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Creating cultural change in large organisations: why do HE staff enact equality 'good practice'?

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ABSTRACT

Creating cultural change within large organisations is a complex process that involves action across all levels of the institution. In the context of incomplete and uneven processes of marketisation, 'top-down' managerial approaches pose further challenges for organisational change in the UK Higher Education sector. Drawing on a study exploring the implementation of 'good practice' recommendations for addressing BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) or GEM (Global Ethnic Majority) awarding and continuation gaps at a post-1992 institution in England, we suggest that individual and peer-driven initiatives might be more effective at driving change within HE, rather than external 'top-down' approaches that risk demotivating staff. Through our discussion of what drives equality work in universities, we highlight the power of harnessing the autonomy, innovation and commitment of HE staff and aligning equality work with their own existing personal values and identities.

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Introduction

UK Higher Education (HE) institutions are paying increasing attention to persistent, sector-wide awarding and continuation 'gaps' for many 'non-traditional' student groups, but particularly BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) or – using the language we adopt in this paper – GEM (Global Ethnic Majority) groups. While some progress has been made in recent years, substantial gaps remain between the likelihood of white and GEM or especially Black students receiving a First or 2:1 (Universities UK 2022) – in contrast to substantial gains in *access* to HE for GEM and other formerly poorly represented groups since the 'massification' of UK HE (Gov.UK

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2023; OECD 2023). Further, GEM students are still overwhelmingly concentrated at newer, post-1992 institutions.

Research on both staff and student views has revealed a range of potential reasons behind the gaps, ranging from macro-level factors such as broader institutional cultures and staff recruitment practices, to micro-level, student-facing issues such as lack of inclusive assessment design; non-traditional students not seeing themselves reflected in the curriculum, materials, examples or reading lists; and microaggressions from staff. The resulting HE environment has been described as 'hostile' for GEM students and staff, with many feeling a distinct lack of belonging within HE institutions (Bhopal 2024; Rollock 2020). However, the recommendations for HE institutions and staff to improve the situation for GEM students are now also relatively well-established (Akel 2019; Bunce et al. 2021; Universities UK 2022; Universities UK and NUS 2019; Wong and Tiffany Chiu 2020; Wong, ElMorally, and Copsey-Blake 2021), although much less is known about the *implementation* of such recommendations by institutions, departments, academics and professional services staff. This is partially the case because creating change in large organisations, such as universities, is complex and takes time (Wong, ElMorally, and Copsey-Blake 2021). Further, increasing financial pressures across the sector have resulted in the increasing marketisation of HE, with both universities and staff increasingly subject to performance metrics, league tables, external monitoring and audit – creating a potentially challenging environment for organisational change initiatives (Deem 1998; Maisuria and Cole 2017; Soin and Huber 2021).

Addressing GEM awarding and continuation gaps is complex and likely requires action not just at national and senior levels but also from individual staff and departments, and for instance, Wong, ElMorally, and Copsey-Blake (2021, 1157) recommend that 'institutions wishing to close the ethnicity degree awarding gap ought to survey staff perceptions on the issue.' This paper draws on a study that did exactly this, comprising a qualitatively driven questionnaire and interviews with employees at a post-1992 university in England. The study aimed to engage both academic and professional services staff beyond those already involved in related institutional initiatives; understand experiences of challenges and barriers involved in the uptake of 'good practice' recommendations for closing GEM awarding and continuation gaps; and explore solutions for overcoming them.

The section that follows outlines the UK HE context and discusses approaches to organisational change, culture and leadership. The methods section provides further detail about the research project that this article draws on. The results section first explores what the key drivers of change are, and, second, if there are things commonly assumed to be drivers that seem to have less impact in reality. Finally, the discussion section argues that

managerial, top-down ideas about change-making may not be particularly effective in the context of equality 'good practice' in universities. Here we argue that allowing smaller teams to develop their own organisational 'subcultures', sense of identity and professional practices may be more successful in initiating and driving institution-wide change.

