Anti-Racism Communication and Action Proposal

The following proposal highlights how the University of Sheffield can work to create and communicate sustainable, holistic change across campus and the surrounding community.

Based on an examination of the previously completed three phased anti-racism strategy, the research within the Race Equality Strategy and Action Plan and an analysis of wider anti-racism work taking place globally and nationally, a number of takeaways have become clear:

Key considerations

1. There is a prevalent lack of understanding across Britain of how the structures of racism function and how those structures existed across history, especially as related specifically to British history.
2. Without having a foundation for understanding the histories of British racism, it becomes impossible to understand and therefore confront the complexities of the contemporary realities of racism.
3. In order to teach the University community a necessarily nuanced understanding of race and racism, there must be an acknowledgement of the University's partaking in structures of racism.
4. As well as a moral imperative, there is a reputational and financial risk imperative to acting robustly on racism.
5. We must ensure all those who wish to report racist incidents are able to do so by adjusting the systems as necessary and communicating the processes effectively.
6. The University must follow its guiding principles of civic responsibility to impact not just the campus, but the surrounding Sheffield community.
7. We must create systems of accountability to ensure that the University completes the work necessary with the urgency and dedication necessary.

These considerations will be examined in more depth in the following proposal.

Examining the problem

Understandings of British history and racism

Based on feedback obtained from the post-lecture surveys after Phase Two of the Anti-Racism Working Group's strategy, the Race Equality Strategy as a whole and analysis of current events, we can ascertain where the key failures of the University specifically and the country more broadly lie.

Across Britain, there appears to be a general lack of understanding and acknowledgement of the historical, political and economic structures of racism, especially as related to this country specifically. The removal of statues of slave traders and colonialists recently and the conversations this has sparked have revealed blindspots across the British consciousness surrounding British historical and contemporary involvement in racism.

Crucially, without the foundational understanding of what racism is on a historical, social, political and economic level, it becomes impossible to understand the contemporary, far-reaching problems racism creates and continues to perpetrate. In order to appropriately confront racism within the University and outside of it, we must consider the following:

1. British people tend to have a highly sanitised and censored understanding of British history. We should simultaneously confront what has *not* been taught and also examine the processes which ensured these truths were not taught in the first place.
2. There is a lack of acknowledgement and critical understanding not just of the *original* acts of slave traders and colonialists, but also of the long term impacts of these histories on the economy and politics of the UK and the rest of the world. We need to examine and educate our staff and students on the links between historical acts and contemporary realities.

3. There's a strong impulse to protect the nostalgic, sanitised version of the truth. This perpetrates a dangerous ignorance — by refusing to understand the past, many British people are unable to understand the present. We need to confront uncomfortable truths about the British past and present.

To create this foundational understanding amongst our staff and students, we therefore must create a system of campaigns which both examine the *history* of racism and track the *impact of those histories* on contemporary Britain. This should include an examination of the rich history of anti-racism and rebellion across Britain and the countries that Britain colonised.

These explorations should be taken up on both a departmental and University-wide level.

Examining the macro to understand the micro

Previously, the focus of our anti-racism work has been on instances of interpersonal racism, microaggressions and cultural appropriation. It is impossible, however, to have fully considered conversations about these topics without a foundation of knowledge about what racism is and how it functions.

We created a Halloween campaign confronting cultural appropriation, questioning if certain costumes mock or demean those of different races. The unsurprising media backlash highlighted the problems with examining *specific* elements of racism without also providing a *foundational* understanding of racism. If you don't understand how White supremacy has shaped history, you cannot understand why wearing a sombrero or a Native American headdress could be considered to be perpetrating racist ideas.

Considering the wider functions and implications of racism also means moving past an exclusively 'incident' based understanding of how racism works, on and off campus. Our previous framing of racism during the three-phased Anti-Racism strategy presented the key tools and outcomes of racism as being racist comments

and microaggressions. The focus on microaggressions and 'incidents' of racism which can be easily reported can reinforce the belief that being anti-racist is simply not saying certain things as opposed to active, sustained work both internally and externally. We should focus on generating an understanding of what work goes into becoming *proactively anti-racist* as individuals and as an institution.

Whilst there are actions we must take to empower staff and students to report incidents of racism (as highlighted later in this proposal), we must also confront the more complex ways racism expresses itself. Relying on racism existing as a series of 'reportable' incidents can cloud our understanding of how racism tends to function. Many people who experience microaggressions will not feel able to report them specifically because microaggressions are designed to be subtle and disputable — relying on reporting and then disciplining microaggressive behaviour is ultimately limited in its effect.

By focusing instead on creating a community that has a nuanced understanding of how racism exists today as a direct result of a history of institutionalised racism, we can convince staff and students that confronting racism isn't just about not making microaggressive comments, but is about the wider dismantling of racist institutions and actions.

