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RESULTS OF THE ARCHERIF SURVEY ON RACISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN FRANCE

Report n° 02-26



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March 2026

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For more information on the ARCHERIF project, go to <https://www.archerif.fr/>

Editorial

The ARCHERIF project (*Anti-Racist Certification for Higher Education and Research Institutions in France*) is organised in two phases of activities. Phase 1 (2024-26) consists of a systematic literature review of publications on racism research and education in higher education and research (ESR) worldwide so as to identify best practices (Objective 1). This was followed by a field survey of French universities in order to identify the forms of racism affecting students, teaching, administrative and technical staff (Objective 2). The main results of this field survey (Objective 2) are presented in this synthesis. More detailed and comprehensive results of the two tasks of phase 1 will be published via appropriate channels in the coming months.

The institutions surveyed

The ARCHERIF survey adopted a mixed methodology via a quantitative survey using self-administered questionnaire and a qualitative component involving individual interviews in order to gain a more detailed understanding of the mechanisms that allow racism to be perpetuated in Higher Education and Research Institutions (HERIs). The survey was conducted between January and July 2025. Seven institutions took part: Sciences Po Lille, ENS de Lyon, University of New Caledonia, University of Haute Alsace, Claude Bernard University Lyon 1, ISARA (Lyon & Avignon School of Agricultural Engineering) and Aix-Marseille University.

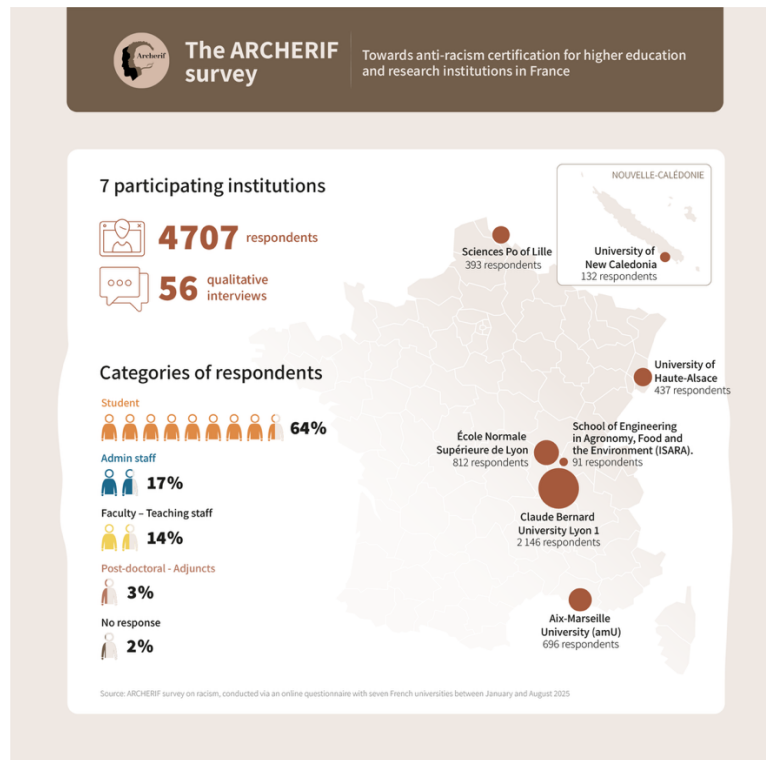
In the quantitative phase (QUANT), a total of 4,707 people filled the questionnaire across the seven sites, including 3,274 complete responses and 1,433 partial responses.

The 1,433 partial responses correspond to respondents who abandoned the survey without completing it. Nevertheless, this completion rate (70%) remains satisfactory for a survey dealing with a subject classified as “sensitive” under the CNIL (*The National Commission for Informatics and Liberties*) and the GDPR (*General Data Protection Regulation*).



