



The Racialisation of Campus Relations

Dr Ruth Mieschbuehler

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Summary

There is a real danger that campus relations at universities will become racialised. The verb ‘to racialise’ and the term ‘racialisation’ refer to the process of emphasising racial and ethnic grouping. Higher education policies and practices implemented to address the ‘ethnic’ attainment gap are driving this trend. The result of these interventions is that students are ‘minoritised’. They are held to be in need of special treatment.

The minoritisation of students drives racialisation on campuses because the higher education sector is trying to understand and address disparities through ethnic grouping which racialises relations on campus. Racialisation, in turn, minoritises students because it denies students their individuality by emphasising their group identity and vulnerability.

The findings discussed in this report are based on a study undertaken to gain a clearer understanding of the so-called ‘ethnic’ attainment gap in higher education. The four findings relevant to the discussion on the racialisation of campus relations are:

- (1) Any claim that ‘ethnic’ attainment differences exist and persist across British higher education is not substantiated by statistical data as reported.

What appears to be a significant gap when attainment is reported by ethnicity has been shown to be significantly

reduced when other factors known to impact on attainment are taken into account. For the categories 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other', the gap disappeared altogether. For other ethnic categories the gap would have been further reduced, or might even have been eliminated entirely, had all factors that are thought to impact on attainment been taken into account (Broecke and Nicholls 2007).

There is no statistical evidence that 'ethnicity' determines educational attainment of higher education students. Yet policymakers and practitioners believe in the 'ethnic' attainment gap and introduce measures to address it with adverse consequences. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds are believed to underperform academically when they do not. This stigmatises students based on their ethnicity and contributes to the racialisation of campus relations.

- (2) The practice of defining and grouping students by their skin colour and basing attainment policies and practices on these divisions reinforces the idea that racial groups exist. Grouping students by ethnicity racialises relations on campus.

The act of grouping students by ethnicity is based on the assumption that experiences of some ethnic groups are fundamentally distinct from those in other groups. But the differences between groups are created rather than real as the process of defining a group advances. Group thinking requires clear boundaries between groups and looks 'most seductive where all differences' have been 'banished or erased from the collective' (Gilroy 2000: 102). To reach those clear boundaries, in-group differences and people's individuality are ignored while minor particularities that may apply to a group

as a whole become more significant. The defining and grouping of students deprives them of their individuality and distorts reality.

The consequence of grouping students is that it drives a wedge between people and removes any sense of our common humanity. It forces us to see other people's skin colour and acts as a divisive force. It also forces group identities upon students and ignores their individuality. For the higher education sector, it means that attainment policies and practices that are based on ethnic grouping enforce group divisions and do very little to disperse ideas about racial and ethnic differences.

- (3) The rise of a new type of 'deficit talk' depicts students as being vulnerable. Their supposed vulnerability comes from pressures that are thought to impact adversely on students' capacity to achieve academically. This new 'deficit talk' affects all students, but more so students from minority ethnic backgrounds.

The new deficit approach questions students' ability to take charge of their own learning and their capacity to achieve. This means deficit-type explanations for differences in attainment are no longer about personal and social differences but about human agency: the capacity to act in pursuit of conscious goals. Today, students are thought to be restricted by hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases, and this is thought to affect their attainment negatively.

The assumed vulnerability of students leads to an increased focus on them and inevitably draws attention away from the subject content of their studies. In the higher education sector this means a shift from subject content towards 'student-centred' and process-oriented

learning. This leads to a lack of intellectual challenge when presented with their academic studies. It denies students the opportunity to develop fully academically and it accommodates them to failure.

- (4) The shift in education away from subject-based teaching towards a growing concern with student-centredness and the learning process shows a lack of trust in students' capacity to achieve. If university students were generally thought to be capable of taking charge of their learning, the growing concern with learning process-oriented teaching would be irrelevant.

Universities that implement student-centred approaches have abandoned the idea of providing an academic education to students. The focus is on the learning process and on teaching content that is related to a person's background, thinking that students will do better academically if presented with content related to their lives or ways of thinking. Teaching 'relevant' knowledge can, however, reinforce existing social divisions and inequalities as it constrains students to their background instead of providing students with an academic education that takes them beyond their current experience.

Issues associated with student-centred approaches to education, like teaching 'relevant' knowledge, affect students from minority ethnic backgrounds disproportionately as teaching 'relevant' knowledge, for example, may also imply not teaching students the 'best that is known and thought in the world' (Arnold [1864] 2003: 50). Student-centred approaches provide students with an impoverished university education and racialises campus relations as it imprisons students in their particular experience.

Introduction

There are well-reported concerns in British universities over ethnic attainment differences. There is an assumption, even a conviction, that students from minority ethnic backgrounds are less likely to graduate with a high degree classification than their white counterparts. This is generally referred to as the 'ethnic' attainment gap.

