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Black and minority ethnic academics set their sights high at first diversity forum

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Improving the standing and numbers of black and minority ethnic academics in the UK is the main goal of a group holding its first conference on 8 October.

Deborah Gabriel, the founder of Black British Academics and organiser of the first so-called leaders' forum, says she hopes to attract the most senior staff at universities. "The people at the top of our target list are the vice-chancellors," she told Research Fortnight, adding that some university chiefs have already booked.

BBA is a consultancy, lobby group and network of university staff with concerns about the poor representation of black and minority ethnic people in academia. Gabriel is a former journalist who set up the network in 2013 and will be starting as a lecturer in marketing communications at Bournemouth University this autumn.

The forum has the backing of Geoffrey Petts, vice-chancellor of the University of Westminster, who is providing space free of charge for the 1-day event.

Gabriel is still finalising the programme for the forum but says it will include a mixture of speeches, workshops and performances. The aim is to provide an open space for discussion about race equality in universities.

She says there is increasing debate about the poor representation of black and minority ethnic people in academic and management roles in universities. Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency show that of 181,385 academics working in the UK in 2011-12, only 2,640—or 1.6 per cent—were from the black British population, which makes up 3.3 per cent of the total population.

The Equality Challenge Unit, a national initiative to improve diversity in higher education, is piloting a 'race equality charter mark' to recognise institutions that have made progress and to encourage others to do more.

Gabriel says that one keynote speech at the forum will come from a vice-chancellor talking about

diversity training in a university, and another will be from a senior academic and BBA member talking about her personal experiences in academia. The workshops will cover embedding diversity into research, enterprise and professional practice, inclusive teaching, curriculum diversity and increased diversity among staff.

During the day, participants will hear a series of poems written and read by Martin Glynn, a criminologist at the University of Wolverhampton. Glynn was commissioned to write poems in response to the results of the network's race equality survey, conducted in April 2014. Gabriel says these poems are "really marvellous...this is a creative and different way of putting the message across".

This article also appeared in Research Fortnight

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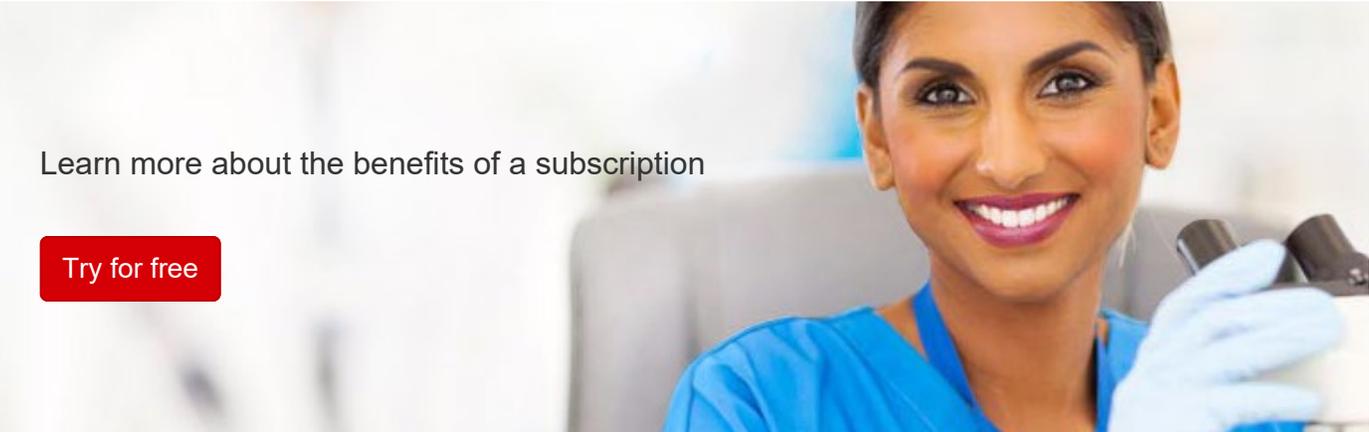
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