Advancing Racial Equality in Higher Education

Edited by

Ashlee Christoffersen, Aerin Lai and Nasar Meer

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Introduction: Racial Justice Work in Higher Education in 2023

Ashlee Christoffersen, Aerin Lai and Nasar Meer

This collection of essays follows on from the 2021 RACE.ED event "Racial Equity Work in the University and Beyond: The Race Equality Charter in Context", which explored what racial equality means in higher education and was organized following publication of the report of a large-scale review of the Race Equality Charter.[1] Advance HE's Race Equality Charter (REC) is a UK wide programme that began in 2016 aiming to improve the representation, progression and success of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff and students[2] within higher education. REC is one tool for addressing racial injustice in higher education institutions[3].

At the University of Edinburgh, REC membership inspired the establishment of the Edinburgh Race Equality Network. Among other findings, the review of the REC found evidence of a prevailing anti-Blackness in universities, wherein outcomes for other minority ethnic groups seemed to have improved due to REC efforts while in some institutions the outcomes for Black staff and students had remained the same or worsened. Moreover, evidence suggested that siloed efforts toward race equality on the one hand, and gender equality on the other (e.g. through the Athena Swan Charter) had, predictably, failed to address the specific experiences of Black women and other women of colour.

The REC review involved speaking with equality and diversity practitioners tasked with leading racial justice work in their institutions, from across the UK. These practitioners, often from racially minoritized backgrounds, are frequently isolated in their institutions, lacking institutional seniority, support or resources to

make the changes required. Often, they sit uncomfortably within university HR teams which can be resistant to making procedural changes that might enable better representation and outcomes for staff and students of colour. Race equality practitioners work with academics, other professional services staff, and students on racial justice efforts, who themselves are often isolated and do not have their racial justice work properly recognized or remunerated. Yet, during the time the REC review research was conducted, renewed mobilization of racial justice movements in the light of the murder of George Floyd had seen universities across the UK make public statements condemning the murder and committing themselves to renewed racial justice efforts, such as this one from the University of Edinburgh[4]. These statements remained promissory notes to many antiracist academics and activists at the time, given perceived lack of real commitments explaining the slow pace of change (though at the University of Edinburgh important new efforts in this area are underway[5]). Race equality practitioners often shared this scepticism and cynicism, but some were also hopeful that these statements might lead to concrete improvements, for instance in allocation of resources to racial justice work.

We are now two years on from the event and three years on from these renewed mobilizations. This collection asks an important contextual question—what, if anything, have universities done to progress racial justice in the meantime? The same questions as presented at the 2021 event continue to motivate this collection, and remain relevant as ever amidst growing conversations in this area[6].

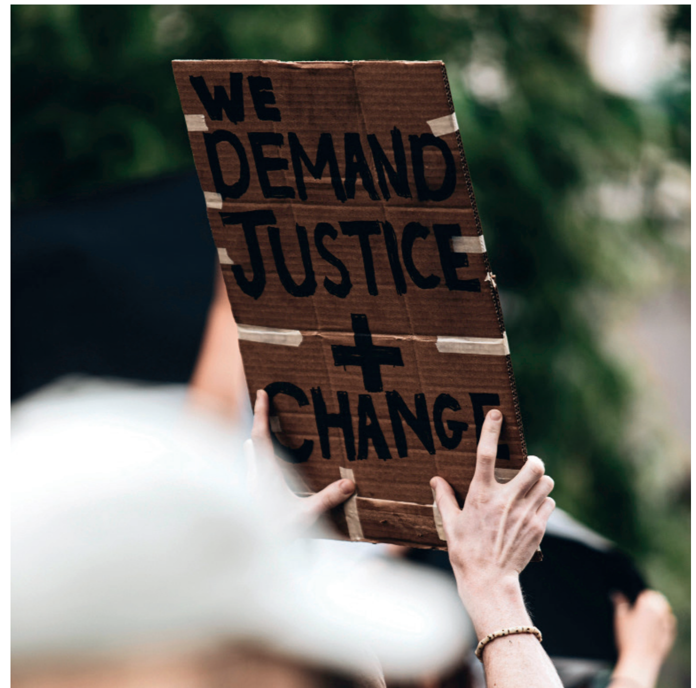
What should racial justice and "decolonization" efforts by universities comprise of? What are the obstacles to achieving racial justice in universities? How can we ensure that racial equity work specifically addresses anti-Blackness and achieves outcomes for Black staff and students as well as other students and staff of colour? How can racial equity work be undertaken in an intersectional way? How can universities engage people from across the institution, and develop a better understanding of race and structural racism in the institution's particular context? What institutional initiatives are happening in the sector, and what are they achieving?

The context for racial equity work in universities has changed in more ways than one since 2020. Indeed, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK saw a dramatic rise in often violent hate crime committed against the East Asian community. Many within the community saw these actions as part of a collective scapegoating of anyone who was perceived as "Chinese", for the emergence of the pandemic. However, such racist attacks on said community should not be isolated wholly to this period. Scholars such as Stan Neal[7] have demonstrated how the spread of the British imperial project to Southern China, and most of Southeast Asia, brought about racialized "knowledge" about Chinese people as a whole, namely that they were economically useful as a source of cheap labour.

Within the context of the neoliberal university that sees Chinese students as invaluable sources of income, what is the moral responsibility of the university in first, ensuring the safety of its students, and its role in educating its student polity on the historical specificity of racism targeted toward Asians within the context of British colonialism?

Moreover, the higher education sector can be riven with conflict about not only increasing neoliberalization, but also equity efforts more broadly. A backlash politics against recognizing a plurality of equality claims, sometimes called "culture wars", has bolstered the visibility and power of (often aligned) antagonists with media and policy platforms, and which has included the UK government. In many respects, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill is a culmination of these agendas, specifically in seeking to sanction HEI institutions where they deny platforms to protagonists to promote these agendas within the activities of the university life[8]. Further, and as Holmwood documents in this collection, the mobilization of anti-terrorism legislation to target Muslim university students, crosses a new Rubicon in the relationship between UK HEIs and the Westminster government.

In some respects, the growing power of this agenda is seen in the case of Advance HE itself, which has been subject to controversy[9] because of its regression on trans inclusion efforts, represented by its platforming of a speaker with known transphobic views to the exclusion of any trans speakers at its 2022 conference on



gender equality in HE, and its "backsliding" from good practice in equality and diversity data collection. The essays presented here address some of the above questions and more.

Sarah Gordon's piece is on experiences of Black students and academics in HE, often an experience of "*working twice as hard for half as much*." Her honest intervention highlights the isolation that many Black students and academics confront, such as the disconnect between their racial identities and what "academics" are expected to look and act like. rashné limki's insightful intervention on "EDI as a punchline", argues "diversity work is largely perceived, and often undertaken, as a means of embellishing reality; of saying the 'right' words and showing the 'right' images" without tackling the structural reasons why racialized academics and students may have negative experiences in these same institutional contexts. Succinctly put by Parise

Carmichael-Murphy in her essay, the straightforward question is, "why are universities leaving our pleas for equity on read?" Universities who engage in "trending" political discussions, such as #BlackLivesMatter, do so in ways that are pragmatic and serve a broader corporate purpose. Despite seemingly providing a safe space for students and academics of colour to talk about experiences of inequality, there is no guarantee that these stories are heard openly, without forceful silence afterward. A good example of barriers hindering open and connected dialogues between universities and racialized people is Prevent, the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy and its role in policing academic freedom in HE. John Holmwood's essay sheds light on an aspect of the problematic scaffolding of HE, and how that affects individuals of colour on a micro-level. Drawing on Advance HE's recent student academic experience survey, Holmwood points out simply that "free speech" or "academic freedom" is not experienced homogeneously across student and academic bodies. Further, we see how other forms of discourse that challenge the "status quo", like Black Lives Matter, Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion, are also deemed as "extremist" by the UK government.

So where do we go from here? Having tools such as the Race Equality Charter (REC), may be helpful to move the conversation forward. Arun Verma highlights REC's usefulness in addressing structural inequalities that emerge from existing systems of race, gender, and class, because it allows an interrogation of these same inequalities and power dynamics. Yet, there remain some challenges for REC that impede achieving substantive equity in HE. Paul Ian Campbell argues that the Charter at present cannot account for and respond to the heterogeneous ways in which different ethnic groups experience barriers in HE, where "exclusions in education are more acute for stakeholders who are British Black African or African Caribbean heritage." Campbell encourages analyses of these experiences that can account for the multifarious ways in which race operates in social contexts and for these analyses to be more qualitative in nature. HE institutions need to go beyond "procedural change" and implement "cultural change" as well. The importance of social networks to inclusion means that institutions will have to grapple with ameliorating their white-European, middle/upper-class, and masculine mono-cultures.

