

Competing Inequalities

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Competing inequalities: Gender versus race in higher education institutions in the UK

Abstract

This article explores findings from two projects that explore the impacts and institutional experiences of the Athena SWAN (ASC) and Race Equality (REC) Charter Marks in UK universities. The article offers an important, timely and original insight into the ways that these two charter marks are shaping and influencing practice in universities. We argue that in higher education policy making, there has been a privileging of gender over race in terms of addressing inequalities in higher education. Whilst acknowledging the persistence of inequalities in both groups, the data from our projects highlights a significant risk that gender and race inequalities become conflated in current equalities work. We argue that as a consequence of a logic of efficiency that drives Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to combine gender and race equalities work, and the privileging within this combination of gender, HEIs can publicly work towards equality and inclusion in general terms, without having to confront uncomfortable and deeply embedded practices that perpetuate White privilege in the academy (Bhopal, 2018).

Competing inequalities: Gender versus race in higher education institutions in the UK

Introduction

This article sets out findings from two projects that explore the impacts and institutional experiences of the Athena SWAN (ASC) and Race Equality (REC) Charter Marks in UK universities. As noted by Caffrey *et al.* (2016), although evaluative studies have explored the effectiveness of the ASC (see, for example, Munir *et al.*, 2013), **there is little** research that has explored the lived institutional experiences of applying for charter marks, and working with their criteria and processes. Furthermore, due to the ASC's origins in STEM¹ disciplines, many existing studies are of STEM faculties' responses to the charter mark, rather than of institution-wide responses to the expanded framework. Because of the relatively recent introduction of the REC, there is only one published study exploring its effectiveness and the experiences of staff in working with it (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018). There are currently no published studies exploring both the gender and race equality charter marks together. This article therefore offers an important, timely and original insight into the ways in which these charter marks are shaping and influencing practice in universities. The article will argue that in higher education policy making such as the charter mark awards, there has been a privileging of gender over race in terms of addressing inequalities in higher education. The main beneficiaries of higher education policy making have been White women, and the main beneficiaries of the ASC have been White middle class women (Bhopal, 2018). This precedence of gender above race has resulted in a hierarchy of oppression in which women's experiences have been privileged over that of men and women of colour.

¹ Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine.

As this article will demonstrate, there remain significant inequalities in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) both for women and for people of colour. These inequalities can be located in similar areas of academic experience and practice, such as entry to the academic profession, access to permanent, secure employment, and career progression. Whilst acknowledging the persistence of inequalities in both groups, the data from our projects highlights a significant risk that gender and race inequalities become conflated in current equalities work. This conflation is far from a neutral or equal combination of the issues of gender and race inequality. Gender is privileged in institutional approaches to inequality, in part because of the chronology of the charter mark policies in the UK (explained in detail in the section below), which has seen the ASC become firmly established across HEIs nationally before the REC was introduced. In part, however, we argue that the privileging of work on gender equalities rather than race equalities in HEIs is a response to the discomfort of addressing institutional racism (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal, 2018; Gillborn, 2008; Warmington, 2018). We argue that as a consequence of a logic of efficiency that drives HEIs to combine gender and race equalities work, and the privileging within this combination of gender, HEIs can publicly work towards equality and inclusion in general terms, without having to confront uncomfortable and deeply embedded practices that perpetuate White privilege in the academy (Bhopal, 2018).

In the sections below, we provide a brief summary of the context of the charter mark policies in UK higher education, before drawing attention to some of the enduring inequalities that the policies set out to address. We then explain the methodological approaches taken in the two projects from which this article takes its findings. In the data analysis sections that follow, we focus on the ways in which respondents represented the struggle to balance gender and race

in equalities work, as well as the ways that gender can be justified as both a more universal and a more institutionally necessary equalities concern than race.