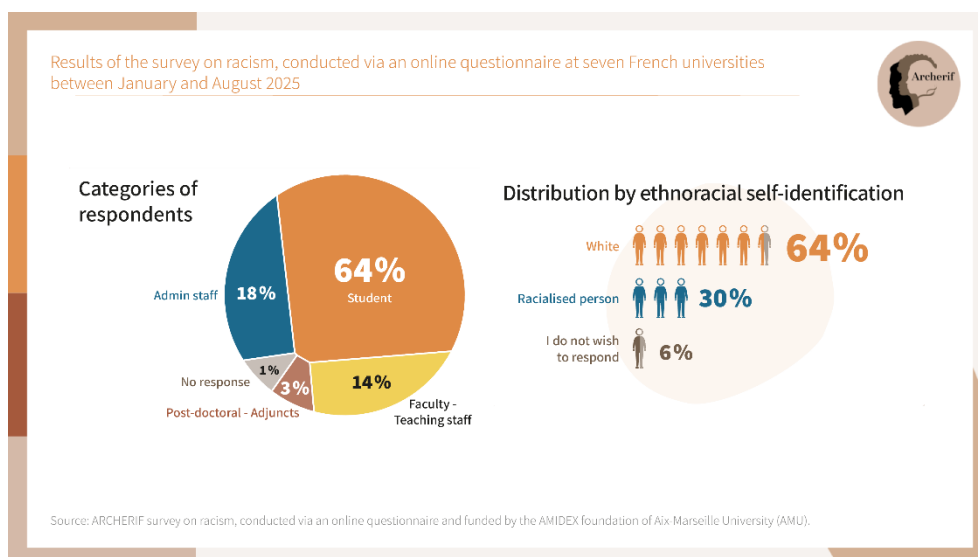
The map below shows some of the key figures on the participation in the survey.

01. Key figures from the survey on racism in French Higher Education and Research Institutions (HERIs)

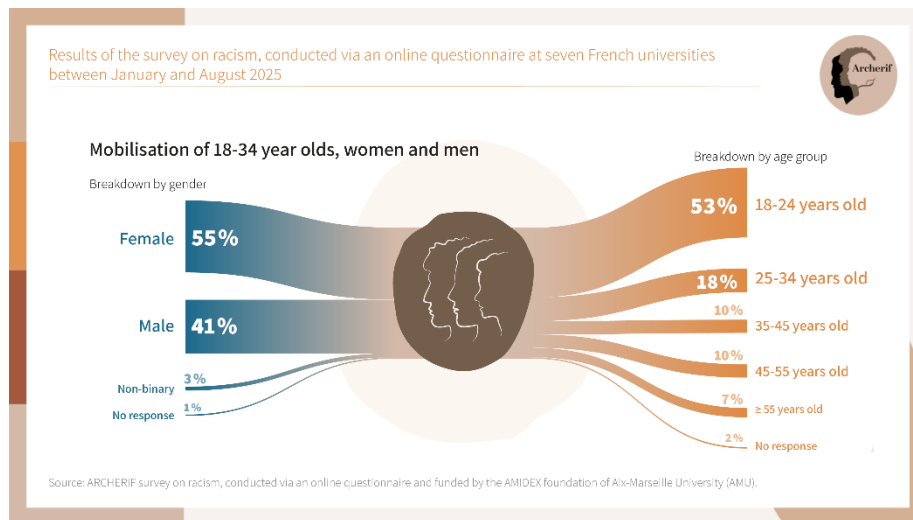


👁 Respondent profile

Students represented 64% of respondents, administrative staff 17%, Faculty 14% and doctoral students/adjuncts 3%. In terms of ethnoracial makeup, people who self-identified as "white" made up 64% of respondents, while 30% of respondents self-identified as "racialised persons". 6% of respondents did not answer this question.