Organisational change in UK HE: context and literature

'Massification' since the early 1990s has transformed UK higher education from an elite pursuit to a more egalitarian model in terms of student access, with a comparatively high share of the adult population having tertiary education as a result (OECD 2023). This has involved both intensification of access among traditional entry groups *and* its 'widening' to include many from previously under-represented backgrounds. Although such progress is to be welcomed, the widening HE participation of historically under-represented groups is shrouded by the sobering reality of degree outcomes: a gap of 8.8% exists between the likelihood of white and GEM students receiving a degree classification of a First or 2:1 in 2020/21, and the gap between white and Black students is even more pronounced, at 18.4% (Universities 2022). Given these persistent realities for GEM groups in UK HE, it is not surprising that this situation has moved some to act, with institutional attempts to confront persistent, sector-wide awarding and continuation gaps for many so-called 'non-traditional' student groups now commonplace.

While institutional and sector-wide guidelines and toolkits for addressing awarding gaps are now commonly produced and shared with HE staff (see e.g. Collins, Islam, and Hall 2021; MMU 2025; UCL 2025; Universities UK and NUS 2019), it is less clear how widely such 'good practice' recommendations have been adopted or implemented by institutions, managers, leaders and other HE staff. This is at least partially because creating change in large organisations is complex and takes time, involving action across the micro, meso and macro levels of the organisation (Wong, ElMorally, and Copsey-Blake 2021). The state of the broader HE environment may also provide some clues as to the specific challenges HE institutions and staff may face in changing their practice. Perhaps most obviously, the above-mentioned trends of widening access but persisting awarding gaps across UK HE have occurred alongside changes in the organisation and culture of HE. Many describe these changes in terms of increasing 'marketisation' of the sector, transforming universities to business-like organisations that compete for student-customers in an open market (see e.g. Deem 1998; Maisuria and Cole 2017; Marshall 2010; McRoy and Gibbs 2009). Since universities are (mostly) not-for-profit entities in the UK, rather than in terms of profit, they compete in status, research 'excellence', student

satisfaction, success and employability outcomes, while Quality Assurance, external monitoring and audits tend to dominate the regulatory frameworks.

Alongside, and as a result of these shifts, some now argue that UK HE is becoming more bureaucratic, in line with principles of 'new managerialism' (see e.g. Creaton and Heard-Lauréote 2021; Deem 1998). Soin and Huber (2021) detail the main characteristics of HE managerialism, from market orientation and emphasis on income generation, to a shift in authority from academics to managers. According to this view, traditional academic work (research and teaching) is increasingly regulated by managerial imperatives, with the autonomy and collegiality of academics declining. Consequently, power in HE institutions is increasingly concentrated in the hands of senior managers rather than academics, and institutions tend to adopt a top-down approach to introducing new initiatives (Greenbank 2007; Lumby 2019; Soin and Huber 2021). Such understandings of change-making tend to involve ideas about strong institutional *cultures* (shared norms, values and beliefs), ideally accepted and internalised by all employees (see e.g. Gaus, Tang, and Akil 2019; Greenbank 2007; Sinclair 1991).

However, the reality of HE institutions may differ considerably from the fully marketised model presented above. Firstly, processes of marketisation in HE are necessarily incomplete and uneven, with significant institutional differences. As Greenbank (2007), for instance, argues, many areas of academic work still function according to the traditional, 'community of scholars' model – such as peer review and semi-autonomous departments. Many university workers, including those in leadership positions, may also disagree with marketisation and managerialism. Contrary to a common view of middle managers as 'captured by managerialist agendas and primarily motivated by the implementation of top down institutional strategy' (Creaton and Heard-Lauréote 2021, 199), they may actively resist top-down initiatives – or perhaps more commonly, *comply incompletely*, as Soin and Huber (2021, 1146) suggest in their conceptualisation of compliance as a 'nuanced social practice in its own right.' In a similar vein, Machin's (2018) study shows that school Heads can resist managerial discourses and enact hybrid identities as both managers and educators instead. Thus, policy formulated by senior management can be significantly reinterpreted, even undermined or ignored, by resistant or reluctant actors at the *meso* level of an organisation.

