

State of the Art

What Do We Know About Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Participation in UK Higher Education?

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Here, we offer a synthesis of recent evidence and new developments in relation to three broad aspects of Black and minority ethnic (BAME) students' participation in UK higher education (HE). First, we examine recent trends in ethnic group differences in rates of access to, success within, and positive destinations beyond HE. Secondly, we examine the nature of UK universities as exclusionary spaces which marginalise BAME students in a myriad of ways, not least through curricula that centre Whiteness. Finally, we consider the impact of the marginalisation of BAME students on mental health. We argue that progress towards race equality in each domain has been hampered by white-centric discourses which continue to identify BAME students and staff as 'other'. We highlight the important roles that academic communities and HE policy-makers have to play in advancing ethnic equality in UK universities.

Keywords: Black asian and minority ethnic (BAME), higher education, decolonising, access, racism.

Access to and success in higher education and beyond

Young British people from Black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds have been *more* likely than their White British peers to participate in HE for more than three decades (Modood, 1993). In 2019, rates of HE participation stood at 45 per cent for Black British young people, 50 per cent for British South Asians, and 68 per cent for British Chinese, compared to just 30 per cent for the White British ethnic group (UCAS, 2021). Until recently, however, Black British, British Pakistani and British Bangladeshi students have been substantially under-represented at the UK's most academically selective universities (Boliver, 2015). This historic under-representation has been due partly to corresponding ethnic group differences in pre-university attainment at GCSE and A-level (Department for Education, 2017, 2019). But research also shows that BAME applicants to highly selective universities have been *less* likely to be offered places than their comparably qualified White British peers (Boliver, 2013, 2016; Noden *et al.*, 2014). Growing public and political awareness of such ethnic biases in university admissions decisions (Social

Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013, 2015; Cameron, 2015) prompted provisions in the 2016 Higher Education White Paper to ‘place a duty on institutions to publish application, offer, acceptance and progression rates, broken down by gender, ethnicity and disadvantage’, and to ‘legislate to require those organisations who provide shared central admissions services (such as UCAS) to share relevant data they hold with Government and researchers in order to help improve policies designed to increase social mobility’ (DBIS, 2016: 41). Subsequently, rates of access to higher-tariff universities for BAME students have improved significantly. For example, while White British students entered higher-tariff UK universities at 2.4 times the rate of Black British students in 2010, by 2020 this ratio had declined to just 1.1 to 1 (UCAS, 2021).

Although the representation of BAME students at higher-tariff universities has been improving, students from some BAME backgrounds continue to be less likely than their White peers to complete degree programmes. Statistics for 2017-18 indicate that HE continuation rates at universities in England (i.e. the inverse of drop-out rates) were much lower for Black students at 86 per cent than for White students at 92 per cent (OfS, 2020). The corresponding figure for the broad category of Asian students was 91 per cent, but this conflates the high continuation rates for Chinese and Indian students on the one hand with what are likely to be much lower rates for Pakistani and Bangladeshi students. A report on British Muslims in UK HE, a religious group largely comprising students of Pakistani and Bangladeshi ancestry, found that across the period 2012-15, Muslim students were the group least likely to have gained their intended award and most likely to have left with no award (Malik and Wykes, 2018).

A similar pattern is evident with respect to the rates at which students from some BAME groups are awarded what is commonly termed a ‘good degree’: that is, a first or upper second class degree classification. Data for 2013-14 indicates that the percentage of students awarded a ‘good degree’ was some sixteen percentage points higher for White students than for students from BAME backgrounds, at 76 per cent compared to 60 per cent (HEFCE, 2014). Even after controlling for students’ A-level grades on entry, White students continued to receive ‘good degrees’ at a rate 15 percentage points higher than their BAME counterparts (HEFCE, 2015). The latest available data for England indicates that students from all major BAME categories continue to be much less likely than their White peers to graduate with a good degree; the figures for 2017-18 were 82 per cent for the White group, 77 per cent for those of Mixed ethnicity, 70 per cent for Asian students, and 59 per cent for Black students (OfS, 2020). For the discipline of Sociology specifically, the White-BAME gap in degree classifications is no better than for the sector as a whole, at 15 per cent overall, and higher still for students from Black African and Pakistani backgrounds. (Joseph-Salisbury *et al.*, 2020).

