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Editorial: Special edition ‘Race and Ethnicity’

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Introduction

The articles in this special issue of Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning are based on presentations at a series of remote seminars organised by The Open University (UK), titled ‘Avoid Photocopying the past – re-designing HEIs to reduce inequitable outcomes for BAME students’. The first seminar (15 July 2020) proved so popular that parts 2 (6 October) and parts 3 (3 December) were added. The theme continued into Day 1 (of 4) of The Open University’s Access, Participation and Success (APS) Biennial International Conference held online in March 2021. This special edition therefore includes five articles which originated as presentations focused on research around race and ethnicity in higher education (HE).

The aim of the seminars was to provide opportunities for those across the UK higher education sector to present research and scholarship focused on re-designing universities to reduce inequitable outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students. The ambition was to share ideas aimed at redressing the seeming inaction on racial inequalities in higher education in the UK.

As discussed during the seminar programme, although we align with sector policy makers in using the terminology ‘Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic’, we are acutely aware of the controversy and debate about using this shorthand to conflate the very different experiences of minoritised students. While recognising its ubiquity, we are committed to challenging use of the reductive acronym BAME.

The stimulus for the original seminar reminds us all of an important context, especially urgent given events at the time. In the latter part of 2020, there was a great deal of attention given to discussing and debating racism, inequality and discrimination experienced by Black and minority ethnic communities in the UK and across a range of institutions. This was partly in response to the unlawful killing of George Floyd on 25 May 2020, and to the emerging statistics outlining the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black and minority ethnic communities. COVID-19 has served to highlight the racial contours of health inequalities and the longstanding and persistent impact of institutional and systemic racism.

Through these discussions and debates, there was a greater recognition of the pernicious and pervasive nature of racism. This is particularly true of racial inequalities in higher education and a recognition that whilst there has been some action to address these inequalities, it has been painfully slow as witnessed by:

- The stubborn persistence of the Black Awarding Gap across the sector.
- Woefully low numbers of Black female professors.

Colleagues organising the seminars were frustrated that creating change in higher education has been associated with constant demands for more evidence and a refusal to believe the day-to-day realities of Black and Asian people. We wanted to move the 'conversation' beyond awareness of the challenges facing both university students and academic staff and focus instead on disseminating examples of pro-active, positive, and effective interventions.

History: The 'BAME Awarding Gap'

Previously referred to in sector publications as 'The Black Attainment Gap', there has been research on this issue in the UK since at least 2007. By 2017, the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) identified the attainment gap between Black and white undergraduates leaving university with a 'good degree' (1st or 2:1) at 25.3%, even if the grades that students entered the course with (entry tariffs) and socio-economic class are taken into account. In addition to disparities in degree outcome (the Awarding Gap), there are poor retention rates – students who identify as Black,

Asian or 'Mixed Other' have a higher drop-out rate than those who identify as white or Chinese. These are urgent issues because assertions by politicians about 'levelling-up' and 'social mobility' will be worthless if inequitable degree outcomes and lack of access to graduate jobs (leading to economically better futures) disproportionately affect the whole life-course of Black and Asian students. HEFCE's 'Tackling Inequality' report (2017) proposed four explanatory factors for the 'attainment gap':

- curricula and learning
- relationships
- cultural, social and economic capital
- psycho-social and identity factors

These factors appear to place the blame around lack of attainment solely with Black and minority ethnic students. Shirley Tate and others called for the recognition that the problem is an 'Awarding Gap' rather than an Attainment Gap and that Higher Education Institutions should take responsibility for and be held accountable for this. Furthermore, Tate (2019) argued that previous attempts to implement EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) strategies failed: rather than improving the experiences of Black and minority ethnic students, they displaced the need for anti-racist strategies in universities – Black students continued to experience racism, hostility and de-legitimisation from white students and academics.

The 'Closing the Gap' Universities UK/NUS Report (2019) identified five key areas through which universities could reduce attainment differentials:

- Providing strong leadership
- Having conversations about race and changing the culture
- Developing racially diverse and inclusive environments
- Getting the evidence and analysing data
- Understanding what works

The articles in this special issue aim to build on the momentum and interest that was created at the three seminars and Day 1 of the APS Conference and to address the complacency in higher education on action on racial inequalities. Each article explores

the complexities and challenges associated with the awarding gap. Topics range from developing inclusive curricula to interventions to close the degree awarding gap, and intersectional barriers including addressing mental health concerns of Black and minority ethnic students.

In a key Discussion article, Dave Thomas and Kathleen Quinlan argue that culturally sensitive curricula can address those racial equality gaps as well as support the development of culturally competent graduates equipped for social change. Drawing on a framework associated with critical race theory, the authors advocate challenging the power in the academy to instigate change.

Joanna MacDonnell and Amandip Bisel, in a substantive research article, outline a university-wide study to identify some of the factors contributing to the UK-domiciled Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic degree awarding gap from the perspective of the students that it impacts. They argue that in order to address the degree awarding gap, a whole-institution approach to culture change is necessary, and they outline their action plan as a starting point.