Integrating Intersectionality: A Whole Institution Approach

Arun Verma

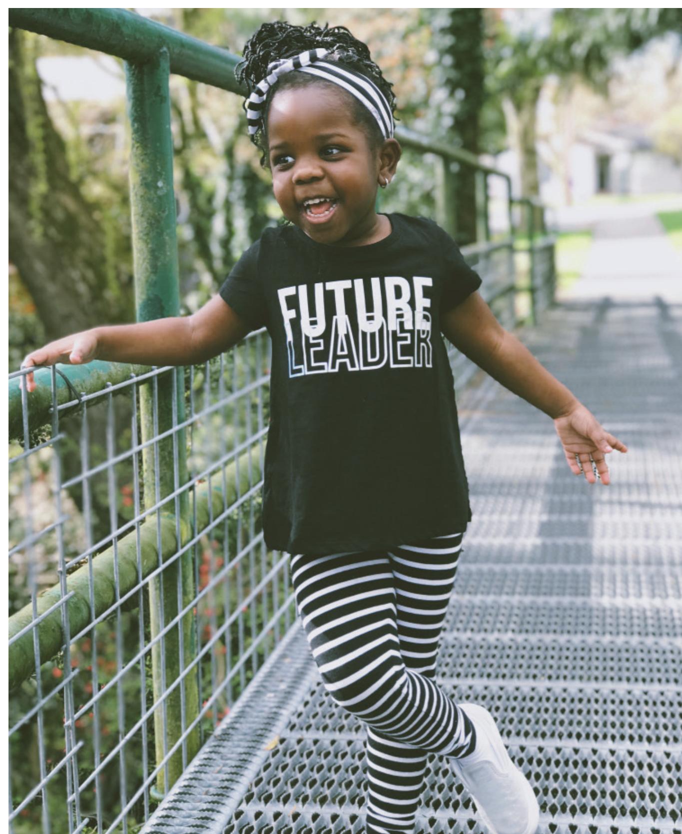
When writing or speaking on the importance and subject of intersectionality, we should always acknowledge that this theory and metaphor stems from the experiences and expertise of Black feminist scholars such as Kimberle Crenshaw[10], and Angela Davis[11] who have pioneered this term into the world. The notion of intersectionality, as we know and use it today, in recent years has become increasingly used by those who use it to talk about the compounding of protected characteristics, rather than the centring of voices of racially minoritized women and communities. Often, institutions and organizations get caught up in a hierarchy of identities and inequalities, while intersectionality is a prism to dismantle a racialized hierarchy.

With an increasing mysticism surrounding intersectionality, institutions often neglect the voices of Black women and intersectionality is typically spun into a buzzword that exists in a range of public statements and commitments. Recently I saw intersectionality spread all over an organization's diversity strategy, and when I asked, despite knowing the answer, "What does this actually mean?" the individual replied to say, "We just need to be more intersectional." Let's pause there for a moment; inserting a word does not make your work intersectional. If that were the case, there wouldn't be any mysticism on this idea, so I take this opportunity to challenge those that are inserting the word "intersectionality" and I ask a more focused and critical question of, "how are you going to implement intersectionality?" whilst being mindful of centring and tackling racism as the area for action and analysis in inclusion work.

When it was initially theorized, intersectionality was considered in three interrelated

parts: first, structural intersectionality referring to the institutional policies, processes and structures that marginalize, oppress and racialize people at the intersection of their identities (e.g., race, gender, class, ableism) in relation to their experiences of a system. For example, higher education is a system where students and staff should thrive, succeed, and be empowered. However, we know that disparities exist, such as racial disparities in the degree awarding gap[12], and the lack of diversity at professorial level in universities, with just 160 Black professors in the UK[13], of which only 51 are Black female professors[14]. Second, political intersectionality refers to the wider policies and political debates that influence the inequalities experienced by marginalized and racialized groups (for example, government policy and reports) which have often resulted in the denial of structural inequalities, the siloed approach to equality policy and political debate that exist in evidence and data and have led to national levels of racial gaslighting. Representational intersectionality refers to the influence of social and cultural depictions and imagery of marginalized and racialized groups. These can often be noted in national and international media representations and are instrumental to the ways in which racialized communities are perceived and seen in society.

Throughout my career, I have been met with silence, and a glazed look in response to my question when asking institutions how they will implement and utilize intersectionality in their inclusion work. Reflecting on integrating

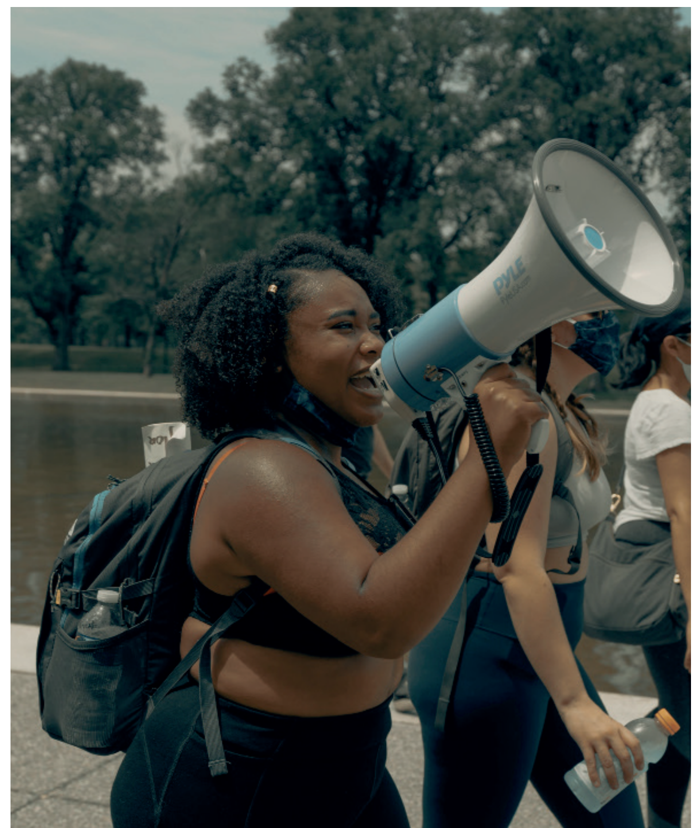


intersectionality, I reinforce intersectionality as centring the experiences and outcomes of racially minoritized communities to create opportunity to transform structures, systems and cultures that perpetuate racism and the oppression of minoritized and racialized groups. I argue that individual inequalities are not separate from one another but co-exist within marginalized, minoritized and deprived communities. Recommendations from the independent reviews of the Race Equality Charter (REC), have enabled the REC to have a stronger emphasis on how inequalities intersect with racism. Recognizing and acknowledging the ways in which intersecting identities reflect intersecting inequalities enables an inclusive conversation about how to make sense of this marginalization and how to address it.

The REC embraces an intersectional approach and was co-created with the higher education sector in 2015 as a tool and lever to accelerate institutions' commitments to tackling racism, highlighting that "all individuals have multiple identities, and the intersection of those different identities should be considered wherever possible." It offers a framework for a whole institution approach to advancing race equality and its operational processes are similar to that of Athena Swan. Whilst this principle considers ways in which identities are aggregated and disaggregated, a part of the REC enhancement is evolving this principle to speak more to race as the focus of analysis and action, along with centring the voices of racially minoritized women and communities that live and experience multiple inequalities in universities. With a framework that provides a whole-institution approach to tackling the urgent issue of racism in higher education, the thread of intersectionality enables institutions to have transformative and critically reflective conversations about the racial disparities that exist with everything from the interpersonal through to the institutional.

The REC framework enables institutions and multidisciplinary teams to interrogate the racial disparities that exist within the structures (reflecting and tackling issues identified from a structural intersectionality lens), it invites institutional leaders to utilize their positions in an effort to be more proactive in their inclusiveness of institutional policies and processes (reflected in tackling issues pertaining to political intersectionality), and it encourages teams to use data and evidence to dismantle the deficit model[15] a "perspective that minority group members are different because their culture is deficient in important ways from the dominant majority group[16] and tackle how racialized communities are represented within and beyond the university walls."

Intersectionality continues to be considered in higher education and has prompted universities to re-consider their institutional evidence and learning that can enable programmes of actions and interventions to be sustained in tackling racism. With intersectionality being inserted as a word amongst many equality, diversity and inclusion strategies, there has been an increasing interest in implementing intersectionality into various internal and external



activities. Doing intersectionality requires centring the voices and experiences of the most marginalized and deprived racialized communities and exploring levers and opportunity for systems change. In doing this, we can nurture effective actions and interventions that can disrupt and sometimes dismantle systems of oppression. This constructive disruption and dismantling refer to building ways to nurture equity, inclusion, respect, and belonging[17]. When intersectionality is understood, as brought to light by Black feminist scholars, and used mindfully, it can help cultivate interventions and nurture a society that can enable good relations, inclusion, and dignity for all.