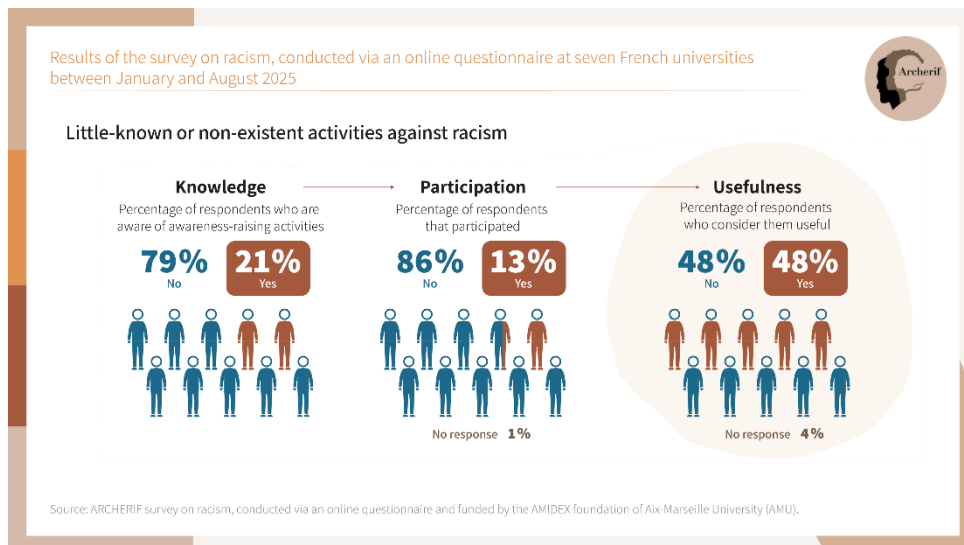


55% of the respondents were women compared to 41% of men. Non-binary people made up 3% of the respondents.



Invisibility of racism compared to other types of discrimination in French higher education and research institutions

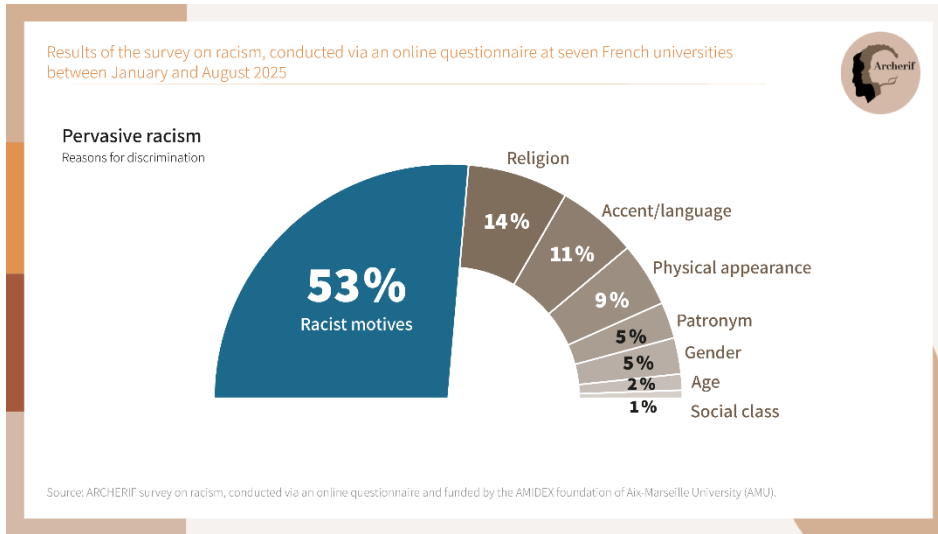
The vast majority of respondents (79%) did not know of any activities or training offered by their institution on racism, and 53% of respondents did not know who to turn to in the event of a racist incident.



This invisibility of racism produces a domino effect: it leads to a lack of confidence in the institutional reporting procedures, which in turn results in a much lower reporting rate for racism compared to the other factors for discrimination. This in turn leads to denial or the minimisation of the prevalence of racism by the governing bodies of HERIs and, consequently, to lack of training programmes, actions and sanctions for racism.



Racism is the primary reason for discrimination against racialised people in HERIs