Relatedly, organisational cultures are complex and constantly evolving, with different members of an organisation holding different views about its culture (Day 2020). This may be particularly the case with universities, which have a range of purposes and audiences, with varying perceptions about institutional aims and functions (Marshall 2010). Thus, rather than one coherent culture, it is likely

that universities have multiple subcultures, aligning for instance, with departmental, disciplinary or professional communities (see e.g. Creaton and Heard-Lauréote 2021; Day 2020; Gaus, Tang, and Akil 2019; Sinclair 1991). Because of this subcultural variety, Greenbank (2007, 220) argues that 'top-down approaches to engendering cultural change often fail.' Thus, some suggest that an understanding of organisational subcultural diversity may be key to effecting cultural change: for instance, Sinclair (1991, 326) notes that 'good management begins with an understanding of the value differences of subcultures and the terrain of controversy.' In this view, subcultures are a positive ingredient in creating organisational change – rather than a hindrance to it, as is claimed by more orthodox understandings of organisational leadership.

Yet others suggest that, while leadership is key to change-making in large organisations, the *practices* and *type* of leadership required for organisational change are subject to debate (see e.g. Kelan and Wratil 2018; Marshall 2010). First, Cuthbert et al. (2023) note in their study of STEMM (science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine) leaders' ability to achieve organisational gender equality change that this can only be successful if senior leaders understand the complexity of the problem, beyond just the numerical presence of women or purely external explanations for inequality. In other words, leaders need to understand gender inequality *as cultural* to create effective change. Second, Lumby's (2019) study of leadership practices likewise demonstrates how HE leaders deploy power in more subtle forms than the top-down approach indicates – by managing impressions; shaping discussions in advance of decision-making; weakening opposition, and so on.

Some argue further that cultural change may be more successful when it emerges from lower down in the organisational hierarchy, driven by enthusiastic 'early adopters' and 'communities of practice' – groups who share a passion about a topic and interact regularly to deepen their knowledge (McRoy and Gibbs 2009). This kind of approach may be more successful, particularly in universities, as it considers the 'micro political history of the institution' (McRoy and Gibbs 2009, 689), harnessing rather than curbing the autonomy and innovation of academics. Such approaches may also help pre-empt the scepticism of staff, who may resist even equality initiatives because they represent yet another managerial agenda (Greenbank 2007). There are, however, some risks to this approach. First, as Greenbank (2007) highlights, there is no guarantee that a bottom-up process will result in organisational change that *favours* equality initiatives. Second, Marshall (2010) points out that, while many institutions support staff in early adopter innovation, very rarely are systems put in place to facilitate the wider adoption of successful initiatives.

Methods

This paper draws on the results of a questionnaire and interviews with employees of a post-1992 university in England. The university is medium size and, according to its 2023–24 Access and Participation Plan, it has a higher proportion of mature, GEM and 'deprived' students (using the Index of Multiple Deprivation) than average for the sector. However, the university has awarding gaps in relation to both socio-economic status and ethnicity, and 'improving' these is a key priority. This research adopted an explanatory sequential design (case-selection variant) (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018), which can be described as a quant → QUAL design (Morse 2003). Rather than quantitative, deductive testing of hypotheses, the underlying logic and goals of the research are primarily qualitative and inductive (Hesse-Biber and Johnson 2016; Morse 2003). The study aimed to engage both academic and professional services staff beyond those already involved in related institutional initiatives; understand experiences of the challenges and barriers involved in the uptake of 'good practice' recommendations for closing the GEM awarding and continuation gaps; and explore solutions to overcoming them.

