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Equity in “Excellence” or just another tax on black skin?

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There is a cost to being Black in the UK: a tax on the colour of one’s skin. It is the price paid for others’ perceptions of what skin colour means about a person’s abilities, intentions or worth. Be it the extra hours spent unearthing opportunities of which they alone amongst white colleagues are unaware, or additional fears about how the world may hurt their loved ones; there is a skin tax and every Black person pays. They pay in poorer health, higher rates of litigation against them, and slower career advancement. These adverse impacts are well described;1-3 strategies to address them have been far too slow in coming.3

Since Mr Floyd’s death, UK higher education institutions have been hastily declaring their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Welcome as these declarations are, what is needed is concrete action that actively includes and responds to the voices of minorities themselves.

Therein lies a critical problem. How many institutions have effective mechanisms to capture and understand what Black and minority ethnicity academics have to say about their experiences?

The heavy burden of documentary evidence, implicit distrust of complainants’ accounts and inability to maintain confidentiality, mean that current Equality and Diversity procedures deal poorly with racism as it is most often experienced.4,5 The department head who, repeatedly, inaccurately and always in group settings, refers to a junior’s hair as “rastas,” makes that Black junior feel uncomfortable. How and to whom does the junior safely articulate this discomfort? How do we capture the effect of the head’s manner on the seriousness with which others view that junior, or its impact on that junior’s performance or trajectory? Yet it is specifically those uncomfortable and difficult-to-measure moments and processes that require action.

Tools exist than can be adapted to measure racism and unconscious bias within institutions,6-8 but who is going to pay for the effort required to make change meaningful? Despite their declarations of solidarity, will universities, still reeling from the financial impact of COVID-19, actually commit adequate resources?

Institutions pay for that which is valued. The Research Excellence Framework (REF 2021) drives UK university rankings. Based on their REF2021 submissions, institutions will be scored in three areas: outputs, impact and environment. Outputs (e.g. publications) account for 60% of the overall score; environment for 15%.9 The submission guidance includes multiple statements about equality and diversity.9 For example, publications and grant income will be analysed by ethnicity and gender, but it is unclear how, or if, this will influence university scores. Narrative submissions about institutional equality and diversity will be assessed under “environment” but have no requirement for data about how minorities *experience* those environments. Nor is it clear what fraction of the 15% available will be determined by equality and diversity. This is of particular concern because easy-to-quantify and high-priority indicators such as grant income and post-graduate degrees are also assessed under “environment”.

Proportionate representation is key to equity. Whilst the active involvement of an Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel in REF 2021 is welcome, of the nine academics on this 14-person panel, seven are White and two are Asian; none are Black.10

Participation of Black and minority ethnicity academics in efforts to promote equity in universities is key if the subtle but powerful processes of racism are really to be addressed. That participation will have a cost. Black academics are few.11 Given the scale of the problem and the paucity of their number, the opportunity cost for Black academics of engaging in such activities is potentially vast. The current fresh recognition of the need to act against racism therefore places new pressures on Black academics. If care is not taken, it will be just another tax on their skin.

Prevailing notions of research “excellence” promote “destructive hyper-competition, toxic power dynamics and poor leadership behaviour”.12 In academic environments that reward competition and aggression and de-incentivise collaboration and citizenship, the price for Black academics of engagement in pro-equity activities could be career suicide. To avoid this, skills contributed, and effort expended in such activities must be recognised in the hard currency of career advancement. Measures of unconscious bias and indicators of toxic environments such as high staff turnover must be reported and scrutinised as part of university assessments. Safe spaces and procedures which allow staff to speak candidly about their experiences must be created. In short, valid measures of equity informed by the lived experiences of the minorities working in those institutions must be given sufficient weight to affect institutional rankings.

Real change will therefore require a radical review of what research “excellence” really means. It will require recognition that action to improve fairness has value and must be rewarded; that there can be no “excellence” without equity; and that research innovation bought with bullying, prejudice and exclusion is simply not worth the price.

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