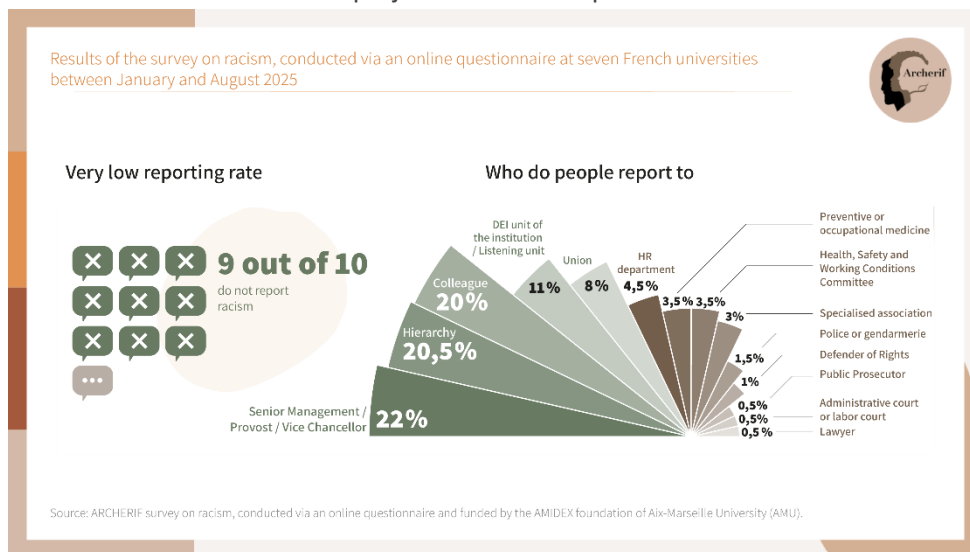



Racism was cited as the first reason for discrimination. 42% of racialised people have been either direct victims, or witnesses of racism. This result is consistent with those of previous studies showing that around 45% of racialised people reported experiencing racism almost constantly in France regardless of where the survey took place (Druetz, 2016), (Weiss & Blassel, 2023), (Défenseur des droits, 2026).



There is a therefore a 50% chance that a racialised person will encounter racism at some point in their trajectory in the French HERI.


This experience of latent racism is compounded by other forms of discrimination, confirming the relevance of the intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) according to which discrimination does not simply add up mechanically but intersects and reinforces itself depending on social positions (gender, race, class, etc.). Hence, racialised women are subjected to stereotypes and microaggressions at the intersection of sexism and racism. Similarly, racialised LGBTQ+ people experience more diffuse forms of marginalization that combine racial prejudice with transphobia.

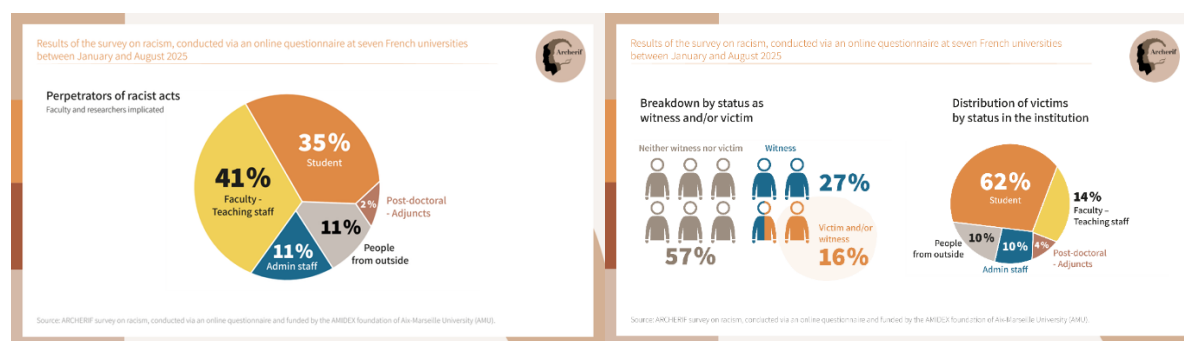



 **Only 1 in 9 victims or witnesses report incidents of racism to the authorities of their institution.**


This low reporting rate is consistent with findings from previous studies which showed that official complaint and redress channels are largely ineffective and that victims have no confidence that they will be heard, understood or protected from the insidious reprisals they will face if they reported perpetrators of racist comments or behaviour. As the *Cadre de Vie et Sécurité* (CVS) survey showed, racist violence and discrimination are often underestimated in official reports, hence the importance of listening to those affected in order to better understand the extent of this phenomenon (CNCDH, 2024).

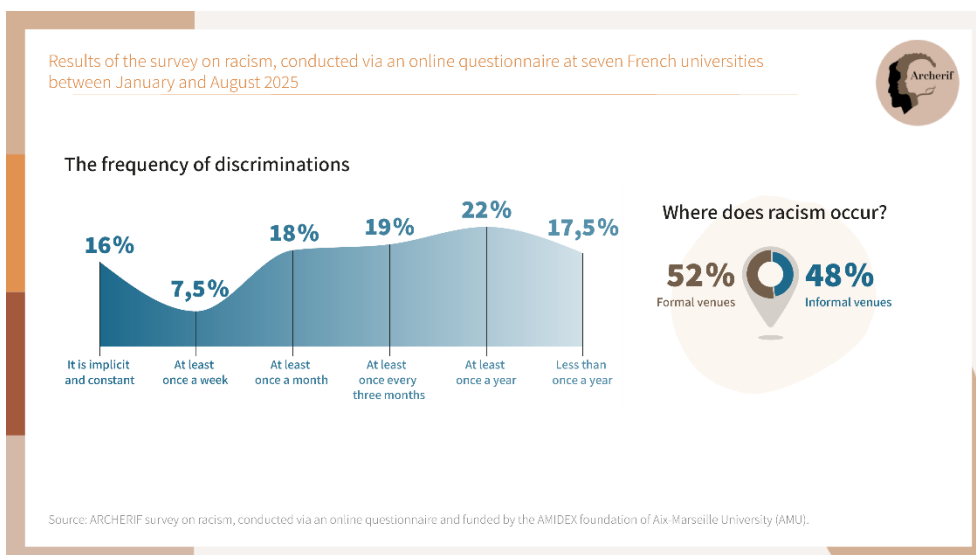
 **Who is affected by racism in the French higher education and research?**