Athena (White) Swan

The ‘Scientific Women’s Academic Network’ (SWAN) was established in the early 2000s as a web resource by the Athena Project, which sought to advance career equality for female academics working in STEMM subjects (Fox, 2014). In 2005, the Equality Challenge Unit combined the SWAN network and Athena Project to form the ASC for Women in Science (Ovseiko *et al.*, 2017). The charter mark offers three levels of awards, at gold, silver and bronze, and is based on four key areas – representation, progression of students into academia, journey through career milestones, and working environment for all staff. The achievement of an institutional bronze award requires a self-assessment of gender equality in the institution or department, a four-year action plan, and an organisational structure to implement the proposed actions (Ovesiko *et al.*, 2017). Applications can be made at whole institution or department level, though a bronze institutional award must be achieved before any departmental application can be made. Between 2005 and 2011, 20 institutions achieved an Athena SWAN award. Awareness of the award shifted considerably in 2011, when the Chief Medical Officer of the British Medical Research Council announced that applicants for medical research funding would not be considered unless their medical school or faculty held at least a silver Athena SWAN award. This announcement precipitated an increase of 400% in medical school or faculty applications for Athena SWAN awards (Ovesiko *et al.*, 2017), while total awards granted nationally increased from 22 to 180 between 2011 and 2014 (Barnard, 2017, p. 158).

In 2015, significant changes were made to the framework of assessment for the award, and to its scope. Firstly, the award was broadened to include all academic departments, in contrast to its previous focus on STEMM subjects. Secondly, professional and support staff were included alongside academic staff as part of the self-assessment and action plan processes. Finally, the remit of the award was extended to include transgender staff and students, and to focus on gender equality rather than explicitly on female staff. These changes demonstrated a growing awareness on the part of the awarding body, the Equality Challenge Unit², that the inequalities in the higher education workplace are multiple, intersectional and complex, and that a focus on female academic staff in STEMM subject areas might limit the impact and success of the Athena SWAN project. As well as widening the scope of the Athena SWAN award, the Equality Challenge Unit, launched a new charter mark to address racial inequality in universities. The Race Equality Charter (REC) was launched in January 2016, following smaller pilot versions of the charter in the previous two years.

The Race Equality Charter

The REC is similar to the ASC in terms of the process of self-assessment using both quantitative and qualitative data, and the compiling of an action plan in response to that data. Like the ASC, the REC can be awarded at bronze, silver and gold levels. There are several key differences between the charters, however. The REC has an explicit focus on students as well as staff, and action plans are required to address differences in undergraduate student retention and degree achievement between ethnic groups, as well as to show how the curriculum can be diversified. To date, the REC can only be applied for as a whole institution; individual schools or departments cannot apply for an REC award. Perhaps most

² The Equality Challenge Unit is a charity that works to further issues of equality and diversity for staff and students in the UK. In April 2018 the Equality Challenge Unit was amalgamated with the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education and the Higher Education Academy into one new organisation, AdvanceHE (see <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/about-us/>).

importantly, the REC has not been linked to research award funding, and therefore does not occupy the same imperative position as the ASC. Finally, the REC was introduced some eleven years after the ASC, and seven years after the ASC was connected to medical research funding. As a consequence of this chronology, any institution deciding to apply for the REC is almost certain to have previously applied for and to be currently holding ASC awards at both whole-institution and department or faculty level. When institutions choose to apply for the REC, they therefore take on race equality work in addition to an existing charter mark workload. Currently, 48 institutions are members of the REC, with a total of 10 of those institutions holding a bronze award, in contrast to the 159 members of the ASC holding a total of 766 institution-wide and departmental awards ranging from bronze to gold. These differences between the ASC and REC charter marks are explored later in the Findings section of this article; the following section outlines the current context of gender and race equality in UK Higher Education. As this contextual information demonstrates, inequalities persist in both gender and race in UK higher education, and often do so in similar or comparable ways; both women and people of colour are over-represented in lower levels of seniority, for example, and under-represented in senior level positions. As we will go on to argue in our findings section however, these commonalities should not be taken as a justification for a 'catch-all' approach to equalities that risks silencing uncomfortable and necessary discussions of institutional racism.

Methodology

This article is based on two studies which explored the workings of the charter marks. One study specifically explored the impact of the REC and the second study compared the REC with the ASC. We utilised qualitative research methods designed to explore the impact of the ASC and the REC in HEIs in the UK. We wanted to explore the different impact and effects

of these charter marks in HEIs that had been successful in gaining a bronze award in either the Athena SWAN or Race Equality charter marks. We invited a total of six institutions to take part in the study. Of these, three were selected based on their participation in the ASC, and three based on their participation in the REC. Although we aimed to invite award holders in both cases, the smaller number of institutions holding a bronze REC award meant that we also included REC member institutions that were working towards a bronze award at the time of the research. While each institution was invited on the basis of their work on *either* the ASC or the REC charter mark, in practice all participating institutions had some experience of working with both charter marks. HEIs that had been successful in ASC were considering or had previously considered becoming members of the REC, and all members or award holders of the REC that participated in the research were also award holders of the ASC. As a result, the research explored the impacts for HEIs on working on either one of the charter marks *and* the impacts of working on or preparing to work on both charter marks.