The magnitude of the White-BAME gap in HE continuation and attainment is so large and persistent that the Office for Students has explicitly tasked UK universities with taking active steps ‘To eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students by 2024-25, and to eliminate the absolute gap (the gap caused by both structural and unexplained factors) by 2030-31.’ (OfS, 2019a: 19). In the Access and Participation Plans (APPs) submitted to the Office for Students by England’s 25 higher-tariff providers, almost all institutions reported large attainment gaps by ethnicity, typically of around 10-12 percentage points and rising as high as 23 percentage points (Boliver and Powell, 2021). Almost all higher-tariff providers explicitly acknowledged in their APPs – in many cases for the first time – that they had an important role to play in

ensuring that students admitted to their programmes succeeded on course, and around a third acknowledged that they were at an early stage of understanding the causes of and most effective solutions to socioeconomic and ethnic inequalities in degree attainment (*ibid.*).

Importantly, ethnic inequalities in UK HE do not stop at the point of graduation but continue on in the form of disparate graduate outcomes. While 73 per cent of White university graduates progressed into highly skilled employment or further study, the corresponding figures were much lower for students of Mixed (69 per cent), Black (68 per cent) and Asian (67 per cent) ethnicity (OfS, 2020). These disparities are due in part to the historically lower rates at which BAME students attend the most prestigious UK universities, which are known to confer superior returns in the labour market (Belfield *et al.*, 2018). However, studies of graduate outcomes for those who attended 'elite' Russell Group universities reveal a similar pattern, with Black, Pakistani and Bangladeshi Russell Group graduates less likely than their comparably qualified White peers to be in a professional job, and more likely to be unemployed, six months after graduation (Lessard-Phillips *et al.*, 2014; Zwysen and Longhi, 2018). BAME students are well-represented among those progressing to postgraduate taught degree programme, making up 22 per cent of the total, but remain under-represented among postgraduate research students pursuing doctoral degrees, at 17 per cent (Williams *et al.*, 2019). Black students are especially under-represented among doctoral level students, making up just 3 per cent of first year PhD researchers in 2017–18, and a miniscule 0.15 per cent of those who received UKRI-funded PhD studentships between 2016 and 2018 (*ibid.*).

Inclusion in higher education

These alarming inequalities shown in the continuation and attainment gap in HE highlighted above suggest that closer attention should be paid to BAME students' experiences within university spaces. Universities UK (UUK) and the National of Students (NUS) continue to urge universities to '[understand] how a poor sense of belonging might be contributing to low levels of engagement and progression to postgraduate study' (UUK and NUS, 2019: 2). The current UK HE system rests on principles of a meritocratic ideal which has been proven to increase inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Boliver, 2004; Dorling, 2015; Boliver, 2018; Reay, 2018) and a 'banking system' of education that not only stifles any potential for learning to be transformative (hooks, 1994) but also actively contributes to excluding certain categories of students (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Freire, 1999). This vertical approach to learning is only worsened by a context of increasing management and monitoring measures within HEIs, including the government's 'hostile environment' policies percolating within the Academy (Alexander and Arday, 2015), and the neoliberal logics they follow. This means that learning spaces remain exclusionary spaces.

