

# Race Equality Works for Northern Ireland

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The objective of NI HEIF is to encourage the higher education sector to increase capability to respond to the needs of business (including companies of all sizes) and the wider community, with a clear focus on the promotion of wealth creation. The long term aim of this funding is to improve Northern Ireland's innovation performance as a key element in raising productivity and delivering economic growth.

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## **Links**

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Ulster University Institute for Research in the Social Sciences  
[www.socsci.ulster.ac.uk/irss/](http://www.socsci.ulster.ac.uk/irss/)

Business in the Community NI  
[www.bitcni.org.uk](http://www.bitcni.org.uk)

Business in the Community – Race  
[www.race.bitc.org.uk](http://www.race.bitc.org.uk)

Equality Commission for Northern Ireland: ECNI  
[www.equalityni.org](http://www.equalityni.org)

Additional copies of the report are available from Business in the Community NI

The author welcomes queries and comments on the research at [I.michael@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:I.michael@ulster.ac.uk)

## Steps employers can take to improve race equality

### Clearly communicate the value of diversity for your organisation

Make statements about diversity visible and meaningful to staff at all levels – this helps to address attrition, since staff are more likely to commit to a workplace when they perceive the organisation as a whole as being a place they can thrive, and are more likely to opt for informal resolution of conflicts. It also helps to support diverse recruitment. Think about external messages – advertising of positions, products and statements in the media are all read by wider audiences – as well as your existing staff.

### Commit to raising awareness of racial bias

Communications about the importance of equality in the organisation underpins staff positivity about training. Management who take training with their team produce more commitment as education is seen as a joint venture. Training is also investment in the wider society of Northern Ireland, since people tend to mix in more diverse groups at work than outside. Staff employ that knowledge and experience more widely in their family and community life, creating positive interactions beyond your business, and widening their experience and perceptions.

### Be aware of the wider context

Racism is high in Northern Ireland, and is not the preserve of any particular group. Regular experience of suspicion or harassment affects ethnic minorities and migrants, but also the neighbourhoods we live in and schools our children attend. Ensuring that the workplace is a psychologically safe space for all staff increases productivity and commitment.

### Know the numbers

Make sense of the wider picture of race equality in Northern Ireland. Employers familiar with local demographics are better equipped to address emerging issues and also to address the local population as service users, customers or potential staff.

### Opt for open, transparent communication

Consultation and feedback are key to understanding how well established the message about diversity is within the workplace culture. Staff surveys, feedback sessions, staff networks and anonymous reporting channels are all ways of ensuring that you have the widest range of information available, and all can be integrated with other forms of consultation and feedback.

### Get comfortable talking about racial bias

Workplaces where there is confident and knowledgeable communication about racial bias are better equipped to deal with harassment, unconscious discrimination and structural inequalities. Introducing the vocabulary of fair treatment and respect for people of all backgrounds helps to focus on positive efforts to address existing inequalities and prevent further inequalities arising in your business.

### Showcase success

Work with ethnic minority and migrant staff to find ways to create visibility for diverse role models. Be creative in ways of managing visibility, using internal communications and external showcasing opportunities effectively to maximise benefit without creating unnecessary additional burdens for ethnic minority and migrant staff which might harm their progression.

### Keep equality on the table

Consider how the value of diversity is reflected in your business activities. Performance evaluation and team goals can be adapted to reflect the core message you create about diversity in your organisation. Setting goals on equality which are objectively measurable are key to ensuring that the organisation stays up to date. Creating a policy review schedule or audit process can prevent slippage on goals, and prompts staff to check for updated materials and consider the changing context for the business and its employees.

## Summary of findings

The overall purpose of this review was to explore the range of measures being used by employers in Northern Ireland towards race equality in the workplace, documenting examples of successful practice and barriers to extending race equality work. Key findings from the research included:

- Employers in sectors which employ high numbers of migrant workers (mostly white European) have engaged extensively with equality measures, but have focused on language and cultural integration. Low numbers of Northern Irish ethnic minorities in other sectors has invited some complacency about the need to address race equality issues beyond migrant workers.
- Employers in other sectors have been highly influenced by the focus of government and equality bodies on migrant workers, and largely view the race equality agenda through this perspective. But migrant workers working in low skill sectors initially due to lack of English fluency are not viewed as potential future recruits to other sectors, despite the high skills levels which they often bring to Northern Ireland.
- Employers assume that racial prejudice is decreasing in Northern Ireland, particularly amongst young people, contrary to evidence from recent surveys. Half of employers interviewed do not want to take responsibility for educating employees about racial bias, and view racial bias training as a burden. Alternatives including unconscious bias training or emphasis on non-prejudiced teamwork have been adopted with varying success. Employers who did not provide racial bias training to employees felt poorly equipped to challenge racist views and behaviours in the workplace which harmed employee relations, particularly where these were couched in humour.
- Employers who implemented a zero tolerance approach to discrimination and harassment reported its success in strengthening employee efficacy and producing a strong team environment and respectful work culture, even where there is not significant training on racial or other biases
- Employers are experienced and knowledgeable about a wide range of equality measures which can be implemented, but do not feel that they have been convinced of the case for prioritising race equality to date. This is the most significant obstacle identified in the research. There is support for affirmative action for community background and gender, but private sector employers largely are not convinced that affirmative action is appropriate to address race equality in Northern Ireland.
- Employers which shared an understanding between management and employees of the benefit of an equality perspective in all aspects of their business experienced fewer problems between employees and were able to incorporate new equality measures more easily. Most employers were able to identify at least one action which they could implement immediately to improve race equality in their workplace. Capacity to undertake this action is influenced by the extent to which equality issues were seen as part of the wider culture of the business. Access to information about local demographics and actions taken by other Northern Ireland employers increased positive responses to the case for expanding race equality measures.

## Context

Highly visible increases in racist violence and stubbornly persistent racist attitudes in Northern Ireland have prompted recent attention from many sectors of society, including businesses employing Black and ethnic minority (BME) workers and serving ethnically diverse communities. There is now a visible appetite to address racism in Northern Ireland through cross-sector partnerships, making research on racial equality in employment timely.

Legislation in Northern Ireland on racial discrimination has fallen behind international standards, with recent policy efforts failing to sufficiently embed responses to racism in a human rights framework or with adequate attention to the diversity of Black and ethnic minority (BME) experiences. Current legislation and policy offers insufficient direction to organisations planning for future ethnic diversification of employees and the communities in which they operate.

A recent report on Race at Work, published in December by Business in the Community, highlighted a range of ways that employers could improve race equality in the workplace, mostly using 'soft' measures to address disadvantage. This collaboration between Business in the Community NI, CRAIC NI and Ulster University seeks to help understand and identify how a programme of work might be developed on similar principles to the UK Race at Work report which could take account of the particularities of the Northern Irish context and facilitate development of racial equality work in Northern Ireland business.

