

SRHE

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into Higher Education*

The Contribution of Universities to Racial Equity

Research report

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Introduction

Global protests have focused attention on the escalation of racism world-wide. Social movements, highlighting how the lives of black people are jeopardised by racism and calling for sustained transformation, have gained international momentum.

In this context, universities have come under fire for contributing to racial inequality within higher education and in society at large. Universities have also been charged with disseminating Eurocentrism as universal, while positioning differences in non-European knowledge and culture as inferior.

Research has highlighted how this epistemological subjugation of other cultures has contributed to the legitimisation of colonialism and racism. However, there has been less research on the positive actions that universities can take to contribute to racial equity.

Conceptual Work

The first phase of the research brought different conceptual work together. This required extensive and close reading of seminal texts. Our understanding is that racism is both interconnected and specific across geographic boundaries and cultures; and manifests itself in a variety of visible and invisible forms. There are also deep historical roots to slavery and colonialism which chain the past to the present, and the growth of new forms of exploitation of racialized peoples. We drew on the substantive scholarship and our lived experiences to outline the multiple ways in which higher education legitimates and reproduces racism while simultaneously attempting to challenge and overcome it. Concepts such as institutional racism, epistemic violence, and the communities that higher education excludes as well as movements, policies, and strategies to overcome racism were explored.

While universities proclaim equality of opportunity, there seems to be a chasm between the cultural attributes that universities value and the culture of students from disadvantaged black communities, resulting in significant proportions of black students being denied entry, or failing in higher education. We drew on the framework of Pierre Bourdieu which uncovers how universities reproduce inequality by rewarding the cultural capital associated with dominant white and middle-class communities. Bourdieu has defined cultural capital as an instrument for the appropriation of symbolic wealth and as a relational concept which is attributed with positive social force in specific fields in the struggle for scarce rewards. While being subject to contestation. Bourdieu's own work has offered an expansive analysis of the operation of cultural capital based on class but he has not paid systematic attention to race. This narrow conception of cultural capital has been deployed to represent the culture of black working class students as deficient and as contributing to their lack of success in higher education without fully accounting for the complex histories of racial domination that influence their social positions.

Our research is based on the understanding that racism is embedded in the material processes of production and exploitation that characterize capitalism, with racism itself not merely being a dependent variable but a primary contradiction linking white supremacy and capitalist accumulation in a powerful manner. While Bourdieu has not focussed on race in a systematic manner, his research on racism and caste in colonial Algeria and postcolonial Brazil provide insights on the racialised dimensions of social disadvantage (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and pave the way for extensions and elaborations to his framework.

Bourdieu's work conceptualising cultural capital as the preserve of the white middle class was interrogated by the work of Franz Fanon and Paulo Freire to challenge the deficit analytical lens and negative value judgments on communities that do not subscribe to middle or upper class colour based resources.

We drew on Franz Fanon to focus on the confluence of skin colour and culture, on Gaytri Spivak's concept of epistemic violence to reveal how racial oppression is legitimised

through knowledge which amplifies difference, eschews common humanity and renders black people as inferior and Paulo Freire's dialogic pedagogy to highlight the importance for universities to engage in dialogue with the world views and knowledge systems of racially disadvantaged communities in order to recognise the alternative forms of cultural capital that are integrated within communities of colour.

While these assets are not recognised nor valued in educational contexts they are powerful in both symbolic and material senses.

Research Journey

The research plan was for the researchers to travel to two centres for transformation at universities in Colombia and South Africa. However, rising death tolls, the non-availability of vaccines in low income countries, and the difficulties faced by communities in poverty before COVID as well as the closure of air travel as a result of the COVID pandemic made the fieldwork impossible to implement. In addition, there were political crises in Colombia impacting on all of society which caused the Colombian University to be unable to continue with the research.

The focus thus shifted to an inside-out and outside-in perspective of work on racism by focussing on a South African university reaching out to external racialised communities and an English University working to transform itself in relation to race equality. The South African University focused on leading the transformation, decolonisation and Africanisation of the university through research, teaching and community engagement with hubs of convergence set up with racially marginalised communities. The English university set up a taskforce to guide the University in institutionalising an understanding of racial diversity as contributing to excellence in research, teaching, the student and staff experience and impact in order to transform itself.

