

Study highlights White lecturers' role in tackling systemic racism in higher education

A team of researchers from the University of Greenwich interviewed academic staff who were aware of racial disparity in the sector



Some White university employees who took part in a new research study described racist encounters as "stomach churning" and said they felt guilt, embarrassment, anger and shame (Pic: Getty)

UNDERSTANDING HOW racism affects White lecturers in universities could be the next step to tackling discrimination in the higher education sector, a leading professor has said.

Denise Miller, a University of Greenwich Associate Professor of Child and Educational Psychology was part of a team of researchers that examined White employees in the sector who were aware of the effects of systemic racism or who understood how White privilege had shaped their careers.

Data

The first of its kind study, called *The Psychosocial Cost of Racism on White Higher Education Staff*, analysed qualitative data from in-depth interviews conducted with 12 employees working across all levels of a post-92 university, which are former polytechnics or colleges of higher education that were given university status by John Major's government in 1992.

The failure to address racial disparity stretching back to the arrival of the Windrush generation, the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 following the tragic death of George Floyd and the racial disparities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic were among the factors that Miller says motivated her to take part in the research project.



Denise Miller,

a University of Greenwich Associate Professor, led a study on White employees who understood the impact of systemic racism and how it influenced their careers (Pic: supplied)

Despite including both Black and White participants, the “strength of the words came through much clearer” in the responses from White staff members who took part in the project Miller recalls.

“When we started off the research, I didn’t anticipate that I would be writing this paper. I thought I would be letting the world know what it’s like to be a Black academic in Britain today. However, when we sent the staff working across all sectors of the university we had many more White participants come forward to talk about their experiences,” she says.

“Then we asked people to take part in one-to-one interviews. And again, many more White people came forward. So we started to write a paper to say what it was like for both Black and White people. But really, we were ignoring the experiences of White people and we realised we just couldn’t ignore them.”

‘Anger and shame’

The results revealed that White university staff felt strong feelings of guilt, embarrassment, anger and shame, with some even describing incidents of racism as “stomach churning”.

Some reported feeling “responsible” for how racism plagues the systems they work in even if they had not directly participated in racially discriminatory behaviour. White staff were also very aware of the impact racism had on others, particularly their Black and minority ethnic colleagues.

According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, the number of Black and ethnic minority employees in higher education has risen from 8.6 per cent in 2010/11 to 15.4 per cent in 2019/20.

However, staff numbers from diverse backgrounds were still disproportionately lower than White staff members with permanent contracts and who also held senior leadership positions or were on higher-level pay bands.



Miller

stresses that her research does not ignore the experiences and frustration felt by Black people in the higher education sector (Pic: Getty)

“They knew [white staff] they were benefiting from the system, which came through in the data” says Miller. “Most of them understood that White privilege had got them through barriers that Black people were trying to jump over to get to the same positions. They realised that actually, they were in the conversations that opened the doors for them more easily.

“Some of them talked about their colleagues being shouted at or being undermined or being given more work than others.”

Miller says she realises that the research, which is thought to be the first of its kind to focus on the impact of racism on White higher education staff, could be met with scepticism from those who frequently suffer from the effects of racial trauma.

However she adds that she and her fellow researchers Dr Charmaine Brown and Dr Ryan Essek believe this different take on the impact of institutional racism could be a stepping stone to tackling racial inequality.

“In the study, we do go to great lengths to say that we’re not ignoring the experiences of Black people. I’m a Black person, I know what it feels like, I know how frustrated and angry I feel about it. But I also know that that’s not new knowledge. We already know this. There are millions of pieces of paper that say the same thing and research that has already been carried out and reported on.

Power

“White people are in positions of power and authority, and they sit around the decision-making tables so it’s really important that they become our allies.”

Professor Hakim Adi, a historian who specialises in the history of Africa, welcomed the study for helping to create a greater understanding of how the effects of racism surpass just psychological distress.

The study showed racism was not just the result of individual attitudes or actions, but that it is also inherently embedded into the structures, policies and practices of the university, including the Black and minority ethnic award gap for students.



Showing how racial discrimination has an impact on everyone in society, could “strengthen the struggle against racism,” says Professor Hakim Adi (Pic: Hakim Adi)

“Racism is always an attack on everybody. It’s not just an attack on one section of the population or one person in the workforce,” he says.

“It has an impact on curriculum, on what is taught and also has an impact on Black staff, how they’re treated, how they’re paid, how they’re recruited. The general conditions in which they operate has an impact on all staff.”

Adi believes that showing how racial discrimination has an impact on everyone in society, could “strengthen the struggle against racism,” because it makes clear that it is an “attack on everybody”.

For both Black and White participants, they were found to be aware of topical issues and debates surrounding racism and were motivated to gain a better understanding of how racism operates within their workspaces.

Miller and her team found that both Black and White participants in the research were interested in learning more about the ways racism manifests in the workplace and were aware of current discussions and debates about the issues.

“We hope that the implications and recommendations will be taken forward” she says. “We have disseminated the research far and wide and there’s been lots and lots of interest from diverse people.

“We also hope that it will have some sort of value and impact, not only at the university where it was carried out. This could be replicated across the country and probably across the world.”