

## **Meeting to discuss the Open Letter on Racial Justice**

**Tuesday 7 September, 4pm, via Microsoft Teams**

### **Present:**

Arabella Stanger, UCU (Chair)

Tom Bamford-Blake, UCU

Alice Corble, UCU

Sophie Valeix, Unison

Yazz James, USSU

Nehaal Bajwa, USSU

Connor Moylett, USSU

Meena Zaveri, former UG and MSc student, former Race Equity Advocate Programme Coordinator, USSU

Daniel Akinbosedo, PGR student, Co-Founder of Race Equity Advocate Programme

Kevin Hylton, Interim PVC Culture, Equality & Inclusion

Sharon Neal, Assistant Director of HR: OD, Culture & Inclusion

Graeme Pedlingham, Deputy PVC for Student Experience

Kelly Coate, PVC for Education & Students

Robin Banerjee, Head of School of Psychology

Sarah Cox, HR Business Partner (Secretary)

### **Apologies:**

Paula Burr, Unite

Sam Solomon, UCU

### **1. Introductions**

All present introduced themselves and their roles.

### **2. Background to the Open Letter**

AS explained the background and structure of the meeting. The aim of the meeting was to hear from UEG about plans of action to address areas of concern raised in the letter, including how difficult areas would be addressed. The meeting was envisaged as a first step and should aim to agree concrete steps. An honest conversation on any challenges that were proving particularly difficult would be useful. It was noted that the writers of the Open Letter appreciated RB's personal email response and the wording of the Black Lives Matter statement issued last year, particularly its commitment that the recognition of uncomfortable truths would be the basis for transformative work.

The Open Letter was published in early June 2021 and had been signed by over 1,000 people: students, professional services and academic staff, alumni and other members of the Sussex community. The letter resulted from a conversation that had been ongoing for the last few years, involving students and staff working together on antiracism. The Open Letter was written collectively and the people in the meeting were representatives of a broader group of co-authors and signatories.

The letter and its demands were included in the agenda: <http://bit.ly/RacialJusticeSussex> . (See appendix 1 for list of six demands.)

### 3. Discussion of the letter's six demands (see appendix 1)

KH had started as interim PVC at the beginning of July and had been meeting colleagues at all levels involved in equalities work. The purpose of these meetings had been to triangulate the ideas of as many people as possible and draw conclusions about the current position at the University. These discussions informed his response on the letter's six demands, which are as follows:

**Demand (i)** – there was no intention to conflate the Race Equity Advocates scheme with Student Connectors. These are distinct roles; it was recognised that there are synergies between them. The University does not directly fund the Race Advocates Scheme and so could not “defund” it. In addition to its block grant to USSU, the University had made a commitment of £34k that was used to pay for the equivalent of one term of the Race Equity Advocates that USSU could use for any of its priority initiatives. Recent meetings had been held between ULT members and USSU to develop joint approaches. USSU had sent a positive email in response, on specific areas of joint working.

**Demand (ii)** – KH reported that security is provided by an external company, Mitie. The recent increased police presence on campus had been as a result of lockdown and the legal requirement to reduce social gatherings and events. Illegal parties were prevalent on campus over lockdown and there had been a call from students to reduce noise and large groups. The campus became a venue for external people to join on-campus gatherings and this was exacerbated by unprecedented levels of assaults, including on security staff. A video was released on social media of an incident involving the police and a woman of colour. KH explained that when he first heard about this video he was appalled and that the concerns of those reviewing the short video clips were understandable, however, they did not show the full circumstances and context of the entire incident which remains an ongoing case. USSU had met with the Police and there are regular meetings agreed. It was noted that there are strong links between the University and the Police.

**Demand (iii)** – KH outlined that the Finance Director had set the scene in 2019, emphasising the need to exercise financial caution. KH had been briefed that there was no all-encompassing blanket ban on recruitment, and recruitment activities continued where there was a clear and present case for it. This and the promotions freeze were designed to reduce the growing deficit and were sensible approaches to take given the University's finances and the state of uncertainty.