 While no category of people in HERIs is spared from, including people outside the institution, **Faculty members, teachers and researchers were cited as the main perpetrators of racist comments or behaviour in our survey (41%), while students are over-represented among the victims (62%).** This finding, observed on all the survey sites regardless of sample and profile, reinforces the robustness of the observation. This result is all the more concerning given that lecturers wield authority within the HERI structure. They are supposed to guarantee the fairness of institutional procedures and set an example for the students they teach. This suggests that institutional measures, training and sanctions targeting this category of personnel, not just students, are needed. The lack of firmness on the part of HERIs which have been shown to be reluctant to apply the sanctions in the French law, explains in large part the persistence of racism and the sense of impunity or tolerance shown to perpetrators.



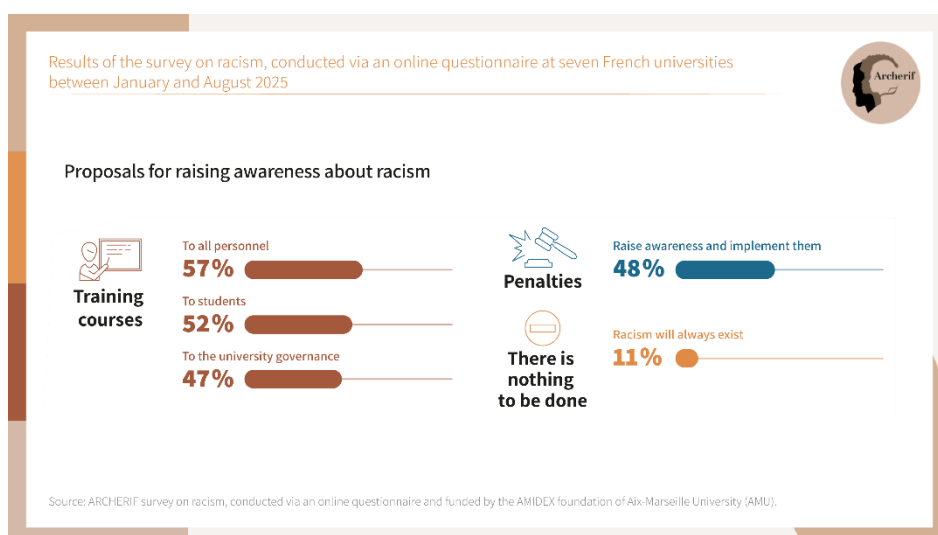
 **Where do racist comments or behaviour occur in French HERIs?**

 **Racist comments and behaviour tended to occur within official and formal settings where teaching and research staff exercise discretionary power** (classrooms, jury meetings, governance committees and bodies, selection committees, recruitment panel meetings, etc.). This means that there is a greater probability of being a victim or a witness of discriminatory behaviour or comments in closed, intimate and secret places, away from prying eyes. This finding is also confirmed in a national survey on discrimination in French HERIs conducted by (Weiss & Blassel, 2023).



? What can be done to better combat racism in French HERIs?

Regarding proposals on how to better combat racism, more than two-thirds of the respondents would like their institution to carry out awareness-raising campaigns and develop **training courses on racism, not only for students but for all personnel** (teachers, researchers, administrative and technical staff). These proposals are in line with several recommendations in the *National Plan to Combat Racism, Anti-Semitism and Discrimination Based on Origin 2023-2026* presented by Elisabeth Borne, an ex-French Prime minister (Borne, 2023) but which has largely gone unheeded. Targeted training is all the more relevant given that two-thirds of our respondents were not able to discern the differences between the different levels and forms of racism (structural, systemic and institutional racism, racial microaggression) which are insidious and tacit forms of racism that are deeply embedded in institutional cultures and practices.