The HE curriculum, dominated by White European canons of scientific and scholarly knowledge, plays a significant role in BAME students' engagement, belonging and marginalisation (Ahmed, 2012; Nwadeyi, 2016). Recent research indicates that BAME students are rarely afforded agency or autonomy in negotiating the canons of knowledge proffered (Bhopal, 2014; Andrews, 2016; Rollock, 2016; Arday, 2019). In many cases, ethnic minority students are engaging with a curriculum that does not reflect their socialisation, worldview, history or lived experience. This is particularly evident in

disciplines such as history, where ‘the narrow scope of the school and university History curriculum is an obstacle to racial and ethnic diversity in History as a discipline’ (Atkinson *et al.*, 2018: 9). The teaching of British history presents a very narrow and constrained view of society and neutralises, by omission, Britain’s persecution of Black people in pursuit of the empire, relegating Black history to the margins (Andrews, 2019). White Eurocentric curricula also disadvantage White students with regards to broadening and challenging their own worldview, particularly against dominant discourses and stereotypes regarding people of colour (Hamilton, 2016; Leonardo, 2016; Arday, 2020; Arday *et al.*, 2020).

The curriculum is not an objective reflection of intellectual merit but a choice, a constructed narrative of what is relevant to a discipline at a given time (Alexander, 1987; Peters, 2018). Any body of knowledge solely produced by White scholars cannot reflect a multi-culturally diverse society (Andrews, 2016; Delgado Bernal and Villalpando, 2016; Leonardo, 2016). The positive contribution of BAME scholars has been largely ignored and their absence within the Academy in relaying these lived experiences and histories remains problematic. This has often resulted in the presentation of Black people, particularly women, as oppressed subjects, rather than agents of change contributing to the development of modern Britain (Mohanty, 1988).

Within the UK there has been a continuing critical mass of students and academics that have sustained calls to decolonise the curriculum and diversify the canon at universities ‘by ending the domination of Western epistemological traditions, histories and figures’ (Sardar, 2008; Molefe, 2016). Student-led campaigns such as the *Decolonising the Curriculum Movement* and *Why is my Curriculum White?* have been pivotal to challenging and dismantling the existing orthodoxy (Sardar, 2008; Arday and Mirza, 2018; Peters, 2018). Establishing a culturally diverse rather than monolithically White Academy requires a shift away from cultivating knowledge through a dominant Eurocentric-constrained paradigm which continues to omit the contribution of people of colour as constructors of knowledge (Andrews, 2019; Arday, 2019). More importantly, these omissions constitute an empirical mistake, divorcing the history of Europe and ‘the West’ from that of a global, connected history (Connell, 1997; Bhambra, 2014, 2016). The effects of this continued marginalisation on academics and students of colour facilitates a learning space which is not reflective of increasingly diverse student populations (Tate and Bagguley, 2017), symptomatic of the entrenched institutional racism which still permeates the Academy and society more generally (Dei *et al.*, 2004; Shilliam, 2015).

Anti-racist scholar-activists have called for the end of dominant ideologies that position ‘white, male, Western, capitalist, heterosexual, European worldviews in higher education as the dominant knowledge canon and discourse’, in favour of a more inclusive lexicon that embodies global ‘perspectives, experiences and epistemologies’ as the central tenets of the curriculum (Shay, 2016). However, recent scholarship within the humanities and social sciences evaluating evidence as to the state of specific disciplines points to the persistent absence of these discussions (see, for example, Joseph-Salisbury *et al.*, 2020 in relation to Sociology; Atkinson *et al.*, 2018 in relation to History; and Craig *et al.*, 2019 in relation to Social Policy). Joseph-Salisbury *et al.* (2020: 6) show that almost a quarter of the undergraduate Sociology degree programmes sampled made no explicit reference to the terms race, ethnicity or racism. Race and Ethnicity often seem to be taught as an add-on, or specialist module, rather than a fundamentally integrated part of the curriculum. When taught, race was more often than not restricted to England or the US, and on Black and Asian populations, with little attention to ‘whiteness as a race category’.