Research into ethnic attainment differences in British higher education tends to depict students from minority ethnic backgrounds as disadvantaged, marginalised, excluded and discriminated against. These ideas are shaped by theoretical perspectives and inform higher education policies and practices across Britain. But the policies and practices implemented to address the 'ethnic' attainment gap perpetuate rather than ameliorate the educational status of so-called minority ethnic students.

Students are not minorities in the way ethnic attainment policies and practices assume or how research and terms like 'black and minority ethnic' (BME) and 'black, Asian and minority ethnic' (BAME) imply. Quite the opposite, students are being minoritised through attainment research, as well as the policies and practices that are implemented to address differences in attainment. It is a process that is referred to in this report as the 'minoritisation' of higher education students as it perpetuates the existing educational status of students and suggests that students are in need of extra support.

The recent report *Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: #ClosingtheGap* published by Universities UK (UUK) and the National Union of Students (NUS) (2019), evades rather than illuminates the problem. The report assumes that the gap exists rather than trying to establish the facts. It states, for example, with regard to the 'ethnic' attainment gap that:

'Overall, evidence from the OfS focused on English universities shows that, once other factors such as prior attainment, gender and age are accounted for, there remains an unexplained difference between White and Black students of 17%, and of 10% between White and Asian students (OfS)' (UUK and NUS 2019: 15).

The report referenced by the Office for Students (OfS) to support the claim in the UUK and NUS report (Crawford and Greaves 2015) is referring exclusively to the participation of so-called ethnic minorities in higher education, not about their attainment. It appears that the OfS and the UUK have not bothered to check in any detail the report they cite with such authority.

The main statistical research on ethnic attainment differences in higher education which considered ethnicity and a number of other factors that are expected to have an impact on attainment was undertaken by Broecke and Nicholls (2007). It is surprising that no similar statistical research has been undertaken on 'ethnic' attainment in higher education since then, given the urgent efforts universities, the OfS and the Higher Education Funding Council prior to that, have made to address the so-called 'ethnic' attainment gap.

There are two possible reasons why the Broecke and Nicholls (2007) report has not been repeated. First, the

report is statistically subtle enough to recognise the unreliability of the variables used in statistical analysis and such subtlety is demanding. Second, and relatedly, this indifference to developing further research of sufficient quality is exacerbated by a political context that assumes diversity in ethnic attainment to justify politically motivated interventions that seem to address social and educational problems.

The problem with the minoritisation of higher education students is that it suggests students are in need of extra support to achieve academically. Besides, the measures taken to address 'ethnic' attainment differences are racialising campus relations as they are based on defining and grouping people by their skin colour and ethnicity. It is argued here that students are not minorities but are being minoritised through policies and practices that are implemented at universities to address the 'ethnic' attainment gap.

A discussion of the most common understanding of the 'ethnic' attainment gap and of the four aspects that illustrate how the process of minoritisation works and how it contributes to the racialisation of campus relations will show that the educational status of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is not being challenged in universities today. Without this challenge and the understanding that students should be treated as individuals and not defined and grouped by their skin colour or ethnicity, universities are moving one step towards racialising campus relations.

The findings reported in this paper come from a study undertaken to gain a better understanding of what is called the 'ethnic' attainment gap in higher education.

The data reviewed in the first section of this report, the 'ethnic' attainment gap, shows that current reporting of ethnic attainment differences inflates ethnic differences and may

even create differences where none exist. Although the use of statistics has been criticised by critical race theorists, such as Gillborn (2006) and Warmington (2009), for downplaying the 'lived experiences' of ethnically minoritised students, it is important to examine the statistical research evidence to avoid inaccurate reporting as well as false knowledge claims.

The second section, the practice and its impact, examines the adverse effects of defining and grouping students by ethnicity and illustrates how this practice racialises campus relations. It identifies a new type of deficit talk on ethnic attainment research and how this perpetuates the educational status of minority ethnic students as 'diminished' students without agency or the capacity to act in pursuit of conscious goals. This section also explores the shift in education away from subject-based teaching towards a growing concern with student-centredness and learning process-oriented teaching and how this reproduces ethnic inequalities in education.

1.

The 'ethnic' attainment gap

The statistical data on student attainment is said to reveal a marked gap in attainment between students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds and their white counterparts (Connor *et al.* 2004; Broecke and Nicholls 2007; ECU 2012, 2013, 2017).

The annual statistics published by the Equality Challenge Unit have, during the past decade, consistently shown an overall gap in attainment of 17.2, 18.4 and 15.0 percentage points between white and BME students graduating with a high degree classification (ECU 2012, 2013, 2017). These figures vary considerably between ethnic groups so that the gap is persistently widest among black students, with 28.8 percentage points in 2010/11 and 24.4 percentage points in 2015/16 and is narrowest among students from mixed ethnic backgrounds, with 6.6 percentage points in 2010/11 (ECU 2012, 2017).

