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Charter schemes ‘have contributed to equality failures’

Panel discussion hears that pandemic should be used as a springboard for real change by looking at leadership

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Charter schemes for addressing inequalities in universities have contributed to the “failure” to properly get to grips with tackling racism and other diversity issues in higher education, a *Times Higher Education* conference has heard.

Deborah Gabriel, founder and director of Black British Academics, told *THE Live* that the equalities agenda had already “ceased to be of relevance” before the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests of this year because it had offered an “escape route” for senior leaders to avoid real change.

Speaking during a session discussing whether the events of this year had “destroyed the equalities agenda”, Dr Gabriel, senior lecturer in marketing communications at Bournemouth University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/bournemouth-university>), said the agenda was already “unfit for purpose” for “addressing systemic racism”.

“There needs to be accountability for a chronic failure of leadership,” she said, which has been characterised by “indifference and complacency”.



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“The equalities agenda provides an escape route for university leaders and white academics to engage with race from a diversity standpoint,” Dr Gabriel added.

“I have to say, based on my own experience, that charter schemes which are often held up as measures of success contribute to this failure by diverting what is already limited funding and resources to the preparation of submissions motivated by the attainment of awards rather than social justice.”

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Many UK universities have participated in charter schemes such as Athena SWAN, which focuses on gender equality, and the Race Equality Charter, in a bid to drive forward and demonstrate their progress.

But Dr Gabriel said the “equalities agenda” needed to be replaced “with a meaningful focus on equity and social justice directed at concrete measures to level the playing field and close the gaps”.

Practical steps should include creating an “equity task force” within universities, with senior roles for black and ethnic minority academics from different faculties and departments, who would also sit on executive boards.

“We don’t want sympathy. We don’t want words. We want action, and we want to shape and lead the new agenda for equity and social justice that the HE sector so desperately needs,” Dr Gabriel said.

Another panellist, Umar Zamman, director of human resources and organisational development at Sheffield Hallam University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/sheffield-hallam-university>), agreed that it was only at leadership level where real progress could be made.

Key to achieving this was “creating great leaders in organisations who understand what the issues are”, he said, describing a scheme at his university that was “about understanding as a person of colour – what is it that they go through, what is it that they experience in order to get to that [leadership] level”.

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In his view, he continued, the pandemic had given issues of inequality “a bit of a boost” because the crisis had again brought “to the surface” the structural problems besetting sectors such as higher education.

“My worry is...is it just going to filter back down again?” he said. “We have been here before with other major incidents. Go back to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry [into institutional racism in the police] over 20 years ago – are we talking about the same things today? Yes, we are.

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“We have to look at putting people into positions where they are able to influence the various equalities agendas. If we don’t do that, then I think we’ll be here in another 20 years’ time talking about the same issues.”

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