

For Equality, Against the Race Equality Charter

A response from *Don't Divide Us!* to Advance HE's Race Equality Charter for universities

Advance HE's [Race Equality Charter](#) provides a framework through which universities are to 'work to identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff and students'. DDU Academics are a group of academics working in the university sector, aligned with the [Don't Divide Us](#) campaign. We believe that the Race Equality Charter is more likely to promote division than the worthy aim of equality on campus. Also, by endorsing particular, contested views, it will limit discussion of a range of important issues relating to race and racism.



What is the Race Equality Charter?

The Charter comes from an organisation called [Advance HE](#). Advance HE is a publicly funded organisation playing the role of a 'single sector agency for equality and diversity, learning and teaching, and leadership and governance in higher education'. Advance HE currently provides training on a range of issues, including equality and diversity, to universities, and through that shapes important agendas. The Race Equality Charter credentialises universities who can meet Advance HE's standards in the area of race equality.

The Charter makes some laudable statements in its [general principles](#). It holds that: 'UK higher education cannot reach its full potential unless it can benefit from the talents of the whole population and until individuals from all ethnic backgrounds can benefit equally from the opportunities it affords.' We wholeheartedly agree. But it prescribes certain approaches to the issue, and in doing so is prejudicial to other viewpoints, with a consequent threat to free speech. It assumes a picture of university life characterised by racial divisions, a picture we do not recognise. Most importantly, Advance HE's remedies are more likely to create division than tackle inequality.

Why we are challenging it

We are a group of academics, diverse in our racial / ethnic and political backgrounds. Some of us have been involved in campaigning on the issue of race for equal rights and equal treatment. Some of us are from liberal and conservative political traditions, and others from the Left of politics. We share the view that the Race Equality Charter is a potential threat to the gains made in racial equality in universities and in society, and also a threat to free speech and academic freedom. The politics behind the Charter divides us and endorses contested views when we should be celebrating what we have in common, fostering equality and cultivating openness.

The following is based on the training currently provided by Advance HE and guidance relating to the Race Equality Charter. We have outlined the key ideas that feature in the thinking behind the Charter, and provided a snapshot of our criticisms. It is concerning that in some cases simply holding the critical views we cite could bring a student or academic into conflict with an institution or employer adopting the Race Equality Charter.

[Note that throughout we have used the term ‘black’ in the sense of a political category, referring to anyone who may potentially be subject to discrimination based on skin colour. This avoids various issues with ‘BAME’ and other terms based on ethnic / racial identity].

Structural racism

Advance HE believes UK universities are [structurally racist](#). One of three key quotes set out under the heading ‘Is structural racism present in higher education?’ is academic Kehinde Andrews’s statement that ‘universities are institutionally racist spaces that have had a historic role in producing the knowledge that racism is based on.’ A second is ‘Why is my University White?’ from a 2014 University College London student campaign. Both of these are contested views of the modern university, presented by Advance HE without a counter position and as an orthodoxy. Yet the recent government report of the [Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](#) stated that the phrase ‘structural racism’ has been ‘too liberally used’ and that there is no longer ‘a system rigged against minorities’. One does not have to agree with either view to see that the starting position adopted by Advance HE is, whilst legitimate, also partial and contested. The existence of structural racism is a plausible view held by many. Yet so are the views of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, and those of others.

We propose that universities, as institutions, should not take sides on the question of structural or institutional racism. Academics and students should be able to articulate heterodox views without being pitted against their employer and university. It is only institutional neutrality that guarantees individual intellectual freedom, and intellectual freedom has always been necessary to advance the cause of equality. The Race Equality Charter has the potential to chill free speech.

Decolonise the university

‘Decolonise the university’ refers to the various ways some feel the legacy of colonialism shapes university life today. Campaigns to decolonise the curriculum, and to remove statues and rename buildings in the name of decolonising the university, have attracted a great deal of publicity in recent years. Advance HE supports the ‘decolonise’ approach. We disagree with many of the campaigns to decolonise the university, whilst sharing the equality aims they sometimes express. We object to the formal adoption of these campaigns by universities and departments, and the role of the Race Equality Charter in mandating this. We are particularly concerned about the negative impact this will have on the academic freedom of dissenting voices.