In social policy, a similar picture is observed where both BAME authors and discussions of 'race' and racism remain completely marginal to publications and the curriculum (Craig *et al.*, 2019: 14). When efforts to 'decolonise' the curriculum are made, these are thus often perceived as tokenistic, further entrenching whiteness rather than dismantling it (Doharty *et al.*, 2020). This is also manifest in the innocuous division of the 'decolonising' labour, which is overwhelmingly passed on to the few (or only) BAME – particularly female – staff within Departments, regardless of their thematic expertise, and rarely workloaded (*ibid.*) (see Housee, 2017). This overburdening of the BAME workforce, along with the 'cumulative burden' of racial microaggressions (Pierce, 1995), makes them more likely to leave the Academy altogether (Bhopal *et al.*, 2015; Advance HE, 2018; Bhopal *et al.*, 2018).

The lack of scholarship in the curriculum coming from the global South and the hegemonic dominance of English and English-speaking countries on knowledge creation and circulation remains astounding (Bhambra, 2014; Marginson, 2020). True efforts to 'decolonise' the curriculum and the Academy therefore not only imply a historicisation of knowledge production and the inclusion of non-Eurocentric scholars and knowledge, but also the inclusion, translation and legitimisation of scholarship not originally written in colonial languages (French, English, Spanish, Portuguese), as well as scientific knowledge exchange beyond Anglo-Saxon institutions. There are great inequalities in the global knowledge economy that should be of concern to the global North and the global South (Connell, 2018). Efforts to properly de-centre academia ideally need to promote greater distribution of the interrelated material structures of knowledge production, such as grants and journals, as well as more symbolic ones, including citation patterns, awards, appointments and so on.

Critical pedagogies have tended to focus on students' learning experiences and opportunities for belonging in classroom spaces. Inclusive teaching strategies, such as 'safe spaces' for students to work in, have been heralded as essential to discuss 'sensitive' topics (Hobson and Whigham, 2018). This pedagogical practice works with various degrees of success and has raised questions as to who exactly is 'safe' in those safe spaces. Leonardo and Porter argue:

... the term 'safety' acts as a misnomer because it often means that white individuals can be made to feel safe. Thus, a space of safety is circumvented, and instead a space of oppressive color-blindness is established. It is a managed health-care version of anti-racism, an insurance against 'looking racist' (Leonardo and Porter, 2010: 148).

Importantly, '... pedagogies that tackle racial power will be most uncomfortable for those who benefit from that power' (*ibid.*: 139), a position many are not prepared to put themselves in (Rollock, 2019). The promotion of social change and a further challenge to exclusive pedagogy can be found in the productive use of emotions in teaching (Hodkinson, 2005; Bryan, 2016; Connelly and Joseph-Salisbury, 2019).

The large degree classification awarding gap¹ between BAME and white students noted above varies between institutions and subjects, which 'suggests that they result, at least in part, from the teaching and assessment practices that are adopted in different institutions and in different academic subjects' (Richardson, 2018: 97). Inclusive methods of assessment have been imagined and evaluated in recognition of the needs of students with disabilities and neurodivergence (Waterfield and West, 2006; Bryan and Clegg,

2020). Most involve a certain flexibility in teaching, offering students more choice, use of peer-review and self-assessment, and creative modes of assessment that question the sole valuation of written abilities (Lynch and Baker, 2005). Inclusive assessment has thus been taken up from its original goal to now standing as general good practice within HEI. However, these inclusive methods have been unevenly practiced by individual institutions (Hanesworth *et al.*, 2019). Inspired by McArthur (2016), some scholars have proposed to harness these methods and develop a social justice approach to assessments which would empower diverse learners (Kaur *et al.*, 2017; Hanesworth *et al.*, 2019). This approach recognises that assessments are not value-free but 'a practice and process arising from specific historical, social and cultural loci through and in which specific values are reflected and enshrined' (Hanesworth *et al.*, 2019: 98; see also Leathwood, 2005). However, most institutions maintain a mode of assessment that is 'traditional' and continues to value specific knowledges and modes of knowing. Overall, reflexive teaching practices and purposeful pedagogy are a step in the right direction (Hobson and Whigham, 2018). But whilst more horizontal teaching practices and critical pedagogical methods do occur, these practices are mostly seen as marginal, 'creative' or 'different' instead of sitting at the core of our teaching philosophy. Recent evidence suggests that staff feel under-trained in appropriate teaching methods that foster an inclusive and empowering environment for all students to learn in (Joseph-Salisbury *et al.*, 2020). Within UK academia, a growing and subtle resistance continues to emerge, which has attempted to disrupt exclusionary canons and practices. Fundamentally, this resistance embraces the promise of a more diverse and inclusive university, and recognises its potency in resolving strained national and global social relations particularly in regards to racial equality (Shay, 2016).