The first phase of the project involved collation of 'good practice' recommendations from research and reports, the university website and conversations with colleagues, managers and leaders in relevant jobs (such as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion or Training and Development). This process identified 37 'good practice' recommendations that had been shared with staff. Similarly, we also searched academic and practice literature to source potential barriers and enablers in enacting 'good practice' recommendations. Nine enablers and 19 barriers were identified.

The questionnaire phase of the research received full ethical approval from the ethics board at the university before any data was collected. Jisc Online Surveys was used to ask participants whether they had fully, partially or not implemented each of the recommendations. Participants were also presented with barriers and enablers and asked if they 'agree', 'somewhat agree' or 'disagree' that this was a barrier or enabler for them personally. The questionnaire was completed by 83 participants, representing approximately 5% of staff employed at the university at the time. Of the participants, 48% were in academic, 46% in professional services and 5% in other roles. 66% were women (compared to 61% of the staff population) and 28% were men (39% of staff); 17.2% identified as Asian, Black or Mixed (14% of staff) and 78% identified as white (78% of staff). In keeping with the qualitatively driven explanatory sequential design (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018), this paper includes a brief, high-level description of some of the questionnaire results, but draws primarily on the more in-depth interview data.

The project's second phase involved semi-structured interviews to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experience of enacting 'good practice' and the barriers to doing so. The research was advertised via university-wide and departmental emails and newsletters. All interview participants were also asked if they could recommend colleagues to participate in an interview, particularly colleagues not already engaged in institutional equality initiatives, as these members of staff were harder to reach. We also approached specific colleagues to address gaps in recruitment, such as a researcher, a senior manager and male staff. This second phase of the project also received full ethical approval from the ethics board of the university before any data was collected. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the data were anonymised: The most popular male and female names in the UK at the time of birth of one of the researchers were used to generate a list of pseudonyms, which were assigned to each participant and applied to transcripts immediately on transcription. All mention of departments, job titles or specific colleagues were also removed or anonymised.

Fourteen participants took part in the interviews, seven men and seven women. Participants worked in a range of job roles, including one administrator, four academics, six professional services staff and three managers/leaders. Some were very involved in equality work while others were not involved at all. The mean interview length was 36 minutes. The interviews were carried out online via a secure university platform which provided a video recording of the conversation. In the interviews, participants were asked about their general views about GEM awarding and continuation gaps, any steps they may have taken to address them in their role(s) and what they thought about the work that the university was doing in this area.

Interviews were transcribed by a research assistant and then checked by the analyst. The transcripts were analysed following the six-step process for inductive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved: (1) Familiarisation with the data: The analyst watched the video recordings and checked all transcripts to ensure accuracy; (2) Generating initial codes: The analyst added codes to the transcripts in the form of comments in Microsoft Word, focusing primarily on semantic rather than latent content. The interviews and codes were then re-read to ensure that codes were clear and consistent and that none were missed; (3) Searching for themes: The codes and extracts were transferred over to a new document and similar codes grouped together. For example, the codes 'desire for a practice culture' (where participants themselves had used the phrase 'practice culture') and 'motivated by own practice/context' were grouped into a theme relating to 'professional practice'; and (4) Reviewing themes: The codes and extracts in each theme were re-

read to ensure synergy. The analyst also re-watched the video interviews while reading the transcripts to ensure that the themes were appropriate for the dataset as a whole. The themes and extracts were then shared with the interviewer and another researcher to check synergy and that the themes were a fair and accurate representation of the interviews.

A negative case analysis was performed to ensure rigour (Given 2012). This identified five instances of positive comments about management practice, which contrasted with the theme relating to management and senior leaders not being drivers of change. Four of these instances were from participants in management or leadership positions talking about their own practice. One was from a Professional Services staff member describing their experience with a manager. This is included in the write-up of the analysis below to ensure that this theme is sufficiently nuanced. (5) Defining and naming themes: Each theme was given a more specific heading by the analyst and checked by the interviewer and another researcher; and (6) Producing a journal article: One member of the team produced a first draft, which was then shared and edited iteratively between us until completion.