The proportion of the population of Northern Ireland counted as Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) doubled between 2001 and 2011 but still only makes up 1.8 percent (32,400) of the population. The availability of migrant workers, particularly after 2004 when the United Kingdom removed visa requirements from citizens of new EU member states, has diversified Northern Irish workplaces further in terms of nationality, language and skills. By 2011 there were 81,318 migrants in Northern Ireland not from elsewhere in the UK or the Republic of which nearly a quarter (19,658) were Polish and 7241 Lithuanian.

This has had an impact particularly on sectors requiring low-or semi-skilled labour, but migrant workers from within and beyond the EU are also present in significant numbers in high-skilled jobs in IT and healthcare, and the challenges facing migrant workers have been well documented. Some efforts to address the particular challenges of migrant workers have offered positive examples of corporate change.

The experiences of migrant workers (including white Europeans as well as visible ethnic minorities), however, have been significantly affected by racism inside and outside the workplace, with regular attacks on their homes and persons, similar to that experienced by ethnic minority citizens of Northern Ireland. These experiences affect the working lives of both groups significantly, although they are rarely considered in employer approaches to racial equality.

Evidence collected by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland points to the high likelihood of workplace discrimination and available data suggests marked exclusion of ethnic minorities from a range of sectors. A recent report for the ECNI showed that white students were more likely to find any type of employment (full or part-time) after leaving higher education than minority ethnic students, and that this is a persistent inequality. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland notes that enquiries or complaints about race discrimination are consistently in the top three areas of correspondence they receive.

The age range of employees can vary dramatically by sector, and employers often assume that younger employees are less likely to hold prejudices against people on the basis of ethnicity or nationality. However research shows that across the UK younger employees are in fact more likely to hold racist views than top executives, and that young people in Northern Ireland demonstrate more prejudice than older groups (even if they are improving slightly) in part because of challenges in finding employment and the belief that this is connected to immigration, and therefore employers cannot be complacent about racism naturally disappearing from the workplace.

This study investigates how employers in Northern Ireland have engaged with race equality measures in the workplaces. The report adds a solid evidence base to understandings of how employers are benefitting from and supporting ethnic diversity in the workplace, and how they are planning for diversity in future workforce development. The research is based on in-depth interviews with employers in the private and public sectors in Northern Ireland, and highlights the factors which help organisations to embed equality measures and to keep equality on the agenda of their organisation.

## Ethnic minorities in the labour market

Certain sectors have higher percentages of ethnic minority and migrant worker employees, including food, IT, hospitality and healthcare companies. But ethnic minorities have largely in Northern Ireland been described and perceived in relation to recent migration. This has hidden the realities of the long resident ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland, including Chinese, South Asian, Travellers and people of mixed racial identity, for whom career choice, promotion and equal pay can be problematic, despite their cultural and linguistic competencies as citizens in Northern Ireland.

There are diverse reasons for BME exclusion in the labour market. The low educational qualifications of Travellers in Northern Ireland and preference for self-employment are attributed with the low levels of employment for this group. Only 11% of the community are in paid employment. The Chinese community, who make up the largest visible BME group at 29%, have high levels of employment, but many of those longest resident in Northern Ireland have been concentrated in the catering sector particularly because of stereotypes about their ability in other sectors.

Employment of migrant workers has been high in the health, IT and food processing sectors, due to labour shortages and overseas recruitment by employers and their agents, but it is in the food processing sector where migrant workers without fluent English have been concentrated. The highest proportion of migrant workers in Northern Ireland, particularly in this sector, have been Polish and from other A8 countries, with a much smaller proportion of non-EU and other EU/EEA nationals. The majority of migrant workers are therefore described as 'white' in terms of ethnicity. There are however good reasons to consider migrant workers within our overall picture of race equality.

High levels of family reunification have resulted in migrants staying in the region if they have the right to work, and workers in low skilled jobs have shown some mobility into other areas. A report for the Department of Employment and Learning in 2009 showed that a significant number of migrant workers in Northern Ireland were still 'under-employed', that is employed below their experience or qualifications, and that migrant workers experience repeated harassment from work colleagues as much as in the street.

The most recent Racial Equality Strategy recognises these experiences, noting:

It is not always easy or sensible to differentiate between minority ethnic people and migrant workers. We need to recognise that each may have issues that are specific to them and there are many issues that overlap. Moreover, a significant number of migrant workers will, in due course, settle. The strategy is therefore concerned with issues that affect all people here, from both majority and minority communities. It is about allowing people, however they might be identified, to participate in society as equals. (S. 1.14)

Existing race equality measures have largely been directed to large and medium sized organisations, and these are also the organisations most likely to employ migrant workers (matching the sectors in which they are present). But there are also 30,000 SME businesses in Northern Ireland have employees and, including self-employed, the SME sector accounts for 75 percent of employment in the region, higher than England and Scotland. There are good reasons to consider the SME picture within any work addressing race equality. Although they hire workforce mainly from the local area, the highest density of small businesses are in Belfast, Lisburn, Newry and Mourne, Derry and Craigavon, where the highest proportion of ethnic minorities and migrants are also resident.

Research in Northern Ireland shows that the availability of skilled labour is one of the biggest concerns for SMEs, and 30 percent of SME employers sell outside the UK (higher than the UK average of 19 percent), to markets which have much higher ethnic diversity than Northern Ireland. Micro-businesses (with less than 10 employees) may also benefit from race equality work as suppliers to or customers from other businesses, or through race equality work by business associations. This is an important consideration since ethnic minorities in other jurisdictions have higher than average rates of employment in micro-businesses, partly as a result of constrained opportunities in the labour market overall.

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## Legal context

The Equality Act 2010 which applies in England, Scotland and Wales does not apply in Northern Ireland. Private sector employers are obliged by the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 to address inequalities in the workplace on the grounds of religion and political belief. All employers must register with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland if they employ 11 people or more on at least 16 hours a week, and should monitor the composition of their workforce in terms of community background and sex and submit an annual monitoring return to the Commission. Failure to do so constitutes a criminal offence.

Every three years, registered employers are required to conduct an Article 55 review, in which they must determine whether members of the Protestant and Roman Catholic communities are enjoying, and are likely to continue to enjoy, fair participation in employment, take affirmative action if fair participation is not being secured by members of the Protestant and Catholic communities, and set goals and timetables as part of affirmative action. The Article 55 review process only applies to community background. All private sector employers, including small businesses, are made responsible under anti-discrimination laws to protect staff from improper conduct by other employees that amounts to harassment.

