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Researching the broken pipeline: HE as affectively racialised space

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

As attested by National Student Survey data and Office for Student reports, students from black, Asian and other minoritised backgrounds have a different and largely more negative experience of HE than their white peers. Beneath these statistics are myriad stories and lived experiences of micro-aggressions, institutional racism, unbelonging, invisibility, and feelings that needs are not being met. Despite two decades of efforts to widen participation, it seems from this data that the social mobility promised by higher education still does not extend to all students.

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data and contributions from participants involved in a national OfS-funded project in a post-92 HEI in the West Midlands, this paper will explore some of the complexities: ethical, political and (therefore) methodological in research and knowledge production focused on decolonising the Higher Education research curriculum and improving the experiences of HE post graduate researchers from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

Full paper

Context

The research this paper draws on originates in a context in which the OfS has identified an 'awarding gap' at undergraduate level between 'black, Asian and minority ethnic students… when compared to white students' (OfS 2021). Earlier reports also highlighted a 10-20% gap in achievement of a first or upper-second class degree between the two groups (OfS 2019) and shared data showing lower continuation rates for students from ethnic minoritised backgrounds (OfS 2021, 3). Worryingly, this bleak picture is coming into focus in a context of widening participation, in which the proportion of students from these backgrounds has continued to increase (OfS 2022, 9).

These statistics have catalysed the launch of a set of metrics and sparked a range of initiatives alongside a tightening of audit in relation to the way funds are being spent. Within HEIs they have also triggered calls to decolonise the curriculum.

This paper will draw on data from a project focused on the issues of inequity related to ethnicity outlined above. This project sought to open up spaces in which participants could share significant personal experiences and insights into their extra-higher education (HE) identities in a modern HEI located in a highly diverse city in the West Midlands of England with almost 50% of its student population coming from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. The project is one of thirteen nationally that aim to tackle a stratification of mobilities into and through HE defined by ethnicity. The That's Me project involves two modern HEIs seeking to address barriers to the recruitment and successful entry into academic life of Post Graduate researchers from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. The data comes from Year 1 of a four year project.

While they do highlight important trends of inequity, the OfS reports that drive this activity can be viewed as operating in a context of market fundamentalism: a belief in marketisation, 'the tide that lifts all boats' that currently underpins HE policy (see for example Willetts 2011, Belger 2022). Arguably, the epistemological and policy paradigm that is funding these interventions and this research established and sustains the issues in the first place (Dumas et al 2016).

Research Methodology

A key concern in this project has been that the forces of performativity within our high-stakes HE market environment could resulting in a performative beauty pageant and no real change. Consequently, the project was forced to grapple with questions about ways of knowing.

The key question at the heart of the research is: how is it possible to bring about real and sustainable change in the lived experiences of HE students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds in racialised HE space and in a knowledge production context in which claims to legitimacy and progress are tainted by performativity engendered by a competitive market context?

The project used statistical data (institutional and national) as a starting point. From there, a multi-faceted participatory approach was adopted with current PGR students and alumni involved as insider co-researchers. The aim was to provide nuanced qualitative data to deepen understanding not just of student experiences and staff perspectives but of the systemic and cultural phenomena that underpin these. Framed by quantitative data, other tools used were surveys, focus groups (staff and students), interviews, creative expression (poetry, collage, photo elicitation) and facilitators' observation notes. A thematic approach was used in the analysis (Braun and Clarke (2006) complemented by a "spotting" of 'glowing' data (Maclure 2010).

Findings and discussion

The findings in the first year of the project highlighted the need to address systemic and empirical issues at every part of the doctoral cycle: application, enrolment, supervision and completion. Undertaking the research involved the problematisation of knowledge production in a context of everyday personal and structural racism in the academy. If 'the university is the Master's house' (Lorde 1984) and the aim is to challenge and transform practice, then anti-racist theoretical perspectives rooted in practice were needed. For that reason, literature on racism in the academy (Bhambra et al 2018), critical race theory (e.g. Gillborn and Ladson-Billings 2020) the literature on 'belonging' (Thomas 2012) informed

the methods adopted and how they were used.

The findings so far indicate that to address the issue of the negative lived experiences of students from minoritised ethnic groups requires very careful co-production of research space. A powerful temporal tension exists between the imperative to address students' immediate pain and anger and the much slower pace required to bring about cultural and attitudinal change within the institution. Trust is a prerequisite; discomfort is expected.

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