Reflections on Racial Equality in Higher Education and the Race Equality Charter as a Tool for Change

Paul Ian Campbell

In a general sense, we might define racial equality in the academe as the ambition that people whose racial and ethnic backgrounds are directly connected to the global majority, should have an equal opportunity in all areas of Higher Education (HE) to their White peers. Put another way, it is a situation where people of colour are not adversely impacted by systemic, cultural or institutional barriers to the same or similar opportunities, outcomes, remuneration, promotions, sense of belonging, and access that are afforded to White peers *who are in comparable circumstances*. This includes academic, professional-services, estates and catering staff. It also includes students and the communities we serve. Racial inequality then (at a similarly broad and basic level), is the antithesis of this description. It is also the reality for most people of colour in the academe today.[18]

There are multiple ways that people of colour experience forms of racial inequity and discrimination in HE in the UK. Yet race inclusion work and interventions in Higher Education Providers (HEPs) over the last decade, have either not been specifically focused on race, or have been bound up within wider and generic Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategies[19]. This includes responses that have tended to focus on specific and headline manifestations of race inequity, such as race-based differences in degree outcomes and in rates of satisfaction between domicile students from White and minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as general race-based percentage differences in the recruitment and progression of staff of colour.

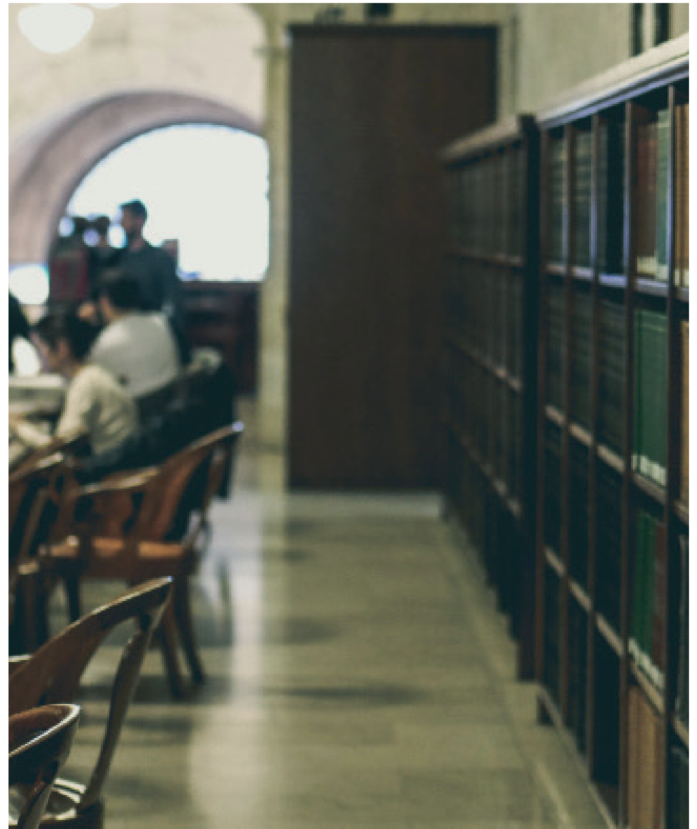
This is in part a consequence of methodological approaches, where the lived and every-

day experience of race and racism in the UK are, for example, difficult to measure holistically with quantitative tools, and exist beyond the ontological reach of these methodological approaches[20]. This is often missed in the kinds of quantitative-based metrics and measurements for success that are typically employed by university leadership and policy makers, such as SMART targets and Key Performance Indicators[21].

UK universities are also operating under increasing financial pressure, which has been exacerbated by the UK's decision to leave the European Union, the Covid-19 pandemic, rapidly increasing energy costs and global inflation. Eliminating the race award gap is clearly an ethical imperative for some. It is, however, also financially lucrative. It would undoubtedly make any HEP that achieved this, the obvious and primary destination for the majority of (fee paying) students of colour in the UK who, in 2020, accounted for 28.4% of the total student body, according to government statistics[22]. This has contributed to a situation where currently, most universities appear to be extremely keen to address inequities experienced *by students* from minority ethnic backgrounds, and seemingly less energized to address current, lived, cultural, systemic and historic inequities experienced by staff of colour and by staff of colour from specific raced groups.

The Race Equality Charter and key challenges

Against all this, the Race Equality Charter (REC) has been a useful tool for focusing the attention



of the sector on race inclusion and for enabling HEPs to begin to meaningfully survey and identify processes of racial inequality within their institutions. It has also provided a framework within which to mobilize and evaluate the efficacy of measurable commitments and interventions for change. Advance HE is the body responsible for the development and monitoring of the REC. Their recent evaluative report of universities that have achieved the REC's first stage Bronze Award, demonstrated some of the early efficacy of the REC for positive change for stakeholders in a general sense. It highlights an aggregate reduction in the race award gap and aggregate increases in the recruitment and promotion of staff of colour[23].

The report also advises caution for those tempted to lionize the early racial equality

successes of the REC. It points out that early signs suggest that so far, inclusion is being experienced unevenly by people from specific minority ethnic groups. The extent to which the REC can facilitate equity for all stakeholders from all minority ethnic backgrounds remains unclear, as has its ability to avoid exacerbating inter-ethnic education-based inequities that are typically found in education.

Other inclusion-based programmes and processes have unintentionally contributed to exacerbating inter-ethnic education-based inequities. The Athena Swan initiative, for example, has so far proved to be remarkably successful in improving gender inclusion in a general sense and in relation to certain groups of women. The positive effects of Athena Swan have largely and unevenly been felt by women whose biographies are White and middle class, as Bhopal succinctly surmises: "Many [W]hite, middle-class women have benefited from pressure to address inequality[24]. But women of colour have still found the door firmly shut in their face"[25]. Since the Athena Swan frame has employed gender as its sole lens of enquiry[26], the process has largely been unable to account for inter-ethnic, inter-racial and intersected exclusionary barriers experienced by women of colour, and especially by those experienced by women who are "Black". These are women whose "gendered experiences… are racialized, and racialized experiences … are gendered", and whose experiences of "racism, sexism, and/or forms of discrimination … uniquely combine the two"[27].

Initial data from the REC evaluation points to similar challenges for the REC in relation to accounting for, and responding to, the unique and heterogeneous inter-ethnic barriers experienced by people from specific minority ethnic communities. The review pointed to the emergence of inter-race and -ethnic fissures in the positive effects of the intervention, and that different minority ethnic groups were benefitting from the REC at very different rates[28]. It also highlighted the presence of what the authors describe as specific "Anti-Black" barriers within their surveyed HEPs[29]. They proffered that this was one of the key causal factors for why people from "Black"-heritage backgrounds were the group that had so far benefitted the least, if at all, from the intervention or related processes of change brought about by the REC so far.

> "Black academic (both UK and non-UK) and Black Professional and Support staff have tended to benefit less from achieved impacts than staff from other ethnic groups, with in fact notable decreases in representation among Black staff as well as UK Black students in some institutions that have held REC awards for the longest..."[30].

The reality that exclusions in education are more acute for stakeholders who are British Black African or African Caribbean heritage will not come as a surprise for anyone familiar with the history of race and education in Britain[31]. Nor will

the fact that inclusion is experienced unevenly for people from specific minority ethnic groups within HE. The presence of particularly acute manifestations of Islamophobia and anti-Black racism in the Labour party as detailed in the recent Forde report[32] reminds us that in the UK, different raced and minority ethnic groups often experience very different and contrasting levels of inclusion in different spaces. In academia, for example, students and academic staff from British East and South Asian communities *who are not of the Islamic faith*, have generally found education to be a less hostile and more welcoming space, and enjoy a more equitable experience to their White peers within the academe, than have other minority ethnic groups, such as those from Black-heritage backgrounds, or people from South Asian communities of the Islamic faith.

To achieve racial equity, university-based race-inclusion interventions need to be significantly more forensic and nuanced in their targeting of, and accounting for, the specific inequities and barriers faced by people from particular communities, in specific disciplines and types and levels of employment. A point not missed by Douglas Oloyede et al.[33]

> "[Attempts to address] Anti-Blackness – racism against people visibly (or perceived to be) of African descent (Dumas 2015)… will require a specific focus if the inequitable outcomes for Black staff and students..."

Universities must also avoid the temptation to over-rely on positivistic forms of measurement to understand and evaluate the efficacy of raced based interventions.[34] For example, percentage driven targets for inclusion tell us something about changes in the number of people employed in any one area of the academe but tell us little about people's experiences within that space – and thus tell us little about how inclusive that space *is* or *is not*. Put another way, because a HEP might be able to boast having parity in the number of men and women that it employs, for example, this does not mean that female employees do not experience misogyny, glass ceilings, or micro-aggressions within that space. The same is true of any positive-based metrics for measuring race equity in HE.

The point is that to achieve racial equity within the academy requires more than procedural change. It requires cultural change too. As indicated above, one of the key expectations and in turn challenges for HEPs that employ the REC, is (how) to evolve the make-up of their existing faculties from collectives that are predominantly mono-racial (White European), -classed (middle-class) and -gendered (male), to collectives that are much more representative of the racially (and gender) diverse student bodies and "glocal" communities that we serve.