The philosophy underlying decolonise the university campaigns is broadly that of ‘decolonialism’. This holds that historically different societies developed different ‘ways of knowing’ or ‘systems of knowledge’, and that some of these knowledge systems (those of the colonised) were prevented from developing by others (those of the colonisers). We hold knowledge to be universal, the product of a conversation across cultures, time and space. Large swathes of the globe – predominantly inhabited by black people – were denied a role in this conversation, hence often scientific advances have been concentrated in economically advanced - predominantly white - countries. But for us, this reaffirms the need to ensure wider and more equal access to the whole spectrum of human knowledge and skills. Disaggregating knowledge on the basis of identity divides and denies all of us the capacity to appropriate and develop the best of human knowledge and endeavour. It is an [approach](#) that is more likely to hold back black people than benefit them.

We dispute the progressive credentials associated with decolonising the university. Whilst this outlook will be affirmed as a formal value and anti-racist orthodoxy by the Race Equality Charter, it was in fact the ideals of the Enlightenment that formed the basis for two centuries of anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles. These humanist ideals of universal equal rights and freedom were not acted upon or realised

in their time, but have been invoked in slave revolts, anti-colonial struggles, democratic movements and famously by Martin Luther King in his 1963 'I have a dream' speech. These ideas were no more or less 'colonial', 'western' or 'white' than critical race theory or other ideas favoured by Advance HE. We concur with philosopher [Anthony Appiah](#): 'When people speak, they speak ideas, not identity. The truth value of what you say is not indexed to your identity. If you're making a bad argument, it's a bad argument. It's not bad because of the identity of the person making it.'

We oppose the trend to rename buildings and remove statues in the name of decolonising the university. All intellectual achievements and new ideas are of their time. This means that many of the most notable politicians, scientists, engineers, artists and philosophers held ideas that were commonplace in their day but are rightly viewed as racist now. It is understandable that people today would want to distance themselves from those views. But by removing statues and changing the names of university buildings we also delete from our culture the historical achievements, events and figures that have shaped a world we inhabit in common. Universities have a duty to recognise this legacy from the past and ensure that our intellectual culture, and the making of the future, can draw upon it. The idea that a Scottish university should disassociate itself from David Hume, a leading figure of the Scottish Enlightenment and of the history of philosophy itself, by changing the name of [David Hume Tower](#), is a clear example of the narrow presentism that at times shapes decolonise campaigns.

We oppose institutional demands that academics must [decolonise the curriculum](#). The strength of ideas and the quality of art are the criteria for inclusion in the canon or the curriculum. Arab philosophers, working class poets and female geographers may well be amongst the beneficiaries of curriculum reviews, but their identity is entirely secondary to their ideas. It is only around a shared recognition that we seek the very best knowledge and techniques that we can judge what should or should not be included in the curriculum. Diversity of thought is not diversity of identity, unless we adopt the trope, itself potentially racist, that black people should think the same way or relate better to ideas that come from someone with whom they share skin pigmentation or ancestry.

We propose that curricula should be determined by academics for the courses they run. Whilst open discussion of what constitutes the best books and sources is always a good thing, no one should be, or feel, compelled to amend their curricula or reading lists to meet today's demands to decolonise. Academic freedom includes teaching, and therefore reading lists and curricula. This should be affirmed by universities.

We propose UK universities should be encouraged, and funded, to develop and deepen links with universities in economically poorer countries, including former colonies. The government's new [Turing scheme](#) could be a mechanism for this. Through this, scholars from the global South should be enabled to access skills, knowledge and resources from more wealthy UK universities, based on the priorities and interests of the former. Through these partnerships knowledge can be shared and long term commitments developed. Staff and students on both sides can become more informed about differences and commonalities in culture and history, and contemporary challenges can be viewed from different nations' perspectives. We should promote, and fund, a more internationally oriented intellectual life to forge a common future.