Targeted awareness campaigns coupled with a zero-tolerance policy that enforces existing sanctions were the two most popular suggestions for combating racism more effectively, not only in higher education and research, but in the French society *writ large*.

02 Results of the qualitative phase of the survey

The quantitative survey (QUANT) was followed by a qualitative survey (QUAL) phase which resulted in 56 semi-structured individual interviews carried out at the seven participating sites. These interviews allowed us to obtain an in-depth and contextualised understanding of the lived experiences of racial discrimination. The thematic analysis of the 56 interviews revealed several recurring themes which we sum up below.

01 The predominance of women among participants, observed in the quantitative section, was again confirmed in the qualitative phase.

02 Participants showed a diversity of ethnoracial self-identifications. Several participants combined multiple identities, defining themselves as Arab, Berber, mixed race or Franco-German/Spanish/Italian, while others claimed a more contextualised identity linked to their family's migration history or to their professional experiences.

03 One constant ran through the narrative of all the racialised participants: they had all been directly exposed to different forms of discrimination linked to their skin colour and to their real or supposed ethnoracial origins. In contrast, the narratives of participants who self-identified as white illustrated the coexistence of majority experiences where racism remained invisible or is misunderstood in all its complexity and nuances.

04 All participants reported discomfort and taboo surrounding the words "race" and "racism" in the French national context, which resulted in the delegitimisation of studies on racism. A lack of understanding of the concepts surrounding racism contributed to this invisibility. For students, doctoral students and researchers working on

this subject, this intellectual taboo constitutes epistemic violence that drives them to practise self-censorship and to adopt various circumvention strategies.

05 The interviews revealed a profound disconnect between the rhetoric of openness by French HERIs and the reality of persistent silence surrounding racism. While measures to combat all forms of discrimination formally exist in all HERIs, participants' accounts showed that the topic of racism is often sidestepped in favour of more neutral topics such as diversity and inclusion. This symbolic denial is accompanied by "*total silence on racist violence*", in contrast to the visibility given to feminist and LGBTQ+ struggles. The predominantly white composition of equality, diversity and anti-discrimination officers in French HERIs partly explains the difficulty or reluctance of these institutions to address this topic and the reticence of victims to come forward when confronted with racism.

06 Racism in higher education and research occurs through a constellation of microaggressions, internalised stereotypes and mechanisms of trivialisation. The forms of racism experienced or observed at university lie on a *continuum* ranging

from microaggressions to institutional and systemic racism. Cases of physical racist violence are relatively rare. The pervasiveness of racism at all levels and in all areas of the university was observed on all the sites.

07 The victims are almost always racialised students or staff members from ethnic minorities who are isolated in their educational and work environment.

08 The rise in explicit and unapologetic forms of racism is linked to the national political context which has veered towards far right sentiments: *"Since the 2024 elections, we have seen unapologetic racism (...) some people feel free to make comments out loud,"* noted one of our participants.

09 Whereas higher education and research institutions claim to be, inclusive and international spaces, the testimonies described a racialised distribution of roles, with racialised individuals occupying mainly inferior positions, rarely leadership or management positions. This racialised distribution of roles fosters a form of intrinsic invisibility and illegitimacy: minorities are present, but only in expected positions, at the bottom of the ladder, with no real power of representation nor of decision.

10 The absence or under-representation of racialised minorities in fields of knowledge that directly concern them creates epistemic violence for these individuals, who are reduced to the position of learners about their own histories, cultures or bodies. Cases of systemic discrimination by white Faculty members towards African and

Asian students are widespread in French universities. Indeed, testimonies of racialised master's and PhD students being forced to rewrite entire portions of their theses to reflect the western Eurocentric and hegemonic viewpoint of their supervisors in order to defend their work were recurrent. The lack of diversity among Faculty, authority figures and peers reinforced the feelings of isolation and the difficulty of finding institutional support for them.


11 Far from being a space that fosters free speech, universities are environments where the cost of denouncing racism is very high, both socially and professionally. Fear of reprisals contributes to the fragmentation of experiences: each racialised person faces alone a situation that is rooted in structural mechanisms. Victims and witnesses therefore develop various "coping" strategies, ranging from silence and minimisation to individual resistance and, as a last resort, to official reporting procedures perceived as ineffective. In some cases, the inaction of the administration and the impasse push victims to leave or resign.