In an important Discussion article, Sara de Sousa, Tejal Mistry and Omotolani Fatilewa review the progress of a BAME Student Advocate programme and reflect upon the outcomes and lessons learned through conducting 24 such module reviews over a three-year period within a participating business school.

In a separate Discussion article with the same lead author, Sara de Sousa, Judy St. John and Emmanuella Emovon use narrative methodology to present positive evidence of change in closing the unexplained awarding gap between BAME and white students. In proposing future developments, the authors make powerful use of the voices of students as potential change agents.

Liz Thomas, in an Innovative Practice article, reports on the #Ibelong project, a partnership led by Erasmus University Rotterdam (Netherlands), with Edge Hill University (UK), Osnabrueck University (Germany) and University of Porto (Portugal), focused on delivering and evaluating a suite of evidence-informed interventions to improve the belonging and success of diverse students in higher education. The project developed three interconnected interventions: Dialogue Days,

Team Teacher Reflection and Community Mentoring. They are designed to be delivered together across a programme of study to the whole cohort and to involve all students, staff and mentors associated with the course for first year undergraduates. The longer-term goal of the #Ibelong project is to improve the retention and success of diverse students through an inclusive learning environment.

Morag Duffin, Fatmata Daramy, Ibrahim Ilyas and David Taylor explore the challenges of addressing inequitable outcomes and experiences for BAME law students. They consider the specific challenges BAME students face in entering a profession which is highly competitive and has traditionally lacked diversity. Their Innovative Practice article details the approach that The University of Law, as a specialist legal educational institution, has taken to work and co-create with its student body to reduce these inequitable outcomes and experiences, as well as to improve a wider sense of belonging for students within their educational institution and the legal sector.

Jon Datta and Naomi Kellman report, in an Innovative Practice article, on a unique programme aimed at de-mystifying Oxford and Cambridge and helping more 14-and 15-year-olds of Black heritage prepare to apply to and gain places at leading universities. The Year 10 programme features webinars with Trinity College academics and students, as well as Target Oxbridge alumni, providing advice to Year 10 Black British students who are considering university. The webinars aim to de-mystify Oxford and Cambridge, offer insights into what college life is really like, and provide information on the application process and guidance about preparing applications. Students also learn about how degree subject choice can affect their career options.

Heather Lloyd (prev. Piggott) and Reena Kaur offer detailed example of genuine collaboration and co-production with students to develop and deliver Access and Participation Plan (APP) work. In an interesting Innovative Practice article, the authors provide a reflective account of how APP leads, evaluators, Widening Participation (WP) practitioners and students can work effectively to design and deliver WP initiatives using Theory of Change methodology.

Shaid Parveen explores the issue of integration in the classroom amongst students in the first year of their law degree, via action-based research. This Innovative Practice article demonstrates that, initially, there appeared to be a reluctance amongst students to open up a dialogue on the issue of integration; however, when they did, the students commented on the benefits of social and/or academic integration and were generally open to the mixing of students within a classroom setting. The research also indicated that after the integrated workshops, students developed an increased confidence of mixing with people from different backgrounds and increasingly felt part of a community both in the classroom and as part of the university.

Joan Simons and Silice Patrice Belton report in their Innovative Practice article how they ran three focus groups with a total of 10 students from a BAME background, exploring issues such as being valued, inclusion, sense of belonging and feeling represented. This had been the first time BAME students at this institution were asked their views in this way. The authors found that although there were positive insights, students were uncomfortable engaging in forums, lacked a sense of belonging and did not feel represented in the curriculum. By encouraging these students to give voice to their concerns, they heard for the first time some of the issues they are dealing with that need to be addressed.

Finally, John Butcher, Rehana Awan and Darren Gray report on a scholarship project with Access students at The Open University to better understand Black students' experiences of policies, practices and culture in relation to mental health declarations that might disadvantage students. The authors explored Black students' reasons for non-disclosure using an ethically sensitive methodology. A self-selecting sample of Black students were interviewed by Black and Brown tutors, resulting in deep, often challenging insights into their lived experiences. Findings were presented through five composite personas and recommendations made around the need for enhanced cultural competence amongst staff, and more inclusive language in policy implementation.

Conclusion

These articles also remind us of the importance of recognising intersectional theory (Crenshaw 1989) when considering educational outcomes for Black and minority ethnic students as 'race' and ethnicity always interact with gender, sexuality, geography and power, privilege and disadvantage to influence experiences and outcomes.

We received feedback from many of those involved in the seminar series 'Avoid Photocopying the past - re-designing HEIs to reduce inequitable outcomes for BAME students' and Day 1 of the OU APS Biennial Conference that they found the presentations galvanising in offering practical ideas and interventions to take back to their institutions. We are excited to publish this special edition on what is a crucial topic in the sector.

We thank all authors for their energetic enthusiasm in writing up their original presentations for publication, and we wish to express particular gratitude for our reviewers and editorial board members in supporting some researchers who had not been published before. We are delighted to encourage new scholars as part of our mission and regard the dissemination of innovative work aimed at enhancing the Black and minority ethnic student experience to be a critical part of the journal's purpose.

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