We propose that statues and the names of buildings be retained and the history they represent studied.

White privilege

Advance HE endorses the notion of 'white privilege'. This idea is associated with critical race theory, as it assumes the primacy of race in shaping our experiences. Notice that it is 'white privilege' rather than

'class privilege' or simply 'privilege acquired through being born into wealth' that dominates the 'privilege' discussion. Many universities have already endorsed the salience of 'white privilege'. Many run training sessions so that their white staff and students can examine, acknowledge and act upon their 'white privilege'. Advance HE provide and endorse such training.

The notion of white privilege holds that the colour of your skin acts as an advantage as you go through life – like 'an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks' according to [Peggy MacIntosh](#). This obliges white people to acknowledge and 'work on' their privilege. This in turn involves unpacking the knapsack: thinking through actions and thoughts and giving up some of that privilege.

Disagreement with the usefulness of 'white privilege' often leads into a Kafkaesque trap. Contesting the concept's utility readily invites the charge of defensiveness or 'white fragility' – to disagree is to be in denial of your 'white privilege' (if you are black and disagree you may be accused of being in denial, or even of acting as a '[racial gatekeeper](#)'). This perspective is set out in the 2018 book [White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism](#) by Robin Di Angelo, whose ideas are [contested](#) but nonetheless shape Advance HE's thinking and numerous training programmes being taken up by universities.

Of course some people have certain advantages in certain situations by virtue of their colour – racism exists. But these situations have diminished as society has become more tolerant. Why is racial privilege more important than, say, class privilege, or the privilege an individual may have through birth, upbringing or a good education? Why should a white student from a poor background be educated about their white privilege by comfortably off senior academics? Why should a black student feel their new white friend is privileged over them simply on account of their colour? The focus on privilege assigned to identity groups based on colour writes out the individual – we are encouraged to view others and ourselves in the classroom, the canteen and the sports field, through the prism of race. This risks the [racialisation](#) of campus life, something that is having very detrimental impacts in the [US context](#), including in some cases the introduction of [segregated spaces](#) and dorms.

Telling young people they are either 'white privileged' (even though they may be from a deprived background) or that they are the victims of 'white privilege' (even though many do not see themselves in this way) does nothing to challenge prejudice. In fact, it will encourage division. It will dampen the exciting experience of going to university. Should a young white woman, as Reni Eddo-Lodge suggests in her 2017 book [Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race](#), reflect upon her white privilege as she negotiates a relationship with a young black man? Better we confront one another as individuals, not repositories of identities marking differing levels of privilege - better for education, better for intellectual and professional relationships, better for friendships.

We propose that universities, and government, look at ensuring that financial assistance based on income and circumstances is adequate so that no one qualified to study lacks the time and resources they need. This will benefit people in proportion to their socio-economic circumstances, and hence will disproportionately benefit black students.

In the name of challenging 'white privilege' many universities promote anti-racist reading lists. These lists invariably include books that align with the concept of 'white privilege' without any contrary view. We think that there is no justification for universities to champion ideas on such a partial basis. **We propose** these reading lists, if issued, should aim to prompt thinking and discussion by reflecting the heterodox views that exist amongst academics and students, and in society.

Critical race theory

[Universities UK](#) produced a report in late 2020 that endorsed critical race theory (along with the other terms reviewed here). We [challenged the report](#). For the main organisation of the leaders of the university sector to appear to adopt a particular and contested framework for understanding race and racism in this way is unprecedented. We note that many universities have subsequently praised or adopted the report as shaping their work on equality. [Advance HE](#) suggest critical race theory is one of the three key ways to understand the issue of race, along with intersectionality and decolonising.

