

STUDENTS AS CONSUMERS

Is trust broken?

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Manchester 2020 highlighted the worst aspects of the tricky relationship that has developed between the student body and universities since the pandemic began.

New students were told they would receive blended learning and that everything would be as normal as possible – but that wasn't the case. Students received little or no in-person teaching; they were ordered to stay in residences, often confined to apartments with people they had never met before; gyms and leisure facilities were closed; green space were fenced off; covid spread rapidly. When a metal fence was put up overnight, students tore it down. When a black student was held up against a wall by security guards and told he looked like a drug dealer, it felt like the university was a faceless corporation more interested in income than in providing a great student experience.

Students are choosing to hold their universities to account on. Students are consumers now, says Cathy Wippell, a third-year student at Manchester and co-founder of Student Action for a Fair and Educated Response (Safer). "It should have been very apparent they were promising something they couldn't deliver," she says. "We therefore demand, as consumers do, money back and compensation for unsatisfactory service."

These issues are not unique to Manchester. Orla Katz Webb-Lamb, a second-year student at Sheffield, has invited students around the country to comment on their experiences via an online survey. "Like eating glass and staring into the abyss," is one response. "We were lied to," says another, "and then expected to produce the same quality of work while also paying the same amount of money for sub-standard experience. Especially when we pay rent for accommodation we were specifically told not to live in."

"A lot of students have realised that we really are being exploited for profit," says Finley Gore, a first-year student at Manchester who is helping to organise a rent strike. "The university's business model depends on income from fees and rent, so they didn't want students to stay away and defer their courses." The resulting "Covid bath", says Wippell, wasn't only a danger to students: "Students' families were put at risk, and the people of Manchester. If money hadn't been a factor that wouldn't have happened."

TACKLING RACIAL HARASSMENT

Stop racial harassment

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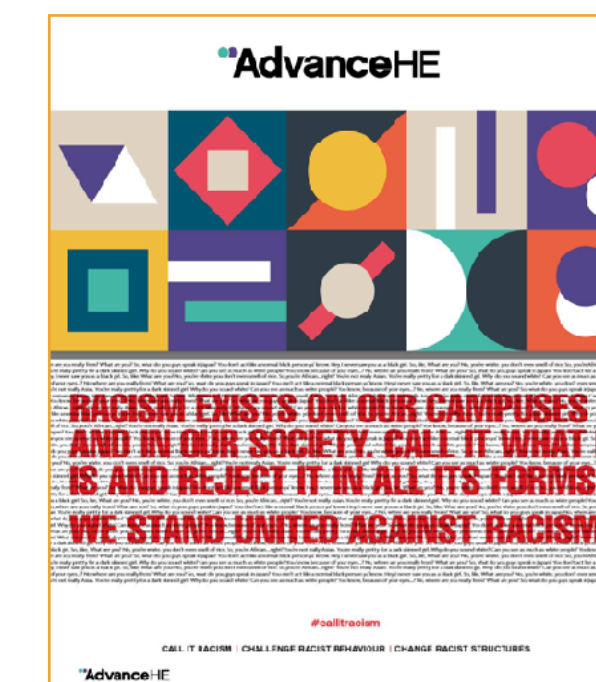
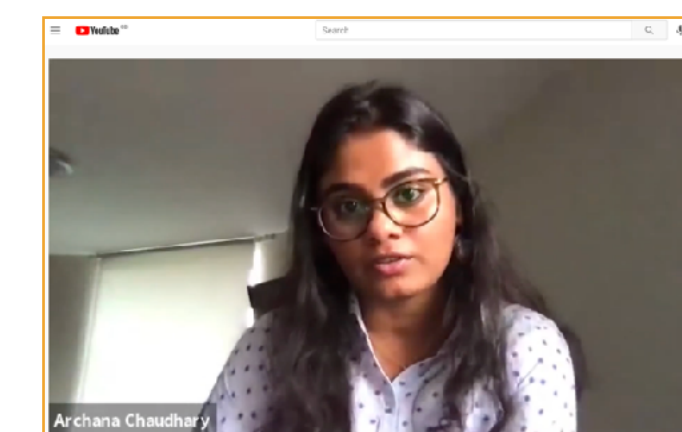
In November 2020, [Universities UK published recommendations](#) to tackle racial harassment in UK higher education:

- 👉 Publicly commit priority status to tackling racial harassment
- 👉 Engage directly with students and staff with lived experience of racial harassment
- 👉 Review current policies and procedures and develop new institution-wide strategies for tackling racial harassment
- 👉 Improve awareness and understanding of racism, racial harassment, white privilege and microaggressions among all staff and students, including through anti-racist training
- 👉 Ensure expected behaviours for online behaviour are clearly communicated to students and staff, as well as sanctions for breaches
- 👉 Develop and introduce reporting systems for incidents of racial harassment
- 👉 Collect data on reports of incidents and share regularly with senior staff and governing bodies

The guidance calls on university leaders to acknowledge that UK higher education perpetuates institutional racism. It also recommends training for senior leaders and governing bodies to improve their awareness; and it makes clear that efforts to address racial harassment will only succeed if the entire university community – including students, staff, alumni, and local partners – are engaged and encouraged to take shared responsibility for change.

Efforts to tackle racial harassment should be closely linked with wider work by universities to address racial inequalities in their local communities, as well as throughout UK society and culture.

FURTHER READING



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