The analysis resulted in three themes that are presented under the heading 'What creates change?':

- Theme 1: Part of professional practice (two codes, 26 instances)
- Theme 2: Personal alignment with goals (two codes, 15 instances)
- Theme 3: Awareness raised by external factors (five codes, 15 instances)

The analysis also produced two further themes, presented under the heading 'What does not create change?':

- Theme 1: Management and senior leaders (seven codes, 42 instances)
- Theme 2: Top-down approach (six codes, 57 instances)

Results

What creates change?

In this section, we outline the key drivers of change that enabled HE staff to enact 'good practice'. In the questionnaire, staff who had enacted some kind of 'good practice' were asked whether they 'agree', 'somewhat agree', 'disagree' or are 'not sure' if different factors were a reason for doing so. Table 1 presents the results ordered from strongest to weakest enablers, as a combined percentage of the 'agree' and 'somewhat agree' scores.

Table 1. Reasons staff enacted 'good practice' ordered from strongest to weakest enablers, as a combined percentage of the 'agree' and 'somewhat agree' score.

Reasons enacted 'good practice'	Agree/somewhat agree
Personal/individual desire to improve practice	94.74%
To encourage inclusion of all students	90.54%
Personally feel aligned with the goals	90.41%
Feel like it's part of my role	88.16%
Awareness raised by external factors, e.g. Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement	80%
As a result of training	60.81%
Pressure/encouragement from students	29.17%
Pressure/encouragement from colleagues	26.39%
Pressure/encouragement from a manager	20.83%

Part of professional practice

In the questionnaire, the top reason for staff enacting 'good practice' was 'Personal/individual desire to improve practice' (94.74% 'agree'/'somewhat agree') and 'Feel like it's part of my role' was also a strong enabler (88.16%). In the interviews, some staff explicitly considered enacting equality 'good practice' as part of their professional practice and doing their job to a high standard:

> There's the development, and developing yourself, about these issues. And that's an ongoing thing. It's going on courses, but it's also reading and it's talking and it's being part of the network. So I mean, it's called allyship now, but it wasn't then. It was just what you did, you know, if you wanted to get better at what you were doing. (Luca)

In the interviews, staff talked about the identity of their 'team', department or discipline, and about networks and groups they were involved in. Belonging to a professional or disciplinary community such as 'librarians', 'chemists' or 'admissions staff' and coming together to discuss problems and find solutions was experienced as motivational. Thus, equality 'good practice' work was considered an integral aspect of doing one's job better, rather than an external add-on.

The first step on this path was awareness, with many participants discussing noticing specific problems, such as lack of diversity around them:

> It's really stark, actually, you know, and I have thought about that a lot, you know, during my time at [University] that, you know, I work with very specific types of people, white middle-class generally women as well, you know, it's, you know, it's almost a homogeneous group that work at [University] (Jenson)

> One class I observed, it was very clear that Black students weren't answering any of the questions. They weren't particularly engaging very well. I mean, through no fault of the lecturer. Well, through no *obvious* fault with the lecturer. I mean, there's always more we could do, right? (Gabriel)

After noticing these issues, many staff were inspired to take action to fix the problem. Since this was something they noticed in their own practice, it was immediately more personal to them, making this a powerful motivator:

> One of the things that I've noticed quite early on during my role was that there was a really big lack of student voice from Black students in particular. [–] And so one of my focuses around my term was addressing that issue and bringing Black student voice to the forefront. (Maisie)

Professional services staff spoke about starting their own initiatives, and academics about doing their own research, for instance to explicitly address racial/ethnic segregation in classroom settings.

