

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Pursuing Decolonial Desires: University Outreach and Spreading the 'Good News' of Higher Education

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**Research Domain:** Higher education policy (HEP)

**Abstract:** Much of the body of work on widening access into higher education (HE) is race-neutral rather than race-focused particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) context. This can be attributed to an over-emphasis on social class disadvantages throughout UK education policy discourse. However, this discourse is far from being race-neutral particularly with the diverting attention given to the underachievement of the 'white working class'. The research attempts to redress this by drawing upon two distinct bodies of knowledge: (1) critical race theory in education and (2) widening access (participation) into HE. The aim of this study is to examine the extent of race influencing widening access HE policy and practice in England. The paper will present results from interviews with widening participation practitioners in examining the role race plays in HE widening access policy and practice. With race at the centre of study, the analysis of interview data suggest that practitioners may be pursuing a 'decolonial desire'.

**Paper: Pursuing decolonial desires: university outreach and spreading the 'good news' of higher education**

This paper presentation builds upon Gillborn's (2005) seminal work on how English educational policy is an act of white supremacy. I specifically focus on English higher education policy and practice aimed at widening access to 'non-traditional' students, which encompasses students of colour.

Much of the body of work on widening access into higher education (HE) has been, for the most part, race-neutral rather than race-focused particularly in the United Kingdom (UK) context (e.g. Loveday 2015). This can be attributed to an over-emphasis on social class disadvantages throughout UK education policy discourse (Gillborn et al. 2012). However, this discourse is far from being race-neutral particularly with the diverting attention given to the underachievement of the 'white working class' (see Crawford 2019). There is a suggestion that this discourse has shaped widening access and participation practice throughout the sector in England to support the government's social mobility goals by increasing the number of young people from underrepresented groups who go into higher education. In evaluating the Higher Education Funding Council for England's National Networks for

Collaborative Outreach scheme, which kickstarted what is presently known as the Office for Students' Uni Connect programme, Stevenson et al. (2017, 29) found that, 'Certain groups are, however, more cited as the beneficiaries of new activities (such as white working class boys) than others (such as those from Black and minority ethnic groups).'

The research attempts to draw upon two distinct bodies of knowledge: (1) critical race theory in education and (2) widening access (participation) into HE. The aim of this study is to examine the extent of race influencing widening access HE policy and practice in England. This is timely given the negative impact of Covid-19 upon the lives of people of colour (Runnymede Trust, 2020), and the Government public release of data suggesting that less Black pupils are entering into UK HE for the first time in a decade (Department of Education 2020).

The paper will present results from interviews with widening participation practitioners in examining the role race plays in HE widening access policy and practice. This data emerges out of a wider study on widening access policy and practice that foregrounds and centres on race (Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008). The study has endeavoured to be consistent with the tenets of critical race theory (CRT) in education (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). By adopting a CRT framework, I acknowledge that: (1) white supremacy is endemic in wider UK society; and (2) that higher education is not value-neutral and colour-blind. The study sought to mark the pervasiveness of whiteness, or what Gillborn (2005) terms a 'tacit intentionality' of white supremacy, in higher education widening access policy that continually reproduces race inequities.

The findings from the interviews suggest that there is a disconnect between the public discourse on widening access into higher education and what practitioners actually do, which was similarly observed in Rainford's (2021) work. However, with race at the centre of my study, the analysis of interview data suggest that practitioners may be pursuing a 'decolonial desire'. This notion of 'decolonial desire' stems from the work of La Paperson (2017) and the 'third university'. The 'third university' is a decolonizing university 'driven by decolonial desires, with decolonizing dreamers who are subversively part of the machinery and part machine themselves. These subversive beings wreck, scavenge, retool, and reassemble the colonizing university into a decolonizing contraption' (La Paperson 2017). For widening access and participation practitioners, this subversion begins with querying existing policies and initiatives that sustain colonial logics and white supremacy, such as singling out 'white working class boys.' The subversion then extends to retooling and reassembling such initiatives to smudge whiteness and support young Black students to progress to higher education. The work of the third university happens in university outreach activities when Black widening policy practitioners share their own experiences of racism in higher education to motivate Black and brown children to identify potential barriers and overcome them.

The paper concludes that the 'third university' is happening despite the 'tacit intentionality' of white supremacy in widening access policy and practice in English higher education. There is anti-colonialist, anti-racist work ongoing in the realm of higher education, fuelled by decolonial desires of practitioners, who are grasping hope, opening-up possibilities, imaginations, and futures.

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Indicative

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