304

Complex Beginnings: Unpacking the Founding of a Positive Action Programme for Black Researchers

<u>James Burford</u>, <u>Emily Henderson</u>, <u>Fatima Alhaj-Hasan</u>, Sarah Dahl, Paul Warmington, Marie Casafina-Orwin, Dinesh Passi
University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper contributes to debates on persistent inequalities in the higher education researcher workforce, arguing that greater attention must be paid to how interventions aimed at disrupting inequalities are conceived. Based on a research-evaluation study, it examines the founding and early implementation of a positive action programme at a UK university designed to address the underrepresentation of Black researchers. Drawing on multiple methods—semi-structured interviews with participants and supervisors, key informant interviews, stakeholder workshops with founders, and a solicited diary study focussed on ongoing coordination—the paper explores the complexities surrounding the programme's establishment. It highlights the diverse range of actors involved, a range of contested accounts of its founding, and the varying intentions that influenced the programme. By focusing on the founding process, the paper emphasises the importance of understanding how equity initiatives take shape, offering insights for those developing similar interventions in the future.

Full paper

Introduction and Literature Review

The composition and experiences of workers in the UK researcher labourforce continue to be shaped by persistent inequalities. Despite a growing range of initiatives, at various scales, designed to promote equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in research, progress remains slow—particularly with regard to addressing the stark underrepresentation of Black researchers in UK higher education (HE) (Arday, 2020; Pilkington, 2020). In response, positive action programmes have been developed to address barriers to and within researcher careers. Recent literature increasingly explores the outcomes and impact of such initiatives (Davies & Robison, 2016; Hudson, Aryal, & Hammer, 2022). However, less attention has thus far been given to the context of their founding, despite the insights such

moments offer into the tensions, institutional logics, and compromises that shape their subsequent trajectories.

Building on studies that interrogate how EDI is operationalised in UK HE (e.g. Henderson & Bhopal, 2022), this paper considers the institutional and cultural conditions that inform programme design and early enactment. Previous scholarship highlights the dissonance between initial visions of 'diversity work' and its subsequent enactment within bureaucratic HE systems. In *On Being Included* (2012), Ahmed shows how EDI work can become co-opted by institutional actors and norms, reducing EDI efforts to symbolic gestures rather than facilitating structural change. Other studies have examined the variety of actors involved in initiating and delivering these programmes (Gewin, 2020), highlighting their differing motivations, levels of influence, and the associated costs for undertaking this work. Focusing on founding processes, this paper shifts attention from implementation and outcomes of EDI work to the complex moments in which such interventions are imagined, negotiated, and made actionable—offering useful insights for future practitioners.

The Study

This paper draws on an empirical study conducted between 2024 and 2025. The research-evaluation centred on investigating a recently established positive action programme aimed at addressing the underrepresentation of Black researchers in UK HE. The programme under study includes an undergraduate research support scheme, PhD studentship funding, early career fellowships for completing doctoral students, postdoctoral funding awards, and an enrichment framework running across these components. The study adopted a multi-method approach to explore the programme's founding and early enactment. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with programme participants (N=9, at time of writing) and their supervisors (N=6, at time of writing), as well as a range of methods focused on those involved in its founding and coordination. These included key informant interviews (N=15), a solicited diary study (N=7) capturing day-to-day activity, and two two-hour stakeholder workshops (N=5) deploying a developmental work research framework (Engeström, 2001; Warmington, 2011). This paper focuses specifically on data collected with key informants involved in the founding of the programme to explore how it emerged and was shaped by institutional dynamics.

Findings

Our paper argues that the founding of the positive action programme emerged as a complex, negotiated process shaped by institutional infrastructures, diverse agendas, and, at times, differing understandings of racial (in)justice in HE. Interviews revealed that while there were key moments of aligned purpose, these coexisted with varying accounts of the programme's origin, aims, and theory of change. Key informants identified a wide array of contributors to the founding process, including senior leaders, academic staff, and professional services colleagues from across the institution. Rather than a single origin story, participants described a cascade of 'founding' events, which cumulatively contributed

to the initiative's creation and subsequent early development. This plurality complicated the programme's coherence but also reflected the distributed nature of equity work in HE. Overall, the findings indicate that EDI initiatives like the one we studied are rarely founded through a singular, unified vision. Instead, they emerge through negotiation, contestation, and compromise, shaped by institutional cultures and a range of stakeholder dynamics.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the founding of equity initiatives, such as the positive action programme studied, is a complex and contested process influenced by multiple actors, competing priorities, and institutional dynamics. Rather than emerging from a shared and unified vision, the initiative under study was negotiated into being—reflecting both the potentialities and limitations of institutional change in HE. Attending to these founding moments of EDI initiatives is important. They offer valuable insights into how structural inequalities can be addressed, reshaped, or indeed inadvertently reproduced. Critically engaging with these early stages in the development of an initiative are valuable opportunities to develop programmes that are as meaningful and impactful as possible.