

Integrating Intersectionality: A Whole Institution Approach

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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 Crenshaw¹⁰, and Angela Davis¹¹ 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 gap¹², and the lack of diversity at professorial level in universities, with just 160 Black professors in the UK¹³, of which only 51 are Black female professors¹⁴. 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 intersec-

tionality), and it encourages teams to use data and evidence to dismantle the deficit model¹⁵ a "perspective that minority group members are different because their culture is deficient in important ways from the dominant majority group¹⁶ 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 centering 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 belonging¹⁷. 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.