Racism, much like other forms of structural domination, has a tendency to evolve and adapt to its challenges. As such, it cannot be 'solved' with a particular policy or set of policies, but strategies to combat it must evolve with it. As Gillborn warns us: 'conventional forms of anti-racism have proven unable to keep pace with the development of increasingly racist and exclusionary education policies that operate beneath a veneer of professed tolerance and diversity. [...] Racism is complex, contradictory, and fast-changing: it follows that anti-racism must be equally dynamic' (Gillborn, 2006: 26). Perhaps a useful question to bear in mind is what Freire asks us, in the dialectic of the oppressor and the oppressed: whose side are we on when we teach/act? (Mayo, 2013).

Students' mental health

Unsurprisingly, the exclusion, marginalisation and 'othering' of BAME students within UK universities takes its toll on mental health. While the mental health of all students is undeniably important, the psychological wellbeing of BAME students specifically is often overlooked, leaving BAME individuals with a paucity of psychological and cognitive interventions to relieve them of the residual trauma and unwanted mental burden that accompanies racism (Arday, 2018b). There is a marked lack of understanding regarding the impact of discrimination and racism on mental health (Burnett and Peel, 2001; Vernon, 2011; Cooper *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, research suggests that BAME students, as well as BAME academics and professional staff, continue to experience inadequate mental health support (Grey *et al.*, 2013; Wallace *et al.*, 2016; Arday, 2018b) including being subjected to discriminatory and stereotypical judgements posited by healthcare

professionals upon presentation of psychological symptoms or altered mental state. As the stigma surrounding mental health within society and higher education more specifically continues to dissipate, an increasing number of BAME students, academics and professional staff have discussed the psychological impact of racism on their own mental health experiences (Arday, 2018b). Consequently, there has been a focus on providing culturally-appropriate psychological interventions as demand for pastoral and counselling services continues to increase.

Currently, existing mental healthcare services can often become a site for exacerbating this racialisation, particularly when healthcare professionals become complicit in sustaining and compounding racism through stereotyping, trivialisation or absolving those involved in these discriminatory episodes. While there has been a steady increase in the numbers of BAME students, academics and professional staff utilising mental health provision within universities, there still remain issues regarding differential and inequitable experiences and outcomes (Wallace *et al.*, 2016). For this reason (amongst many), BAME individuals often internalise these issues at the risk of compromising their own mental well-being for fear that this may be used as leverage to highlight academic or professional incapability resulting in dominant characterisations of deficiency among colleagues. Research generally indicates that people from ethnic minorities are less likely than their white British counterparts to have contacted their General Practitioner (GP) about mental health issues for fear of further stigmatisation (Knifton *et al.*, 2010; Memon *et al.*, 2016). Historically, ethnic minorities have also been more likely to be prescribed antidepressants instead of being referred to psychological and cognitive behavioural interventions that eliminate the need for dependency upon drugs (Memon *et al.*, 2016).