Public sector employers have a higher standard of duty to meet with regards to equality in general. Section 75 of the

Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires designated public authorities to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity in relation to the nine equality categories, which includes racial group, but does not require statutory monitoring (although guidance from ECNI recommends it as good practice). Public authorities are also required to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief; political opinion; and racial group.

Public authorities are also required to submit an equality scheme to the Commission. The promotion of equality of opportunity includes the *positive* promotion of equality as well as the elimination of discrimination and in this it is covered by anti-discrimination legislation. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland notes that for public authorities

The equality of opportunity and good relations duties under Section 75 should be core business priorities, and not seen as a parallel process.

There is no monitoring for race equality required by law by either public authorities or private sector employers, although there is a commitment by the Northern Ireland Executive in the recent Racial Equality Strategy to review Fair Employment legislation to examine the case amending it to include monitoring information on nationality and ethnic origin.

Invitations were addressed mainly to Directors of Human Resources. Additionally the research project was publicised to businesses across the region by Invest NI, CBI and the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Private sector employers expressed more concern that they did not feel particularly confident about their progress on race equality to date. In total 20 employers agreed to participate. Participants in the private and public sectors came from a wide range of areas, including healthcare, hospitality, IT, food processing, manufacturing, construction, transport, finance, public services, customer services and education. In-depth interviews were conducted by the report author at each workplace, with one participant in 19 organisations, and 2 participants at 1 organisation. Qualitative data was analysed for evidence of current practice and reflection on its success, narratives about race equality within the organisation, and challenges to the race equality agenda identified by participants. A thematic analysis was then employed to explore the data by types of measures employed. The presentation of the findings here reflects that analysis.

## Research Approach

The overall purpose of this review was to explore the range of measures being used by employers in Northern Ireland towards race equality in the workplace, documenting examples of successful practice and barriers to extending race equality work. Of equal importance was to assist employers to reflect on current practice on race equality, and to provide an opportunity to consider future needs and capacity in this area. To meet these objectives an appreciative enquiry approach was adopted. This method facilitated participant reflection on the range and quality of equality measures in their organisation, and prompt consideration of progress and concerns.

Invitations were sent out to approximately 70 organisations across the region who were purposively selected. The aim was to access a broad range of employers across diverse areas in the private and public sectors. The selection of organisations was supported by Business in the Community NI and Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

## Policy design and review

All organisations in the study have a policy in place which addressed discrimination on the grounds of racial group. Most organisations had an Equality and Diversity policy or Equal Opportunities policy which was based on a standard template, similar in style to those offered by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland for example.

The extent to which policies were tailored to the specific business of the organisation varied significantly. Organisations which had clear communication to staff about the value of diversity to their business were more likely to have tailored the policy to link it to the organisation's values and clearly identify the purpose of efforts towards equality. The strongest statements addressed both internal (employee and management) and external audiences (customers, service users, suppliers), and concerned the rights of all of those groups to fair treatment regardless of ethnicity.

International businesses learn from parent or partner companies, exchanging templates for race equality policies, and sharing examples of good practice on responding to issues arising. This can be as simple as adopting and adapting practices, but can also involve HR staff travelling to other sites to explore how policies reflect the diversity of the workforce and the local workplace culture, which can differ significantly from site to site.

Amongst those who had considered tailoring of policies to be important were those organisations that might be described as good at listening to staff.

Race equality or ethnic minority staff groups are less common in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK, and both public and private sector employers reported that the small numbers of BME employees could make them unviable. There is also a shared concern about isolating BME staff by establishing such groups. However employers who had established specific networks for other minority groups, for example LGBT or disability, noted that the self-organisation of those groups provided an element of dynamism in keeping equality on the agenda. BME groups may emerge in those organisations over time and will be supported alongside the other groups.

A small number of employers had staff 'diversity' groups, which allowed staff to take the lead on additional diversity projects including social events or awareness raising campaigns and, importantly, to share resources and information about what works, ensuring that staff with an interest in equality progress could co-operate rather than compete across categories of gender, disability or ethnicity. However the co-option of these groups into particular

equality projects could squeeze out others, and a balanced membership is therefore necessary to retain that dynamism.

There was also evidence of consultation with trade unions, other internal employee groups and where policies might affect service users or customers, external groups representing ethnic minorities, though this was appropriately used in fewer situations. Trade unions offer a useful resource, since most employ staff who are expert in race equality issues, and can help to address change within the workforce as well as review policy changes.

Regular review of policies were common in public sector organisations, although there is evidence of few substantial changes being recommended. A strong audit system is helpful to ensuring that policies are regularly reviewed, but in smaller companies it is more likely that equality policies will be reviewed in a tranche with other kinds of policy. It is beneficial to review new standard policies from time to time and to consider tailoring policies to clearly reflect the business of the organisation.

There is significant variation in the availability of those policies to various affected parties, and this was mainly driven by the extent to which staff had access to a web based library of policies or a printed staff handbook. Staff working in environments with little or controlled access to the company intranet (e.g. through a manager's or shared site computer) and who have not been given a printed copy of the policy (e.g. in an employee handbook) were least able to access the company's policies on equality and also on bullying and harassment. While bullying and harassment policies were more likely to be displayed in the workplace, equal opportunities policies were harder to access, with staff having to ask Human Resources for copies of the relevant policies. Access to policies designed to protect workers is key to establishing an environment that is psychologically safe for minorities, particularly in the context of high rates of racist incidents across Northern Ireland.

Policy development should also include establishing objectives for managers at every level to ensure diversity and inclusion in their teams, including ensuring that diverse talent has equal access to training development opportunities and progression programmes. Employers in this study who have implemented this approach for gender targets have reported strong results and commitment from staff for the equality agenda.

## Recruiting for diversity

A dominant theme emerging in the research is significant concern amongst employers about attracting labour in the coming years. Half of employers described the difficulties of recruiting skilled labour as a present concern, but all identified one or more factors affecting the availability of skilled and unskilled labour in Northern Ireland for their business. Future restrictions on labour because of the end of EU-supported free movement of labour between the UK and Europe is a real concern identified.

At the time of writing there is no clarity about the rights of EU citizens already working in the UK to stay, and some indicators of life in the UK generally becoming more difficult for EU citizens both because of bureaucracy and overt racism. The result of this is that employers will seek labour within the UK and outside Europe. However low historic levels of labour migration from within the UK (apart from returners) pose challenges for internal recruitment, and few employers in this study believe that this is likely to offer a sufficient solution.

All of the employers in the study now use social media to advertise positions in their organisations, with just a few also still advertising in print publications. This is generally perceived as being the most accessible and least discriminatory form of advertising. Yet research on social media usage suggests that it relies heavily on social networks, and that people who do not have social networks that include connections in the relevant industries are unlikely to see the advertisements. To this extent, social media recruitment reflects word-of-mouth advertising for recruitment. And while word-of-mouth recruitment works well for diversity in companies which already have a critical mass of foreign-born or BME staff, it may have exclusionary effects in organisations or sectors which have low ethnic or national diversity.

