

## **Prefiguring the anti-racist university: A systems change approach to the Race Equality Charter**

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper I set out three methodological approaches to enable the conduct of the Race Equality Charter (REC) to prefigure the systems change that will make the process of racial equity meaningful. Systems change has been a lens which has gained popularity as a principle of social change in recent years but has yet to be applied to institutional racial equality. My argument here is that how REC is done is as important as the work involved itself; it can either prefigure systems change or it can reproduce existing patterns of domination and disadvantage. Adopting a 'prefigurative' methodological approach will enable the transformative transfer of resources and knowledge to people of colour in higher education and catalyse a mindset shift which can sustain the process of racial equity in the long term.*

Keywords: Race Equality Charter, diversity and inclusion, institutional racism, systems change.

### **Introduction**

There is strong evidence of sector-wide institutional racism in Higher Education (HE), affecting both staff and students. According to Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) research, academics of colour often have to wait longer than White colleagues for promotion and are on more precarious, fixed term contracts (ECU, 2016; Pilkington, 2013). Academics of colour continue to be disadvantaged in relation to promotion (Pilkington, 2013), to be underrepresented at senior levels, where "snowy peak syndrome" remains stubbornly in place, and subject to disproportionate levels of harassment and bullying (Arday 2018; Gabriel and Tate, 2018). Universities also employ more Black staff as cleaners, administrators and porters than as academics (Adams, 2017). Only 25 Black African women are employed as professors in the UK (ECU, 2016).

The growing attention to questions of race equality after the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has led to a surge of race equality regulation and attempts at accreditation to industry wide race equality standards and benchmarks. In HE that takes the form of the Race Equality Charter (REC), administered by Advance HE.

While there has been some limited attention to the process and form of race equality accreditation (Bhopal et al., 2018; Bhopal and Henderson, 2019; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020) far less attention has been played to the role of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff involved in that process, the impact of involvement on them personally and professionally, and the methodological approach which HEIs should adopt in order to reduce the burden on BAME staff involved in similar accreditation processes.

In this article, I propose that attention to what I have termed a prefigurative methodology, grounded in a systems change approach, can lay the groundwork for REC, and other such accreditation processes, to yield meaningful systems change. I review the extant literature on REC, outline the principle behind systems change and prefigurative praxis, and then go on to suggest two key tenets of a prefigurative methodology for the enactment of the REC. The paper concludes with a call for all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to approach REC with a prefigurative mindset in order to build trust with BAME staff in their institutions and to lead to material change.

### **The Race Equality Charter**

The latest framework to tackle institutional racism in academia is the Race Equality Charter (REC) which bestows the Race Equality Charter Mark (RECM) on HEIs who successfully apply to each of its three levels (bronze, silver and gold). In their own words, Advance HE state that the REC:

*“...provides a framework through which institutions work to identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of minority ethnic staff and students. Member institutions develop initiatives and solutions for action, and can apply for a Bronze or Silver REC award, depending on their level of progress.”* (Advance HE, 2020, np).

The REC was introduced in 2014 and was intended as a counterpart to the Athena SWAN Charter. The main objective of the REC was not to remove institutional racism in toto, but instead to improve the representation and progression of minority ethnic staff and students in HEIs (Bhopal et al., 2018).

The REC is underpinned by five key principles:

- Recognising that racism is part of everyday life and racial inequalities manifest themselves in everyday situations, processes and behaviours;
- Individuals from all ethnic backgrounds should benefit equally from the opportunities available to them;
- Solutions to racial inequality should have a long-term impact through institutional culture change;
- Recognising that those from minority ethnic backgrounds are not a

homogenous group and such complexity must be recognised when exploring race equality;

- Intersectional identities should be considered when discussing race equality.

Compared to Athena Swan, the REC has been taken up relatively slowly by UK HEIs (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020). Explanations for the slow take up include the (current) disconnection between the REC and funding, unlike Athena Swan. Also race equality has not had the same sustained attention or resources as gender equality, and there are perceptions that HEIs are worried that by applying for RECM they will expose racial disparities among both staff and student bodies, with knock on consequences for league table standings and ultimately student recruitment.