Mental health research still points towards ethnic minorities being significantly under-represented in health-related research (Giuliano *et al.*, 2000; Chattoo *et al.*, 2019). There also remains a paucity of literature and social commentary on the mental healthcare experiences of BAME communities within the UK context. As the impact of racialisation continues to become more sophisticated and penetrative, this has inevitably resulted in many BAME students and staff experiencing a delayed, and often post-traumatic trauma, which becomes a direct consequence of having to navigate the inequitable and discriminatory HE culture which has historically sustained systemic racism (Alexander and Arday, 2015). Upon facing these experiences of inequity, ethnic minority individuals are rarely afforded the pastoral and psychological support needed to comprehend or make sense of these racialised and debilitating experiences. The gravity of such an experience can also be compounded by cultural interpretations of mental illness which often stigmatise (Arday, 2018b).

The growing interest in mental wellness within the UK has been a significant factor in disabling negative connotations associated with mental health illness (Vernon, 2011). However, it remains the case that mental illness is associated with the stigma of psychological and physical deficiency. Consequently, it remains difficult for ethnic minorities to establish a foothold on a narrative that has largely been situated within a largely Eurocentric backdrop which fails to acknowledge mental health as a global and multi-cultural problem that affects many communities (Grey *et al.*, 2013). This particular lens also fails to acknowledge that because of the contextual discriminatory nuances faced by BAME individuals, mental illness is encountered in a different way and as a result the support and interventions provided must be in alignment within the trauma encountered (Cooper *et al.*, 2013).

There is a need for healthcare researchers to consider more equal representation of mental health experiences and outcomes, particularly with regards to the dissemination of more culturally-specific mental health research that recognises the contextual and nuanced experiences of ethnic minorities (Wallace *et al.*, 2016). The omission of this context and the systematic failure regarding research in this area to reflect the salient differences encountered by ethnic minority groups and how they experience mental illness remains problematic (Arday, 2018b). This distinction is essential in discerning how ethnic minority experiences regarding psychological wellness differ from the rest of the UK population (Rugkåsa and Canvin, 2011). Understanding this context provides the foundation to develop a narrative positing that continual experiences of racism within the university destabilise psychological wellness, affect self-esteem and create emotional instability (Wallace *et al.*, 2016).

The importance of mental health now occupies a position of prominence within the everyday vernacular of HE discourse since this permeates many aspects of the staff and student experience, with both under ever-increasing pressure against sector benchmarks, labour market and consumer expectations (Vernon, 2011). For ethnic minorities navigating the racialised terrain of the Academy, there remains a dearth of culturally-sensitive interventions within the UK mental healthcare system that provide opportunities for BAME individuals openly to discuss their experiences of negating mental health without fear of further discrimination, reprisal, or judgement (Grey *et al.*, 2013). Consequently, this has impacted confidence among ethnic minority individuals in the presentation of potential well-being issues and accessing support within universities and the wider healthcare system (MIND, 2013).

The wellbeing of BAME students, academics and professional staff within universities is integral in terms of establishing a sense of belonging, which facilitates integration rather than marginalisation within spaces where ethnic minorities are often few in number. Lent (2004) situates wellbeing as an essential but often neglected area within psychological health when considering the inclusion of ethnic minority students within universities. Furthermore, Fernando (2010) states that, within university spaces, a wide variety of factors makes it difficult to distinguish the crucial elements of wellbeing particularly with regards to negating the racialised and complex needs of BAME individuals. Understanding and safeguarding this wellbeing remains the responsibility of universities, not only in relation to students but also BAME staff who continue to encounter differential experiences regarding professional support and promotion (MIND, 2013).