Analysis focussed on the key socio-political, economic and cultural levers and barriers of these racial equity measures and a distilling of the insights for other institutions to draw on in their own journeys.

Hubs of Convergence

The South African University developed Hubs of Convergence which was located within their Engagement and Transformation Portfolio to co-create physical spaces where the University met the community to find solutions to problems that affect close immediate communities. These were collaborative multi-stakeholder spaces of exploration for the positioning and re-positioning of the engagement and transformation interface to reimagine the University in service to society.

The Hubs of Convergence were particularly crucial in mobilising resources for the University to contribute directly to challenges facing communities during the pandemic and in its aftermath. These enabled the University to partner with civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and other relevant structures to address poverty, deprivation and hunger and provided the University community with a practical mechanism for expressing solidarity. In this way the University was able to giving practical expression to the value of ubuntu and helping to foster a more humane society.

Analysis was on the repositioning of projects into thematic hubs as spaces for the co-construction of programmes in collaboration with communities, centres and faculties across

the University and civil society stakeholders. Projects included community engagement during COVID focussing on psycho-social support for individual and collective wellness drawing on network of volunteer counsellors alongside staff from the Psychology Department and Student Wellness Centres.

Food security has been another focus with a shift of resources to focus on the local and indigenous context of food growing and allied strategies to promote health and healing, particularly in response to adverse environmental effects on young people. Analysis suggested that the educational and community based components enable learning that can disrupt settled understandings of social and environmental injustices. Importantly, successful design, production and adoption of community-based indigenous systems offer huge potential. To be fully enhanced, the structural challenges of poverty and inequality needs to be tackled simultaneously for more profound processes of social learning to increase recognition and develop further social and environmental growth.

Race Equality Taskforce

The aim of the race equality taskforce was to analyse the state of racial equality and to dismantle barriers, enhance innovations and create the conditions to attract more students and staff of colour and to create conditions for success and belonging.

The objectives of the taskforce are as follows:

- a) To analyse patterns in the recruitment, representation and progression of staff and students of black and minority-ethnic heritage against relevant benchmarks.
- b) To examine the experiences and sense of belonging from the perspective of staff and students of colour.
- c) To identify structural, cultural and other barriers to the recruitment, representation and progression of staff and students of colour; and factors leading to feelings of alienation.
- d) To recommend specific actions to dismantle the barriers identified above.
- e) To identify, learn from and develop synergies and co-ordination with existing innovations contributing to race equality across the University of Bath
- f) To recommend multi-level strategic interventions relating to:
 - i. policies, processes and structures
 - ii. training and support
 - iii. research and teaching

iv. cultural change

The mode of operation, membership, key findings and a set of recommendations for multi-level strategic interventions were analysed relating in particular to:

- i. policies, processes and structures
- ii. training and support
- iii. research and teaching
- iv. cultural change
- v.

Particular focus was on how a wide and diverse membership for the taskforce was recruited and how wider commitment from the University was enlisted to harness and continue harnessing positive energy through volunteers.

The stages of building trust, engaging in confidential conversations and listening actively to understand different experiences at the University were highlighted. An analysis of targeted actions for trust building a review of university structures and processes and live cases was assessed. The key themes including the recruitment, experience and progression of staff and students of colour, decolonising the curriculum, reporting racism and gaining support and institutional cultures were highlighted.

The investigation of racist acts and on language and actions that were more subtle and characterised as micro-aggressions were analysed. In relation to alternative cultural capital and decolonising the curriculum, there were pockets of impressive activity while there were challenges in the collective understanding and use of concepts such as 'inclusive' and 'decolonisation', their relationship to each other, what is meant by this in relation to the curriculum, and what ends they work towards by engaging in critical discussion on the concept and how powerful knowledge is identified. Definitions such as 'people of colour@, BAME or BME or the global majority were discussed and contested, as were issues such as whether travellers and people of various faiths and religion were racialised and therefore important to investigate.