The research on pedagogical and pastoral benefits of achieving a racially representative faculty are clear and tangible. It enables research to move into new grounds and frontiers[35], facilitates more authentic learning experiences and inclusive environments, and improves minority ethnic student retention, as well as positively impact on their senses of belonging and well-being. For example, overt racial discrimination is a form of violence that is often, *although not always*, perpetrated by people who are White on people of colour. An overly White faculty means that currently, we have a peculiar situation where students of colour who have been victims of overt racial abuse often have to trust, approach and be "comfortable" disclosing experiences of racialized violence with a person of contact (usually a personal tutor) who shares the same biography as their abuser. As such, a racially diverse faculty is not about front-line politics, activism or positive discrimination (a charge frequently leveled at people in anti-racism work in HE by those resistant to change). It is about having faculties that are fit for purpose in HEPs that serve a global and multi-racial student body. Moreover, a racially diverse faculty also signals to all within the contemporary student body, that HE is a space for them and where they can be academics of the future.[36]

Social networks in HE play important roles in the maintenance and reproduction of faculties that are overwhelmingly White. In almost all cases, these social networks or critical masses of powerful academics are whitened spaces and difficult to access or endure for staff of colour. They are decisive for securing work by providing candidates that are positioned within them with advance warning of job opportunities, opportunities to amass the desired and desirable currencies, work-experiences and insider-knowledge to secure employment. Their influence on who is successfully recruited appears to be unabated despite the employment of a plethora of equality and diversity interventions across the sector, which so far have focused solely on the recruitment processes.

Social networks not only provide a pivotal role in who *gets in*to academia but for who *gets on* in academia[37]. For example, being in or outside of these whitened critical masses of academics has a significant impact on the ability to be a part of successful grant capture exercises and research output production. Both are key dimensions in promotion criteria. Additionally, social networks in HE typically consist of powerful gatekeepers, who are often part of progression and

promotion panels – and can determine successful or unsuccessful career trajectories via their ability to vouch for or provide insider information on how to navigate complex promotion processes which, for people of colour on the outside, are processes that are shrouded in mystery and difficult to successfully navigate. Put simply, White social networks within the academy facilitate the upward trajectory of the White talent within them and frustrate the ascension of those on the outside – a position typically occupied by people of colour.

Above all else, this last example reminds us that the processes that often facilitate the consistent reproduction of the racialized and classed status quo in HE that the REC is charged with dismantling, are social and cultural as well as procedural – and arguably more so. Achieving effective and meaningful cultural change is perhaps the most important and difficult task for any inclusion-based policy or intervention – including the REC. So far, the REC appears to have already enabled some HEPs to make encouraging starts on tackling race inequity within their organizations. Clearly, however, there is still a long way to go before we see meaningful and disaggregated change for people from specific minority ethnic communities. This requires universities to also and explicitly address the thorny issues of cultural and institutionally racialized barriers that shape these sub-cultural education environs, as well as enacting responses to those that manifest in our processes. Only then might HEPs in the UK be places where *all* people of colour *do not* have to work harder for the same lived experiences that are afforded to White peers.

Designing for Hope: Black Students' Experiences and Mental Wellbeing in British Higher Education

Sarah Gordon

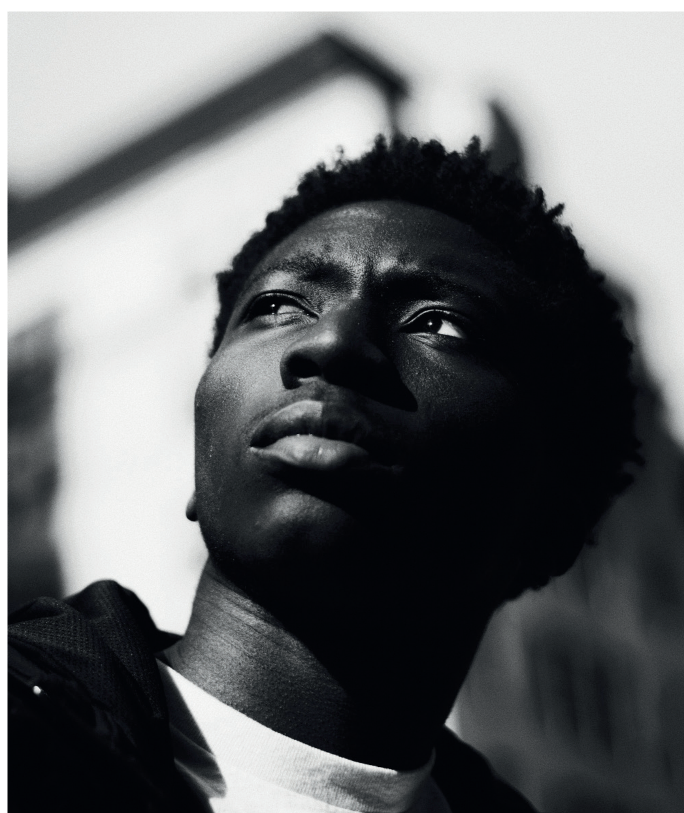
Working with students in higher education (HE) from racialized backgrounds, I was drawn to an underlying theme, considering the mental and emotional well-being of Black students attending higher education institutions (HEIs). This led to my current path, focusing my PhD research on the experiences and well-being of Black students. During my PhD journey, I have found that for staff and students from racialized backgrounds, that academia has the potential to be a profoundly positive, affirming experience. This does not alleviate, however, the inequalities present in HE and the inequalities related to mental health and broader society that detract from this journey.

The Office for Students (OfS), in 2019, highlighted that Black full-time students with a reported mental health condition had some of the lowest attainment, continuation and progression rates. In the same year, Universities UK drew attention to persisting inequalities in higher education, stressing a need for "whole-institution" approaches to addressing these complex disparities. At this present time, I still have a growing concern that without university-wide shifts in culture, Black students struggling with their mental health will slip through the cracks and continue to be failed throughout the student cycle.[38]

Change and positive action for Black students have become more visible in recent years, but this is only the beginning. There is a pressing need to continue listening openly to Black students' experiences and address challenges to ensure needs are met, change is sustainable, and action is not performative. In this short piece, I can only touch the surface of challenges facing Black students, sharing a few poignant matters

from my experience and knowledge gathered on my research journey regarding racial inequalities that manifest in adverse mental health and well-being outcomes.

For Black students and academics alike, permeating the experience is a sentiment of *working twice as hard for half as much*, myself included. A shared understanding is that as a Black person, you must work harder to prove your worth and gain half of the respect and recognition your peers do. You may go the extra mile to simply be noticed or considered average. Not often considered is the toll this may take on one's sense of self, acutely aware that the academic community at large has lower expectations of you or may disregard your achievements due to your race and ethnicity.[39]



As a Black woman in academia, I do not feel a kinship with the academic identity I see others embrace. I think I do not sound or look like an academic. I am a creative; I thrive in the worlds of design, arts and humanities. I am not oblivious that being Black and choosing a creative discipline negates my intelligence for some. I am acutely aware that I operate under this same stress and pressure to overachieve and continually prove that I have a place in the academy.

Some of this pressure for Black students is underlined by a visceral sensation of feeling both visible and invisible in academic spaces. It is an awareness that you are watched, and your every action is scrutinized, whilst you are simultaneously ignored and avoided by your peers and staff alike. On top of this, the spotlight may fall on Black students in a way that leaves them feeling tokenized, expected to represent or speak on behalf of their community in seminars, singled out and "pressed into service". This feeling that you stand out, yet are still invisible, creates a confusing multi-layered sensation that cuts through the academic experience, fostering a deep sense of isolation.[40]

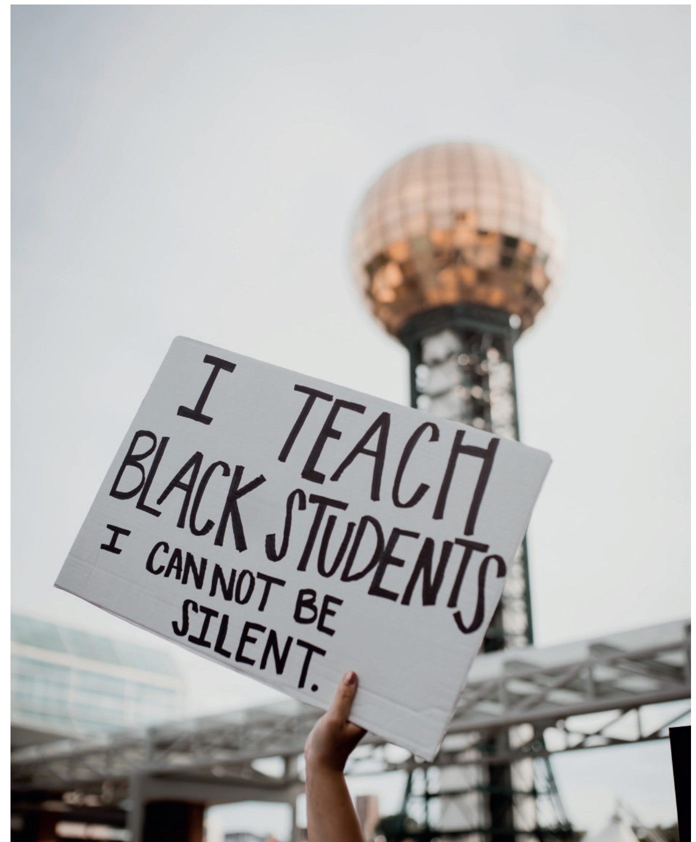
This and other factors may lead many students to feel they must separate their identities, as the Black identity is perceived as incompatible with an academic one. It is difficult for students to feel they are on equal standing with their peers if their identity is predetermined as not having a place in higher education. I have concern for students beginning their academic journeys, potentially feeling a deep sense of

isolation and disconnect from academia from the start. I worry that students may be less inclined to pursue further qualifications such as masters and PhDs due to the isolating experience of being a Black face in HE, becoming the "perpetual outsider"[41].