An employer who recruited largely from the local area near their business used employment agencies to help source a wide pool of applicants during recruitment. It was common practice in this business to change the agencies used on a regular basis to ensure that positions in successive recruitment campaigns were advertised to the widest possible audience. This had the unintended effect of drawing in higher numbers of ethnic minority and foreign-born applicants.

Another employer who advertised in a local job centre as well as online found that changing the advertisements from one job centre to another significantly increased the diversity of applicants, because it is in an area more commonly lived in and worked in by ethnic minorities and migrants. This information came from consultation with staff about how to widen the applicant pool generally.

For those employers who are recruiting from overseas, either through direct recruitment campaigns or through an international recruitment agency, it was important to ensure staff would be retained. Additional efforts to help workers find housing, schools, health facilities and social outlets were variously evident at these employers. However a wider lesson from these companies is applicable to employers of all sizes and kinds. Ethnic minority and migrant staff both rely on word-of-mouth information because this provides them with a good assessment of whether the workplace is likely to be inclusive and safe.

Employers in this study are already incentivising word-of-mouth recruitment for staff, in particular to attract migrant workers to Northern Ireland and draw on the pool of migrant talent already in the region. This approach recognises that migrants to Northern Ireland may be in other forms of employment, or unemployed, perhaps because of migration for family or educational reasons.

This approach is helpful in identifying where Northern Ireland employers might source missing talent. There is an identifiable need to support 'break out' of migrant workers into a wider range of sectors. In Northern Ireland there is an acknowledgement that migrant workers are employed in particular sectors, but those businesses are not seen by other sectors as dynamic in producing a recruitment pool which is more fluent in English and has varied skills. The workforce is seen as low skilled and immobile.

This is contradictory to the perception of migrants, particularly those who take up low skilled work because of language barriers. Since migrant workers come more often to Northern Ireland directly to an employer and via word of mouth, when they seek work in other sectors they do not necessarily have the networks and knowledge to access positions in those sectors. Negative stereotypes of low-skilled employment may also make employers less likely to consider former migrant workers as potential recruits.

Specific benefits were noted for some particular sectors. The owner of a hospitality business, for example, regretted that there wasn't more diversity amongst the workforce to better reflect the range of potential customers in an increasingly diverse Belfast. This employer noted the need to keep a balance between local and foreign staff, noting the salience for tourists of the idea of being 'local', and pointed to the importance for government of reinforcing the message that 'locals' includes ethnic minorities born or settled in the region. If Northern Ireland is to appear welcoming to people of all backgrounds, for employment and tourism, then representations of the region must reflect its diversity too.

## Race Equality Training

The research noted a significant range of forms and quality of racial equality training on offer by employers. Large public sector organisations (even those with few BME employees) and large companies with international connections tended to offer a more in-depth understanding of racial bias specifically, and to use case study materials and discussion to help staff to make sense of the material. At the other end of the training spectrum are medium and large-sized private employers who provide only brief guidelines on discrimination, and do not provide a copy of the relevant policy to workers, although they are advised that it exists and that they may access it through Human Resources.

A third of employers interviewed do not want to take responsibility for educating employees about racial bias, and view racial bias training as a burden. Yet the new Racial Equality Strategy notes that residents of Northern Ireland, because of the small ethnic minority and migrant population

are much less likely to have sustained encounters with migrants and minority ethnic people here than anywhere else in these islands and as a result do not benefit as much from the informal “learning” and “education” about people from other cultures. (S.2.11)

Two-thirds of organisations required their staff to undertake a formal corporate induction (particularly where there were safety critical roles, but not exclusively), while a third left the responsibility for reading the staff handbook and materials to individual staff. The latter is less effective in ensuring that staff understand the purpose and importance given to equality and diversity in the workplace, since there are no dedicated opportunities to raise questions about equality measures in place. For 3 organisations, it was important only that staff had access to the information, should they require it for themselves at a later point. However for 6 organisations, it was clear that the information had a value in itself in promoting a particular kind of workplace culture, and therefore it was shared at the outset with dedicated opportunities for discussion. Organisations considering the form or role of induction should consider the extent to which induction establishes workplace values and culture, and how else those are communicated.

A small number of public sector organisations were very enthusiastic about the positive response from discussions at training sessions which had highlighted areas of misunderstanding and prejudices particularly arising from media framing of issues like immigration. These discussion-based

trainings worked particularly well, according to one participant, when they were tailored for similar staff. Alternatives including unconscious bias training or emphasis on non-prejudiced teamwork have been adopted with varying success.

The powerful effect of the media on views around immigration and ‘race’ was noted by participants. Company trainings which facilitated discussion could be ‘lively’, but provided a unique space for employees to raise questions and to test out their assumptions about key issues. While these sessions required some confidence on the part of the trainer to handle divergence, participants who allowed these discussions felt that they were an important part of the training process, since they allowed for reflection and fact-checking, with prejudices addressed in a timely and appropriate space rather than in the wider workplace.

Large organisations with well-resourced equality training appear to be much more responsive to emerging questions than smaller organisations. In one large public sector organisation, managers could identify an immediate issue, and arrange for an additional briefing at their monthly staff meeting. However the enthusiasm of the HR team in keeping trainings updated and noting relevant case studies meant that they were well equipped to respond to new requests and able to identify likely sources of relevant guidance for the specific issue. These might relate to issues affecting service user experience, or staff relations. A similar approach was found in a large and diverse private sector employer.

The most popular element of the BITC toolkit identified in next steps was unconscious bias training. Unconscious bias training has been adopted by a small number of employers in this study, as part of their wider equality training, where it was common to see it used alongside specific equality training on ‘race’ and other protected characteristics. Previous research suggests that unconscious bias is popular because it allows for discussions which don’t assume that employees are engaged in conscious and deliberate racist behaviours. The idea of unconscious bias is that a person who behaves in an exclusionary or even discriminatory way does not have to have negative intent.

Two employers interviewed offered both racial bias awareness in a standard equality and diversity training and unconscious bias training as an additional training for management and higher professionals. A third was considering offering unconscious bias training as a means of encouraging the workforce to refresh their understanding of discrimination and re-engage them with equality discussions, without repeating the training they had already taken. This

employer was concerned with pushing too much training in the area on staff in the context of low numbers of ethnic minority or migrant staff and in the absence of problems with racial harassment.