This section examines the research that draws on attainment statistics by looking at how the statistical data on attainment was researched and reported. It would be perfunctory to report a complex measure like attainment simply in relation to one variable, in this case ethnicity, without taking into account other factors known to impact on attainment. Even studies, such as the one conducted by Broecke and Nicholls (2007), which have controlled other factors, have been inconclusive

about the extent to which ethnicity is a determining factor in educational attainment. The questioning of this statistical data has been criticised by critical race theorists, among others, for downplaying the 'lived experiences' of ethnically minoritised students (Gillborn 2006: 11). It is nevertheless important to examine the statistical evidence given in support of the ethnic attainment gap to prevent inaccurate reporting and false knowledge claims.

1.1 Attainment

Attainment in higher education is measured by the final graduate degree classification using a classification system that is divided into first, upper second, lower second- and third-class degrees. A degree awarded with either a first-class or an upper second-class is referred to as a 'good' or a 'high' degree (Connor *et al.* 2004; Richardson 2008; Fielding *et al.* 2008; ECU 2013). The attainment gap, in turn, refers to the difference in the percentage, usually percentage points, of students who graduate with a high degree classification. The degree classification system has been criticised on various grounds: for its narrow scope in assessing a complex concept like education in simple numerical terms; for its limitations in the reliability and validity of the decision making processes; for its doubtful relevance in today's higher education world; and for the obsession with marks and top degree classifications it has created (Yorke *et al.* 2004; UUK 2007). It is nevertheless used as a broad indication of attainment and as a measure that allows comparison between programmes, institutions and groups of students.

According to the Equality Challenge Unit, the gap in attainment between white and BME students amounted to 17.6 per cent in 2013 and 15.0 per cent in 2016 (ECU

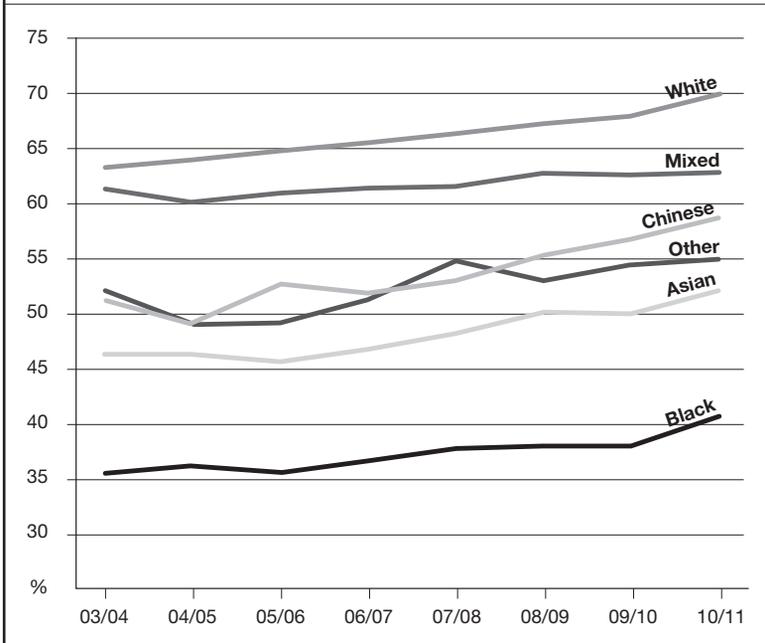
2013, 2017). This refers to 'UK-domiciled' (students whose normal residence was the UK prior to entry into higher education) undergraduate students graduating with a high degree classification (ECU 2012: 84). While the gap has been reported to have fluctuated in the past decade between 17.2, 18.4 and 15.0 percentage points in 2015/16, overall it has remained relatively stable (ECU 2010, 2013, 2017).

When inter-group variations illustrated in Figure 1.1 (overleaf) are taken into account, it becomes apparent that a sector-wide comparison between white and BME students is meaningless because the gap varies considerably between ethnic groups.

The figures between ethnic groups show that the gap is persistently widest among black students, with 28.8 percentage points in 2010/11 and 25.4 percentage points in 2015/16, and narrowest among students from mixed ethnic backgrounds, with 6.6 percentage points in 2010/11 (ECU 2012). For the other categories, the gap is narrower but still present. In 2010/11, the gap was: 17.4 percentage points for Asian students; 10.8 percentage points for Chinese students; 6.6 percentage points for students from a Mixed background; and 14.6 percentage points for the category 'Other' (ECU 2012). Similar trends in attainment have been reported by Owen and colleagues (2000), Connor *et al.* (2004), Richardson (2008), Fielding *et al.* (2008), HEFCE (2010) and ECU (2011).