Personal alignment with goals

A similar but distinct factor that emerged as a key enabler was staff feeling personally aligned with the goals (90.41% 'agree'/'somewhat agree'). This was not necessarily specific to professional practice, but rather about alignment between *personal* values and the aims of equality 'good practice' work – with one interview participant explicitly drawing on their 'personal belief, so I don't – I don't have statistics behind this' (Darcie). Conversely, the weakest enablers in the questionnaire were 'pressure/encouragement from students' (29.17%), colleagues (26.39%) and 'a manager' (20.83%), suggesting that external pressure is less effective than personal value alignment. Many participants had developed their own philosophies and approaches over time, drawing from personal experience, previous jobs, feedback, training and learning from others, which then guided the work they did and acted as an important motivator for continuing it:

> Something that I've said all along the way is that, for me, it's really important that *I've* done that work. And it's not been a GEM person, a GEM student or a GEM staff member who's had to deal with that. I've taken on that burden, to kind of make that progress for the GEM students at the university, and it's something that I've been willing to do. (Maisie)

Sometimes personal philosophies deviated from common, well-known approaches in this area of work, such as 'decolonising the curriculum' – identifying and acknowledging how colonialism has impacted upon systems of knowledge, and challenging resulting biases and power imbalances. Some thought that this was not enough:

> There is a lot of talk of decolonising the curriculum, and so on. However, the problem is that there is still the hierarchical relationship between the lecturer and the student, that prevents students from bringing their knowledges, their expertise, their life, into the room. [–] even if the lecturer delivered the most decolonised curriculum, it still does not support student agency, which is in my opinion is the best way to secure their commitment and engagement. (Rory)

Others explicitly criticised the notion: 'I don't like the word decolonise, but you make it more inclusive. So inclusive teaching in the way that you deliver, in the way – the examples you use in – all of those things need to be made better' (Luca). Luca's responses here resonate with the second highest reason for enacting 'good practice' in the questionnaire: 'to encourage inclusion of all students' (90.54% 'agree'/'somewhat agree').

Awareness raised by external factors

'Awareness raised by external factors' was the fifth highest enabler in the questionnaire (80% 'agree'/'somewhat agree'). One interviewee in particular talked in detail about the impact of learning about the Black Lives Matter movement: 'It came from, actually, this lockdown period, but that was all because of the George Floyd stuff. You know, and I think that Black Lives Matter just pushed out. It started making people feel uncomfortable, which was right' (Sophie). She continued:

> So what's helped me is it being a bit more in the society, Black Lives Matter stuff and it being a bit more out there in terms of a societal discussion, I think, which then has led to more, you know, more online courses being available. (Sophie)

Participants also talked about learning about slave trade and modern-day racism through homeschooling their own children during the COVID-19 lockdowns – and contrasting this with the lack of focus on these issues when attending school themselves.

It is important to note that this kind of external influence was different from training, which seemed far less impactful than the types of external factors discussed here. For the participant above, the external factors had a personal resonance and sparked a genuine desire to learn, which is difficult to replicate through mandatory training: 'I think I just thought, I need to understand this a bit more. So nothing from the institution though' (Sophie). Overall, training was a moderate enabler: 60.81% 'agree'/'somewhat agree' – compared to 80% for external factors and 94.74% for personal desire to improve practice.

What does not create change?

As well as an understanding of factors that seem to enable staff to enact 'good practice', our findings also gave a sense of potentially less effective factors.

Management and senior leaders

'Pressure/encouragement from a manager' was the weakest enabler in the questionnaire (20.83% 'agree'/'somewhat agree'). This is not to say that all managers were bad or ineffective – some interviewees highlighted good

management practices that they saw as helpful: 'I have incredible support, so the Head of [Department] [is] incredible. She's really very, very supportive and I think, sounds so – I hate this term, creating a safe space to have the discussions, because sometimes they're uncomfortable' (Lily). Although some participants valued and praised supportive managers, nonetheless this did not seem to be a particularly strong motivator for action. There was concern about the way that data, targets and KPIs were used by managers, with some feeling as if they were expected to passively absorb information that was 'fed' or 'drilled' into them: 'I'm fed that information, and I just take it as given that there's a gap' (Finley); 'when I was [job role] because we had lots of KPIs [–] we had to raise, you know, to close that attainment gap. So it was kind of drilled into us on a weekly basis' (Isabella).