Yet racism in the workplace is a combination of both conscious and unconscious processes. Several companies in this research noted the power of reminding managers and employees not just to recognise ‘people like me’ in their day-to-day work. This can be particularly helpful in thinking about promotion or mentoring opportunities. But racial discrimination can also be conscious, for example in relying on stereotypes to make decisions about employees or even expressing racist beliefs directly. Overt expression is possibly rarer in Northern Ireland, one participant suggests, because “the history of the Troubles has made us much more careful about what we say, and to whom”. The absence of racist expression does not, however, equate to the absence of racial prejudice.

There are other disadvantages to unconscious bias training, in producing change to the overall picture of race equality, because individual discrimination can become the focus of attention to the exclusion of cultural patterns within the organisation which emerge in the shared behaviour between people and not from any individual. Because unconscious bias approaches also rely on an assumption of innocence in intent, they can reinforce the idea that no-one is responsible for inequalities that already exist in the workplace.

It can, without careful attention, reinforce the idea of the predominantly white workplace as neutral in its cultural form, language and behaviours rather than opening up a discussion about how workplace cultures we take for granted can already be excluding of ethnic minorities and people born in other countries. Unconscious bias training is most effective therefore when provided alongside information about current levels of inequality, cultural diversity awareness training, and includes opportunity for discussion. Evaluating the outcome of training therefore should be based on objective measurements that give us individual and collective feedback on our performance rather than subjective determinations of attitude.

## Invisibility

There were noticeably few assertions that organisations were ‘colour blind’ to the ethnic background of applicants and employees. Nonetheless, two contributions provided useful and complementary insights on colour-blindness. An employer who asserted ‘we don’t really see race – we’re all one team’ is also the most vocal on zero tolerance for discrimination and harassment in the workplace, and the need to consider cultural diversity as a benefit to business. This is a good example of how the team concept is used to incorporate rather than suppress diversity.

Another participant described the problems of a colour-blind approach by their organisation, and their surprise that a manager, in a conversation about race equality, forgot that their team centrally included an ethnic minority person. This kind of ‘forgetting’ was common across the interviews, but particularly noticeable in interviews where the organisation was described as having ‘hardly anyone’ who was not white or where the ‘forgotten’ employee was an ethnic minority woman.

Organisations with ‘hardly anyone’ identified as an ethnic minority are more likely to see race equality measures as a low priority and less likely to support ethnic minorities although they are *more* likely in this context to need interventions like mentoring or sponsorship. This is an important point to note in the Northern Irish context, given the low relative numbers of ethnic minority people in the region and the concentration of migrant workers in a few sectors.

Ethnic minority women are particularly likely to be ‘forgotten’, even in discussions of gender or race equality. Research suggests that this is because they do not fit the prototypes of their respective identity groups, since significant others do not think of them immediately either when they think of ‘women’ nor ‘ethnic minority’. It is important therefore when designing gender or race equality measures to specifically recognise multiple identities and ensure that these are incorporated in activities and goals.

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## Bullying and harassment

Bullying and harassment policies were in place in all organisations participating in this study, and were the main way in which most organisations dealt with racist harassment and allegations of discrimination.

Across the range of employers, there were low numbers of grievances reported, yet this is at odds with the high numbers of cases which the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland reports dealing with. This is likely to be because organisations opted in to this study and were more likely to do so where they perceived the low number of grievances as indicating good practice on race equality.

It is vital that senior leaders recognise that racial harassment and bullying exists and are prepared to take firm action to erase it from the workplace. The Business in the Community report *Race at Work*, which surveyed 25,457 people across the UK, found that 45 percent of all ethnic minority employees had experienced or witnessed racial harassment from managers in the last five years. In Northern Ireland, politicians recently have attributed racism to particular communities and neighbourhoods, yet the evidence shows that racist beliefs and attitudes are prevalent across the region.

Racist discrimination can take many forms, and the verbal or physical abuse that someone might experience is usually dealt with under bullying and harassment policies. Most employers reported the difficulty this produced in terms of trying to assess appropriate outcomes. It is also a highly charged situation where an employee is accused of racist behaviour. As a result employees tend to be very reluctant to mention racism when they report harassment from a colleague, and struggle to properly identify the root causes of their victimisation.

There are particular difficulties when the harassment is racially charged, but racist language is not used directly. For Northern Ireland this is a challenge, as the following quote reveals:

“Because of sectarianism and Fair Employment legislation, we’re probably better off than the rest of the UK in terms of overt racism. We’re a wee bit more sensitive. We know what not to say, and know not to say it in work. You do hear it here, but not so openly”.

Channels for reporting are an important point of focus. They should be known by all employees, clear in procedure and accessible for all. Employers reported using named staff members and in larger organisations, dedicated phone lines, to ensure that reporting was accessible, as well as encouraging staff to seek informal resolution through their manager if possible.

The majority of employers interviewed preferred direct reports of harassment from affected staff to ‘whistleblower’

reports. The latter were reported as having poor outcomes, because it is difficult to address the problem. However this had led to several employers shutting down routes for third party reporting, so that only the affected party could notify HR of a problem. Only one employer regularly redirected staff to their line manager to resolve conflict while most gave staff the option of approaching either their line manager or going directly to HR.

The research found that access to equal opportunity policies and other policies which safeguard against discrimination is very uneven. Although most employers made their equal opportunities policies available on a website or intranet, the high dependence of employers on technology to communicate with staff has produced different levels of access to policy documents depending on staff access to workplace computers and intranet. In addition, efforts to go paper-free have resulted in more material being made available online rather than in hard copy. There is evidence that staff in a small number of organisations have no access to electronic copies at all, and are advised to contact Human Resources to request policies which lay out their rights and procedures for reporting harassment or discrimination.

The central role that Human Resources staff play in receiving reports of racist incidents at work, and in identifying racism in other reports received, means that they should regularly receive updated training across the equality areas. Confident approaches by HR staff to dealing with racist incidents, where they are clearly well informed, are key to instilling confidence in staff experiencing these incidents.

Employee ability to talk about and consider race equality issues is increased where the organisations have a clear narrative about the relationship between race equality and the organisation’s values. Clarity can be lost, for example, where organisations adopt phrases in their value statements which are interpreted by senior management to include non-biased behaviour, but where such an understanding is not clearly communicated to all staff. This is problematic for holding staff to account for their behaviour.

Regular feedback and consultation is necessary to ensure that the absence of grievances accurately reflects a positive workplace culture. Employers who use staff surveys and consultation groups are able to provide evidence for their assertions that workplace relations are good, and can document how they have responded to queries that arise through those channels. This provides a level of accountability to staff for the application of policies, and greater confidence in the protection offered.

## Challenging racist behaviours

Employers who did not provide racial bias training to employees felt poorly equipped to challenge racist views and behaviours in the workplace which harmed employee relations, particularly where these were couched in humour. One manager noted that they did not know how to respond when an employee told a racist joke during a social event in the workplace. While the remark would have been unacceptable in the normal working of the organisation, addressing the remark risked creating a bad atmosphere at the social event. This example represents a common problem.