The conclusion drawn from these statistics in the literature is that ethnic attainment differences exist and that ethnic inequalities are deeply ingrained in the British higher education system. Much of the literature talks of inbuilt institutional and social biases that are thought to exclude some groups while privileging others (Mirza 2009; Pilkington 2008, 2013; Leonardo 2009; Sheared, *et al.* 2010; NUS 2011; Singh 2011).

Figure 1.1: UK-domiciled graduates achieving a first-class or upper second-class honours degree by ethnicity from 2003/04 to 2010/11 (ECU 2012: 83)



However, it is questionable whether this so-called ‘ethnic’ gap is indeed an ‘ethnic’ gap or whether the use of broad ethnic categories, and the reporting of ‘ethnic’ attainment differences without taking into account other factors known to influence attainment, inflates differences and may even create differences where none exist.

1.2 Broad categories mask intra-group variations

When broad ethnic trends in higher education are compared to the school sector this shows that, until recently, broadly similar ethnic attainment patterns have become more complex. The complexity emerges, according to the Interim Report of the 2012 *Mayor’s Education Inquiry in London*, from

the increasingly varied attainment patterns that are emerging within rather than between the various ethnic groups. The report refers, in particular, to the black African, Nigerian and Ghanaian children who 'comfortably met the national benchmark of 5 GCSE grade A*- C, including English and Mathematics 2010/11' while black African Congolese and Angolan pupils were far less likely to reach these levels (Mayor's Education Inquiry 2012: 34-35).

The report concludes that broad ethnic groupings mask significant intra-group variations which need to be examined if the attainment gap is to be addressed (Mayor's Education Inquiry 2012). This undermines the validity of the broad ethnic categories that are still applied to ethnic attainment research in British higher education and suggests that it may be the country of origin rather than ethnicity that impacts on attainment.

1.3 Ignoring other factors inflates and creates differences

The reporting of ethnic attainment differences without accounting for other factors known to impact on attainment inflates differences and, as the Broecke and Nicholls (2007) have shown, creates differences where none exist. Their study included 65,000 UK-domiciled undergraduate students and found that:

'after controlling for the majority of other factors which we would expect to have an impact on attainment, being from a minority ethnic community (except the "Other Black", "Mixed" and "Other" groups) is still statistically significant in explaining final attainment, although the gap has been significantly reduced' (2007: 3).

The fact that 'the gap has been significantly reduced' when other factors were taken into account indicates that ethnic differences are inflated when other factors are ignored,

which was not only found by Broecke and Nicholls but also by Richardson (2008) and Fielding *et al.* (2008) to impact on attainment. This is because differences in attainment become simply and solely attributed to ethnicity. Exaggerating the importance of ethnicity as a determining factor in attainment has serious implications. It may minoritise some higher education students by attaching the stigma of underachievement to them.

Not taking into account other factors misrepresents 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other' student groups who were exempt from Broecke and Nicholls' assertion that 'being from a minority ethnic community is still statistically significant in explaining final attainment' (2007: 3).

Being exempt means that there is no 'ethnic' gap for students in the categories 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other'. The attainment differences that occurred between these categories and the white reference group were explained in the Broecke and Nicholls (2007) study by a combination of other factors. The factors controlled for were:

- ethnicity;
- gender;
- prior attainment (although not a full control of prior attainment);
- disability;
- deprivation using the Index of Multiple Deprivation;
- subject area;
- type of higher education institution;
- term-time accommodation; and
- age.

The evidence of the Broecke and Nicholls study shows that some ethnic groups are clearly exempt from overall

judgements about the applicability of generalised statements about ethnic attainment differences. Therefore, studies that generalise attainment by ethnicity may actively create differences by taking only the two variables, attainment and ethnicity, into account. Creating differences where none exist, even if this is unintentional, perpetuates the minority status of many higher education students in Britain. This occurs because attainment is reported as being at least partially determined by the students' ethnic background which, in the case of 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other' student groups, has been contradicted by Broecke and Nicholls (2007).

1.4 Do inbuilt institutional and social biases exist?

The exemptions Broecke and Nicholls (2007) identified question the assertion that inbuilt institutional and social biases are responsible for the ethnic attainment differences currently being observed in the British higher education system. Institutional and social ethnic biases are held to exclude some groups while privileging others and to cause ethnic inequalities and attainment differences (Mirza 2009; Pilkington 2008, 2013; Leonardo 2009; Sheared *et al.* 2010; NUS 2011; Singh 2011). The fact, however, that ethnicity was not found to be significant for the categories 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other' indicates that inbuilt institutional and social biases are unlikely to be responsible for ethnic attainment differences in British higher education: exemptions would be less prevalent if inbuilt biases were at work.

Broecke and Nicholls emphasise that the results from their study 'do not automatically imply' that 'there is some form of ethnic bias within the higher education system' (2007: 19). This is partly due to the 'quality of the variables' included

and partly because the variables excluded from the study are important for any analysis of attainment (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19). Because the factors that were controlled (listed above) are not exhaustive, it is reasonable to assume, according to Broecke and Nicholls (2007: 19), that the 'gap would have been further reduced' if other variables had been included or if the quality of the variables that were included had been improved. The extent of the reduction or whether the ethnic attainment gap 'would have been eliminated entirely' is difficult to ascertain (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19).