Reputational and financial threats

If the University does not take visible, sustained and tangible action, it runs the risk of reputational and financial damage. Over the past weeks, a campaign entitled *Defund to Decolonise Leeds Uni* has been created by Leeds University students and alumni encouraging all alumni to withhold donations until the University undertakes the work of decolonising and confronting racism. The specific demands of the campaign include changing the curriculums, employing more BAME staff in senior roles and donating money to racial justice work. This is one of many campaigns that are currently gaining momentum across Higher Education and beyond.

There is a growing understanding that by not making proactive, genuine and sustained change, institutions and organisations are not remaining neutral — they are taking the side of oppression and racism. As well as the moral imperative to act, there is a serious risk of reputational (and therefore financial) damage if the University does not act quickly and decisively.

As part of the growing Black Lives Matter movement, it is also becoming increasingly commonplace for individuals to be much more public about the institutions, organisations and individuals who have perpetrated racism against them and others. If the University does not work publicly and transparently to dismantle racism within its walls, there is an increasing risk of staff, students and others who have interacted with the University creating public indictments of the University's failings.

As organisations are put under pressure to speak out about racism, there is growing criticism of those who apply the language of anti-racism without looking inwards and making the changes necessary to tackle these structures. As organisations made statements about Black Lives Matter after the killing of George Floyd and the international protests the murder sparked, many (including the University) faced criticism. Releasing statements about racism without action is increasingly being viewed as a cynical and even harmful PR move rather than being indicative of a genuine desire to confront racism.

Recent fundraising pushes for radical projects such as the Free Black University led by Melz Owusu help to further question the role of the university in shaping an anti-racist future. The University of Sheffield should be particularly rigorous in its attempts to dismantle racist structures as it prides itself on being an international university with a high international population. The Coronavirus pandemic and the increase in hate crimes aimed at people of East Asian heritage it created highlights the urgent need to tackle racism across the city in order to protect our students.

It is therefore crucial to approach the problem of racism in the University and beyond holistically and with an unshakable commitment to solving the problem from the root up.

What can be done?

Creating a multifaceted, multi-stage approach

Attempting to build a foundational understanding of racism and a robust confrontation of the racism which exists on and off campus is a far-reaching project. We need nuanced, multifaceted solutions — a print campaign or video alone is too limited in scope. Following on from the three phase approach of 2019-2020, the University should embrace another multi-stage approach which confronts the problem of racism across all aspects of University life.

Stage One: a transparent examination of the University's history
The University must first undertake a transparent exploration of its own past and current participation in systems of racism. In the first Anti-Racism Training video, we allude to the University's historical failings, but don't adequately confront or acknowledge them — making a vague acknowledgment of the University's history of participation in racism has limited effectualness without providing the tools to understand and rectify that history. This would be similar to the transparency we have shown in our ongoing sustainability work.

This would include examining (and sharing our findings about):

1. Investments the University has made (past and present) in companies or properties that in any way perpetuate racism.
2. The people and organizations who have invested in the University.
3. The people whose names the University's buildings are named after.
4. The creation and maintenance of curriculums which contribute to the erasure of BAME people and / or uphold tenets of White supremacy and racism.
5. How the University has previously and currently approaches incidents of racism on campus.

6. The numbers of BAME members of staff and students across different areas of the University and what their experiences are.

Some of this research has already been created in the past — assuming that what was found is still up to date, we should be using this information as part of a transparent examination of what the University needs to do (and then take the steps to do it).

The discovery of this information should be interactive in nature, encouraging staff and students to have open discussions with the University about where there are key failings and how they can be addressed. These can take the form of surveys, panel discussions, focus groups and more.

Stage Two: creating a foundational understanding of racism across staff and student populations

Stage Two should use the discoveries of Stage One to begin shaping the foundational understanding of racism discussed previously. This would mean examining:

1. How Britain was and continues to be shaped by histories of White supremacy and racism (with particular emphasis on the realities and effects of the slave trade and colonialism).
2. How the University (and education generally) has partaken in the maintenance of these histories, past and present.
3. The effects of these histories on contemporary society (examining across the economic, political, social and psychological).

Rather than just a singular output, these conversations would have to take place across multiple media outputs:

1. A series of lectures, led by experts across a variety of topics related to race and racism and with an emphasis on highlighting BAME speakers. These could be run by both the University and the Students' Union.

2. A video series explaining and discussing different aspects of racism from the historical to the contemporary.
3. Print and digital campaigns. During the most recent era of the Black Lives Matter movement, social media has proven to be an excellent tool for education, with large numbers of people engaging in complex topics through slides created specifically for Instagram or threads on Twitter. How can we better use the tools at our disposal to creatively educate our staff and students?
4. Partnerships with the library. As well as discussing with staff, students and subject experts what additions must be made to the library collections to work on creating a truly decolonised space, we can create curated mini-collections, reading guides, book groups and more to encourage engagement with the texts.

Stage Two should also include the reshaping of curriculums across the University based on the conversations and feedback of Stage One.

Stage Three: working with the Sheffield community
Stage Three would involve working with a coalition of researchers, students and the local community to learn more about race and racism in Sheffield, with the aim of creating public-facing, tangible results for both the University and the city more broadly.

