

Blog post

Reclaiming our roots in higher education: A call for policy development to address hair-based discrimination in UK educational institutions

[Myrtle Emmanuel, Associate Professor in HRM & Organisational Behaviour at University of Greenwich](#) 25 Apr 2025

A crucial yet often overlooked aspect of educational equity is the need to address hair-based discrimination in UK educational institutions. While racial inequality in education is well documented, the impact of hair discrimination on teaching, learning and achievement requires urgent attention. This blog post explores emerging evidence on its effects, and proposes interventions for more inclusive learning environments.

Research highlights how appearance-based discrimination affects academic outcomes. Black and mixed-race students often face disciplinary actions and exclusions due to their natural hairstyles (Henry, 2021), while staff feel pressured to alter their hair to advance in academia (Doharty, 2020). These experiences create barriers to learning and undermine a sense of belonging in educational spaces. As a result, students and staff believe that modifying their natural hair is essential for academic and professional success (Griffiths & Houghton, 2021).

‘Students and staff believe that modifying their natural hair is essential for academic and professional success.’

My relationship with Black hair reflects many shared experiences. For decades, I conformed to societal pressures, using chemical treatments from my teens into my late 40s to meet ‘acceptable’ standards. The phrase ‘good hair,’ rooted in racist beauty norms favouring European textures (Griffiths & Houghton, 2021), shaped my self-image. Wearing my natural hair in tight coils rather than straight or loose curls led to microaggressions in education, from awkward silences to explicit criticism. This echoes Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly’s (2018) view: ‘If your hair is relaxed, white people are relaxed. If your hair is nappy, they’re not happy.’

As an educator, I have observed students facing challenges in expressing their identities while adhering to academic expectations. Research shows that hair discrimination in education:

- reinforces Eurocentrism, lowering expectations and increasing disciplinary measures, creating self-fulfilling prophecies (Joseph-Salisbury & Connelly, 2018)
- disrupts education, contributing to exclusions that hinder academic progress (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2022)
- negatively impacts academic performance, as emotional distress, and a weakened sense of belonging hinder students’ ability to succeed (Gurley, 2022).

At the University of Greenwich, we are taking initial steps to address these challenges. As part of Black History 365 last November, our university community took a stand. The powerful photograph below was captured on our Greenwich Maritime Campus. It features Black staff and students proudly wearing their natural hair, standing together with non-Black colleagues and students who support their right to wear their hair naturally without discrimination. This visual statement of solidarity demonstrates how institutions can actively challenge discriminatory narratives.



The 'Halo Code', a UK initiative, sets voluntary guidelines to protect Black students and employees from hair-based discrimination. While it raises awareness of this issue in British schools and workplaces, Rollock (2019) argues that voluntary measures alone are insufficient to address systemic inequalities. Ahmed (2012) calls for enforceable policies, while Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) emphasise the need for comprehensive anti-discrimination frameworks.

Our solidarity photograph is not an endpoint but a call to action. We urge UK higher education institutions to:

1. Collect national data on the impact of hair discrimination on student attainment, sense of belonging and identity.
2. Conduct research on how Black staff and students navigate identity expression amid hair bias.
3. Assess how hair discrimination affects academic success and inclusion within university communities.

Tackling hair bias is a crucial step towards decolonising universities and dismantling systemic racial inequities. Institutions can challenge Eurocentric norms and help close

the BAME Awarding Gap through embedding anti-discrimination policies and fostering inclusivity. Additionally, research and policy reform are essential to ensuring that Black students and staff can thrive without compromising their identity.

Reclaiming our roots is more than a statement. It's a movement for change. Now is the time to challenge bias, drive reform, and build truly inclusive universities where Black students and staff thrive unapologetically and authentically.

---

## References

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Duke University Press.

Doharty, N. (2020). The 'Angry Black Woman' as intellectual bondage: Being strategically emotional on the academic plantation. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 23(4), 548–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2019.1679751>

Equality and Human Rights Commission. (2022). *Preventing hair discrimination in schools*. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/guidance/public-sector-equality-duty/preventing-hair-discrimination-schools>

Griffiths, S., & Haughton, M. (2021). UK Black hair matters: A thematic analysis exploring Afro-Caribbean women's hair as representations of the socially constructed knowledge of identity and identity threats. *Psychology of Women & Equalities Review*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.53841/bpspowe.2021.4.2.17>

Gurley, Z. (2022). Influence of racism on minority students' mental health and academic performance. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research*, 14(4), 49–55. <https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/jiur/vol14/iss1/4>

Henry, C. (2021). Knot today: A look at hair discrimination in the workplace and schools. *Thurgood Marshall Law Review*, 46, 29. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/thurlr46&i=39>

Joseph-Salisbury, R., & Connelly, L. (2018). 'If your hair is relaxed, white people are relaxed. If your hair is nappy, they're not happy': Black hair as a site of 'post-racial' social control in English schools. *Social Sciences*, 7(11), 219.

Rollock, N. (2022). *The racial code: Tales of resistance and survival*. Random House. [https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The\\_Racial\\_Code/SiZhEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/The_Racial_Code/SiZhEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0)