The factors excluded for practical reasons in the Broecke and Nicholls (2007) study were:

- parental income and education;
- term-time working;
- English as an additional language;
- the level of the English when an additional language;
- prior institutions attended;
- communal and/or parental responsibilities;
- immigration status;
- reasons and motivation for embarking on the degree course; and
- the academic aspirations for graduating with a high-class degree.

Given that these are arguably vital factors when analysing attainment, it is neither justifiable to talk of ethnicity being statistically significant in explaining final attainment nor to extrapolate that inbuilt institutional and social biases within the British higher education system are causing ethnic attainment differences. What can be questioned, however, is whether ethnicity is at all a determining factor in attainment.

1.5 The 'ethnic' attainment gap is a supposition

Careful analysis of the research data on student attainment is important to avoid inflating differences or possibly creating differences where none exist. However, this analysis is not always welcome, especially when statistics are believed to be unimportant, as Gillborn (2006) argued, compared to the lived experiences higher education students recount.

It is true that attainment statistics which try to determine the statistical significance of social indicators have little explanatory power, not least because many social indicators are conceptually intangible. It is not surprising, therefore, that studies which attempt to determine the statistical significance of a variety of social indicators in relation to covariants have been inconclusive (Connor *et al.* 2004; Bhattacharyya, *et al.* 2005; Leslie 2005; UUK 2007; Richardson 2008; Fielding *et al.* 2008).

It is nevertheless important that statistics are reported accurately because misreporting and drawing conclusions based on incorrect statistical research data may unjustly perpetuate the educational status of many higher education students.

This review has shown that any claim that ethnic attainment differences exist and persist across British higher education is not substantiated by the statistical research data. What appears to be a significant gap when attainment is reported by ethnicity has been shown to be significantly reduced when other factors known to impact on attainment are taken into account. For the categories 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other', the gap disappeared altogether. Therefore, treating ethnic attainment differences as universal when the 'Black Other', 'Mixed' and 'Other' student groups have been shown to be exempt from the 'ethnic' gap creates, for these three categories, differences where none have been proved to exist.

For the remaining categories, it is tempting to accept the Broecke and Nicholls statement that ethnicity is 'statistically significant in explaining final attainment' (2007: 3). However, the fact that the Broecke and Nicholls had to make compromises on the quality of the variables included and that factors such as term-time work, English as an additional language, academic aspirations, as well as communal and parental responsibilities were, among other factors, excluded for practical reasons, makes it all the more reasonable to assume, as they pointed out, that the gap 'would have been further reduced', or might even have been 'eliminated entirely', had all factors that are thought to impact on attainment been taken into account (Broecke and Nicholls 2007: 19).

The statistical evidence does not confirm that ethnicity is a determining factor in the educational attainment of higher education students in Britain. The ethnic attainment gap appears to be a supposition rather than a real phenomenon. But the constant misinterpretation of the data by academics and policymakers continues to support the mistaken perception that ethnically minoritised students are underachieving and this indirectly racialises campus relations.

2.

The practice and its impact

As noted in the Introduction, research into ethnic attainment differences in British higher education tends to depict students from minority ethnic backgrounds as disadvantaged, marginalised, excluded and discriminated against. These ideas shape the theoretical perspectives and inform higher education policies and practice across the country.

The problem is that the policies and practices implemented to address the 'ethnic' attainment gap perpetuate rather than ameliorate the educational status of so-called minority ethnic students. The issues with these policies and practices are discussed below in terms of: the divisive nature of ethnic grouping of students; the perceptions that students are vulnerable, as this leads to a new type of deficit talk; and the devastating effects 'student experience' has on university education.

2.1 Ethnic grouping

Grouping students is divisive

Questions about the practice of grouping students and the relevance and validity of the ethnic categories currently in use ought to be part of any discussion concerning ethnic attainment differences in higher education. The use of ethnic categories is problematic because it creates a divisive

subtext. But Warmington (2009) argued that categories must be used if ethnic inequalities in education are to be addressed, even if the use of these categories to some degree reinforces the racial and ethnic differences it aims to dispel.

This argument is disingenuous. We cannot, in academia, argue against racism and socially and ethnically-based discrimination and then engage in the process by putting students into ethnic categories that reinforce the idea that group-based social and ethnic differences exist and, even worse, determine educational attainment.