In my own experience, I am aware I am surveilled. I know this manifests in multiple ways, from holding back language to curating my image to something that does not feel too "Black" for HE audiences. I have in the past been met with little empathy when I have shared this feeling. Instead, it was implied that I was surely just imagining the questioning eyes, and perhaps the micro-aggressive comments were harmless misunderstandings, as though it was all in my head.

In the Equalities and Human Rights Commission's report addressing racism at universities, around 24% of students from an ethnic minority background said they had experienced racial harassment since starting university; of these, 30% had been physically attacked, and 56% had experienced racist name-calling, insults and jokes[42]. I would not have known where to go if I had a concern I wanted to discuss. I would have felt uncomfortable seeking help from an environment that felt unwelcoming to me. Services did not then, and often do not now, have the l anguage, skills or resources to appropriately support Black students in a way that does not further impact students' mental health by avoiding or trivializing race[43].

In a letter to former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Black Impact and Make Diversity Count



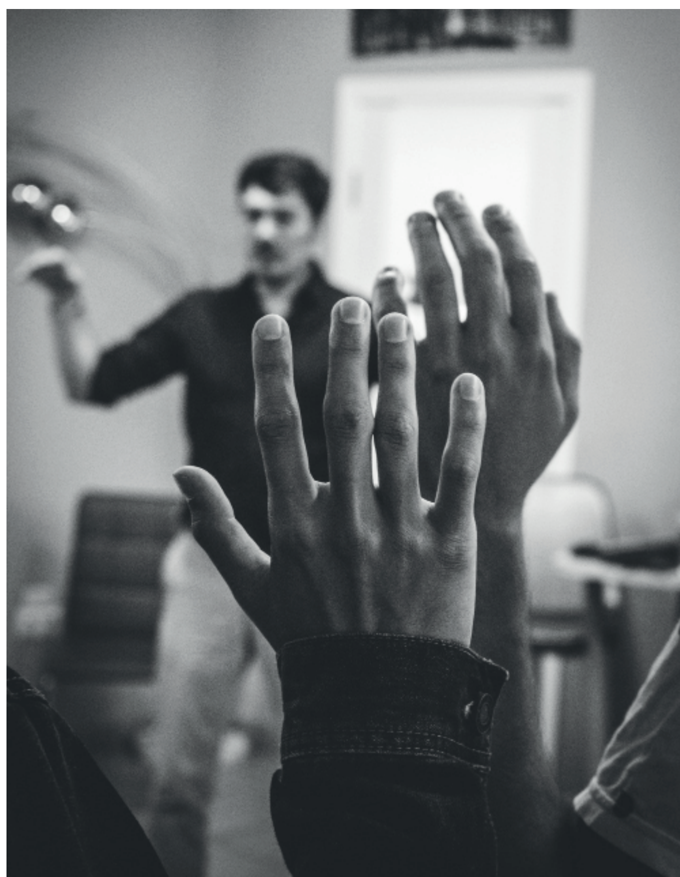
(supported by the National Union of Students) spoke to the growing presence of racism, day-to-day discrimination, and other disadvantages Black students face. An area they drew attention to in addressing these inequalities, as many have, is the lack of representation. In the UK, there are only 155 Black professors out of 22,810. There is low representation in critical roles such as counsellors and academic leadership across the UK HE sector. This lack of representation can harm students' sense of belonging and potential in academia and leave Black students without adequate mentors and support. It does not leave much hope for whole-institution approaches to change. It is unlikely we will see significant shifts in representation without addressing issues of racism and stereotyping for staff and

students alike.[44] It is not an attractive prospect for me to potentially put myself in harm's way by pursuing a path to academic senior leadership or professorship. I want to see representation, but not at a cost to my mental health and well-being.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was reignited in 2020, platforming a profound, worldwide response to systemic oppression and police brutality towards Black Americans, particularly the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd[45]. The feeling echoed worldwide, with many looking inwards at their own systematic inequalities and tragedies, asking for change at home. Here, at protests, the passionate refrain "the UK is not innocent" was not difficult to miss. As in the US, many British universities quickly "took part", participating online during this period of Black trauma as an opportunity to reflect and pause on what they can do in their institutions. For others, they may have been engaged, but it seemed from where I stood that not enough was done to reach out to students affected by such matters, on-top of dealing with the ongoing global pandemic. We must not see racism and structural inequalities as something that only happens in the US.

Where initiatives started and opportunities were created, I have some apprehension that without the pressure of BLM and the attraction of social media hashtags, the desire to continue to work on racial inequalities and listen to Black students' concerns is fading. I still struggle to point Black students in a genuine direction I can be confident in, where there is funding and space to support them.

HEIs and connected services must spend more time actively listening with empathy. We will not progress if Black students and staff voice challenges that universities will not acknowledge. HEIs should not only be reacting to Black students' pain after the fact. They should strive to be already able to offer and approach students with support, leaving the door open when they need it. As more Black students attend university, and universities actively encourage them to participate, universities must look beyond Black student's socio-economic status, as seems to be the default, as studies and Black voices shout that there is more to attainment and retention than where we might come from, that the



experience of being Black in education plays a role in students' time at university.[46]

I see enormous potential in utilizing co-creation, creative research, co-design, participatory design, and other similar practices under this collaborative approach to addressing such matters. These approaches share a common value, keeping the human at the heart of any "thing" that is designed. This could be, for example, a new resource, an art piece, a service, or a course. Although I speak from design, this does not equate simply to being creative. It is considering more than just imagery, but the tone, language, emotion, format, accessibility, user needs and user experience of anything we want someone to interact with, from HEI websites to wellbeing programs.

With a co-design/design thinking mindset, we can seek to avoid assuming the needs of Black students, speaking to them rather than about them. We strive to avoid adding to the frustrations of those with lived experience, working with them to challenge imbalances in power. It encourages us to stay curious and embrace complexity and ambiguity, as we understand there is no one-size-fits-all approach to such multi-faceted issues. Designers have understood that although we can make or re-design things for people without any input, we often envision such things through our own eyes. This leaves room for misunderstanding and costly development of things that do not work for those they are intended for[47]. From this perspective, I think of well-intended schemes and efforts to approach Black

students that may have missed the mark or remain unheard as they have not been created in a way that connects with students.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the possibilities and value of co-production in addressing health and social matters (such as student mental health), particularly in marginalized communities where important issues can be left unaddressed due to inattention and a lack of resources[48]. I feel hopeful to see funding for programmes with the ingredients to have more suitable, long-term benefits that Black students can meaningfully feel. The OfS launched a mental health funding competition in 2021, aiming at projects supporting collaborative approaches to target student mental health. Amongst the

18 projects are these, that introduce themselves as "Proactive and Preventative Interventions for Black Students" from London South Bank University, "Mental health resources for hard-to-reach groups" from Coventry University and "Wellbeing for People Like Us: Racial and culturally competent wellbeing support" at the University of West London[49]. It gives me hope to see initiatives with funding behind them embrace co-creation and speak to the idea of opening doors for Black students, proactively inviting them to participate in their well-being rather than talking about them through attainment.

Left on Read: Feeling Unseen and Unheard in Higher Education

Parise Carmichael-Murphy

When someone is "left on read" their message has been received without acknowledgement; this is typically used on instant messaging via mobile applications and social media, where people engage in instantaneous dialogue. In light of online social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #BlackInTheIvory, and #BlackInTheOffice, the call for racial equity in higher education, online, and wider society has been loud, visible, persistent, and clear. So, why are universities leaving our pleas for equity on read?

Universities are failing to engage in and facilitate open and transparent dialogue and as such, "the voices of both teachers and students are being squeezed out"[50]. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement mobilized online spaces[51] and instigated public dialogue that called for social change to address racial inequality in a historical and contemporary context. The Black Lives Matter hashtag (#BLM) drew attention to political issues and influenced public discourse, contributing to the uptake of anti-racist terminology in online spaces. Universities may share empty slogans, publicize annual statements, and display seasonal profile pictures but these offer nothing more than "symmetrical communication"[52].

When universities engage in acts of corporate political activity, at best they may raise awareness of an issue; however, they are often simply signifying that they have an awareness of something as symbolic. In this sense, universities are working to manufacture a sense of shared meaning. One example is the hasty construction of "diversified" or "decolonized" reading lists as a remedy or "fix" for past and present harm.