For study 1, we conducted ten interviews and five focus groups across the six participating institutions. Where possible, we conducted interviews with the Equality and Diversity Manager and the SAT chair for the ASC or REC charter mark in each institution. In three institutions, it was not possible within the timeframe of the research to arrange both of these interviews, and one interview was conducted with either the Equality and Diversity manager or the SAT chair. Focus groups of 3-7 members of the SAT were arranged in 5 of the 6 institutions. The combination of interviews and focus groups in the participating institutions means that our research explores the perspectives of those working on charter marks in a variety of capacities and institutional roles in each HEI. The focus groups were a particularly rich source of data as they enabled discussions between participants who had previously not reflected together about their experiences of working on the charter marks. In several cases,

focus group participants noted that the research had offered them an opportunity to think about their experiences with their colleagues in a new or different way.

For study 2 we used qualitative research methods to explore the impact of the REC in HEIs in England. We wanted to explore the different impact and effects of the REC in HEIs that had been successfully awarded the REC, those who were members (and expected to apply in the next 3 years) and gain an insight into HEIs who were not members of the REC but were working on diversity and equality (with a specific focus on race). We conducted 12 interviews with REC award holders, 22 interviews with members and 11 interviews with non-members. A total of 45 interviews were conducted across both projects.

The aims of both projects were:

- To explore the impact of the charter marks on work practices;
- To examine what constituted good practice and how it could be improved and
- To identify issues for future research and policymaking

Recruitment and selection of participants

For both studies, potential participants were initially identified by researching public information through each institution's web pages via the equality and diversity departments. Once initial contact was made with a relevant staff member, we contacted them with information about the research study and requested the contact details of staff members who had been involved in work on the ASC or REC (if applicable) or who focussed on race equality in the institution. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the nature of the research and its intended outcomes. Once respondents agreed to participate,

they were provided with the participant information sheet and a copy of the consent form. A mutually convenient time was established to conduct either a face to face or telephone interview, or a focus group. Four of the ten interviews were conducted over the phone. All other interviews and all of the focus groups were conducted in person.

Ethics

Ethical guidelines were followed in line with the British Educational Research Association's guidelines (BERA, 2018) and approval was obtained from the University ethics committee.

Interview participants were invited to take part via email correspondence and informed consent was obtained prior to all data collection. An information sheet and a consent form were attached to the email invitation. Participants returned copies of consent forms and the research was conducted in compliance with GDPR³ and University research policy.

Electronic data was stored on password protected computers only accessible by the researchers. All data has been treated as confidential and participants have remained anonymous. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Data Analysis

All of the interview and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. The interview data was analysed by using a process of thematic analysis from which to generate themes which were categorised under particular topics and headings we were interested in (Roulston, 2001). We examined and focussed on the ways in which respondents spoke about their

³ The General Data Protection Regulation is a European Union regulation based on providing data protection and privacy for individuals on how and where their personal data is held and used.

experiences in HEIs and analysed the meanings attributed to their experience of the REC. The codes and themes were cross checked by both researchers to enhance reliability and validity of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the following sections we present the key findings to emerge from the data; each theme is explored using multiple direct quotations so that the voices and concerns of participants are clear and undiluted. Due to the similarity in themes that emerged in data from ASC and REC awarded or member institutions, the following findings focus on both charter marks together. Where data is quoted, we indicate whether the interview or focus group was based on ASC or the REC.