The fact is that ethnic categories themselves have very little meaning. They are known to be socially constructed, yet, although they are acknowledged to be social constructed 'pigments of the imagination', the use of these categories is thought to be essential if ethnic inequalities in higher education are to be addressed (Anwar 1990; Gilroy 2000; Cousin 2002; Gillborn 2008, Warmington 2009; Singh 2011). The practice of grouping people is based on the assumption that group-based social differences exist. This assumption is rarely questioned. In consequence, the repercussions of applying group-based social differentiation in higher education policy and practice are not being examined.

Ethnic categories are often used in higher education to: quantify student attainment by ethnicity; specify group identities; determine groups that are vulnerable to discrimination; identify cultural learning styles; develop cultural inclusiveness; and shape inclusive teaching and learning practices. Amid the rush to identify these and other differences in the name of diversity, inclusion and equality, the consequences of grouping students are rarely discussed.

One reason why categories are applied is that universities in Britain are, by law, required to gather and publish information on how they are meeting the general duties

of the Equality Act (2010). Although there is no prescribed process to meet the legal requirements, ethnic monitoring, using broad categories, is now universally adopted as a mechanism for gathering equalities data. In 2016, almost all (98.2%) UK-domiciled higher education students disclosed ethnicity information (ECU 2017).

But the necessity of using categories if ethnic inequalities are to be addressed is not as self-evident as it is made to be. On the contrary, grouping students by ethnicity, or the practice of allocating students to various predetermined ethnic categories, is problematic. It overemphasises differences between groups of people and it suggests that the experiences of some groups are fundamentally distinct from those in other categories (Barry 2001; Good 2013).

Good's (2013) conclusions are confirmed in this study. According to Illiana, one of the research participants (pseudonyms are used for research participants), what students really want is:

'[to be] treated as well as any other individual, you know, being treated like a human being, as a person [...] just like everybody else in class. Without any [...] prejudices in class. Without people making you feel that; no, you are not like everybody else.'

This extract from one of the interviews undertaken for this study suggests that students want to be treated 'like everybody else' and not differently depending on their ethnic or social background. Grouping students by ethnicity for the purpose of establishing and providing for supposedly different educational needs that are believed to be determined by ethnicity works against the idea of treating students 'as any other individual'.

Grouping students is further detrimental because it

elevates minor differences between groups to the level of major differences, while reducing important in-group differences to the point of non-recognition (Good 2013). By repressing differences within groups, differences between groups gain importance. This drives a wedge between people and any sense of our common humanity.

In higher education, lecturers start to think that educational needs are determined by the ethnic group a student appears to belong to rather than seeing and treating students as individuals who are eager to engage with the educational process to pursue their studies.

Treat students as individuals

What those in the higher education sector need to understand is that the continued use of the terms 'race' and 'ethnicity' suggests that race and ethnicity are of overriding importance. This belief inadvertently advocates essentialism, as well as the idea that current ethnic categories are valid for defining human differences. Instead, the higher education sector can, and should, treat students as individuals if they want to avoid perpetuating the mistaken belief that the educational experiences of some groups are fundamentally different from others.

The use of these terms can be easily abandoned. All that is needed is to discontinue their use in policy documents, to erase it from websites and to stop asking students and staff to self-declare their ethnicity. Universities currently believe that this terminology is a requirement of the Equality Act 2010, but the requirement is simply not to discriminate. Alternative approaches that challenge discrimination but do not focus on 'race' and 'ethnicity' could be developed.

Universities should be treating students as individuals. As Good has pointed out, 'treating people as individuals

rather than category-members is at least as anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic as the group approach', and in the long run, it is 'probably the best guarantee of security against discrimination' (Good 2013).

2.2 Constructing the vulnerable student

A new type of deficit talk depicts students as 'vulnerable'

Ethnic attainment research and discussions have adopted a new type of deficit talk. This talk sees students as vulnerable. It questions their ability to take charge of their own learning and their capacity to achieve academically. This happened despite, or because of, the shift away from personal and social deficit-type explanations for differences in attainment towards a greater focus on hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases.

Prior to the latter half of the 1990s, deficit-type explanations for differences in attainment focused on personal and social deficiencies in students. This model explained ethnic attainment differences in education by claiming that people from low socio-economic and minority ethnic backgrounds 'cause their own social, economic and education problems' because of personal and social deficiencies, such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations and due to familial deficits and dysfunctions (Valencia 1997: x-xi, 9; Turney *et al.* 2002; Jones and Thomas 2005; Jacobs *et al.* 2007; Ahmed 2007).

This deficit model and deficit thinking in general have been criticised for 'blaming the victim'. It is believed to have a negative effect on students' self-esteem, especially if it leads to low teacher expectations, as these are thought to have a detrimental effect on students' academic confidence, achievement and self-esteem (Ball *et al.* 2002; Connor *et al.* 2004; HEA 2008; Byfield 2008; Harper 2009; Dhanda 2010).