12 Lack of targeted antiracism training and the lack of ethnic diversity in the university's decision-making echelons are symptoms of the same problem: an institution for which racism is reduced to its inter-individual form, and which remains blind to its structural dimension.

13 Overall, these testimonies underscored a double effect: on the one hand, persistent psychological and professional suffering, fuelled by stigmatisation, invisibility and career stagnation; on the other hand, the absence of an institutional response

capable of alleviating the psychological burden of the suffering and injustices endured.

03 Levers to combat racism in higher education and research

 Three lines of action emerged from the interviews for a more effective approach against racism: developing targeted antiracist education and integrating them into disciplinary curricula; strictly applying the penalties in the law; crafting a binding anti-racism charter that French HERIs will be signatories of.

01 Embed antiracism education in the *curricula*

All the participants expressed the wish for their institution to address the clear lack of anti-racism education, perceived as a major shortcoming in terms of awareness-raising and to embed anti-racism content into the *curricula* in all the specialties. Participants also wished for these training courses to be compulsory, multi-level and embodied, adopting creative and participatory teaching approaches, so as to reach not only students but also teachers, administrative staff and senior leadership.

02 Strict application of sanctions in the law

The second lever is the strict application of sanctions already provided for by law, but which are rarely applied by these institutions, thus creating a sense of impunity and entitlement.

03 Creation of an anti-racism charter for HERIs

The *French National Plan to Combat Racism, anti-Semitism and discrimination based on origin (2023-2026)* presented by the former French Prime Minister, Elisabeth (Borne, 2023) had recommended that HERIs adhere to a label or charter that would signal their commitment to equality and to antidiscrimination and to

implement significant measurable actions. But these recommendations have remained largely unheeded.

Unlike some English-speaking countries, there is no antiracism in the French HERI. In the United Kingdom, the **Equality Act 2010** includes the "*positive action*" provision which enables its public sectors to correct inequalities in the representation of ethnic minorities within an organisation. In addition, British universities are signatories of the **Race Equality Charter**ⁱⁱ which signals their commitment to combat racism on their campuses with targeted measures and resources. The *Race Equality Charter* has been signed by more than 100 British universities. Membership of the Race Equality Charter is accompanied by quantifiable and measurable commitments, the level of whose accomplishment is assessed at each request for membership renewal. Canadian universities created the **Scarborough Charter**ⁱⁱⁱ after the emotions caused by the racist murder of George Floyd in 2020. This charter specifically targets "*anti-Black racism and Black inclusion in Canadian higher education*". While the idea of such anti-racism charters attracted interest, our participants were divided on their applicability to the French legal and cultural frameworks. Difficulties in implementing them, given the prohibition to collect ethnic statistics in France, were raised.

Others, on the contrary, saw such charters as a strong political signal: *"It would be very interesting. It would reaffirm the principle of non-discrimination and send a message to all students."*

French universities are indeed already signatories of various antidiscrimination charters based on other characteristics: **LGBT+ Commitment Charter, Diversity Charter, Gender Equality Charter**. Some participants raised the possibility of extending the gender equality requirement already implemented in French law and enforced in the universities, to ethnic diversity. This idea was deemed both stimulating and controversial, and in any case judged difficult to transpose to the French "republican" model. While comparisons with anti-racism measures in anglophone HERIs evoked interest and curiosity, participants largely emphasised the specificities of the French national context marked by the denial of structural and systemic racism. They feared that such charters may *"make race a criterion"*. The risk of an implementation that would lead to superficial equality, where the symbolic representation of racialised minorities would

take precedence over real transformation of power relations was also raised. While **representativeness is considered necessary, its implementation raises dilemmas.**

Between a defence of meritocracy at the risk of perpetuating *de facto* inequalities—because we are not all equal in front of opportunities, and the necessity for regulation, a middle ground emerged, that of a **binding but non-numerical public commitment**. Encourage institutions to commit to the fight against racism, with reporting and measurable indicators while enforcing the application of institutional and legal sanctions.

04 Phase 2 of ARCHERIF

The ARCHERIF project has now begun its second phase. It will draw upon the results of its first phase to design creative antiracism educational resources and will work to lay the foundations of an anti-racism charter that French and European HERIs can leverage should they wish to tackle racism more effectively. So, watch this [space!](#)

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