As discussed in the methodology section above, although each participating HEI was invited to be part of the study on the basis of their work on either the Athena SWAN or the Race Equality Charter, in practice almost all HEIs were in the position to comment on both. ASC award holders were in the process of considering or preparing to work on the REC, and all REC members and award holders held at least an institutional bronze ASC award. In all interviews and focus groups, therefore, there were discussions of both charter marks. These discussions focused on issues ranging from the difficulties of managing both charter marks at once, the idea of competing or conflicting equalities agendas, the possibility that just one equalities charter mark should replace the existing two, and the relationship between the REC and geographical location. **In the following sections we explore how gender and race inequalities continue to persist in higher education and in our findings we demonstrate how gender has taken precedence over race in how discourses of inequality are addressed and understood.**

Inequalities in higher education: Gender

As noted above, the Athena SWAN charter mark grew out of projects aimed at increasing the representation of women in academic science, and has sought to address the multiple ways in which gendered inequalities are experienced in academia. Of particular focus have been issues of women's access to senior academic positions, the proportions of women on teaching-only or temporary contracts, and inequalities in access to and perceptions of part-time academic positions. As the award has been extended to encompass all academic disciplines and professional and support services staff, these representation issues have emerged as systemic and enduring, despite the considerable numbers of ASC applications and awards. As a consequence, existing studies of the effects of the ASC consistently highlight both the importance and potentially positive impacts of work to reduce gender equality (Galley and Colvin, 2013), and the stubborn nature of the barriers to its success (see, for example, Munir *et al.*, 2014; Ovseiko *et al.*, 2017).

Of particular focus for ASC action planning in HEIs has been the issue of childcare, with many initiatives in HEIs centred around recognition of caring responsibilities and the mitigation of their impact on academic careers (Caffrey *et al.*, 2016). However, this focus is limited in its effects both by the wider societal gendered distribution of emotional and familial labour, and by the danger that associating childcare with women's careers in fact reinforces the perception of care as women's responsibility (Barnard, 2017; Moreau and Robertson, 2018) or problem (Garforth and Kerr, 2009). Similarly, HEIs have worked to provide clearer advice and guidance around criteria for recruitment, appraisal and promotion in actions that seek to redress the imbalance of women to men in senior positions. While there is some evidence to suggest that these actions can be effective (Barnard, 2017), there are also concerns that such actions do little to challenge gendered perceptions of academic

excellence (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019; Van den Brink and Benschop, 2012), of care and institutional caring roles (Leathwood and Hey, 2009) or of women as requiring additional support (Van den Brink and Stobbe, 2014), all of which are significant barriers to career progression and gender equality in the academy. The statistics below, taken from Advance HE's 'Equality in Higher Education' report (2018a), highlight some current inequalities in UK HEIs in the areas of contract type and career progression.

As demonstrated in Table 1 below, although women comprise a higher percentage of the total Higher Education workforce than men, there are inequalities in the types of staff role occupied. In 2016/2017, women were significantly over-represented in professional and support services, with men taking only 37.4% of these roles. Meanwhile, despite being in the majority in the total Higher Education staff by just over 8%, female *academic* staff were in the minority by almost 10%. Of a total of 192,040 men employed in HE, 59.3% were in academic roles. In contrast, 40.7% of 227,670 female HE employees were in academic roles, representing a difference of 18.6%.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 highlights further inequalities in terms of contract types. In both academic and professional and support services, women were more likely than men to be on a fixed term rather than an open-ended contract. There were further important contract differences in academic staffing **with women occupying 5% more of all teaching-only contracts and 5% fewer of all research-only contracts than men. Most strikingly, 17.8% fewer of all teaching and research contracts were taken by women than by men.** Given that teaching-only contracts are the least prestigious of these contract types, it is significant that women occupied the

majority of these, and the minority in higher-status contracts associated with research. Women also took the majority of part-time contracts across the whole of the HE workplace. This difference was most marked in professional and support services contracts, where 79.6% of all employees on part-time contracts were women. In academic staff, 55.6% of employees on part-time academic contracts were women, representing a smaller but nevertheless significant difference in modes of academic working between men and women.

Table 2 about here

Whilst the differences in Table 2 between men and women were relatively small, there were far more significant differences as levels of seniority increase. Table 3 below shows that less than a quarter of professorial roles were occupied by women across all UK HEIs, despite women occupying 45.7% of all academic contracts in total. This suggests that women were over-represented in less senior academic roles, and under-represented in more senior roles. Similarly, although men made up only 37.4% of professional services and support staff contracts, 45.9% of the most senior level roles were taken by men.

Table 3 about here

In addition to the gender differences in levels of seniority, there were also significant differences in salary. Of professional and support services staff earning at the highest pay grade, less than half (48.2%) were women despite women making up 62.6% of that workforce. In academic roles, 71% of those earning in the highest salary spine were men.

