

TITLE: The Problem of Prejudice, Discrimination, and Institutional Racism in a post-92 Higher Education Institution

ABSTRACT:

Following the unlawful killing of George Floyd in the United States of America, and the revelations that people from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, many Higher Education (HE) leaders have made well-meaning proclamations to decolonise curriculum, they have espoused to somehow close ethnicity attainment and remuneration gaps, and once again they have targeted equality, diversity and inclusion as a priority. These proclamations have been made alongside research suggesting the overall experience of BAME staff and students in many large organisations remains negative and aversive (e.g., Bhopal et al., 2016; Miller, 2021; Miller, 2022).

In this symposium, the researchers present and discuss the results from two studies that were developed to examine the problem of institutional racism in a London-based, Post-92 Higher Education Institution (HEI). The researchers aimed to (1) examine the extent to which racism was omnipresent across all levels of the HEI, and (2), understand the impact on both BAME and non-BAME staff and students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); thereby bringing to the fore diverse perspectives about the systems that serve to reproduce and maintain inequalities in HE.

Title of Paper 1: “I’m managed by a white man who's managed by a white man who's managed by a white woman who's managed by a white man”: A mixed-methods study examining the problem of institutional racism in a UK-based University

Research undertaken on institutional racism in Higher Education (HE) is invariably based on BAME people’s perspectives, thus overlooking the significance of non-BAME people’s experiences and viewpoints. To address this gap in the literature, this study aimed to examine and understand the problem of racism in a Post-92, London-based (UK) university. In Phase 1, data were collected from BAME (n=60) and non-BAME (n=24) HE staff via an anonymised online survey. In Phase 2, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with BAME (n=6) and non-BAME (n=16) staff. Participants were evenly spread across a range of employment characteristics, including length of service at the HE and the campus at which they worked. Overall, the thematically analysed interview transcripts revealed how BAME staff were primarily affected by institutional racism, yet BAME and non-BAME participants felt the impact, mainly on their mental health and wellbeing. The findings suggest that racism was experienced by HE staff at all levels of the university, drawing attention to the long-standing systems that produce and maintain racialised hierarchies and inequalities.

Title of Paper 2: Race, Higher Education and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

In the UK, questions about the overrepresentation of BAME groups with special educational needs have been raised for more than six decades. ‘The widely-held belief that Black children were somehow educationally subnormal’ (Demie & McClean, 2017, p. 1) was formally articulated by Coard in 1971. In his paper, titled ‘How the West Indian child is made educationally sub-normal in the British school system’, Coard expressed real concern over the large numbers of children from African and Caribbean backgrounds that were being labelled with ‘educationally sub-normal’ (ESN), and how this label invariably led to stigmatisation, lowered expectations, school exclusion and poor self-esteem and educational outcomes. It is against this background that the current pilot study emerged. Drawing on survey data of 224 students at a Post-92, London-based university, students with overlapping intersectional identities (that is BAME and SEND) were considered in terms of ‘ecological niches’ that

might cause disadvantage and discrimination (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). To date, there is no research examining intersectional discrimination within HE in this way. While additional research investigating this topic is warranted before the findings may be generalised to a larger population, the results reveal that students with SEND are much more likely to encounter specific forms of interpersonal and microaggressive discrimination simply because of their BAME identity. The results are timely given the ongoing SEND review (DfE, 2022).

Overall conclusions/implications:

Conclusions/implications. While the two studies are not without limitations, the findings point to university leaders taking responsibility for creating truly equitable, diverse and inclusive universities for their students and staff. Further large-scale research is needed to critically examine the practices of dominant structures in HE, and the conditions under which said structures can be made equitable. In this way the long-standing problem of racism might be better understood, addressed and diminished.

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