Conclusions

The persistence of racial inequality in relation to higher education access, success, inclusion and mental health contradicts the professed egalitarian values of the Academy. Dismantling racial inequality in HE is particularly difficult in light of the institutional and structural racism that continues to permeate the sector (Ahmed, 2012; Arday and Mirza, 2018). Although there have been many seminal moments in the long struggle for racial equality throughout the sector, the pace of change remains slow, often lacking resource, sustainability and penetration. From fiscal and human resource perspectives, universities have historically been non-committal in this endeavour, resulting in the continued exclusion and marginalisation of ethnic minority staff and students (Rollock, 2016; Adams, 2017). As such, universities have been complicit in undermining their own

poorly-developed race equality interventions and this has significantly hindered diversification agendas and the mobilisation of ethnic minority staff within the Academy (Arday, 2019).

The murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 has created another seminal moment in race relations history which has brought about a collective moment of reflection, resulting in a challenging of whiteness and the power and privilege that accompanies this at the expense of BAME communities. This collective reflection as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement provides a stimulus for a renewed commitment to an egalitarian and racially inclusive Academy (Arday, 2018a). While the labour of race work continues to predominately fall on those encountering this systemic violence on a daily basis, this period of reflection has illuminated the need for White people to disrupt these racially discriminatory spaces and dismantle the monopoly on power that serves to disadvantage ethnic minorities attempting to progress throughout the Academy (Miller, 2016).

While the evolving role of White allyship has been integral during this reflexive period, it is important to note that this support has historically been 'intermittent'. This seasonal engagement by White allies with the struggle for race equality has been a contributing factor in enabling the perpetuation of racist institutional cultures. It is important to acknowledge that there are individuals that obstinately have no desire to embrace racial equality nor see it as a priority issue (Tate and Bagguley, 2017). Such dispositions are reflective of a minority that continue to obstruct pathways towards greater diversification and representation in the Academy. There is, however, a larger majority that has continued to campaign for an Academy that is truly reflective of our multicultural and multi-ethnic society (Pilkington, 2013).

The collective endeavour needed to sustain real change requires an evaluation of how universities can develop and improve race equality interventions. We are at a critical juncture in race relations history, which must be used as the catalyst for re-evaluating our approach towards tackling racism and ethnic inequality within the Academy. While racism remains largely interwoven in the fabric of our universities, the collective resistance to structural and systemic racism provides a chorus of hope, unity and solidarity for ethnic minorities continuously on the end of this oppression. The shifting sands of this issue provide unsteady ground, but there are emerging signs that universities are now being held to account by students, staff, and activists with regards to their commitment towards eradicating racial inequality. There is now a concerted collective pressure to develop a more ethnically-diverse and inclusive Academy.

The HE regulator has a crucial role to play in achieving this goal. The Office for Students, which replaced the Office for Fair Access in 2018, has been pushing universities to confront ethnic inequalities in rates of HE continuation and attainment, prompting universities to produce Access and Participation Plans covering the period 2019-20 to 2024-25 which include a range of new initiatives seeking to improve inclusion and support for students from BAME groups (Boliver and Powell, 2021). The Office for Students (OfS) has also spearheaded research into ways of better supporting students with mental health conditions, with an emphasis on the need for 'culturally competent approaches to support services' (OfS, 2019b: 6).

More longstanding equality interventions such as the Advance HE Race Equality Charter also continue to be pivotal in challenging universities to change racially discriminatory cultures and practices. Commitment to this intervention varies and institutions must

fully resource and invest in this work if they are serious about addressing racial inequality in the sector. Senior stakeholders at universities must consider the composition of their workforces and discern whether existing workforces are reflective of increasingly diverse university populations (Ahmed, 2012). There is also a need for institution-wide commitment towards this endeavour which facilitates continuing professional development as a way of supporting staff and students in understanding the importance of a racially-diverse university community (Shilliam, 2015). Engagement with such activities must empower people actively to intervene and challenge evidently inequitable structures and behaviours.

Notes

1 This term is used by Joseph-Salisbury *et al.* (2020) instead of 'attainment' gap in order to convey the responsibility of the institution in this outcome, as opposed to understanding this phenomenon as a personal, individual failure. This sociological understanding allows for a richer discussion of the structural factors at play here.

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