### **Criticism of the REC**

Critical race theorists in the UK have been sceptical of new equality frameworks, describing them as marketised efforts to offer a veneer of respectability to universities which are not genuinely interested in challenging institutional racism or the White power which animates them (Dar and Ibrahim, 2019). Relatedly, researchers have pointed to the “terrors of performativity” as a consequence of the neo-liberal marketisation of higher education (Ball, 2003). Performativity is described as “a technology” or a “culture and mode of regulation” that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of incentive, control, attrition and change” (Ball, 2003: 216). Performativity is used as a facade for real change and challenges to incumbent power which sustains disadvantage. It is for that reason that Ball insists we must pay close attention to the enactment of policy and policy making (such as the REC) which itself reflects a wider pattern of social and cultural behaviour (Maguire et al., 2015). In this vein, Bhopal and Pitkin caution that “the performativity of the REC and its enactment in higher education, work to enhance the reputation of HEIs rather than to address and tackle structural disadvantages faced by BAME groups in HEIs” (2020: 543). A more profound criticism is that the REC will not disturb patterns of domination and disadvantage, leading neither to transfers of authority or resources to people of colour, to policies which will have a long-term impact on student performance (such as the attainment gap) or the necessary dismantling of White privilege (ibid.). Such criticisms are linked to the narrow scope of REC, with its focus on racial disparities rather than institutional racism. For these scholars, the REC is doomed to failure because it fails to confront whiteness and White privilege (Dar and Ibrahim, 2019).

### **Systems Change**

Here, I argue that a useful interrogative lens on the REC, responding to critiques from Critical Race Theory (CRT), is systems change. One way to productively move beyond superficial efforts is to view race equality accreditation through the lens of systems change. Though it has a long academic tradition, systems change

has only recently grown popularity in formal social change institutions as a way to achieve enduring impact (Kania et al., 2018).

Systems change is a way of understanding social change, both at an international, national, local and organisational level (Zhao, 2020). While there is no agreed upon definition of a system since it conceptually spans geography, sociology and environmental studies, I adopt a definition of a system as an interconnected set of elements, coherently assembled. Systems are permeable and dynamic (they can change over time), and they can also be nested within other systems (such as individual universities nested in the HE system). The definition of *systems change* adopted by this paper is grounded in ongoing discussions in the field of social innovation, where it is understood as a collective process designed to alter the inter-element relationships of an extant system related to a social problem (Green, 2016; Meadows, 2008).

Any given system has the following elements: actor, relationship, resource, roles and norms. These, in turn, can act as constraints on systems change, particularly when inter-element relationships are characterised by power imbalances, knowledge gaps and embedded social narratives (Kania et al., 2018). The actor element refers to 'focal' populations affected by a social problem (BAME staff and students) but also includes junior, middle and senior leadership, as well as external governors, employers and parents.

Relationships refer to the dynamics between stakeholders, which are often characterised by imbalances and asymmetries. The resource element describes how resources (in a HE context this might mean research funding, but also pay and workload relief) are allocated and exchanged. Rules refer to the formal rules of the system, such as policies which define and regulate behaviour and relationships (such as harassment policies and promotion regulations which either disadvantage or support minority groups). Norms describes institutional values and cultural norms that work either to incentivise, punish and constrain the behaviour of actors. Although these elements can be independently analysed, they are also often mutually reinforced (Thorpe, 2014; Vexler, 2017).

While systems are dynamic, and elements are intrinsically interconnected, it is possible to see how they might be disentangled with the purpose of making effective interventions. For example, interventions which seek to transform resources, relationships and even rules might be considered 'first level', while those which target worldview and moral assumptions might alter 'second level' systems elements which effectively 'order', give meaning to and guide first level system elements. In HE, an example would be how neoliberal ideologies have led to marketisation, dramatically reconfiguring the relationship between students and lecturers, as well as the allocation of resources from research towards the student experience (Radice, 2013).

## Prefiguration

I join this notion of systems change with the concept of prefigurative action. While they may seem disparate, I am using it in the sense that radical change - exactly what REC is intended to usher in - demands that the means is just as important as the end. While the literature on prefigurative action and politics is large and diverse, stemming from research into anticapitalist and anarchist social movements, it derives from the notion of prefiguration: to anticipate or enact some feature of an alternative world in the present, as though it has already been achieved (Yates, 2015). Prefigurative action presumes that the opportunity to act out a vision, and a new set of relations, is just as important as the objective of social change (Epstein, 1991, 123).