Inequalities in Higher Education: Race

Current scholarship on race in the UK academy consistently highlights the pervasiveness of institutional racism (Ahmed, 2007; Bhopal, 2016; Bhopal, Brown and Jackson, 2015; Law *et al.*, 2004), which persists despite the presence of equality and diversity policies and the 2010 Equalities Act. Institutional racism works in overt and covert ways (Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal, 2018; Gillborn, 2008; Gillborn *et al.*, 2018; Stockfelt, 2018; Warmington, 2018). In its covert form, racism is felt in BME staff exclusion from decision-making practices and cultural insensitivity, and in the performance and reproduction of the university as an elite, White space at all levels of the institution (Bhopal, 2016). As stated in a recent report by the Trade Unions Congress, ‘BME workers too often experience racism at work, which is part of their everyday life. And more times than not it’s hidden. There are more obvious racist incidents that take place. But also the more hidden types such as micro-aggressions, implicit bias and prejudice’ (TUC, 2017, p. 4). While covert racism is difficult to pinpoint and to prove, high proportions of BME academics have also experienced overt racist bullying and harassment from managers (72% of respondents) and colleagues (69% of respondents), according to a UCU report (2016). The combined effects of these forms of institutional racism can be seen in the significant under-representation of BME staff in UK HEI’s, and particularly at levels of seniority in both academic and professional and support services. The effects can also be seen in the high proportions of UK BME academics who consider a move overseas due to their experiences of marginalisation in UK HEIs (Bhopal, Brown and Jackson, 2015; ECU, 2015).

In terms of career progression in academic or professional and support services in HEIs, research has found racist practices in recruitment, promotions and pay (Bhopal, 2016; Bhopal, Brown and Jackson, 2015; UCU, 2016). In addition to these measurable inequalities, the daily experience of racial marginalisation and exclusion remains deeply ingrained in the

cultures of HEIs (Bhopal, 2018; Pilkington, 2018; Reay, 2018), and is a significant and normalised aspect of institutional life for many BME employees. Due to this institutional culture, it is difficult for BME staff to raise or report their concerns and experiences, for fear of being discredited and therefore experiencing further career disadvantages (Bhopal, 2018; Coates, 2008; Stockfelt, 2018). The insidiousness of racist practices across the academy has proved difficult to challenge through equality and diversity policies thus far. However, the Race Equality Charter has been found to offer the potential to address racism in the academy, not least by providing a framework through which difficult conversations can take place, and specific actions planned (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018). As the statistics below suggest, the kinds of change promised by the REC are urgent if the significant inequalities in entry into the academic workplace, access to secure and permanent employment and career progression as a BME member of staff are to be addressed. Current research findings (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018; Bhopal and Henderson, 2019) suggest that although the REC has been found to offer a potentially powerful framework for beginning to address institutional racism in HEIs, there is evidence that considerably more resource investment and incentive is needed in order for the charter mark to be as effective as is necessary.

In 2016/2017, 9.4% of staff identified as BME. Between 2003/2004 and 2016/2017 there has been a significant increase in the numbers of BME staff working in HEIs. The numbers of staff who were UK BME increased from 4.8% to 7.6% and the increase of staff was most pronounced for professional and support staff (4.8% in 2003/2004 to 8.4% in 2016/2017). The proportion of BME academic staff increased from 4.8% to 6.7% (ECU, 2018a). As Table 4 demonstrates, however, there were differences within the overall category of BME, with the highest proportion of BME staff identifying as Indian (23.3% of all BME staff) and the lowest proportions identifying as Arab (1.3%) and Black other (1.5%).

Table 4 about here

Although the proportions of BME staff in HEIs are increasing, those identifying as BME remain more likely to be on fixed term, temporary academic contracts compared to White groups (32.2% compared to 28.2% White). This is also the case for professional and support staff (ECU, 2018a) (Table 5).

Table 5 about here

In 2016/2017, UK BME staff were also more likely to be underrepresented in the highest contract levels and overrepresented in the lowest contract levels. For example, only 0.8% of UK heads of institutions were BME, and 5.5% of academic managers and directors. Of all research-only contracts in UK HEIs, UK BME academics held 12.2% of these. UK BME academics held a lower percentage (9.1%), with UK White academics occupying the remaining 90.9% of these. A larger proportion of White academics were on the highest pay range of £58,754 or more compared to BME staff (18.1% White staff compared to 17.0% BME). Furthermore, there were only 85 Black professors in the UK compared to 13,535 who were White (Table 6).