Critical race theory originated in legal studies. It poses the important question as to why in a society with formal equality before the law, racism still continues. Racism is deemed to be so deeply rooted in society and in individuals that formally equal rights – including equality before the law, equality in the workplace and free speech – are viewed not as an expression of, and means to, equality and freedom, but as part of a system upholding ‘white supremacy’. On this basis adherents to critical race theory often decry the value of free speech which they feel leads to voices (black and white) that are part of the system of white supremacy dominating public discourse.

But the rights that critical race theory decries as part of a system of oppression were fought for and won by oppressed and disadvantaged communities, and have led to great advances in equality. These universal rights – to vote, to speak freely, to expect equal pay and treatment in employment - have created a society far more egalitarian, and one in which a ‘colour blind’ approach is more productive and reflects the lives most people lead. For us, ‘colour blind’ does not mean we do not see colour and recognise that racism exists on that basis, but that we do not see colour as important in *defining a person’s politics or cultural outlook*.

Critical race theory is *a* theory, not *the* theory of race and racism. It is presented via the Race Equality Charter and Advance HE as orthodoxy. It is a popular theory, advocated by many black and white academics. But it is opposed by black and white academics too. Political outlooks on race cut across identity groups - all groups contain heterodox views. Of course there should be no bans on critical race theory – it is rightly protected as part of universities’ commitment to academic freedom. Equally, there should be no institutional endorsement of critical race theory. This limits dissent, as dissenters and doubters – staff or students - find themselves in conflict with their university’s or employer’s stated values.

Others emphasise that critical race theory contributes to a [racialising of university campuses](#) and society in general – at a time when the UK is more tolerant and pro equality than ever before, race is once again presented to us as a central feature of [pedagogy](#), encounters between students and staff, and knowledge itself.

We propose that universities should promote discussion on the themes of race. These could look at how the issue was seen in the past (critical race theory is different from the view of many anti-racist movements of the past). It could present advocates of critical race theory, such as [Gurminder Bhambra](#), in conversation with critics, such as [Kenan Malik](#). Rather than partisan reading lists presented to students as a semi-official institutional line, contrasting readings could open up a discussion. [Ibram X. Kendi](#) and [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) (sympathetic to critical race theory) could be paired with [Glenn Loury](#) and [Coleman Hughes](#) (critical of the theory) (you’ll find the former pair on many university equality and diversity reading lists, but never the latter). We think it is entirely in the interests of the fiercest adherent to critical race theory to avoid their views being the endorsed, official line of their employer or institution. As J.S. Mill pointed out, ideas protected from critique can easily

become 'dead dogmas' held by self-referential thinkers, shielded from questioning in an intellectual bubble.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is one of the [five key principles](#) of the Race Equality Charter, which states: 'All individuals have multiple identities, and the intersection of those different identities should be considered wherever possible.' The term originates with [Kimberlé Crenshaw](#), a civil rights activist and legal scholar, who in 1989 wrote about how traditional feminist ideas and antiracist policies exclude black women who face overlapping forms of discrimination unique to them. This is an important legal discussion, and indeed within society at large.

An article produced for [Advance HE](#) refers to intersectionality as 'the understanding that social inequalities are not experienced as unitary exclusive phenomenon of race, class, age, gender, sexuality, ability, and other aspects of social position but as mutually constituting or reciprocally constructed phenomenon. It rejects the idea of defining human experience on the basis of a singular identity or category of difference and assuming the primary importance of one category.' Whilst we agree with this, and also reject the idea of 'defining human experience on the basis of a singular identity category', there is a danger that viewing the individual as a product of myriad intersecting identity categories also writes out the individual – putting people in many overlapping boxes is little better than putting them in one.

For example, in a section on [intersectionality](#) on their web site, Advance HE assert that 'the experiences of, and outcomes within, higher education will be very different for a Black woman compared to a White woman'. But we can only assume this to be the case if we have decided, *a priori*, that being white or black are important prisms through which women interpret their experiences. This is not a safe assumption and does not resonate with all women. Even the most sophisticated analysis of intersecting identity categories can downplay the most important aspect of identity: the aspirations of the individual. Without that, black people can easily be painted as victims of circumstance rather than aspirant and ambitious individuals. White people are portrayed as carriers of attitudes born of white privilege that they must check, rather than individuals for whom colour may be irrelevant in their friendships and professional relationships. Applicants for the Race Equality Charter are invited to increasingly view people, collect data, and develop policies based on this view of intersectionality.

