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Hypocrisy or Authentic Agitation? Reflections on Addressing the HE Awarding Gap

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Research Domains

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Abstract

An increasingly globalised higher education landscape, combined with a sector-wide acknowledgment of disparities in outcomes between Black and White students, has given rise to a reimagining of what is meant by an 'inclusive curriculum'. One unifying feature affecting both BAME and International students is their ability to develop a 'sense of belonging' (Smith,2017) something that is evidenced as having a significant effect on learners' motivation and self-esteem (Ulmanen et al, 2016).

Using Smith's (2017) six actions to address the BME attainment gap, as the basis for reflection, this paper provides a critical overview of the steps taken in using relational pedagogy as framework for the development of a suite of resources to address the degree awarding gap in one large HEI in the northwest of England. The authors offer a critical overview of the role of allyship, dialogue, and individual agency, in bringing about institutional change.

Full paper

Like Bhopal and Pitkin (2020) we use the terms BAME and BME 'to refer to individuals from Black British, Black African, British Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi, Chinese and those from other non-White backgrounds, official terms used in the Census (2011)'. Similarly, we are 'aware of the limitations of the term, particularly that BME individuals are not a homogenous group, but it remains a useful designation in a field such as higher education in which White identities remain dominant' (544).

Across the HE landscape there has been a significant sector-wide shift to promote curriculum that is accessible to learners from a diverse range of backgrounds. One catalyst for this has been the Office for Students consultation on new conditions to reduce the disparity of difference in completion, continuation and progression outcomes. For example, one key performance measure maps the gap in degree outcomes between white students and black students. This measure indicates that black students are awarded proportionately fewer 1sts and 2:1s than their white peers. While there has been some closing of the gap for those students receiving a 2:1, the gap for those receiving 1sts alone has significantly increased. (OFS, 2022).

It is widely acknowledged that students experience multiple and intersecting inequalities which can have an effect on their retention, progression and overall experience in HE. For students who are BAME, studying in a second language or away from their home country the implications can be significant, especially when faced with other challenges, such as language barriers, lack of a sense of belonging or difficulty forming relationships with tutors and peers.

Relational pedagogy challenges the individualised approach to knowledge acquisition, yet acknowledges the value that recognition of 'self' and 'other' have in this process. Curriculum designed to embed a relational approach can therefore encourage practice that incorporates interaction between learner and teacher and learner to learner as well as the promotion of relationships between individuals, facilitating pedagogic practice that can aid the creation of a sense of belonging. Notably, interpersonal relationships can have a profound effect on the development of a learner's sense of belonging (Gillen-O'Neel, 2019) and making connections with tutors and peers can result in increased engagement.

In January 2022 the authors were tasked with providing resources to be used by academics to support them in addressing the BAME awarding gap. One key component of this work was the development of a toolkit for academics to assess their practice against proposed measures that could be adopted to address these gaps. This resource has the potential to impact outcome as the HE degree awarding gap is significantly linked to students experience of learning and teaching in HE (Wong et al, 2021;Smith, 2017).

The approach taken was to co construct resources with colleagues capitalising on their expertise and experience . Working across a large institution with over 1500 academic staff the resource needed to be flexible to work in a range of different contexts and disciplines.

In the development process the authors were cognisant of their white homogeneity and lack of heterogeneity raising issues around representation and privilege. In this context a focus on 'allyship' played a huge role in justifying the approach taken. In addition to this, open dialogue between colleagues and students became a significant feature of the creative process, one that has been transformative in understanding privilege and its role within racial injustice (Lee, 2017).

Institutional data and feedback suggests that the resource has been useful for staff. Here the authors reflect on their experiences of creating content, consultation with the wider university and observations of the resource in practice using Smith's six actions as the basis for reflection (Smith, 2017).

References

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