula, culture and pedagogy in UK universities (Debate Paper 23). HEPI. [www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/07/23/miseducation-decolonising-curricula-culture-and-pedagogy-in-uk-universities/](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/07/23/miseducation-decolonising-curricula-culture-and-pedagogy-in-uk-universities/)

### 1.1.4 Anti-Racism

Anti-Racism discourses, practices and policies have been present in education in the UK since at least the 1980s, and speak to a more active focus on tackling racism, as opposed to complacency with ‘not being ‘overtly’ racist’.

“An anti-racist stance [in contrast to non-racism] is an active rejection of the institutional and structural aspects of race and racism and explains how racism is manifested in various spaces, making the social construct of race visible.”

King and Chandler: 2016

“Teaching practice is engaged, anti-racist and decolonial if it forces students, especially those comfortably in the majority, out of their comfort zones. It forces them to employ critical thinking skills, including in understanding their own social positions, entitlements and power. A decolonised, anti-racist and engaged classroom is one in which students’ experience and contributions are respected and valued.”

Ono-George: 2019

See also:

- + The Scotland Anti-Racist Curriculum Project (Advance HE in collaboration with QAA Scotland, funded by the Scottish Funding Council, QAA):  
[www.advance-he.ac.uk/anti-racist-curriculum-project](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/anti-racist-curriculum-project)
- + Arday, J, Zoe Belluigi, D, and Thomas, D (2021). Attempting to break the chain: Reimagining inclusive pedagogy and decolonising the curriculum within the academy. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53(3), 298–313.  
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## Supporting your work

Suggested ways you may use this publication to support your work in tackling ‘race’ inequality:

- + as a handout or advance reading for institutional or team discussions, workshops or training
- + as a reflective exercise when reviewing action plans, communications or new initiatives
- + as a provocation for respectful peer discussion and learning
- + signposting students and staff to the wider range of research, evidence and scholarship
- + as a reference or reflective piece to support your own personal learning.

For ongoing resources, including blogs, webinars, and useful links to Advance HE services and materials see [www.advance-he.ac.uk/membership/advance-he-membership-benefits/tackling-structural-race-inequality-higher-education](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/membership/advance-he-membership-benefits/tackling-structural-race-inequality-higher-education)

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## Websites

Advance HE Race Equality Charter Principles

[www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter#principles](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter#principles)

Advance HE Race Equality Charter and Athena SWAN Charter database of initiatives

[www.advance-he.ac.uk/charters/rec-athena-swan-initiatives](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/charters/rec-athena-swan-initiatives)

EHRC: Race Discrimination

[www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/race-discrimination](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/race-discrimination)

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland

[www.equalityni.org/Race](http://www.equalityni.org/Race)

We Stand Against Racism Scotland pledge

[www.advance-he.ac.uk/we-stand-united-against-racism](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk/we-stand-united-against-racism)



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