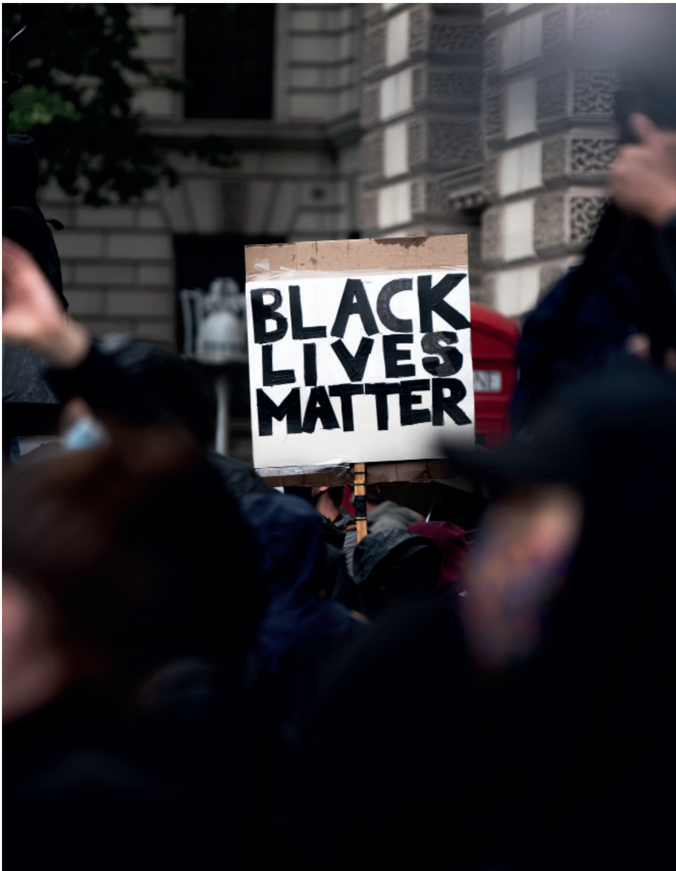
Failure to accept, acknowledge, and recognize the impact of harm enacted by the university on our experiences historically and at present shows a lack of willingness to engage with another in transparent dialogue. One does not have to be the same, or in agreement with, another to acknowledge and listen to them; but when we listen, we should try to understand another's view and recognize their worth[53]. So, even if the university disagrees that #BlackLivesMatter or #RhodesMustFall, what is their excuse for *choosing* not to listen to our calls?

Technical listening is pragmatic and serves a purpose[54] but to listen to another openly, one should not expect the act of listening to reach certainty or closure. Listening could also be about attuning to silence[55]; it could be appreciated as more than "giving" a voice but perhaps about amplifying silences. It is often in the disconnect between two people that learning takes place[56]; and for many, that disconnection results in silence and/or silencing. We must consider how and why environments prohibit people from speaking up and speaking out in ways that restrict authentic dialogue and mutual understanding. People need to feel psychologically safe before they can speak up, but further still, speaking up does not ensure that someone will feel heard[57].

We need to acknowledge what Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) describe as "oblivious or hostile contexts" as a barrier to being present, fostering authentic connections, and feeling safe in educational spaces. To be present is to respond with compassion; to pay attention to "the affective and cognitive interactions" that are "the very elements of classroom practice that are threatened by the current educational trends"[58]. To be present in education, teachers need to be self-aware and connected to students[59]. As it stands, the university is so busy distracting students and teachers with equality metrics and standardized curricula that separate them from being present and listening. We should all collectively tune in to what or even who is supporting that disconnection. Moving forward, we should expect the dialogue that we deserve; we must demand that decision-makers and policymakers are present, so that we can be present in these spaces too, rather than physically visible but absent-minded.

We need to work on our ability to see and hear people, beyond "the patronising and superficial pluralism of the social inclusion agenda"[60] to recognize where, when, how, and why someone may feel included *and* excluded at the same time[61]. Non-reciprocal extraction of epistemic labour is exploitative, especially when this primarily alleviates guilt or responsibility without the dismantling of systems of power[62]. What kind of message does the university send when they offer Amazon vouchers in exchange that we document our concerns and fears in focus groups and culture surveys? When someone is invited to "fix" something or to develop resolutions, that is not facilitating open dialogue.

To call upon another is to direct them, but to listen is to be directed[63]. In the university, there often is an expectation that people



should share their experiences of inequality so that another person can learn about them. This is one-sided and suggests that listening in this sense should be purposeful for another. It is vital, that racialized people are not called upon to share their experiences of inequality, and their feelings as quantifiable currency in the drive for "racial equality". For some, appointed "safe" spaces become "courtrooms", where people have to justify, evidence, show, and prove their experiences of inequality[64]. So, perhaps the university offers spaces where people can *technically* be listened to; but who can say they really feel seen and heard?

People may feel seen when they feel that their worth has been recognized[65], and may feel heard when their ideas and questions are recognized and responded to[66]. Further still, we need to tune in to when and where people feel "seen and understood, not just emotionally but cognitively, physically and even spiritually"[67]. We know that being seen in higher education is important because universities spend substantial amounts of money building statues, fixing plaques, and hanging pictures of historical figures. Working to enable people to feel heard is not simple but requires humility in inquiry and transparency in decision-making processes to ensure that "leaders may be able to say yes a bit more and to say no better"[68]. If those who hold decision-making power in higher education were truly open and transparent about their wishes, aspirations, goals, targets, and plans of action, would we really want to offer our voice as a contribution to the change *they* want to see?

Paolo Freire (1967) encouraged us to change the structures that impede dialogue, but we often forget to re-imagine the *absence* of a structure, rather than a rebuilt or repurposed one. There is an emphasis on the university as the ultimate goal, the ideal structure, that people need support to access and participate in equally for the betterment of society. To work toward "equality" in existing systems pushes for the redistribution of power in ways that maintain the status quo; without dismantling the very power relations that exclude people physically, emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually[69].

Distributive equality is concerned with deciding the most appropriate currency of equali-

ty, with less emphasis on why people need access to currency or how that currency serves existing power relations[70]. In higher education, the push for distributive equality positions high grades and high-income careers as currency; this feeds into deficit narratives that mobilize differences in the way that grades are awarded, and labour is paid. Inequalities in the distribution of "currency" in education and employment are individualized, repackaged, and represented as "attainment" and "earning" gaps at the individual level.

When we name equality as "gender equality" or "race equality", we are putting conditions on it. When we describe efforts toward equality as for people grouped by gender or race, we are describing who currency gets to be distributed amongst. Further still, how do we acknowledge racial equality and how do we know it has been achieved? If we try to make equality visible, we might consider the number of students and staff who can be categorized as belonging to a gendered or racialized group. Except viewing equality as a visible "thing", to turn it into a quantifiable currency, completely disregards it as an experience and something *felt*. So, when someone is invited into a space to talk about their experiences of race, racialization, and racism, who *feels* the benefit?

Changing narratives alone will not result in structural change. "Equality, Diversity and Inclusion" (EDI) discourse prioritizes equal access to an existing system, in this case, the university. But, what *else* beyond academia might we aspire to instead; what *else* do we deserve? Telling people that they are "safe" to speak in designated spaces creates only a superficial sense of safety. Just because someone has been placed, or "included" on a panel does not mean they will be able to speak up and speak out. Just because someone has been appointed a seat at the table, does not mean that they will feel a sense of belonging in that space. We also need to remember that to feel *included* is not the same as feeling like you belong; to *belong* is to feel an affinity for a space or place. What we need is for people to try and *listen* to the university as a space and place and attune to when and where silences occur.

We so often encounter silence and silencing in universities, that we are pushed to feel unseen and unheard. If universities listen to what *is* being said, people are being open and transparent about their wishes, aspirations, goals, targets, and plans of action. Students are voicing their concerns; they have affirmed that #BlackLivesMatter, proclaimed that #RhodesMustFall, demanded that universities #DecolonizeTheCurriculum, and have driven participation in #RentStrikes. Teachers are voicing their concerns; they are disclosing why they are #LeavingAcademia and they are sustaining participation in #FourFights. Yet, for some reason still, the university thinks it is okay for us all to be left on read.

Higher Education, Prevent and Academic Freedom

John Holmwood

What is the relationship between the government's counter extremism strategy, Prevent, HEIs, and academic freedom? One answer is found in The Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023 which applies only to universities and colleges in England. Its supporters argue that its provisions are necessary to counter a worrying 'cancel culture' within higher education. This is the view put forward by right wing thinktanks like Policy Exchange[71], Civitas[72] and the Legatum Institute[73]. There is little evidence of a problem as described, or that existing legislation on academic freedom as it applies in other jurisdictions is insufficient. This chapter will show how one form of "cancel culture" which has been accepted by universities – and other public bodies – derives from the government's counter extremism strategy, Prevent. This is something that is largely missing in discussions of academic freedom.

Prevent and free speech

Prevent was first introduced in 2005 as a scheme designed to promote community integration. It was significantly amended in 2015 to require all public bodies to safeguard vulnerable individuals from being "radicalised"[74]. This included reporting any worrying signs of extremism to safeguarding officers for a possible referral of the individual to a local Prevent Panel. Here they would be considered for a further intervention through the Channel programme[75]. The latter, is "about ensuring that vulnerable children and adults of any faith, ethnicity or background receive support before their vulnerabilities are exploited by those that would want them to embrace terrorism, and before they become involved in criminal terrorist

activity."