The research programme included a seminar by on anti-racism as a decolonisation strategy to show how concepts such as excellence have been constructed in accordance with privileged and powerful groups, dominant economic principles, histories, and cultures to create an artefact of the ideal university. Produced by racialised history, particular notions of excellence were shown to be reaffirmed in the present and projected into the future, with 'worth' aligning to a race-class nexus. The profound implications for the transformation of higher education, and the negative effects on staff and students of colour as their so-called lack of worth was shown to be recirculated within global and local socio-economic systems. Analysing conceptions of excellence, how these are measured and how unequal resources can penalise institutions and communities was seen as essential. Decolonise Architecture , a collective of students and alumni at the University of Bath highlighted the institutional discrimination that arises through the curriculum, admissions, and practices in Architecture

education. DA presented their pioneering work on achieving 'realistic and effective change through solution-based initiatives. Clearly a more extensive mapping of activity linked to decolonising the curriculum and making it more inclusive across the University that recognises the breadth of disciplines, perspectives and approaches that are already being employed by different individuals and groups was required. In addition more detailed work linking the curriculum to engagement with external communities was perceived as essential.

Key Insights

Context Matters

Care must be taken to avoid preconceived ideas of the most pressing issues facing how communities, systems and groups and how they are likely to respond. These relationships and problems are highly contextual and are constructed on historical, cultural, political, social and economic inferences that exist not only between the university and its closest external communities but within universities themselves. Solutions need to be co-constructed or they would not be sustainable or integrated.

Understanding the University outside of Elitist Notions

There is a need to understand community engagement outside of elitist notions of university interventions. Interventions need to be co-constructed through engagement and research by actively engaging across university faculties, centres, and units, students and academic and professional services staff and external community groupings to respond meaningfully to historical and contextual challenges.

Relationships

Trust-building is crucial and takes time and resources. It requires genuinely listening and undertaking targeted action in the early stages to build and maintain trust. It also means acknowledging mistakes in errors in communication.

Unequal power balances and capacity must be catered for with adjustments to balance voices, accepting critique and re-distributing resources to empower disadvantaged groups.

Commitment from Senior Leadership and from Grassroot Structures

Commitment from senior leadership and strategies embedded in core high level organisational structures galvanise all parts of the University in a positive way.

Grassroot structures including community members working on the ground, student and staff unions and networks were crucial to surface issues and create safe spaces where stories were shared, ensuring that experiences were not dismissed as idiosyncratic..

Inspiring trailblazers

It was important to celebrate the work of trailblazers to serve as inspiration. For example, Decolonise Architecture, a student and alumni collective presented pioneering work on achieving 'realistic and effective change through solution-based initiatives', ensuring better representation of global architecture in course content, securing more diverse resources in partnership with the Library, and working with the Access and Widening Participation team on recruitment. Their Inclusive Review is a flagship developmental tool written by students

and approved by the Department of Architecture which can be used to display significant prevailing subconscious biases. Their work was published in the leading Architecture journal RIBA and they were invited to showcase their sector-leading work at numerous institutes and events, including the prestigious Bauhaus School in Weimar, Germany.

Integration and Intersectionality

Work on inclusion should not be carried out by a central isolated unit and a few core people but integrated by change-makers in various organisational units across the University into the community for deep and sustained transformation. It is important to avoid silos developing between different groups fighting for equality in relation to gender, race, sexuality and disability. Incentives such as shared funding to build bridges of communication and nudge groups towards collaboration; and by putting actions in place that simultaneously enhanced equity for a range of groups are important.

Enhanced space for dialogue

Rather than instructing people on what they cannot do, it is important to encourage colleagues and students within the bounds of respect and dignity to discuss and question. It is important to allow everybody to engage without fearing they will come under fire for making a mistake and to have the space to fail and derive learning opportunities from this. At the same time, action when breaches of respect or harassment occurred is important.

The Power of Stories

The development of powerful lived experience content such as 'Living Voice Videos' was found to be a powerful lever for change and used to highlight the impact of the 'everyday' aiding in more powerful cultural change.