Jivraj uses a similar concept in the context of her own student-staff decolonising praxis as an academic of colour. As she describes, such praxis and action are not necessarily end-goals in and of themselves, but “part of a self-liberatory process” which facilitates the “re-existence of people of colour in the Academy” (2020: 3). In her words, it allows for the “constructing of paths and praxis towards an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing and living, that is both resistance and re-existence” (ibid.: 4).

This article argues that the REC will only create long term change if careful attention is paid to its enactment so that it can prefiguratively create the micro-dynamics which show that systems change is possible - and ultimately that White power and privilege will be confronted. I argue that if REC can be conducted with a prefigurative enactment in mind it will not only encourage many people of colour in HEIs to participate, but it will instill a wider confidence that the institution is committed to long term transformation.

### First level systems change: shifting ownership of the Race Equality Charter

*“The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.”* (Lorde, 1984).

The first prefigurative methodological change involves a ‘first level systems change’: reconfiguring power dynamics in inequitable systems. That’s easier said than done in universities, which are uniquely (and often anachronistically) hierarchical entities. The scarcity of BAME staff in the higher echelons of leadership structures only heightens the power asymmetries between ethnic majorities and minorities. In such organisations, power tends to flow downwards and not upwards; the interests of BAME staff, who tend to occupy positions towards the lower end of the organisational hierarchy are consequently rarely represented in managerial decision-making (Kania et al., 2018).

When it comes to equality initiatives such as the REC, flows of power and authority are complex. There is course significant evidence that the involvement of senior

leadership as sponsors and executive leads on equality charter marks is vital (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019, 33). When senior leaders are involved in equality charter mark applications, including as chairs of self-assessment committees, it sends an unequivocal signal that the university takes the process seriously, and is willing to invest the time of senior leaders in that endeavour rather than deploying those resources elsewhere. Senior leaders (whether they are pro-vice chancellors or deans) also have an institutional overview. As chairs, they are also able to bring findings and recommendations to the highest-level decision-making forums, increasing the likelihood that policies and mindset transformation occur at an all-university level.

At the same time, CRT perspectives would suggest that when the REC itself is explicitly written by White majority academics including those from senior leadership teams, it will inevitably reflect the interests of the White majority, and where the executive or editorial process is wholly owned by White senior management, there is little effective scope for co-creation. In their interviews with staff involved in REC across 24 institutions, Bhopal and Pitkin found that some respondents described high profile celebratory events for REC being performed as a “song and dance” (2020: 537). So, while having a senior leader as a symbolic figurehead has undoubted merits, from a prefigurative systems level perspective it is vital that people of colour participate in active executive roles in order to undo the nexus between policy enactment and White privilege.

At the moment however, there are three major problems with how BAME staff tend to be incorporated into REC and other initiatives. Firstly, BAME staff are often brought in to play ‘informant’ roles: to talk about their lived experience and their experiences of racism to a panel of head-nodding White staff who take their testimony as ‘evidence’. If BAME staff are treated that way, as data sources and informants rather than as architects and designers of policy, then their leadership capabilities are effectively devalued (Sandhu, 2016). It reproduces a system of power ‘over’ rather than power ‘with’. The result is the perpetuation of White privilege and hierarchies of agency. By contrast, for BAME staff- especially female BAME staff- to occupy decision making, institution shaping roles would mark a decisive prefigurative break to those hierarchies.

Secondly, there is a long history of BAME staff being used in race equality meetings as “representational abstractions” (Dar and Ibrahim, 2019, 33). There are long standing issues with tokenistic colour-washing or “image inclusion”, symptomatic of a “badge culture” which can performatively mislead about the progress made by HEIs. Historically, white equality schemes have worked only to “whitewash alterity and reproduce racialised hierarchies where Whiteness dominates” (ibid.: 1244).

This badge culture is a symptom of an institutional mindset which rather than challenging the status quo is merely used to validate and legitimate existing

relations of power without shifting practices in material terms. In Bell's theory of interest convergence, the interests of Black groups in achieving racial equality are only accommodated when those interests converge or do not interfere with those of powerful White groups (Bell, 1980). It's no surprise, then, that for many BAME staff, REC is approached with wariness because we've been here before, and very little has changed.