Management who find themselves confronted with such a scenario could comment that the remark is not in keeping with the organisation's values, and should not be repeated in the workplace out of respect for others and the organisation. This approach allows management to take a strong position in any context. The necessity of addressing 'joking' behaviour was noted by four organisations who specifically mentioned that they addressed this behaviour in their induction. One noted that it was necessary "to make people aware" and prevent conflict arising.

There are two elements to an effective communication on racist statements presented as humour. The first is raising awareness of why racist humour is intimidating and damaging to the workplace environment, and the second is to clarify that such behaviour is not in line with organisational values. The example of racist humour is helpful in pointing to the importance of management having confidence in discussing racism, because it relates to their ability to challenge such behaviour.

The key to zero tolerance is to communicate a clear message about the nature of racist harassment and the penalties for it. Employers may wish to highlight it separately or as part of a wider equalities issue, but it should be particularly highlighted to clearly communicate the organisation's position. Racist harassment thrives in contexts in which the perpetrators believe (often in the absence of evidence to the contrary), that their views are shared widely. The rise in racist harassment after Brexit vote across the UK is evidence of this.

Zero tolerance requires that the organisation have a clear and accessible policy on harassment, and management are confident enforcing it. In one example, staff approached management about a 'practical joke' on a Muslim employee by a colleague that had seriously breached his religious practice. The perpetrator was informed by management that their behaviour breached the organisation's values and policies, and constituted gross misconduct, and their employment was terminated.

Describing the incident, the participant emphasised the need to enforce the rules in order to set appropriate standards for the workforce, despite the cost of recruitment and training of staff, since workplace culture affects staff retention significantly.

"If you don't treat other staff with respect, we don't want you."

While most measures to address race equality are aimed at avoiding conflict between staff, there is less information available about what organisations do when racist statements or behaviours come from customers or service users. Examples of good practice include a senior manager directly addressing customers about their inappropriate behaviour towards a staff member, and visual reminders of zero tolerance of harassment of staff.

Challenging racism in the workplace, against or by staff members, regardless of the presence of a victim, is key to ensuring that it does not become part of workplace culture. It is notable that the recent Racial Equality Strategy mentions the need for stronger protection against racial harassment including by clients or customers (S. 5.13iii).

A recurring issue is the insubordination from colleagues faced by ethnic minority staff when they are promoted or take on additional responsibilities. This kind of behaviour rarely presents as bullying or harassment, but primarily usually as disciplinary action against the ethnic minority or migrant member of staff. Employers in this study noted the difficulty of persuading staff to act up where this had occurred previously.

There are additional challenges posed by the extension of the workplace when staff socialise together, for example, or share social media connections. Employees who are not trained in social media at work can mistakenly believe that interactions outside work premises are not subject to the same consequences. These situations benefit equally from an educational approach initially and in the case of harassment, a zero tolerance approach.

**It is vital that senior leaders recognise that racial harassment and bullying exists and are prepared to take firm action to erase it from the workplace.**

## Monitoring for success

Data monitoring is so well established in Northern Ireland as a means of achieving equality that it is unsurprising to find it used widely by employers in this study. Organisations are gathering data by racial group across a variety of areas, including job applicants, selection and recruitment. However it is much less common to see data monitoring in the areas of promotion or development opportunities. Research in Northern Ireland to date shows that ethnic minorities and migrants are most likely to be underemployed, and therefore data monitoring would be particularly useful to understand the barriers involved. It is worth noting that most of the employers in this study saw data monitoring as a valuable indicator of the health of their business generally. Employers are already expanding voluntary monitoring undertaken on race equality .

A difficulty which employers raised during the study concerned appropriate benchmarks against which to evaluate date. Most used Census data from 2011 as a means of measuring progress against the whole region, although recent demographic data suggests a shifting picture. For Belfast-based organisations, local diversity also raised the question of which areas or people constituted an appropriate comparison. Further, it would be necessary to break down census data to look at the working age population in order to get a true reflection. This population is likely to be considerably more diverse.

The inadequacy of ethnic categories in the Northern Ireland Census has been noted, particularly since ONS guidance for England and Wales suggests that census data

“can be used by private and public organisations to monitor equal opportunities and anti-discrimination policies, and to plan for the future through resource allocation and informing provision of services”

Other kinds of data which have been used to provide informal indicators include customer/service user surveys or marketing information , and feedback from employees on customer/service user needs

Organisations can use existing corporate or organisational networks to share information on changing demographics as well as good practice and information on issues arising. This is especially important for regional diversity.

It is also useful to compare initiatives across equality areas with ongoing and completed work on community / religious background or gender. Many more of the initiatives are transferable than participants in this study appreciated, despite the wealth of experience that some organisations had with equality initiatives, and a mainstreaming approach should produce this kind of benefit. Applying

successful initiatives from other areas to race inequalities should be done with consideration, and with consultation with appropriate internal or external groups. An advantage of this approach is that initiatives are more likely to become established and well-known to staff, and more easily evaluated over time. This avoids the usual problem for equality initiatives of being short-lived and under-evaluated.

Avoid the ‘no problem’ problem. It is important to establish clearly how you can recognise success. Organisations who focused on the negatives (how many grievances, hours spent on resolution) were more likely to perceive a low number of grievances as success. This approach, however, produces a false result. Staff who perceive an organisation as not valuing diversity may be less likely to submit a grievance when they experience discrimination, since they may perceive the process as pointless. Research internationally shows that staff perception of the organisation’s commitment to diversity can determine their response to discrimination they do experience, seeking to resolve the situation if they feel positive about the organisation, or if they do not, losing their sense of commitment to the organisation and seeking to leave their position when possible.

A more effective approach is to look for indicators of success in communicating how the organisation values diversity, and use corresponding feedback from staff to assess the clarity and reception of this message. Key actions to underpin this approach include looking for evidence of a workplace culture that values diversity, ensuring a high level of understanding amongst staff about bias in decision-making and about the organisation’s commitment to diversity, and engaging across the organisation at all levels for feedback. Staff surveys are described as invaluable by participants who use them regularly, allowing for reflection on employee awareness and perception of the diversity commitment over time.

Staff surveys can also produce data on harassment which is not reflected in grievances. While employers in this study agree that they would prefer to be able to tackle the individual problem with more detail, the survey can allow for anonymous reporting where an individual has decided that pursuing a grievance is not in their interest. Participants who use staff surveys to take the temperature on harassment emphasise the importance of allowing this kind of reporting within the survey and producing action plans to address the general picture. A mainstreaming approach can be helpful here, thinking about the range of groups who might be affected by harassment of the kind reported, and how to prevent or reduce future incidents.