Rooted in the civic responsibility and engagement which are at the core of the University's guiding principles, the University should use its resources to examine the history and contemporary realities of the city it belongs to. Many of the University's students and researchers will already engage in academic research on race, colonialism and migration — how can we help situate some of this research into the city space, engaging with local communities to create city-wide understandings of racism?

Much as the Storying Sheffield project has created engagement across a large variety of topics, using research undertaken by staff, students and the local

community to discover and tell stories about Sheffield, we can find creative ways to approach and discuss race in the city.

Stage Four: integrating anti-racism into University life
Stage Four would entail the creation and maintenance of long-term solutions of anti-racism, integrated into every aspect of University life. Rather than creating a campaign which educates one generation of staff and students, we must ensure that anti-racism is embedded into the University forever.

Creating a sustainable integration of anti-racism into the University would necessitate an understanding of racism informed by an examination of how gender, sexuality, class and other identities and cultural designations interplay with race. Forming a more complex conception of how oppression functions across intersections of identity will equip our staff and students with the tools necessary to confront racism on a wider scale. By integrating anti-racism into our approach to events such as Pride and International Women's Day, we can create a much more nuanced approach to racism and other areas of oppression.

Across all stages, we should work to bring the Students' Union on board so that all communications carry both the University and the Students' Union logos.

Working within departments and faculties

By working directly on a departmental and subject level, we can ensure that all students are engaged in our anti-racism work. Having particular conversations, for example, about the functions and processes of White supremacy within STEM is particularly crucial. There is often particular resistance to talking about race and racism in STEM subjects — there exists a belief amongst some that science and technology possess an objectivity which humanities subjects don't and are therefore immune to racism.

By engaging directly with staff and students by faculty or subject, we can examine the racial biases within their areas of research through lectures, panel discussions, videos and print campaigns.

Engaging directly with the student population

Now more than ever, many students at the University are already engaged in the conversations surrounding race and are enthusiastic about creating change.

We also know that students being 'talked at' about racism can create some problems, as highlighted in the responses to Phase One and Two of the Anti-Racism Strategy:

1. Some White students were hostile to the approach and angry by what they perceived to be a lack of acknowledgment of their personal hardships (especially surrounding conversations of White privilege).
2. Some students from BAME backgrounds expressed discomfort at being told about the racism they already experience, especially as some of our student lecturers were White.

Rather than simply talking *at* our students, we should make every effort to engage with them from a position of discussion and interactivity. This requires a more comprehensive approach which builds on what we learnt with the first three phases of the Anti-Racism Strategy.

1. Surveys, focus groups and open discussions which encourage students to discuss their experiences and ideas for how the University should focus its anti-racism work. Too often, students perceive anti-racism work (arguably with good reason) as the University trying to 'look good' without doing the real work to make substantial change. Including the students from the beginning will help them feel involved and empower them to hold the University accountable.

2. This work requires absolute transparency: we must be honest with the students about where we currently are, where we want to be and how we're planning on getting there. This requires talking in *detail*. In the past we have alluded to 'having not done enough' or 'needing to do more', but we have not explained exactly where our failures are or what we are doing to address them. This allows staff and students to hold the University accountable to pledges.

3. Creating University-wide projects which staff and students can participate in as part of their University work. Are there ways in which we can collate students' research and work centred around race and racism across the University? Can we create partnerships across departments?

Examining reporting processes and communication

As part of this wider work, we need to look at how we can make the reporting system work as well as possible for staff and students whilst communicating its processes and how we will support those who choose to report.

The questions and concerns we will have to confront and be able to appropriately communicate the answers to will include:

1. Will reporting a member of staff impact my grade / my position in the workplace?
2. Will I have to convince a panel of white staff members of my experience?
3. Will I be supported throughout this stressful process? What if it disrupts my education / work?
4. Will the response be appropriate? What tangible results will I see from my complaint?
5. What happens to my University accommodation contract if I lodge a complaint against a flatmate? What if I lodge a complaint against a colleague?

We must ensure obstacles to reporting are cleared, whilst creating a campaign which reassures staff and students that the University will support them adequately throughout the reporting process.

Building accountability

Allocation of resources

The resources necessary must be allocated to allow this work to happen with the urgency and care it requires. Dismantling racist structures should be of the utmost importance to the University, with the funding, resources and time allocated to this work reflective of that. We need systems of accountability to ensure that the work is completed and that it is prioritised adequately across the institution. BAME consultants should be hired to ensure that the work is completed with the expertise and support necessary.

Preparedness for criticism

The University needs to be prepared for criticism from certain areas of the media and have the resources in place to respond confidently. It is impossible to engage in anti-racist work without antagonsing racist people — the University must have structures in place to protect and stand by any anti-racist work undertaken.

Conclusion

Taking anti-racism seriously across campus means creating a comprehensive, robust and multi-faceted approach which accounts for the complex and far reaching ways racism manifests across society. Through a strict system of accountability, transparency and collaboration, the University has the opportunity to entirely change the relationship between itself and its BAME staff and students, whilst helping to shape an anti-racist future for the city as a whole.