Thirdly, piling 'race work' on the shoulders of overworked BAME staff, particularly academics, can ironically reproduce the same inequalities which equality accreditation seeks to address, something which was painfully apparent in evaluations of Athena Swan (Munir et al., 2013; Ovseiko et al., 2017, cited in Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020). In their study of REC participants, Bhopal and Pitkin (2020) found that the biggest barriers to participation were the issues of resourcing and workload: despite sponsorship from senior leadership teams, equalities work is not valued as much as research funding or publications. As a consequence, it is not built into workload allocation models or appropriately rewarded. As a result, BAME staff face a double, disproportionate disadvantage; they are often called in to do 'race work' on top of an existing workload which hinders their professional progression. The act of assuming BAME staff are there to be used for anything related to race equality is itself a microaggression, which is both a product of structural racism and contribution to it (Doharty et al., 2021).

In existing REC submissions, a clear mark of difference has been the performance of "responsibility and authority" by those in senior management roles and the allocation of "hard graft" for achieving these outcomes to BAME staff at lower levels, who have also shouldered the administrative burden of applications (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020, 538). Evidence has shown that when BAME staff are brought into race equality consultations and procedures to gather evidence or to talk about their lived experiences of discrimination it constitutes a form of emotional labour (Sian, 2019). Reliving racially motivated attacks, both explicit and implicit, including microaggressions, is painful, as is hearing testimony about racism from other colleagues. Many of those involved in collecting evidence from REC have described it as "emotionally draining" (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019, 40).

### **Towards a prefigurative enactment of REC ownership**

So, the challenge for engaged HEIs is to enact REC in a way which can distinguish it from previous equality efforts and the legitimate scepticism they engender. A prefigurative, transformative enactment of the REC would strike a balance between elevating BAME staff into decision making positions (effectively giving them ownership of the REC) *and* protecting their emotional health and professional interests, while acknowledging that accountability for the implementation and outcomes of REC must be shared across the university so that BAME staff are not scapegoated if they fail to meet targets.

Prefigurative enactments of the REC would slowly but carefully work to rewire the relationship between senior leadership and BAME staff at other positions in the organisational hierarchy so that the submission was legitimately co-created and co-produced, without a disproportionate administrative or accountability burden falling on BAME staff. The management of REC committees, in terms of self-assessment teams, working groups and editorial groups who compose the institutional effort at large would all be carefully co-designed with input from BAME staff and White allies alike to ensure that at no level of the work would there be any processes or relationship which reproduced those which characterised BAME disadvantage at large.

Practically, a prefigurative enactment of the REC would also build a co-designed policy, explicitly communicated, to compensate and reward those BAME staff who are involved in the REC. BAME staff would have time built into workload models so they could do REC work without disadvantage, and they would be rewarded appropriately through professional reviews. Beyond the practical benefits of enabling BAME staff to adopt such decision making and executive roles, such a methodological commitment would demonstrate that HEIs recognise that power asymmetries perpetuate institutionalised inequities, and symbolically communicate an acceptance that the REC was not merely performative box-ticking exercise, but a vehicle for long term, transformative change.

### **Second level systems change: shifting the gaze to institutional whiteness**

*“A fish is swimming along one day when another fish comes up and says ‘Hey, how’s the water?’ The first fish stares back blankly at the second fish and then says, ‘What’s water?’” (Anon)*

If rewiring power asymmetries is one form of the methodological principles of the REC and is one form of prefigurative systems change, then an essential accompaniment involves confronting the root cause of racial disparities. If a reproductive approach to the REC would ignore the mental models and norms which perpetuate the relationship between senior leadership and BAME staff, a prefigurative one would foreground them, and make them the foundational basis for long term action on race equity.

In fact, from a system change perspective, addressing mindsets and beliefs is a prerequisite for rebalancing resources and authority, because we have to explore the institutional norms which act as constraints on the transformation of relationships between actors and the distributive of power. Kania et al. (2018) describe these as the less visible elements of a system, but they can be the most causative, with huge impacts on shifting the system as a whole. Systemic change is thus unlikely to happen when the stakeholders are not aware of the source of intractable inequities. When it comes to systems change at large, “the first step in seeing the water is to illuminate the systemic forces at play” (Ibid.: 2). For institutional change in HE, there is important evidence that simply focusing on



symptom level interventions doesn't work. This is particularly true in the specific case of the so-called 'BAME attainment gap', where a slew of interventions have been tried, funded by the Office for Students (OFS), but where the gap has stubbornly refused to shift (McKellar, 2019).

Such findings are not surprising, because policy change without shifting frames of reference at the level of mental models of social narrative have a higher chance of failure. So, while it is possible for policies to be implemented without addressing mental models comprised of naturalised norms and assumptions, they are unlikely to stick and the chances of lapsing into reproductive policies and practices is much higher<sup>1</sup>.