In adopting intersectionality as a point of principle, universities, in the context of the Race Equality Charter more generally, are affirming and promoting an identity-based conception of university life, rather than one that emphasises the individual. Yet it is as individuals that courage, determination and desire shape how people forge a sense of themselves in relation to their studies and society. Not only will the reporting and data requirements of the Charter be intrusive and burdensome, but they will assign importance to categories that simply do not reflect how many people see themselves.

We propose that, as is currently the case, intersectionality is a term used, advocated and critiqued in our universities. Like other terms, it should not be presented as an orthodoxy through institutional endorsement.

Unconscious bias training

We note that many universities offer or mandate unconscious bias training and similar. In their efforts to obtain the Race Equality Charter from Advance HE - an organisation partial to and involved in delivering unconscious bias training - this may become the norm.

'Unconscious bias' is an idea drawn from psychology. It holds that we all have unconscious biases, and therefore whilst we may think we are not biased against other groups, we are wrong. Unconscious bias training is effectively a form of therapy whereby we are encouraged to think about our biases and how we might come to recognise them. It holds that racial bias is rooted deep in our psyche, and we need professional help to root it out.

We question this psychologisation of racism. In the past racism was understood as a political issue to be considered and countered politically, not through expensive training or therapy with a [dubious record](#) and [contested psychological foundation](#). We note that some [psychologists](#) see a real danger in therapeutic techniques that assume the politics of 'white privilege' as unconscious bias does. Arguably it encourages us to conceive of our actions as being those of a 'white person' or 'black person', rather than those of us as individuals fully responsible for what we say or do.

We propose that universities stop unconscious bias training. At a minimum, no one should feel in any way compelled to undergo such training – it should have no bearing on promotion, work role or teaching credentials. The money saved can be used to materially benefit poorer students. This is a view echoed by the government's [Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities](#) report.

Micro-aggressions

Advance HE are in favour of formalising 'micro-aggressions' as a part of a strategy to promote equality. We believe that the rise of micro-aggressions as a focus for concern is unjustified and has the potential to divide people. It encourages us to view any perceived slight or snub through the prism of race or another protected identity characteristic.

Guidelines and policies on 'micro-aggressive' speech and even gesture are becoming common. We support the [Cambridge University academics](#) who protested their university's adoption of a list of micro-aggressions - including the raising of an eyebrow at a black student - and its invitation to report transgressors. But this is not an isolated case. To be accused of a micro-aggression could lead to lengthy, intrusive investigations culminating in action up to and including dismissal at many UK universities.

The institutionalisation of micro-aggressions is insidious. The [University of Edinburgh](#)'s code includes advice on 'micro-insults' such as saying to a black person that 'you are aggressive', and 'microinvalidations' including 'I'm sure they didn't mean anything by that' or 'your colour doesn't matter to me, everyone's human'. Many find this nonsensical and patronising. Black people, like anyone else, can be aggressive. This micro-management of language and gesture encourages us to check ourselves before we speak for fear of causing 'micro-offence'. The range and subjective nature of microaggressions means that people may well refrain from welcome conversations, needed interventions, and even striking up friendships, for fear of breaching guidelines. A culture that polices language and even gesture in this way is likely to close down the conviviality and openness that is so important on a university campus and in life generally.

Our criticism of micro-aggressions has nothing to do with downplaying the seriousness of racist abuse. Black supporters of Don't Divide Us, like many other black people, have experienced abuse based on their colour. When it occurs, all of us have a duty to challenge it. But policies around micro-aggressions problematise and pathologise wholly innocent and even friendly actions as racial insults. They also imply micro-aggressions are on a continuum with actual racial abuse, which we feel can devalue the latter.

