

Journal of Impact Cultures

Guest Editorial by Professor Marcia Wilson

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It is a privilege and honour to write the editorial for the inaugural special issue of *the Journal of Impact Cultures*. In recent years, there has been an increase in focus on the University culture in relation to inequalities experienced by Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students and staff. It is timely and crucial for a journal such as this one to critically explore the key cultural Higher Education issues of our time.

There are several key equity issues that impact students and staff in Higher Education (HE). For students, probably the area that has received the most attention is the Degree Award Gap (which is also known as the Attainment Gap)¹. This is the percentage points difference in good degrees (which are classed a 1st or 2:1) between White and BAME students. In almost half of the English universities, the degree award gap is over 20% and in several London Post 92 Universities that have a large BAME student population, the Degree Award Gap is higher (in some cases, almost double the national average of 13.2%) (Office for Students). Related to the degree gap is the fact that student progression on degree programmes, retention, and graduate employability levels are worse for BAME students compared to their White counterparts.

There has been much speculation about the causes of the Degree Award gap and how it is sustained over time. One of the potential reasons is linked to the Whiteness in Higher Education. Whiteness refers to the structure, systems and processes that maintain and reproduce White privilege. Within the academy, Whiteness reigns supreme and this is clearly reflected in the largely Eurocentric curriculum, the academic staff who deliver the content through to the demographic of the management and governing bodies.

¹ An important but often overlooked issue is terminology. Across the sector, this phenomenon is generally known as the BAME Attainment Gap. I have also heard it referred to as the Opportunity Gap, and the University award gap. However, I chose to use the Degree Award Gap because we are referring to the 'degrees' that the University awards students. The responsibility for the degree gap must be located within the structures of the educational system rather than within the individual. When the BAME Attainment gap is used as the preferred choice, we are specifying that the discussion is about the attainment of BAME students which infers the responsibility as located within the individual or that the student should be fixed. This is aligned with the student deficit model and absolves the institution of any responsibility for addressing degree gaps.

BAME staff in the academy experience a lack of career progression and reported higher rates of bullying and harassment compared to White staff. Recent figures from the Higher Education Statistical Analysis (HESA, 2018/19) show that less than 0.1% of senior management staff in UK universities are Black. Similarly, less than 1% of almost 21,000 professors in the UK are Black. Across the sector, there exists an ethnicity pay gap (9% which rises to 14% for Black staff) but is amplified if you are a BAME woman because this intersects with the gender pay gap. In 2015, the higher education sector witnessed the first Black female head of a UK Higher Education Institution, Baroness Valerie Amos and she has been very vocal about calling for equity in HE. At present, there are less than six BAME VCs in the UK.

In the full knowledge that this inequitable situation in HE needs to be addressed, Advance HE introduced the Race Equality Charter (REC) Mark in 2016. However, uptake from universities has been slow. At present, 14 institutions have achieved a bronze award compared to over 800 Athena SWAN awards (institutional and departmental) attained by UK universities. Although the more cynical among us may argue that universities might simply collect charter marks or awards to dress their shop window (website) and look attractive from the outside for potential students and staff, it cannot be denied that the REC is a good mechanism for beginning an institution wide conversation about racism.

The contributors share valuable and insightful information on ways to challenge institutional hegemony. Dr Julie Botticello reveals how she is challenging the Whiteness of her institution by organising the Many Voices Reading Group. Creating a safe space for students to engage with literature from marginalised voices provides a counter narrative to the Eurocentric dominance across the sector. The importance of this can not be underestimated as it raises awareness of other types of equally important knowledge. In her article, Francesca Gilbert writes from an ethnographic perspective of the trauma experienced by Black students under the illusion of progress in HE and the challenges that are entwined with being a Black student in a predominately White institution.

This special edition gives voice to the stark inequalities that exist in HEIs and is a call to action to work towards solutions. The education sector, and indeed society, cannot fully benefit if a substantial number of people do not have the opportunity to flourish and reach their full potential.



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