Some interviewees felt that managers were simply 'ticking boxes', rather than being genuinely motivated to improve student experience or achievement:

> I mean, senior leaders in higher education are expected to be addressing these things. It's on the government agenda. You know, these things come from somewhere else. Not many of them were internally generated, as this is a problem specifically in our university and we care about this to the extent that we want to do something about it. [–] But, in many ways, it feels like people are ticking boxes rather than doing it because it comes from the heart. (Gabriel)

Staff felt that management were driven by external regulation and targets, which was experienced as demotivating. One participant made an explicit distinction between managers driven by data and targets, and on-the-ground staff driven by moral concerns:

> I'm looking at my screen right now over here. Numbers. Data. [–] Those are 141 lives, dreams, visions and plans that we let down some way, somehow. That's what creates that action. Again, I mentioned right at the start, by leaning on that moral imperative as opposed to the regulatory imperative. The only people who get in trouble if we miss our regulatory imperative is the board, the VC, leadership, people way above us. But the moral stuff is our responsibility because it's the day-to-day action. (Robert)

In some cases managers were described explicitly as 'blockers': 'previous team leader has been like no, no we can't do this, or, you know, leave that to somebody else. And it's just been maybe not getting the support' (Jasmine).

Top-down approach

Some interviewees explicitly discussed the problems of 'top-down' approaches, such as being removed from the staff taking action on the ground, as in the case of the following manager who works on Widening Participation initiatives:

> We meet with subject leads, twice a year, to discuss their data, to discuss what they're doing with their data [–]. But the thing is, subject leads aren't module leaders, they're

> not programme leaders. So that information doesn't always trickle down. And then you're dealing with the fact that, actually, subject leaders are accountable to Deans, but we don't necessarily meet with Deans. So it's a big communications challenge, but we're in it as best as we can. (Robert)

It was felt that management oversight was not always necessary for change, or that it was sometimes a limiting factor. Some interviewees talked about preferring management to not *get in their way* so that they could deliver effective change: 'I don't think I would have expected much more, than for people to recognise it as important. And to make sure – and not to get in my way when I'm trying to do something about it' (Gabriel).

Many participants expressed a desire for a more personal approach to equality 'good practice' work, to work with others who cared about the goals, and a supportive, sharing culture – not one of targets and regulation. Some shared examples of local, team-driven approaches, which were experienced as positive: 'As I got into leadership roles, like, my main way to address the BAME gap was to facilitate groups of lecturers, coming together and sharing good ideas and good practice with each other' (Gabriel). One participant talked about the importance of trust: 'I've raised certain things across the years, and, you know, said, you know, this isn't right and you, kind of, want to have faith in other teams, that they will address that' (Jasmine), and pointedly asked: 'If this peer-to-peer approach is working, why not allow it to happen? Why not foster or encourage it?' (Jasmine).

Discussion

In our study, participants were very aware of the managerial nature of the environment they work in, including the pressure on middle management to deliver on specific targets. In an HE environment increasingly dominated by targets, internal and external monitoring and audit, equality goals (such as reducing GEM awarding gaps) can come to be treated by institutional discourses, senior and/or middle managers as *just another target*. This culture of top-down, target-driven initiatives was not experienced as motivating by on-the-ground staff in their day-to-day work. Indeed, many experienced it as particularly demotivating when they felt that managers were *only* pushing equality-related work because of institutional targets – echoing the notion of the middle manager as primarily driven by implementing top-down institutional strategy (Creaton and Heard-Lauréote 2021). When equality work was framed as externally motivated and target-driven, participants understood it to be conversely *not* motivated by staff or student concerns, such as enhancing the student experience or improving student achievement (Greenbank 2007). For our participants, this also highlighted the different views they hold about the institution and its mission, compared to those of senior or middle management (Day 2020).