## Taking corrective action

Data shows that there is disagreement when considering corrective action to produce race equality. Organisations in this study had mostly already considered corrective action in the case of gender, and this attitude is heavily influenced by the STEM agenda and the resources invested by professional and statutory organisations in this area.

Forms of corrective action which have been supported have been most successful where they have been led by equality working groups or standing committees as part of a larger effort to monitor and address inequalities, and where there is parity in the corrective actions across equality groups. Leadership by employee groups can be helpful, but BME staff networks tend to be supported only in the public sector.

Recent research in Northern Ireland notes the growing recognition that affirmative action, adopted in the region to address disadvantage on the basis of religion or community background, must also recognise new minority groups. Affirmative action for race equality undertaken by employers is not defensible under the current legislation. Where affirmative action is to be undertaken, it is defined restrictively as “action designed to secure fair participation in employment by members of the Protestant or the Roman Catholic community” (S.1.3.1).

The data clearly showed that employers were familiar with the purpose and forms of affirmative action which have been established in Northern Ireland legislation, and there was no evidence of challenges to the affirmative action principle in relation to community background.

In this respect, the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 allows for a range of affirmative actions, including:

- the encouragement of applications for employment or training for people from under-represented groups;
- targeting training in a particular area or at a particular class of person;
- the amendment of redundancy procedures to help achieve fair participation;
- and the provision of training for non-employees of a particular religious belief- following approval by the Equality Commission.

Affirmative action here recognises the structural inequalities which have discriminated against people from Catholic communities in Northern Ireland and seeks to address these. In respect of all other minority groups, however, the principle of individual merit applies. Guidance from the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland states that

An equal opportunities employer also operates recruitment and selection procedures that are fair and are based on the principle of selecting the best person for the job.

The Fair Employment Code of Practice states:

Your policy and practice must be firmly based on the principle of selection according to merit... (S.5.1.1)

The merit principle is firmly asserted by participating organisations in this project. Some, however, expressed regret that affirmative action is difficult to put in place for other groups in the workforce, including women. Efforts to address gender imbalance in the workplace have been established with caution.

Participants largely rejected the suggestion however that race equality measures might include forms of affirmative action. The reasons given for this largely centred on the idea that “women make up half the population” and on the basis of statistical disproportion, gender inequalities sat much more closely to the issue of discrimination on community background than inequality on the grounds of ‘race’ and ethnicity. There is a danger that gender and race equality agendas are viewed as being separate to one another, and this ignores international evidence that disparity is especially pronounced for ethnic minority women, who face the most barriers to advancement and experience the steepest drop-offs with seniority.

It is notable that the Northern Ireland Executive has now committed to reviewing the possibility of expanding the scope of positive action which employers and service providers can lawfully take in order to promote racial equality (Racial Equality Strategy S.5.13v). This is an advance to be welcomed on the evidence from this study.

### Mentoring and sponsorship

Although the employers in this study were strongly in agreement that affirmative actions were useful in ensuring access to the workplace, there is much less agreement on interventions to support ethnic minority staff to progress. This is an area where Northern Ireland most needs to ensure race equality, since career mobility across and within sectors is low generally, and there are no reliable statistics on mobility within organisations.

One action suggested by the Business in the Community Race at Work report (2015) is that leaders could act as active sponsors, using their influence to mention the names of the BAME people when development or progression opportunities are being discussed – especially

when there are no people from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds in the room during these conversations.

A key concern expressed about this type of action is that ethnic minority staff might suffer as a result of being given 'special treatment', particularly if there were small numbers in the organisation. There is insufficient understanding of the impact of structural inequalities or cumulative low level direct discrimination on BME or migrant career progression within organisations, although there is some evidence of recognition of the same in respect of gender. A participant at an organisation with offices elsewhere in the UK however noted that they had observed a very successful example of this type of sponsorship of an ethnic minority staff member, and would be happy to consider adopting a similar approach in their Northern Ireland business.

There is no evidence of work with ethnic minority jobseekers in any of the organisations in this study. One organisation described a collaboration with a community group in a disadvantaged area of Belfast, but the group is not ethnically diverse to the employer's knowledge. Data on employment in Northern Ireland suggests that ethnic minorities experience lower levels of unemployment than elsewhere in the UK, but are more likely to choose self-employment. Diversifying jobseeker training therefore may be worth considering in the future, but will be a more appropriate consideration for organisations already undertaking jobseeker training to ensure inclusivity in their external engagement activities.

As a means of emphasising organisational commitment to diversity, there are a range of available strategies to highlight the occupational success of existing ethnic minority staff. There are notable examples of organisations increasing visual representations of diversity within the workforce by, for example, using posters emphasising key messages of cultural values including teamwork, respect and inclusion, which include images of groups of staff from different ethnic backgrounds. These were powerful visual aids within the workplace.

Participants have described successfully using internal communications, including magazines, websites and blogs, to highlight ethnic and cultural diversity. Examples included feature stories about individual staff successes at work, awards, and individual staff interests beyond the workplace, and focus pieces on particular cultures reflected in the workforce. Organisations who shared a corporate magazine across the whole UK featured a higher level of ethnic diversity, but were not necessarily perceived as reflecting the workforce or workplace culture in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, publications like this were seen to prompt discussions amongst staff which were framed in a more positive way than the same issues might be framed in the mass media. Publications like this were particularly valuable in workplaces where employees were not regu-

larly engaged with corporate web-based materials.

Making professional role models visible outside the workplace is perceived as being a much greater challenge for employers, and not a priority activity. Only public sector organisations saw value in playing a role in this kind of activity.

Employers were unenthusiastic about the power of careers fairs to highlight diversity in their organisations to students and schoolchildren. Two participants were able to describe careers events where there were ethnic minority staff in attendance. There is reluctance in most organisations to divert staff other than Human Resources to such events, and one participant particularly noted that in the context of small numbers of ethnic minority staff, such diversions could be detrimental to ethnic minority staff by taking them out of their workplace. There is agreement that the lack of ethnic diversity in universities would present a challenge later on in diversifying the workforce, and both public and private sector participants who required skilled workers felt strongly that universities were better placed to impact the diversity of available and qualified labour in the region.

Where projects with schools were undertaken, organisations were on the whole careful to ensure that schools were 'matched' in terms of community background, so that no particular group is excluded. However integrated schools were generally not considered in this 'matching' exercise. This is an important gap to recognise, since research on inequalities in education in Northern Ireland has shown that minority ethnic and newcomer children represent a greater share of children within the integrated sector.

One employer noted that there were a greater number of women amongst their staff participating in school partnerships, and that this was perceived as positive in reflecting women as professional role models. However the participant later questioned whether since women were more likely to be perceived as natural 'teachers' for children than men in that industry, the higher proportion of women in these roles could reinforce rather than disrupt stereotypes.