It is for that reason that critical race theorists have long been sceptical of any race policy enactment which fails to confront institutional racism or White privilege. People of colour in White majority institutions - such as HE - unsurprisingly greet new diversity and new racial equality initiatives with the wary recognition that such are not intended to dislodge existing power structures, but skirt around them. In other systems it is well established that resourceful and dominant actors in systems defend and promote conventional (read: ineffective) approaches to address identified problems which might impinge on their dominance (Zhao, 2020). As Ahmed argues, such "non- performativity of anti-racism" (2006, np) acts to leave structural determinants intact and is a mechanism for the reproduction of institutional authority which conceals the ongoing reality of racism. Tate and Bagguley similarly argue that the "liberal-inclusive approach based on a commitment to diversity" does not acknowledge the pervasiveness of the racial contract "assured by the intensity of the affective attachment to privilege from those who benefit from it" (2017, 293). Ball (2008) has shown that when White senior managers define the benchmarks and processes of race equality work, rather than confronting White privilege, it often elides a discussion of *whiteness* entirely, refusing to recognise it as a cultural formation which sustains White privilege.

From a critical race perspective, the concept of interest convergence suggests that White groups - those who benefit from structural racism and discrimination - will only support and tolerate the advances of equality for non-White groups if it does not threaten or challenge their own interests (Gillborn, 2013; Bhopal, 2018). As a result, CRT tells us that REC will work to perpetuate the interests of the White majority, shore up White power, and maintain White privilege (Decuir and Dixson, 2004).

Ultimately then, unless the methodological foundation of REC involves looking at whiteness - the cultural bedrock which holds the conditions in place for institutional racism to reproduce itself - the process itself will lead to little in the way of systems change (Bernal and Villalpando, 2002). Instead, the REC will simply be used by universities as "window dressing" to inoculate themselves against liability, or to improve morale rather than increase managerial diversity (Kalev et al., 2006, 610).

## Unpacking whiteness

So, to apprehend whiteness as the water of institutionalised racism which in turn gives rise to racial disparities, then we need a better way of 'seeing the water' of institutional racism, and that should be part of the prefigurative methodology for the REC. Whiteness can be dismissed easily when it is understood abstractly, but less so when it is unpacked, disaggregated and understood from the perspective of those who are disadvantaged by it. On one level, whiteness is a structure, system and discourse that enables and naturalises a set of practices, codes, responses and actions. It "encompasses a set of hidden racist values, practices and customs that form the institutional norms of structures and organisations and is closely associated with white privilege" (Patel, 201: 126). In systems thinking we would describe it as a "mental model" (Kania et al., 2018: 9). Mental models such as whiteness are deeply held beliefs and assumptions - often unconsciously and unreflexively - which influence how we think, what we do, how we talk and even how we carry our bodies. They operate implicitly "without intent to harm and without recognition of privilege and power" (Okazaki, 2009: 104).

Whiteness is a mental model which also appears as a form of 'racial governance' which Hesse terms "white governmentality" and as the "institutional grammar of white power (2004: 143). White governmentality manifests itself both through structural conditions *and* everyday interactions (Franklin et al., 2008: 13). Whiteness, as White governmentality, also upholds White power and privilege by disciplining BAME staff and students in HE to adapt to the normative grammar of the White academy. Non-White bodies are required to 'inhabit whiteness' to be accepted, or a form of 'likeness'. Such 'likeness' is not neutral but normative. BAME staff are expected to adapt and adopt to the likeness of White subjectivity despite the discomfort, exposure and vulnerability that happens when racially marked bodies enter spaces of whiteness. In her research on the experiences of BAME staff in HE, Sian (2017) points to how this process of regulation works in practice, such as cultural activity orientated around the consumption of alcohol, leading to exclusion or compromise. Whiteness is normalised as a social position, and all behaviour which does not conform to its dynamics are constructed as deviant (Garner, 2010: 118).

So, for the REC to be prefigurative and a transgressive force against White privilege and White power, it is important - in fact *essential* - to be able to *name* whiteness. If we were to complete forms of structural disadvantage, the equivalent would be to seek to achieve gender equity/equality without an explicit acknowledgement of masculinity and its prevalence in institutional cultures. A prefigurative enactment of REC can only be successful if built on the foundation of naming and recognising whiteness in all its myriad forms: as a form of institutional power, as a location and perspective, as a form of privilege, as the basis of racial governance and as a set of assumptions and biases in the production and valorisation of knowledge.