Interrogating Culture

It is important to exemplify how culture is rooted in powerful social and organisational norms and shared values which may inadvertently be prejudicial; and how changing these can potentially improve wellbeing and belonging for the whole community as well as performance.

Co-Construction of Knowledge and the Legitimisation of Capital

There is a need to make collective understanding of what we mean by an 'inclusive' and 'decolonised' curriculum and knowledge clearer.

In the Social Sciences, researchers have indicated how non-western knowledge has been largely erased from the intellectual field, or been repositioned as European in origin. These studies are substantiated by research into the evolution of knowledge, which indicates that the growth of intellectual fields is accompanied by power struggles and specific interests;

and that knowledge can be utilized as an ideological device for protecting privilege. It is important for students to see themselves, their histories and their heritage reflected in the curriculum. Including diverse knowledge sources in scholarship and teaching avoids fossilisation and keeps courses relevant. At the same time, it is all too easy to reach the point where academic knowledge is perceived as relative, and where we cannot make any epistemological claim to validity. There is the danger that equating knowledge in too simplistic a manner with a static view of culture may result in students not gaining access to powerful forms of emerging knowledge which gives them the foundation to innovate.

In the Sciences, the situation is even more complex. There is innovative work across the on the history and non-western origins of some strands of scientific thought and there is also content on social justice and the application of Science. These are important innovations which relate to history, context and application whilst maintaining fundamental disciplinary principles. Further in-depth work is required to work through these issues in a way that will enhance the ability of students to engage in deep and impactful learning.

Key Output

a) Thought Leadership Film

It was agreed with the SRHE to use the funding to create a thought leadership film using film crews in South Africa and England to highlight the work being undertaken around race equality by interviewing key players from both universities focussing on how one university is reaching out to external communities to combat racism and on how another is working to transform itself as a university in relation to race equality.

The intended outcome is to enable other universities to gain insights, ideally as a hybrid of both universities.

The film will be accessed via the SRHE website and the websites of both universities.

The film will explore the challenges faced each university faced, their working methods and the impacts of undertaking this work. A series of different headings. such as: an overview of the work, why it was undertaken, the challenges, setting up the projects, the impact and legacy of the projects being undertaken.

The films will involve the voice of the communities they have engaged.

We would like to commission poems, spoken word pieces and or songs from communities in both countries. These poems or songs would be on specific topics - such as inclusion, transformation, trust, community and knowledge and we would film the poets or singers performing their poems and /or songs. These poems and / or songs will form the starting point for the conversations between key players from each university.

Key players from each university will be filmed talking to each other about their projects via a video conferencing platform such as Zoom. The key to this creative concept is that each person will also be filmed in real time during this interview, so we don't see grainy Zoom footage, but a close-shot conversation between the two people from different countries. Rather than question and answer format, the participants will engage in dialogue and touch on complex issues relating to work in this area. Supporting footage of each person within their university will be supplemented with any archive supporting footage filmed of the work they have been undertaking in the communities and a recreation of meetings and steering groups will be filmed. The films will not be didactic but rather reveal insights and open up questions for others to consider in their own work.

Stages of work for the film now being undertaken:

- 1) We have decided on the 4 or 5 key areas that need to be covered
- 2) We are developing a brief for commissioning poems / songs

- 3) We are connect with a small production company in SA.
 - 4) We are devising scripts with the interviewees (Ideally 3 from each university)
 - 5) There will be initial conversation over zoom to familiarise interviewees with each other and set interview questions.
 - 6) Pre production on the filming will occur in collaboration with the South African unit
 - 7) Film, poems and songs will be filmed separately
 - 8) These will be edited.
 - 9) Film interviews will be conducted.
 - 10) The South African film unit will send footage back to the UK
 - 11) Editing of films will happen in a collaborative manner with the researchers and the film makers.
 - 12) The film which may be sub-divided into a set of films will be exported for distribution. This would ideally be a simple playlist which can be hosted by both universities and the Society for Research in Higher Education.
- b) Blogs to accompany the film will be created for SRHE news, together with a journal article.