Our findings suggest that equality work is most successful when motivated by a desire to improve one's practice, driven by personal or professional values, and supported by alignment with professional, disciplinary and/or personal identities. This corresponds with Sinclair's (1991) positioning of culture as something that only works effectively when internalised, not when imposed from above – contrasting somewhat with the orthodox view that an ideal organisational culture is coherent and unitary. The implication for institutions is that their most important role in advancing equality 'good practice' might be to make explicit the connections between the goals of such work, and the existing professional practices, identities and cultures of staff – rather than driving such work via external targets and/or a top-down notion of culture. This also means utilising data in a more open way: instead of numerical data only appearing as distant external targets 'drilled into' staff, data could be useful as part of more exploratory discussions that seek to find commonalities between the data and the experiences and values of staff.

As Greenbank (2007) notes, there is of course a risk that subcultures resistant to equality work will develop when staff autonomy is encouraged. There was some indication in our study of staff resisting common, well-known approaches, such as the notion of 'decolonising the curriculum', and preferring to use the broader, but arguably both less precise and less radical, terminology of 'inclusion' instead. In line with this finding, for instance Hall, Ansley, and Connolly (2025) argue that decolonising work may be losing its radical edge by being subsumed under generic EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) agendas.

Although some managers were viewed explicitly as blockers to equality work, there were also indicators in our study of managers with 'more collaborative and engaging' (Kelan and Wratil 2018, 15) leadership styles, who created 'safe space' for staff to openly discuss the challenges they were facing. Staff also referenced being part of 'communities of practice' – networks or groups that share a passion about equality work and meet regularly to discuss and brainstorm (McRoy and Gibbs 2009). There was evidence of team or peer-driven initiatives being successful at driving local change, which was experienced as very motivating – although, as Marshall (2010) notes, it is important that institutions also create systems to facilitate the wider adoption of successful initiatives. Our findings suggest that harnessing the autonomy, innovation and commitment of university staff, and aligning equality work with their existing professional values and identities, could be much more successful in driving institutional change towards equality goals than external targets and regulation – although managers with more collaborative leadership styles were also experienced as enabling of such work.

Conclusion

In this article we have discussed key enablers for and barriers to equality 'good practice' work in HE institutions, drawing on a study exploring the adoption of 'good practice' recommendations for closing GEM awarding gaps, conducted at a post-1992 institution in England. Our findings indicate that managerial, top-down ideas about change-making may not be particularly effective in the context of equality 'good practice' – rather, allowing individuals and teams to develop their own professional identities, practices and organisational 'subcultures' may be more successful in initiating and driving institution-wide change. This is because, when staff are able to draw on their personal values, professional identities and communities, they are more motivated to change their own practice, and to collaborate on initiatives to address local issues. If HE institutions and leaders within them are serious about improving outcomes for GEM and other so-called non-traditional students, they would do well to create at least some space for staff autonomy, open discussion and development of organisational subcultures, as well as systems for spreading successful initiatives – even if this goes against some of the broader developments in an increasingly marketised sector.

A number of limitations should also be discussed to both contextualise the findings of this research and provide suggestions for future research. This research focused on one post-1992 institution, and therefore the results may not be generalisable to other institutions, in the UK or elsewhere. Both the questionnaire and interviews involved relatively small sample sizes, and therefore a larger study covering a broader range of institutions would be beneficial to understand the generalisability of the qualitatively driven findings of this paper. We argue that it is important for us to understand more about the barriers and enablers to enacting 'good practice' recommendations, if we are to see improvements in race equality in higher education.

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Data availability statement

Due to ethical restrictions, supporting data is not available. More information is available at: https://doi.org/10.24339/3f9f8a88-7655-413c-805d-479a13c0038f

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