One of our group has witnessed a university investigation involving two staff, each accusing the other of a micro-aggression based on a separate protected characteristic, in one case, race. A disagreement, a sharp word and an abrupt response, became a matter of race and sexuality, with no evidence that either party thought ill of the other based on these respective characteristics. Alongside the unfortunate reinterpretation of everyday interactions along racial lines, this instance also illustrates the potential for intrusive policing of language and gesture to act as a form of divide and rule in the workplace. If we are predisposed to view others as potential micro-aggressors, solidarity around issues of workload or actual discrimination will suffer.

We propose that there should be no codes or sanctions for micro-aggressions. Rudeness, snubs, misunderstandings and wholly innocent questions are better dealt with by individuals without recourse to divisive interventions.

The politics of identity

Advance HE's approach is indicative of today's identity politics. An indication of this is found in their training module '[decolonising identity](#)'. The module assumes that 'structural inequality forces people to mask their authentic identity and reinforces white privilege'. It explores 'how to be authentic in different spaces and the tensions that can arise', and 'what do staff and students of colour truly need from white colleagues'. The module builds on a particular model that includes the concept 'Expedient Agency' which refers to '[r]ecognition people of colour have to change/adapt to the circumstance in order to succeed (i.e. become inauthentic) e.g. changing accent, clothes, hairstyles, behaviours'. Further, staff will be taught about 'White Sanction' which refers to when '[p]eople of colour have to rely on white people to broker for them. White people are the gamekeepers who use their privilege to 'help' people of colour'.

We find this patronising and not reflective of the generally accepting, tolerant and friendly culture on campus. It is clear that Advance HE look upon relationships between academics, managers and students through the prism of colour. We believe that whilst racism exists, the vast majority of people view others first and foremost as individuals. We object to universities aligning themselves with contested, divisive values that are not reflective of the vast majority of interactions, professional or personal, on campus. The politics of identity in its various forms, manifest in the various terms and concepts we have briefly critiqued here, are wholly legitimate positions and philosophies. But it is not legitimate for universities to effectively mandate these positions at an institutional level. Staff and students who perceive these ideas to be divisive, have not considered them, or who simply are unsure what they think, should be free to explore and hold alternative views. This is vital in a university.

Against the Race Equality Charter, for equality

Racism remains an issue in the UK. The UK and its universities have become more tolerant, equal and accepting. Both of these statements are true. The advances have come about through the struggles, both political and personal, of black people and anti-racist campaigners. They have come through struggles for equal rights, and also through everyday solidarities of men and women in the context of their daily lives. In a university young people pursue knowledge and skills, aspirations and dreams. It is a unique part of the lives of many as they venture away from the authority of home and school, without yet having fully entered the labour market and hoped for careers. University provides an environment in which they will meet many new people from many different backgrounds. This presents new opportunities for relationships, discovery, intellectual development and, simply, fun.

The Race Equality Charter divides us, and prejudices these positive things. Through endorsing 'decolonise' it takes the view we respond to different pedagogies and judge knowledge and the

curriculum based on race. Through endorsing 'micro-aggressions' it encourages us to interpret innocent, everyday interactions as potentially racially problematic, diminishing the conviviality and openness of campus life. Its advocacy of 'white privilege' and critical race theory views race as strongly affecting our chances in life, when for most, myriad other influences are more important. Unconscious bias training presents the issues of race as an unconscious prejudice that all white individuals hold, denying both individuality and, when it occurs, racism as the conscious decision of an individual for which they should be held to account. The Race Equality Charter divides. In mandating a particular approach to race and racism at an institutional level, it prejudices the academic freedom and freedom of speech of those – lecturers, students or support staff – who take a different view.

We call upon university Vice-Chancellors and everyone in our universities to reject the Race Equality Charter in the interests of academic freedom, free speech, equality and unity.

Don't Divide Us!

Contact us via <https://dontdivideus.com/> or at team@dontdivideus.com