Table 6 about here

The data suggests that BME groups continue to be marginalised in HEIs; they are less likely to access high-status contracts or occupy senior managerial positions, less likely to be professors and less likely to be on the highest pay range compared to their White colleagues.

Managing both charter marks at once

Due to the fact that the ASC award was introduced earlier than the REC, all of the institutions in the study were approaching the REC with the lessons learned from their experiences of the ASC charter mark. Respondents therefore spoke of their awareness of the economic and time resources necessary to making a charter mark application successful:

There was a group actually in this faculty, the health faculty that have been kind of actively talking about it [the REC], wanting to kind of start the process, and I think in a not coordinated way, the ASC got in first. And then the REC, that group, which was quite a localized group, realised what a massive job it is, and sort of stepped back, thinking, 'Well we need one of those'. One of me, and we haven't got the money for that at the moment (White female, post-1992, ASC award holder)

In some cases, the awareness of the work required to make a charter mark application successful resulted in an ambivalence towards beginning the process of focusing on race equality in the institution:

Well, we haven't sat down yet to talk about the REC, but it's really hard, because you don't want to sound negative, and I do absolutely think we should do it, but I am concerned about resourcing, because it is a lot of work and I don't think anyone realizes quite how much work it is, so that is an issue. (White female, post-1992, REC member)

In some institutions, the reluctance to begin work on another charter mark was framed as a kind of fatigue, with the charter marks seen as something from which institutions need rest and respite.

When we said we were going to apply or join the REC, quite rightly there was, there was a kind of intake of breath, and people said, 'Well, let's get ASC out of the way, then have a year off, and then do it,' because people realise there's a lot of work involved. And they just, they were just, 'Oh, do we really want to do this?'

We do want to do it, we want to do it for all the right reasons, but people get put off by the workload. You know, the university wants to have the award, and it wants the accolade, and it wants to show itself off as a university that takes equality seriously, and can deliver, but it's the work that goes in that puts people off. And that's the negative side. (Black male, red brick, ASC award holder)

In each of these instances, the work on gender equality required by the ASC framework has not only happened earlier than the work on race equality for the REC, but has left a legacy of reluctance to address more, different issues of equality in addition to gender. Given the often thankless nature of 'diversity work' (Ahmed, 2012), as well as the commonly acknowledged workload issues of the ASC in particular, it is not surprising that respondents felt a sense of weariness at the prospect of taking on another, similar equalities task. However, what risks being lost within a discourse of workload and resource allocation is that work on race equality is effectively positioned as optional or dispensable in these accounts. HEIs can be seen to be working on equality through their ASC applications, and during the time it takes to recover from these applications and to consider the lessons learned from them, the equivalent work on race inequalities is put off, or approached with reluctance. In these accounts, race equality work does not only happen after gender equality work, but is further disadvantaged by the associations that have grown up around equalities work in general through that initial focus on gender. In some cases, *because* of gender equality work, addressing race inequality is *even more* unappealing than it might otherwise have been.

Competing inequalities

As well as giving institutions beginning the REC process previous experiences of the charter mark workload, ASC was seen by participants as occupying the majority of the resources spent on equalities work in their institutions. This focus on gender equality led to comparisons between the resources given to different marginalised groups:

But I do wonder, given that the animal sciences institute has taken it (Athena SWAN) so seriously and has improved life for everybody, but it is always talking about ASC. I'm starting to wonder how some of the other marginalised groups feel about this focus. (White female, Russell Group, ASC award holder)

In some institutions, working on the REC had allowed a comparison between gender equality and race equality in terms of the kinds of issues and conversations that were associated with each charter mark, and a further comparison of institutional readiness to confront these different issues:

I think there is also, it's fair to say, it's an easier conversation, to talk about gender than it is when you trying to have a discussion about race. And for me, some of it is around people saying, "Well, ok, we can see around gender that it may be to do with childcare responsibility, people taking time out and then coming back in and so the lack of sort of time in terms of their progression," and other things, all of those things that they can talk about. When it comes to talking about race, there seems to be, all of a sudden it's a bit like, 'Why is this happening?' And no one wants to or would go there in terms of, people do sort of talk about institutional racism, and, you know, that's a conversation that institutions don't really want to have, so it becomes a bit more difficult (Black male, Russell Group, REC award holder)