KH explained that, in his view, antiracism has to be explicit in order not to be half-hearted and that while a statement is an initial expression of intent, policy action and strategy plans make statements come to life. He noted that there have been inconsistencies in the University's approach in this respect. He referred to the BLM statement's point that 'there can be no neutral ground towards racist practice', yet noted the lack of a public statement that Sussex is an antiracist institution. This is something he intends to remedy.

In KH's role as PVC he wished to develop an antiracist statement on recruitment, underpinned by strategy and action plans. The University was working towards improving transparency and reflection. HR would be embarking on a full review of the University's promotions procedures and recruitment processes to ensure they were antiracist and anti-discriminatory.

**Demand (iv)** – KH explained that funding had always been available for the BAME network. The role of chair was currently vacant and would be advertised. KH's intention was to propose formalising the roles of all the EDI leads and network chairs and ensure the resourcing of these roles was sustainable. In particular, the role of network chair will have 0.2 fte of their role released to undertake this work. This would be part of a wider review of the structure and governance of EDI at the University.

**Demand (v)** – It was imperative that the Race Equality Charter was adequately resourced. A new full-time Equality Charter Manager had just been appointed (the previous post was at 0.6fte). The terms of reference for the EDI leads and chairs would be refocussed. KH acknowledged that there has been no direct conversation about the work of SARA and he would be happy to meet with any representative of SARA to talk about how the University could meet its antiracist agenda.

**Demand (vi)** – KH was currently working with Organisational Development colleagues to explore antiracism development for UEG, considering impactful options and how these initiatives would impact on the REF and the wider organisation.

**The following views were expressed in response by letter coordinators:**

DA provided an initial response to Kevin’s statement, articulating a number of points and concerns listed below.

- Profound disappointment was expressed at the nature of the above response from UEG. The coordinators of the letter came to the meeting with hope that the response would be reflective and substantive but felt shocked that this was all the University had to say in response to the grave concerns expressed in the letter.
- Astonishment was expressed in particular at the idea that the Student Connectors (SC) programme could successfully serve as the focal point in addressing the University’s awarding gap. Other universities are spending large amounts of money in ensuring these gaps close. The point is not that Sussex is uniquely bad but that clearly no one in the University leadership team appreciates the scale of the problem we face. As a majority white leadership team, it is not UEG but it is students of colour and our families who have to deal with the inequalities this university is creating.
- The University has and continues to avoid responsibility for jeopardizing the future of the Race Equality Advocates (REA) scheme on technicalities and excuses. Some important parts of that picture have been left out of the account given here by UEG today.
- The majority of School DoSEs (Director of Student Experience) wrote a letter stating that the REA programme is a better use of our time and resources than the SC programme. Instead of being listened to, alongside the lived experiences of those actually doing the REA work, these voices were ignored.
- There have been ongoing attempts by students and staff to enter into productive dialogue with the University leadership. But those who had been working hard in this area for the last 2-3 years were feeling burnt out because no change was discernible.
- The University’s leadership can pay lip service to wanting to be an antiracist institution and wanting to develop a plan, but it is grossly insufficient in the face of existing patterns.
- This is why he had made the decision to leave the University’s Race Equality Charter (REC) team. It was lamented that Black and brown staff who have been the lifeblood of antiracism work at Sussex are leaving the University at an alarming rate. [It was noted through the meeting that the Equality Charter Manager has now resigned, that the BAME Network Chair left in 2020, that those leading on support for students of colour in Global Studies have left, that two Black academics in Life Sciences, one being one of only 25 Black women professors in the UK, have also recently left Sussex]. The lived experience of staff and students of colour clearly doesn't matter.

YJ and MZ voiced strong agreement with DA’s points and AS noted that the coordinators of the letter stood fully behind his analysis, his identification of barriers to change at Sussex, and that they shared his disappointment with UEG’s response in this meeting.

Additional points made by coordinators of the letter include:

- In response to the demand relating to police presence, the view was expressed that the Sussex police response on campus was disproportionate towards Black and brown students
- Strong feedback was given on the need for concrete action plans rather than statements and policies
- Positive parts of the UEG's response were also noted. It was heartening to hear that Sussex would be focusing less on individual behaviours and more on structural change.