Academic freedom has always been limited by criminal law, including that applying to counter terrorism. However, it is important to understand that the 2015 Prevent safeguarding duty operates in a pre-crime space[76]. That is, individuals reported to Prevent have committed no criminal offence, nor have they indicated any intention to do so. If they had, they would be charged with the relevant offences. The claim – unsupported by any rigorous evidence – is that there are behaviours or "ideologies" which, although lawful in themselves, are possible precursors to the commission of terrorist offences (whether violent, or non-violent).

For most academic staff and student representative bodies, the most intrusive aspect of the Prevent duty in higher education is the monitoring of external speakers. This involves notifying a relevant officer within the university, providing background information on speakers and a description of the topic of any presentation. The requirement is to do so is well in advance of the event (usually at least 14 days).

The Office for Students has collected data from universities on their speaker policies as part of their compliance with the Prevent duty since 2017. They note that in 2020-21 – the last year for which data is available – close to 193 speakers or events were rejected at English universities and colleges compared with 53 in 2017-18, 141 in 2018-19 and 94 in 2019-20[77]. The total number of events reported in 2020-21 was 19,407.

Notwithstanding that rejections of speakers or events in 2020-21 represented fewer than 1% of all cases, the interim CEO of the Office for Students (OfS) stated, "it is the case that the number and proportion of rejections sharply increased in 2020-21 … We would be concerned if those cases suggest that lawful views are being stifled."

This is worryingly disingenuous. All the views at issue under Prevent are lawful, *including in those cases – 47 in total – that gave rise to a formal Prevent referral*. But, as the People's Review of Prevent argues, Prevent is intrusive even where it does not lead to referral. No data are collected on events and speakers that might have been considered, but are not taken forward on the grounds that they might be considered "extremist"[78]. The impact of Prevent on the expression of lawful views is likely to be greater than indicated by raw numbers provided by the OfS.

The problem is not only associated with the invitation of external speakers, but also the expression of lawful opinions in other academic and social contexts. Most academic departments will have a safeguarding officer (most likely incorporated into the welfare role) and most academic staff will have received some training, probably in the form of a government provided e-learning module setting out the "signs" of radicalization for which they should be on the lookout.[79]

This is a responsibility not only of staff in academic and support roles, but also of other staff in close contact with students, for example security and catering staff, staff in halls of

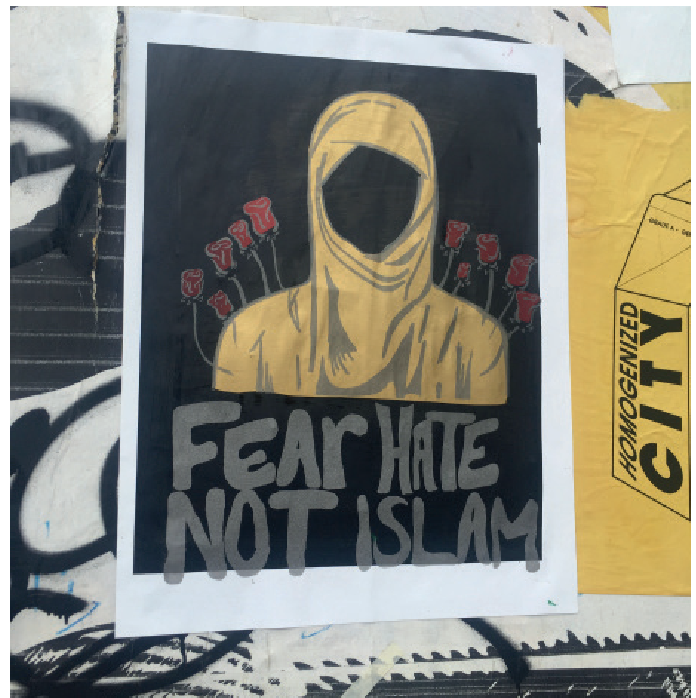
residence, and those involved in premises used by student societies and clubs.

Critics of Prevent have frequently argued that Prevent has a chilling effect on the expression of views by young people in educational settings. This is something which its proponents have denied. Nonetheless, the advocates of the new Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill propose that there is a problem for the expression of conservative views.[80]

To some extent, the findings from research reflect the impact of government and media campaigns against "intolerance on campus". The Policy Institute at King's College London, for example, found that 49% of their student respondents thought that universities were becoming less tolerant. However, 80% felt that they were free to express their views at their own institution. Among conservative-supporting students, 59% declared themselves reluctant to express their views.

In the most recent Advance HE student academic experience survey, the majority of students felt comfortable expressing their opinions on campus, with just 14% disagreeing or disagreeing strongly.[81]

However, the authors allow that there were "significant differences in answers to these questions when broken down by ethnicity. In particular, Black and Asian students were less likely to agree that they heard a variety of views on campus (58% and 61% agree versus 72% of White students)." Of course, given the government's identification of the promotion of Islamic



values as potentially extremist, and similar charges made against Black Lives Matter, the response of Black and Asian students is noteworthy. It is also noteworthy that the report studiously avoids discussion of Prevent. The Policy Institute report, for its part, does acknowledge that Prevent is a restriction on free speech, but fails properly to address how it operates on campus. It uses the language of "left leaning" and "right leaning" opinion and party labels (Conservative, Labour, Green and Brexit Party, for example). The implication is that party identification is part of a normal democratic process. But so, too, are many views identified as "extremist" under Prevent.

The authors state that, "Prevent legislation – aimed at reducing radicalization in universities – inhibits free speech whilst arguably providing some form of protection for freedom from hate". However, hate speech is a criminal offence and it is not the focus of the Prevent

duty. Earlier research by the Islam on Campus Research Group, found that students and staff self-censor their discussions to avoid becoming the object of suspicion under Prevent and are sometimes discouraged from exploring, researching, or teaching about Islam. Only a quarter say they feel entirely free to express their views on Islam within university contexts.[82] Significantly, this research addressed the role of Prevent itself in the construction of views about Muslims and Islam among non-Muslim students, showing that students who see radicalization as a problem on campus are four times more likely to believe that Muslims have not made a valuable contribution to British life.

Moreover, the report argues that "Muslim students are more likely than Christian students to see their religion as core to their identity; they are also more likely than Christian students to see the purpose of universities and the values of faith as compatible, with a quarter saying they have become more religious since they started university". Prevent guidance suggests that increased "religiosity" may be a potential sign of "radicalization", indicating that the self-development of Muslim students at university and their student associations are likely to be a matter of particular scrutiny.

Indeed, the same thinktanks concerned about freedom of speech on campus have also regularly led campaigns about "extremists" on campus directed at Muslim student organizations such as the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (FoSIS) and Muslim civil society organizations like MEND[83]. Indeed, as I was writing this piece at the end of Islamophobia Awareness Month, Imperial College cancelled an event organized by FoSIS on the grounds of the alleged extremism of the speakers, of which I was one. This followed a media item about the event, in which the event's implied criticisms of Prevent were described by the Home Office as "dangerous and irresponsible".[84]

How did we get here?

The response of universities in England to the Higher Education (Free Speech) Bill has been resigned and muted. In general, their view seems to be that academic freedom is well-established within UK universities and that separate legislation is unnecessary. Universities UK (the representative body for UK universities), for example, has expressed concerns about some of the new Bill's clauses providing a charter for vexatious complaints.[85]

In part, this is because they have for the last decade followed the government's steer about academic freedom. They have sought to ensure that university statutes properly reflect the legal position and have provided further guidance in advance of government legislation. For example, in 2011 they published *Freedom of speech on campus: rights and responsibilities in UK universities*, and in 2013, guidance on *External Speakers in Higher Education Institutions*.

The reports are no longer available on Universities UK's website, but a YouTube video of the launch of the first report is available[86]. In

it, then Provost of UCL, Professor Malcolm Grant, describes how it was occasioned by media concerns when a former student had been arrested in December 2010 trying to blow up a plane over Detroit. Professor Grant proposed that universities had a duty to mitigate what he called, "malign forces leading young students on campus in the direction of terrorism". This was set in the context of protecting freedom of speech for the expression of contentious views within the law. Professor Grant drew a comparison with the BBC's invitation of Nick Griffin, the leader of the far-right British National Party, onto Question Time in 2009, stating that it was positive that his controversial, but lawful, views should be exposed and debated[87]. The 2013 guidance on external speakers[88] set out the details of the duty to maintain free speech within universities under Section 43(1) of the Education(no2) Act 1986, supported by the Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010, limited only by the requirement that speech was *within the criminal law*.

In effect, Universities UK has acted proactively and consistently, both in relation to the maintenance of free speech and to perceived concerns about counter-terrorism. So what has changed? The introduction of a Prevent safeguarding duty on all public authorities in 2015 significantly altered the context in which free speech on campus was considered. It identified an issue of "extremism" that needed to be mitigated. The duty was part of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015, but, as I have already commented, the "offences" in question were not themselves "unlawful". The Prevent Duty became part of University policies on free speech despite the fact that the views at issue are not proscribed by any law.