Recently, a new type of deficit talk has been identified

(Mieschbuehler 2018). This new deficit talk assumes that students are disadvantaged by hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional and social biases. This appears to take the 'blame' away from the individual by emphasising structural factors. But it still suggests that student attainment is determined primarily by social attributes. Choices open to students based on deliberately acting in pursuit of conscious goals or taking agency are downplayed, while ethnic and social attributes and identities are described as all important when it comes to attainment (Malik 2006).

This new deficit talk questions resilience and human agency in students and masks a lack of faith in students' ability to achieve. Students are being reconstructed as essentially vulnerable and unable to cope. Behind much of the discussion is a fatalistic assumption about the potential of students to achieve. Students are said, for example:

- (a) to underperform because they are predisposed to lack self-esteem as a consequence of being held in low regard by others, mainly from the majority group (Donnell *et al.* 2002; Byfield 2008);
- (b) to have internalised negative stereotypical beliefs about ethnically minoritised students – which will affect their educational attainment negatively (Steele and Aronson 1995; Osborne 2001; Woolf *et al.* 2008; Steele 2010; Bagguley and Hussain 2007; NUS 2011);
- (c) to be disadvantaged by unconscious biases held by lecturers that may affect students' grades negatively (Bruner 1996; DiSA 2013; ECU 2013); and
- (d) to be disadvantaged by hierarchical power relations which appear in universities in the form of institutional racism (Ladson-Billings 1998; Law 2004; Leonardo 2005; Gillborn 2006, 2008).

Assuming that students are vulnerable in these ways perpetuates, and even reinvents, the minority status of many higher education students. It affects ethnically and socially minoritised students disproportionately because the new deficit talk creates doubts about the ability of ethnically minoritised students to take charge of their own learning. Furthermore, as students are no longer thought of as capable of achieving, it accommodates them to failure.

Unwarranted as it was, the old deficit talk allowed for the possibility of remedial action. The new deficit talk, by contrast, which discredits resilience and agency as determining factors in attainment, accommodates only failure because students are no longer thought capable of achieving. The impacts are clearly visible.

Students today are disappointed about the lack of intellectual challenge presented by their academic studies (Connor *et al.* 2004; HEA 2008; Dhanda 2010; Mieschbuehler 2018). Students in Dhanda's (2010) study talk about not being sufficiently challenged, wishing to belong to a more intellectually demanding group, or for university to be more stimulating academically.

Some students who participated in the study upon which this report is based, also lamented the lack of intellectual challenge they were presented with. Johura said, 'the whole syllabus [...] wasn't very challenging' and Valerie mentioned in the interview that 'people don't really have that high standards here'. Paul, in turn, said that, when describing what happened in seminars, they had to do 'a little power point presentation and just present it to ten people, but didn't really learn anything from it'; they 'just learned' what 'is on Google Scholar'. When students talk about low standards, a lack of challenge, and describe the university education they are receiving as 'Google Scholar teaching', it

is an indication that university education has lost its focus on knowledge-based education.

The assumed vulnerability of students – in terms of their ability or inability to cope with intellectual challenges – leads to an increased focus on ‘the student’ and the ‘student experience’ and, as a result, university education takes a student-centred and process-oriented approach to learning. Student-centred approaches deny students the prospect of developing their full academic potential.

The consequence is that the student-centred approach perpetuates rather than ameliorates the educational status of students from minoritised backgrounds and, by perpetuating the educational status, racialises campus relations.

Respect the human potential of students

Students are resilient and have the capacity to achieve. If they think they do not have this it is because universities tell them they need extra support to achieve academically. Students that are viewed and treated as needing extra support are perceived as vulnerable. This perception of students underrates their agency and ability to act in pursuit of conscious goals. It amounts to a crude downplaying of the students’ human agency and potential.

The perception of students as vulnerable affects students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds disproportionately because these students, more than any other at university, are supposed to be disadvantaged by hierarchical power relations and inbuilt institutional biases. This perceived disadvantage is something students are thought to be defencelessly exposed to and that is where the notion of ‘vulnerability’ comes in.

Universities can and must counteract the idea that students are vulnerable. The way to do it is to challenge

students intellectually and to respect them by teaching them ‘the best that is known and thought in the world’ (Arnold [1864] 2003: 50). That way, the university acknowledges the human potential of students and counteracts the new type of deficit talks that centres on the notion of vulnerability.

2.3 The ‘student experience’

The centrality of subject-based teaching

The shift in education away from subject-based teaching towards a growing concern with student-centredness and the learning process formally occurred with the publication of the *Report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*, the Dearing Report, in 1997. The shift shows the lack of trust universities have in students’ capacity to achieve. If students were generally thought to be capable of taking charge of their learning, the growing concern with learning process-oriented teaching would be irrelevant.

The problem with student-centredness for students from minority ethnic backgrounds is that universities perpetuate rather than challenge the students’ educational status. Being student-centred means, for example, choosing knowledge that is ‘relevant’ to a person’s social and ethnic background. It also means being ‘inclusive’ and taking an ‘inclusive’ approach to education at university. Such trends divert attention from subject-based teaching and perpetuate the educational status of students because they are primarily concerned about developing students as learners rather than teaching them subject knowledge.