Professional organisations can help to raise the profile of ethnic minority people too. For example, industry magazines can do this by auditing panels of editorial contributors or features on 'rising stars' for diversity. Panels of speakers might equally be reviewed. Neither of these measures should be interpreted as advocating a specific quantitative presence, but rather that the editorial or events teams are reminded of the problem of invisibility for ethnic minorities in the workplace. These kinds of activities can produce amplification because of the way in which professional publications and events act as signposting for the wider media industry.

## Creating a clear message about diversity

One of the strongest messages emerging from this study is that organisations must establish the value of diversity and clearly communicate this to all levels of the organisation as a first step in progressing race equality efforts. Getting the message right means reflecting this value in corporate value statements, key communiques from Directors, and having those reflected clearly throughout the organisation's communications at all levels.

Both organisations with highly diverse workforces and organisations with few ethnic minority staff employed strong messages aimed at staff which emphasised respectful working environments, team unity, and a culture of openness. These messages were presented in staff handbooks, in highly visual poster form by some employers, and verbally weekly staff meetings in others. The message was reflected too in the chosen content of corporate magazines and news noticeboards for staff.

Clarity of values is an important consideration. Choosing the terms to use in this communication is important. The absence of the term 'equality' from corporate values in some organisations can be contrasted with the clear, direct and unambiguous reference to equal opportunities and treatment in others. Employing the term 'diversity' without reference to 'equality' operates to undermine the positive message about employee value which the organisation should seek to create and communicate.

Ambiguity can creep in even where significant work has been done to define values. Two employers in this study using corporate value statements to guide workplace culture believed that the terms, and their definitions, included equality. However the absence of the word 'equality' both from the nominated values and from the extensive value definitions that accompanied them left ambiguity which undermines the clarity message about diversity in the organisation.

Being specific about when and how staff learn the values of the organisation helps to ensure that the workplace culture develops informed by those values, and not in spite of them. Values can be communicated implicitly in the recruitment process, and made explicit in induction to sensitise new staff to their purpose.

Commitment to racial bias training by senior staff injects the process with their authority and reflects organisational commitment to equality from the very top. Demonstrating management endorsement and encouragement, through co-attendance or video messages incorporated in the training, can significantly increase staff commitment to the process.

A common response from employers who had increased

the diversity in their workforce already was to emphasise the additional benefits which a diverse workforce can provide. This included taking different approaches to problem-solving, understanding a wider range of customer or client needs, having knowledge of other organisations or markets, and seeking alternative perspectives. These were true both for ethnic minorities born in Northern Ireland as well as those born overseas. The evidence presented by employers for this position reflects the fact that the workplace is not a 'neutral' place, but one which is dominated by the ideas and expectations of the majority group. Increasing the mix of employee backgrounds is identified as prompting creativity and discussion.

Organisations with clear communication of the corporate approach to race equality across all levels of staff present this information to staff regularly and consistently, through posters, corporate newsletters and communiques of value statements from senior management. In some cases, staff are asked to sign a regular statement of corporate values which includes a statement on race equality (along with other equality groups).

**The workplace is not a 'neutral' place, but one which is dominated by the ideas and expectations of the majority group.**

## Keeping Race Equality on the table

The research also explored how and if organisations successfully focused attention towards race equality work over a sustained period of time. More than half of participants in both sectors described senior management as 'driving' the equality agenda in their organisation or 'keeping it on the table'. There were notable examples of HR staff being encouraged to particularly address equality issues because of the positive impact which monitoring, intervention and awareness raising had on the wider workplace culture.

A range of measures were taken to address the equality agenda, including making dedicated budgets available for training, interventions and positive reinforcement (e.g. through company-wide social events), and hiring staff experienced in dealing with equality duties (from the public sector into the private sector, for example). Organisations which perceived equality efforts as a central part of the human resources function reported higher rates of confidence amongst staff to address new issues identified, and to reflect on workforce planning.

However when it came to race equality training, there were identifiable concerns in 2 companies about how to justify repeated racial bias training, particularly because there were few ethnic minority employees and few grievances in recent years. Here it is useful to draw on the work being done by other employers in the study. Up-to-date training materials use recent case studies from the Equality Commission, BBC and other sources helps to keep material fresh and relevant, and allowing discussion in trainings helps to keep equality team informed about the issues of most interest/relevance to staff (and that can vary by role). Consultation with staff plays a role here again.

Awards provided an additional means of staying engaged with race equality work, and participants felt that they formed an important part of the message sent to staff, although that wouldn't be possible for all organisations. Awards focused work, ensuring allocation of time and resources. There is however a risk of staff seeing them as disingenuous unless they are matched by efforts to proactively address the culture of the organisation or address pay inequalities.

### Next steps

A unique feature of this study is that participants were asked, in interviews, to identify ways in which their own organisation could improve on race equality efforts. This encourages an incremental approach to moving forward on race equality, with consideration of time and resources.

Prompts included thinking about ways to draw on past achievements, leverage strategic opportunities to highlight positive experiences of diversity, or adopt new equality measures.

Half of the employers interviewed were able to identify activities which they could implement which would improve race equality at their workplace. Obstacles to these activities were dominated by time resources, competing demands to the 'equality agenda', and lack of interest from management. Most of these activities directly to bullying and harassment prevention or resolution, but some also addressed recruitment and selection activities, and a few mentioned interest in addressing promotion or progression (although most employers reported that this was the area to which they paid least attention in all respects).

Just under half of employers suggested that they could monitor ethnic or national identities more widely, although for organisations with small numbers of BME or foreign-born employees, they were unsure about how to make use of that monitoring data. Most employers felt that it is easier for employers in Great Britain to make use of monitoring data given the greater ethnic minority or foreign-born population. Almost all employers looked to the Northern Ireland census to benchmark BME participation in their business. Just one public sector employer looked to local demographics to benchmark ethnic minority participation in the workforce, and this is aimed at addressing the higher rate of ethnic minority service users in the area. Nonetheless it gave them a much stronger starting point for understanding staff experiences in the workplace.

While research shows that mandatory policies are the most effective means of achieving diversity, recent evidence from the NHS shows that there are key predictors for success that can help us to plan voluntary approaches. These are core leadership support, resource allocation, evaluation and rewards for diversity. Clear links between diversity and excellence drive focus and ensure that efforts to address equality in the workplace are effective and efficient. Strategies should be planned to operate for a sufficient period to raise awareness, consult staff on their ongoing impact, and evaluate them. Short-term strategies can be useful to make a start on race equality work (particularly if other equality groups are significantly more embedded in the organisation), but should be a prelude to an established and resourced equality strategy.

**A full bibliography for research cited in this report is available at <https://ulster.academia.edu/LucyMichael>**



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for Northern Ireland**

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