For other participants, the dual focus on gender and race meant that other marginalised groups were unseen, or losing out on key resources and input:

Because we can see that generally, a lot of our protected characteristics are very happy. You know, religion, sexual orientation, they're all ok. But it's our disabled staff who are clearly not happy. And it does grate on me slightly that we're doing all of this stuff for gender and race when actually, things aren't perfect by any means but it's our disabled staff where we have real issues. (White female, post-1992, REC member)

In these responses, discussions of 'marginalised groups' and 'protected characteristics' show how the charter mark policy intersects with the Equalities Act, prompting measurements of multiple inequalities against each other. In part, as P28's response shows, the embedded institutional focus on gender equality as a consequence of ASC has sparked questions of what is left out of this equalities agenda. However, as the subsequent data excerpts demonstrate, the introduction of race as a second (and secondary) area of equalities focus for HEIs produces both discomfort around the confrontation of institutional racism, and a possible

justification for deflecting issues of racial inequality into other, seemingly more deserving, equality issues.

A single equalities charter mark

In part because of the ways that resources and time were seen to be unequally balanced between different marginalised groups, and in part because of the dual workload of the ASC and the REC, many participants discussed the possibility of a single equalities charter mark that might replace the current gender and race charter marks. For respondents like those above, who felt that some equalities characteristics were being overlooked in a focus on race and gender, the possibilities of a single charter mark were positive:

I think they could be put into one submission, because a lot of the recommendations you make around gender equality actually apply equally to race as well. So yeah, getting data is getting data, but I think it could be put into one submission, an equalities submission, rather than just ASC or REC. You could call it an equalities mark – especially if we're going to go down the lines of intersectionality, you know, we perhaps need to look at our wider equality credentials and just see what else we're doing as well. So I do think, I do think there is definitely scope to look at the whole thing, and to put it into an equalities submission. (Black male, red brick, ASC award holder)

Some participants drew on their experiences in other organisations and other sectors to show how single equalities frameworks might be successful.

I used to work for the [name of organisation] and they have one thing, called the Diversity Assessment Framework. It would be useful, I think for ECU to have a look at how that works. It's just diversity, and it is kind of, because they work all over the world and lots of countries are in different positions in terms of equality than others, so the goalposts are quite wide. But that concept, of a Diversity Assessment Framework is something that potentially could be adapted, rather than being about race, and about gender. Perhaps, later on, you might get an LGBT one, disability charter, how many different people are you going to employ to be able to essentially get that tick? (White female, post-1992, REC member)

However, some respondents also raised concerns about the possibility that, under a single equalities framework, the hard-won focus on race equality of the REC might be lost or diluted:

The other thing people talk about is, why not put it all together and just have one charter mark? But I'm not really in favour of that. I mean there's pros and cons with these things, but I think what you would find is, you just wouldn't have the focus and I think having that clear focus and being able to have those conversations about that single issue is really important, whereas it would be lost within a wider framework. (White male, Russell Group, REC award holder)

We want the specialist interest in race, because of the risk of dilution. We don't want to dilute race amongst all the other characteristics. (Asian female, plate glass, REC member)

The two opposing responses to the idea of a single equalities charter mark can be seen to represent two approaches to discussions of race. In the first response, race is characterised as one of multiple similar inequalities that can be addressed through a universal diversity agenda. In the second, there are specific inequalities associated with race that make race equality both crucial to focus on as a single issue, and vulnerable to becoming absorbed and silenced in a multiple equalities approach. Particularly given the chronological precedence of gender equalities work in HEIs, we argue that the more established, familiar and comfortable measures taken in addressing gender inequality would be likely to take priority in an already crowded equalities agenda.

The REC and geographical location

In discussions of the REC with respondents in the HEIs which were either just beginning or had not yet begun to engage with the charter mark, respondents expressed their uncertainty about the necessity of addressing race as an issue in their particular institutions. Often, the geographical location of the HEI referred to as a barrier or difficulty for their race equality work:

And when I looked at the results [of initial race equality data analysis], I thought to myself, I know obviously there is a university benchmark, but we've also got to consider where we're positioned, we're not an inner London university, our campuses are not in ethnically diverse places, so there's some relativity to that, I think. (White female, post-1992, REC member)

Respondents saw geographical location as affecting their race equality work in ways that did not impact on gender equality action:

On different applications the meaning of the REC in different institutions is actually going to be quite different, which probably it has to be, in as much as, you take a city like [this city] and its racial composition is going to be very different to Bradford or wherever, and so the goal is going to be very different. Whereas everywhere has pretty much the same proportions of men and women, so it's a different challenge. (White male, red brick, ASC Bronze Award Holder)

In one HEI, participating in the study as an ASC bronze award holding institution, a previously unsuccessful application for the REC was understood according to the specificity of their geographical location:

We think there was a lot of lack of understanding from the judging side about the [area of UK] context. There's only one institution in [area] that has got an award, and I've seen one of the other institution's submissions and it was really good. I thought their action plan was really good – it was better than ours, and so I don't know why then didn't get an award. But it was [university] and they're in a tiny, tiny town, and there aren't people of colour there, and so you know if you go there that it is a very White institution. It's difficult to give it the same context as Birmingham or London or Bristol. And we felt that that was something that the judges weren't understanding. (White female, Russell Group, ASC Bronze Award Holder)

There are two key ways in which a discourse of higher education geography is a false justification for shifting the equalities focus away from race. First, given the global marketplace in which HEIs position themselves (Marginson, 2016), it is contradictory that the same institutions were keen to locate themselves in specific areas of the country in which race has less relevance than it might otherwise. Historically, and particularly in elite UK universities, the relationship between a university and its immediate locality is questionable – the university is often seen as separate from its geographical area, despite recent policy efforts to incentivise community-university relationships (Chatterton, 2000). Secondly, there

is a perception in these excerpts of gender as a universal issue, in contrast to race which is a concern only where racial diversity already exists. There is a risk here that White-only academic spaces are perpetuated by the myth that this is the natural or given state of a particular academic space, and should only be more diverse, paradoxically, if it already is diverse. Despite the contradictions of the race-geography argument, it was common across our data set, and therefore clearly represents a convincing justification within equalities work for a shift away from addressing White privilege through the perception that race, in contrast to gender, is a niche or context-specific inequality.

Conclusions

Across our sample, it was clear that both the Athena SWAN and Race Equality charter marks offer an important framework for equalities work in UK universities. Respondents saw the charter marks as having enabled difficult conversations to take place, providing justification for the importance of undertaking work to address gender and racial inequalities in their institutions. In particular, the connection between the Athena SWAN award and medical research funding was seen as having made gender equality a priority. The result of this was that good practice for gender equality had become a standard item on meeting agenda and appointment panels, and data systems had improved so that metrics on gender in recruitment, promotion and retention were accessible and up to date. Department and School-level Athena SWAN awards were also identified as prompting localised as well as institution-wide changes to practice. Without the weight of a connection to research council funding or an established process of moving from institution-wide to department-level awards, the Race Equality Charter was nevertheless seen as a vital tool for negotiating the discomfort around

discussing issues of race in the workplace, with the gathering of triangulated data providing an evidence base from which to work.

However, a common perception of the REC was as an additional, often impossible, equalities workload, largely due to experiences of working on the ASC. As a consequence of this perception, HEIs responded by considering economising strategies such as combining roles focusing on race and gender, or arguing that the REC was less necessary in a particular institutional context. Given the potential, noted above, for the charter marks to enable difficult and necessary conversations on separate issues of gender and race equalities in universities, and given the particular discomfort of discussions of race and racism, we would see these economising strategies as a backwards step. Rather than approaching the REC with a logic of economising and efficiency, we would suggest that the REC requires significant investment of resources and time at institution-wide and localised levels, as has been shown to be effective in relation to the ASC.

Even if it is couched as a simple accident of timing and chronology, the effects of the introduction of the REC after the firm establishment of the ASC are that the REC is a second and secondary equalities priority. While institutions can claim to be working on structural inequality by focusing time, resources and attention on gender equality, there is little or no imperative to shift the focus to uncomfortable conversations about race and racism in the academy. The findings from these projects show how, as race is introduced, so is a weariness with the equalities agenda, an economising logic for diversity work, and justifications for inequalities more universal or more deserving than those of race. Given the stark and persistent racial inequalities in UK higher education, it is crucial that these inequalities are

not allowed to be conflated with or replaced by more familiar discussions around gender equality. Through such a conflation, HEIs could appear to be conducting work on redressing inequality, while ensuring that the very issues that exclude people of colour from the academy are further excluded from discussions within the academy.

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