Through professional networks I have heard of how a reluctance to name whiteness

has been actualised in response to institutional responses to fairly uncontroversial national campaigns such as “why is my curriculum white” (NUS, 2016, np).<sup>2</sup> The campaign, launched at University College London (UCL) but widely adopted throughout the UK, has been either rejected or challenged as inflammatory at some HEIs around the country simply because it uses the term ‘White’. Some HEIs have chosen to dilute the term by using the supposedly more inclusive title ‘why isn’t my curriculum diverse?’ and insisted on White staff being part of the panel in the interests of ‘balance’. One can see how such ‘race-evasiveness’ hampers any attempt to confront institutional racism and the redirection of the gaze from BAME staff and students to institutions and institutional norms. It frequently results in a rush to an intersectional analysis before we’ve even had the chance to look racism squarely in the eye. In these moments, intersectionality, powerful in so many contexts, becomes an unreflexive sleight of hand through which race is never given centre stage or understood as a key vector of disadvantage. Compare that to how unproblematically gender, sexuality and disability are discussed. Intersectionality is effectively mobilised as a defence mechanism to keep White privilege and White power concealed.

An open, expansive discussion of institutional racism is therefore predicated on an acknowledgement of whiteness. When Bhopal and Pitkin (2018) interviewed REC members at 34 institutions, they found, unsurprisingly, that race is much harder to discuss as a vector of disadvantage than gender, disability or sexuality. My own experiences of supporting BAME staff and promoting anti-racist policies bears this out too. Racism is often given sidelong glances but rarely confronted head on because, unlike gender or disability, it is less obviously visible in the form of concrete workplace disadvantages such as childcare responsibility or building access. Fundamentally, as CRT informs us, that’s because male privilege and able-bodied privilege is widely acknowledged, whereas White privilege remains widely contested despite the slew of evidence to suggest otherwise (Bhopal, 2018).

Talking about racism, let alone whiteness, is uncomfortable for everyone concerned (Eddo-Lodge, 2017). As Yancy (2012) suggests, perhaps the only way to have such conversations is to shift the gaze back to the water of institutional racism, and how naturalised systems of racial governance disadvantage and diminish people (and especially women) of colour.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I’ve argued that for the REC to be effective it must embrace a prefigurative methodology, because how such processes are enacted is as important as the conduct of its associated activities. As scholars of racial governance have shown, universities have a long, complex institutional architecture which has embedded the disciplining and diminishment of people of colour which cannot be unwound without a radical shift in how things are done, and where we direct our gaze.

For universities looking to undertake REC, my advice is to spend some time laying the methodological groundwork, and recognising that doing so *is* the work itself, as much as the activities mandated at each level of the REC. It might feel like it slows down the process, but it will help to ensure its integrity. The pull of performativity in the marketised university subject to the tyrannies of benchmarking and league table ranking means that REC is often approached through a logic of economising and efficiency, whereas it needs significant investment, patience and a refusal of tick-box urgency.

The prefigurative imperative described here brings to mind a quote from author and activist James Baldwin: “I can’t believe what you say, because I see what you do” (1998: 738). That seems like a perfect description of the challenge to HEIs undertaking REC. Of course, REC has to lead to concrete policies to eradicate the student attainment gap, and to ensure that there is a better representation of BAME - particularly Black women - in the professoriate as well as senior leadership. But it also has to go beyond that to prefiguratively create the antiracist institutions it aspires to. Systems change specialists will tell you that a plethora of policymaking can go some way to shift culture, but also that through micro-cultures and micro-dynamics new cultural mental models can generatively cascade and proliferate through institutions. Ultimately prefiguring the anti-racist university is just one step towards racial equity, because meeting the criteria for REC at bronze, silver or gold levels is not the end of the journey.

There is always the danger that the achievement of equality awards leads to a sense of completion and that the work is finished when the award is made (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019). The idea that anti-racism can ever be ‘complete’ in any traditional linear fashion also assumes a simplistic ‘cause and effect’ model which doesn’t acknowledge the iterative “mosaic of constantly fluctuating activity” during systems change (Kania et al., 2018, 15). REC can only facilitate the process towards an anti-racist university, but a prefigurative approach, using a systems lens, can accelerate that process.

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