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'To teach in varied communities not only our paradigms must shift but also the way we think, write, speak' (hooks, 1994): creating resources to address the BAME awarding gap

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Abstract

In this brief communication, the authors reflect on the development of a suite of online resources to address the Black, Asian and Minority Ethic (BAME) awarding gap in Higher Education. They consider the sector, allyship and relational pedagogy to explain the approach of these publicly accessible staff-facing resources.

Keywords: BAME Awarding Gap; bell hooks; inclusive curricula; relational pedagogy

What do we mean by an 'inclusive curriculum'? What are 'belonging' and 'belongingness'? How do we shift how we think, write and speak about them? And how do we create resources to address these huge questions?

The sector-wide acknowledgment of an awarding gap between black and white students has rightly prompted a *reimagining* of what inclusion and belonging mean and what they might mean. The ability to develop a 'sense of belonging' (Smith, 2017) is evidenced as having a significant effect on learners' motivation and self-esteem (Ulmanen et al., 2016). And Black, Asian and Minority Ethic[1] students and international students report that they

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[1] Like Bhopal and Pitkin (2020) and others 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

experience exclusion, marginalisation and even discrimination while studying in higher education (UUK and NUS, 2019; EHRC, 2019).

Across the HE landscape, there has been a significant push to promote curricula that are accessible to learners from a diverse range of backgrounds. One catalyst for this has been the Office for Students (OfS) consultation (2021-22) on new conditions to reduce the disparity of difference in completion, continuation and progression outcomes. For example, key performance measure four maps the gap in degree outcomes between white students and black students. This measure indicates that black students are awarded proportionately fewer firsts 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 firsts has significantly increased (OfS, 2022). Instances of good practice include the University of Leeds Anti-Racism Toolkit and 'Why is my curriculum white?' (University College London, nd). Previous work by Nona McDuff at Kingston University London (Kingston University, 2017) on an inclusive curriculum framework, used to facilitate dialogue between staff and students, had significant impact too, as will the Anti-Racism Lab, a worldwide hub for research on decolonisation and anti-racism hosted by the University of Alberta.

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 (Runnymede Trust, 2015; 2018; HESA, 2019; Advance HE Race Equality Charter, phase one and phase two, 2019; 2020; HEPI, 2021). As Audre Lorde famously wrote, 'There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives' (1982, cited BlackPast, 2012), a quote we cite on our Inclusive Curriculum webpage. And for students who are BAME and 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 (Murphy

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identities remain dominant' (544). Other terms include Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) and Black and People of Colour (BPoC).

and Brown, 2012; Bovill, 2020). As Bovill explains, relational pedagogy therefore 'puts relationships at the heart of teaching and emphasises that a meaningful connection needs to be established between teacher and students as well as between students and their peers, if effective learning is to take place' (2020, p.3). Curricula designed to embed a relational approach can therefore encourage practice that incorporates interaction between learner and teacher and learner to learner, as well as promoting 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 on them making connections with tutors and peers, which can result in increased engagement.

In January 2022, the University Teaching Academy were tasked with providing resources to support academics in addressing the BAME awarding gap. Focusing on inclusion (as action on the part of staff) rather than belonging (as the anticipated feeling in students), one key aspect of this work was the development of an intersectional toolkit for academics across three interlinked webpages:

- [Addressing Awarding Gaps](#)
- [Inclusive Curriculum](#)
- [Internationalisation](#)

Through developing these interlinked publicly accessible resources, we realised that we had to rationalise the relationship between, for example, inclusive curriculum and its role in addressing awarding gaps. We decided that inclusive curriculum was one potential tool colleagues could use, alongside others, such as getting to know their students and [promoting positive classroom cultures](#) (relational pedagogy). Thinking carefully about awarding gaps also made us realise that we needed a separate webpage for colleagues to think about strategies for supporting their international students, as, even though there are overlaps with the experiences of racialised home students, equally there are differences and/or additional challenges.

Working across a large institution with over 1,500 academic staff, our resources needed to be flexible to suit a range of different contexts and disciplines. During their development, we were also cognisant of our white homogeneity and lack of heterogeneity, which raised

issues around representation and privilege. In this context, a focus on 'allyship' played a huge role in justifying the approach taken (DiAngelo, 2019). 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). The next step will be to evaluate, over the subsequent academic year, whether or not these resources have helped academic colleagues shift how they think, write and speak so as to teach in varied communities more effectively.

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