KH said that the meeting time today was limited and he could only give so much information but there was more detail and opportunities for dialogue on the 6 points. KH indicated that a lot of work was being done and good progress had already been made. This was the time to stay at the table, consider a fuller response and engage in productive and constructive dialogue.

In response, AS and TBB expressed the view that this meeting represented a commitment to stay at the table, but that previous exchanges had not changed anything and it was felt that it would be impossible for discussions to be productive until something shifted. It was suggested that those shifts needed to be based in concrete actions initiated by the University leadership listening to issues raised by its staff and students and not dismissing these issues or simply justifying the current state of affairs in the institution.

The meeting was extended to 17.20.

It was agreed that attendees would raise specific issues and receive a response about what would or would not be taken forward.

### **Normalisation of police presence**

- The point was made by CM that the USSU and UEG have previously come to a shared recognition that students have been negatively impacted by police and security behaviour on campus, and especially for those with marginalised identities and most of all students of colour. What USSU has been seeking agreement on is a real joint approach between students and the University in which any kind of police presence on campus, even that of community-orientated policing, is not normalised and to move instead towards a safe space settlement as a norm in higher education.
- Agreed. No desire from UEG or Sussex Police to normalise police presence on campus. As the catalyst had been lockdown and COVID-related restrictions, and these had now eased, so had the necessity for police patrols. This will be picked up further outside of the meeting by KH, USSU and Estates

### **Training for UEG**

- to include addressing the low levels of literacy on racial justice and race equity among some senior management. A question was posed as to how many members of UEG had read the SARA manifesto and a request was made that all read it as part of any antiracism training for that group. One student commented in the chat: "I think all should read the manifesto if they truly want to understand the experiences of students of colour within and outside of the classroom at Sussex." [<https://sussexstudent.com/change-things/sara>]
- Agreed that reading the SARA manifesto would form one part of the programme of development activity for the University leadership. KH suggested a meeting between him and students/unions to discuss this further. KH and AC agreed to meet so that campus Trade Unions can be involved in this collaborative approach to antiracist training. A student shared in the chat: "I'd also be concerned about what may happen when you leave Kevin. You sound like you're willing to put the work in but our experience with the university has been that this work does not continue."

## **Recruitment freeze**

Concerns were raised as follows regarding the pausing and scrutiny of recruitment in early 2020:

- Black and brown members of staff were leaving, and it was difficult to replace them. The freeze was in place in areas across the University, and has had a negative impact on students and on staff in those areas. Students are asking their departments: why are all our tutors white? Schools and departments are being actively prevented from addressing the problem of dominant whiteness at Sussex and are given only financial rationales as a reason. The point was made that this was not only a question of recruitment, but also of retention and casualization.
- KH discussed an antiracist statement, a review of our hiring data and our recruitment data in order to improve the diversity of our staff population. A robust, proactive, systematic approach was needed. This was starting to be developed in HR, but such things took time to develop and implement. It was important to put measures in place that were robust and sustainable and to avoid 'token' hires.

RB felt that many are doing much and giving much and worried that the narrative is that the University is doing nothing, without demands being made. Recognition for the effort that is being made is important.

That work was being done already was acknowledged and it was pointed out that the open letter also acknowledged this work but that the salient point remained that this work was not enough and that more action was needed. It was also felt that the University consistently fails to acknowledge the uncomfortable truths concerning where it has gone wrong. MZ expressed the view that some staff are motivated to get involved in race equity work by an interest in their own career progression. For this reason, statements at this point are felt to be disingenuous by well-intentioned staff and students who are by now burnt out by their experience of institutional ignorance.

A summative point was made that students and former students of the University had come to this meeting in good faith and were speaking from the heart about the struggles they had faced and continue to face at Sussex. Their critique and experiences demonstrate that something is going wrong with race equity work at Sussex. Colleagues were asked to listen to these students. It was acknowledged that this has been a painful conversation but that the meeting was convened and the letter written precisely in order to address the situation at Sussex, with honesty.