Given that the Prevent duty operates in the pre-crime space it is also subject to expansion as a consequence of new offences brought under the criminal law. So the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2019 introduced new non-violent terrorism offences associated with the "reckless" display of flags and symbols associated with proscribed organizations, while the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 has introduced new restrictions on "disruptive protest". Each of these creates an expanded pre-crime space in their wake, where actions associated with Palestinian rights, or calls for extra-parliamentary protest can be deemed "extremist". The language may remain that of "challenging extremists", but no longer is the "challenge" that of debating controversial or radical views – as set out by Professor Grant and envisaged by Universities UK – but of curtailing their expression and reporting those who espouse them. Worse, the government – more properly the Home Office – is able to determine which views are to be regarded as 'extremist' under Prevent guidelines. At various times, the views of environmental activists, such as Greenpeace or Extinction Rebellion, and of anti-racist groups, such as Black Lives Matter, have been described as "extremist".

What is to come?

The Prevent duty has recently been subject to an independent review.[89] This was put in place as a condition of the passage of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2019. It finally reported in February 2023 (the People's Review of Prevent recently published its own detailed response), but the Home Office had been leaking details to its favoured thinktanks like Policy Exchange and Henry Jackson Society and to favourable press outlets. These leaks had indicated that the review would declare that Prevent to be "unfit for purpose".

Despite a recent report by the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament[90] suggesting that right-wing terrorism is on the rise, globally and within Europe and the UK, the review argues that Prevent needs to refocus on "Islamist extremism" with too many referrals being made for right wing extremism[91]. This is presumed to be because of "racism fears" on the part of liberal professionals charged with the implementation of the Prevent duty[92]. It has also been claimed that Prevent is too concerned with protecting vulnerable individuals and not enough with protecting the public[93].

These are all very worrying developments raising serious issues for higher education in England. The idea that Prevent should be re-focused risks being in breach of the Equality Act 2010. Given that the ideas and behaviours that might trigger action under Prevent are not illegal, it is also difficult to see how interventions could be justified in terms of "public safety". They are currently regarded as legitimate only because they are defined as being about safeguarding vulnerable individuals. But there is worse. Policy Exchange has attacked Muslim civil societies for seeking to de-legitimize Prevent (in truth, it is thinktanks like Policy Exchange that are now doing most to delegitimize it)[94]. They now propose that the Home Office should set up a unit concerned to evaluate and certify Muslim civil society organizations with the purpose of identifying those that can be in receipt of public funds or be engaged with by bodies in receipt of public funds. This will include engagement by universities. These recommendations have been endorsed by the review and accepted by government.

The questions that need to be asked of Universities UK are these:

- how will it respond to attacks on lawful freedom of speech by the government and its agencies?
- Will it continue to argue that freedom of speech in universities should be restricted only by considerations of what is lawful?
- Will it regard challenges to restrictions on speakers deriving from Prevent as vexatious?

EDI as a Punchline

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With the movement for Black lives claiming renewed visibility in the United States in the summer of 2020, and advancing momentum globally, people and organizations have been forced to reckon with the ongoing history of racial injustice in their midst. There has since been a flurry of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives across private and public organizations, including universities, intended to address racial inequalities within them.

A fundamental challenge to and for EDI work is that minoritized groups[95] – in other words, those who are the primary "objects" of diversity work – hardly believe that diversity policies and practices actually work. In general, there is little faith or trust amongst minoritized people that anything "EDI" related can or will have any meaningful impact on their personal and professional lives. This claim is based on both, my experience and my research.

In fact, we might go as far as to say that, in the past few years especially, EDI has become a bit of a punchline. And, in my opinion, rightly so. This is because diversity work is largely perceived, and often undertaken, as a means of embellishing reality; of saying the "right" words and showing the "right" images, with much less consideration given to actually examining and undoing the structures and operations of an organization that perpetuate minoritization.

The mistrust and, often antagonism, from minoritized people towards diversity work stems from this notion of what Sara Ahamed calls "official diversity". Ahmed's proposition is quite simple but significant. Through her research she shows how diversity work in organizations is less

about addressing how people are minoritized and marginalized by the operations of the organizations, and more about saying and showing the right things. She writes:

> "[official diversity] becomes about ''saying the right things,'' such that the official speech creates a cultural requirement about what can and cannot be said. … To value diversity [becomes] to make diversity the right way to speak"[96].

Official diversity thus signals what activities organizations are willing to invest resources into and what they are less willing and able to commit to. For example, a university may choose to distribute glossy brochures with visual and discursive representations of diversity, rather than providing staff with the additional time and financial resources needed to build a more inclusive classroom.

More crucially, bearing witness to the constant repetition of official diversity is a big part of the lived experience of minoritized people in organizations, leading to a deep-rooted mistrust of the intent of and the possibilities for diversity work. And it underscores the fundamental tension between "diversity work" and the desire for social and reparative justice.

As Black feminist philosopher and American civil rights activist, Angela Davis, notes diversity work most often has very little understanding and interest in justice. Rather, as Davis notes, 'I have a hard time accepting diversity as a synonym for justice. Diversity...is a strategy designed to ensure that the institution functions in the same way it functioned before... It's a difference that doesn't make a difference'[97]. It is imperative, then, for organizations to be attentive to this mistrust when undertaking diversity work. For the possibility for meaningful change is contingent upon recognising the ongoing misapprehensions and failures of EDI work.

Centring the mistrust and failures of EDI work, would require us to ask new, and uncomfortable, questions. For example: Does the organization possess the competence and literacy to understand the experiences of minoritized people and the reasons for their marginalization in institutions? Do minoritized people perceive their colleagues, managers, peers, etc. as having the requisite competence and literacy on issues of racial minoritization?

In other words, are organizations "fit-for-purpose" with respect to the welfare and

well-being of minoritized people? Research on this subject often demonstrates that the answer to both questions is a resounding “no”[98]. Moreover, decades of EDI praxis demonstrate that the possibility of a tangible – i.e. substantive, structural – shift in this circumstance, is remote. And, until then, organizations risk reproducing harm in the guise of EDI. This needn’t mean, however, that the project of EDI is a lost cause. Perhaps, for EDI to be more than a punchline, its meaning and activity need to be wrested back from organizational purview.

Author Biographies

Paul Ian Campbell *is Associate Professor in the Sociology of race and inclusion and Inaugural Director of the University of Leicester Institute for Inclusivity in HE. He is an award winning academic and published widely in the areas of race and higher education and on race and sport. Paul's work is sector leading in developing and evaluating interventions for making HE curricula and assessment racially inclusive and he has published a number of ground-breaking reports on how to move from race inclusion theory to practice.*

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Ashlee Christoffersen *is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Edinburgh and Postdoctoral Fellow at Simon Fraser University. Ashlee's research is concerned with the historic and contemporary operationalisation of the Black feminist theory of intersectionality in equality policy and practice: its influence and possibilities, as well as the discursive and material resistance it faces. Formerly, Ashlee was a Researcher at the Equality Challenge Unit (now Advance HE). As an independent consultant she contributed to the Phase 1 Review of the Race Equality Charter led by Dr Nicola Rollock, and completed the Phase 2 Review with Freya Douglas Oloyede and Tinu Cornish.*

Sarah Gordon *is a creative designer and postgraduate researcher at the University of Nottingham. Her current focus is her PhD study, which embraces the worlds of design, education and mental wellbeing, exploring Black students' experience of university life with creative, design-led methods. Sarah is passionate about advocating for underrepresented and marginalized groups within education and sharing the value of creative, collaborative and open approaches to student wellbeing initiatives and research.*

John Holmwood *is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Nottingham. He was expert witness for the defence in professional misconduct cases brought against teachers accused of 'Islamifying' the curriculum in the Birmingham schools. Together with Therese O'Toole, he is author of Countering Extremism in Birmingham Schools? The Truth about the Birmingham Trojan Horse Affair (Policy Press 2018) and, with Gurminder K. Bhambra of Colonialism and Modern Social Theory (Polity 2021). With Dr Layla Aitlhadj, he is co-Director of the People's Review of Prevent.*

Aerin Lai *is a PhD researcher at the University of Edinburgh's Sociology department. Their work focusses on masculinities, specifically taking a decolonial intersectional approach in understanding gendered citizenship-making practices in Singapore. They are an AdvanceHE Associate Fellow, and have tutored / guest-lectured on courses such as Understanding Race and Colonialism and Introduction to Queer Studies at Edinburgh University.*

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Nasar Meer *is Professor of Social and Political Science at the University of Glasgow, and was a Commissioner on the Royal Society of Edinburgh's (RSE) (2020–21) Post-COVID-19 Futures Inquiry, and a Member of the Scottish Government COVID-19 and Ethnicity Expert Reference Group. He is co-Editor of the journal Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power, and his recent publications include: The Cruel Optimism of Racial Justice (2022); Whiteness and Nationalism (ed, 2020); The Impact Agenda (co-authored, 2020).*

Arun Verma *is a leading figure in implementing and integrating intersectionality in systems, policy and programmes both nationally and internationally. He is Head of Inclusion for the University of London, Academic Tutor (University of Dundee) and Fellow of the RSA. Arun has been granted a number of awards supporting and facilitating his research and was nominated as an inspirational Diversity and Inclusion Leader 2022 by d&i leaders. He is a Trustee for Getting on Board and his edited collection Anti-racism in Higher Education: An Action Guide for Change is accelerating action for inclusion in higher education.*

Endnotes

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