## **4. Next steps**

- Share minutes with all present and, once agreed, make them publicly available
- UEG to publish a response to the Open Letter, in light of this meeting
- Work together collaboratively to make progress on the issues raised, with added clarity that future collaboration will be contingent on a commitment from UEG to make concrete changes in light of the open letter and this meeting
- KH to undertake a comprehensive handover with his permanent replacement to ensure that work continues in this area after his interim appointment ends
- GP to arrange a follow-on meeting with USSU on student antiracist priorities
- AC (for UCU) and KH (for UEG) to follow up on collaborative approach to race equity training across the University
- Students and staff at the meeting take up KH's personal invitation to further dialogue with him on the issues at stake

## Appendix 1 – The six demands made in the Open Letter

- i) Reinststate and increase, with immediate effect, funding for the independent USSU Race Equity Advocate scheme, and guarantee the future of this scheme alongside, and not co-opted into, the Student Connectors programme. The presence of the REA programme should be ensured in all 12 schools at this University.
- ii) Commit that police will not again be invited to patrol campus and that police presence on campus will not be normalised, and instead work with student and staff groups within the University to develop forms of community-led safety.
- iii) Lift the recruitment freeze, redress the loss of earnings represented in the promotions freeze, and take meaningful steps to ensure the University enshrines an anti-racist approach to staff recruitment and promotion processes.
- iv) Ring-fence funding and proper resourcing for the revival of the Sussex BAME Staff Network.
- v) Invest greater time and resources not only in the institutional Race Equality Charter exercise, but first and foremost in community-led programmes for racial justice, an exemplary case being the SARA Manifesto. This manifesto has already, thoroughly and convincingly, delivered to the University leadership the ‘uncomfortable truths’ it called for in its now-inoperative BLM statement of last year.
- vi) Commit to anti-racism training for all members of the UEG.

**Appendix 2 – substantive text comments made in the Teams meeting – those which have not otherwise been incorporated above. (It was requested in the meeting that these comments were included in the minutes.)**

NB

I think perhaps the explanation of what is happening would have been clearer to those gathered if there had been less emphasis on ground we have covered before - understandable that you would cover it, Kevin, as you are new, but many of us have had the same conversations which haven't moved multiple times now, so I think that is where the frustration is coming from.

DA

I have been listening for 3 years...

YJ

I also think we need to think about students here. A number of us are students here and have been for years and can tell you that our experiences have been appalling. These issues have been raised for years, before the resurgence of BLM. I'm not sure how long the university can expect us to be patient and continually experience multiple forms of oppression at a place where we're meant to feel safe and have fun.

TBB

One thing I wanted to register but not spend conversation time on: I think the commitment to de-escalating police presence on campus is welcomed and positive, but I am confused as to why then the initial response to that focused on the specific circumstances of police being on campus during lockdown, rather than the future commitment that was clearly the content of the demand. Again I don't blame Kevin Hylton personally for this, but I think UEG in general could have responded more concretely. No need to spend more time going over this but it's worth acknowledging.

DA

I just want to make it clear that I am done begging this university for scraps. University leadership clearly have an ideological reluctance to address these issues with real material urgency. As for my comments, I stand by every word. I image there will be thoughts to dismiss them are 'angry black student' remarks, but they are true. Thank you to all my peers for putting this together. I have to go now.

YJ

I will second the above view and say that I am currently at the point where I will only be willing to be grateful when we actually see results

GP

my points were to say what is happening with actions and how we go forward with these. I think it is possible to be productive.

TBB

I think we've quite explicitly acknowledged points where things are moving forward and have not dismissed those. Voicing frustration with what has been lacking has to be part of the productive conversation.

Sharon Neal

Just for info, we have committed to reviewing recruitment practice in its holistic entirety in order to improve the diversity of our staff population. That's one of the actions that the staff sub group of the REC has identified.

NB

That's great to hear, , thank you

AC

Plans can be shared with TU negotiators according to our procedure agreement I believe