Students as learners are merely offered ‘relevant’ knowledge that relates to an individual’s background and experiences. It is assumed that students perform better academically if they can relate the content of their studies to their social and ethnic background.

It has rarely been asked whether teaching students knowledge 'relevant' to their background might constrain them to their background and functions to reinforce 'existing social divisions and inequalities' (O'Hear 1981: 20). The belief that students are not interested and cannot relate to knowledge that does not have an apparent link to their lives is draping students in their existing world.

Students that are being taught 'relevant' knowledge may be denied an academic education that takes them beyond the immediate world they inhabit and introduces them to unknown or unexplored ideas and concepts. These students are intellectually restricted to certain contents at university for no other reason than the belief that your background determines what you are interested in and where your academic potential lies.

If this happens, universities have given up on the idea that humans have potential and want to move on and leave their past behind. An academic education opens opportunities for people to do that (Peters 1965; O'Hear 1981; Oakeshott 1989; Hirsch 2006, 2016). The problem with abandoning the idea of providing an academic university education that goes beyond the 'relevant' is that it perpetuates the existing educational status of students – which is particularly detrimental to students from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Teaching students 'relevant' knowledge might also result in not teaching students 'the best that is known and thought in the world' (Arnold [1864] 2003: 50). In this sense, the 'relevant' knowledge argument is clearly an example of the deficit thinking described earlier, as it suggests that ethnically and socially minoritised students lack the capacity to engage intellectually with knowledge deemed unrelated to their background or lives.

Rather than enabling students to develop their full

academic potential, as the literature on 'relevant' knowledge and social and academic belonging suggests (Astin 1984; Tinto 1993; Thomas 2012), teaching 'relevant' knowledge effectively restricts students from accessing the best that has been said and thought.

The other example mentioned earlier that contributes to the racialisation of campus relation is the drive towards delivering an 'inclusive education' in universities. Inclusive teaching and learning have become widely advocated to address ethnic attainment differences (Skelton 2002; Thomas and May 2010, Hockings 2010, Berry and Loke 2011; NUS 2011, Livsey 2011; Stevenson 2012). Inclusive teaching and learning aim to embed considerations about equity into all functions of the institution; to treat equity considerations as an on-going process of quality enhancement; and to apply equity considerations to support practices and environments, as much as to teaching and learning (May and Bridger 2010; Thomas and May 2010).

Inclusive education relies on describing and dividing students into ethnic and racial groups for it to be implemented. The concept has no meaning or existence without engaging into the practice of ethnic grouping. The issue with inclusive education is that the continuous use of ethnic grouping and categories artificially maintains existing social divisions, and may even create new ones.

Students and staff at university may be ready to respect people for who they are, irrespective of their ethnic heritage, but inclusive education will not let them. Students and staff are continuously reminded of people's backgrounds and are urged to consider the ethnic origins or heritage of students. The short extract below, from an interview with Ronuka, illustrates how students absorb ideas about 'ethnic' differences in education, in this case about the style of writing.

(Ronuka) Maybe, the way I'd write is informed by my background, you see. So, if somebody is not exposed to that, or doesn't have an understanding of my background, it's so easy to just assume, you know, that this person, what he is doing is wrong until somebody said, no, it's only because he does things different. So maybe if you look at things differently, you will be able to understand some of it.'

This shows how students come to think that lecturers should be aware of differences in writing styles and have an understanding that these differences emerge because of a student's background. When students are provided with feedback on how to improve their academic writing they do not want to hear 'what he is doing is wrong' but want lecturers who understand that, in Ronuka's words, 'he does things differently' and that 'the way I'd write is informed by my background'.

In this case, the differences in the style of writing Ronuka was referring to was about the linking of paragraphs, something that, according to Ronuka, teachers in his country of origin did not pay attention to, but was considered important in British universities. What was considered by Ronuka as a cultural difference in writing was in fact a difference in the level of competency in writing and, as such, entirely unrelated to culture or ethnicity, except that Ronuka happened to be an international student from Zimbabwe who struggled with the linking of paragraphs when writing essays.

This example illustrates that students are not able to escape their background because both staff and students are continuously reminded to consider their ethnic heritage when an inclusive approach to education is adopted. The wider problem is that policies and practices – implemented as part of the inclusive education practice – racialise campus

relations as lecturers and students are encouraged to consider their students' skin colour and ethnicity.

Lecturers are expected to be aware of inclusive education practices and to address the specific needs students from minority ethnic backgrounds supposedly have. What the university sector does not seem to understand is that student needs, if identified in terms of ethnic groups, become meaningless as intra-group and individual differences are ignored. All the inclusive approach to education does is perpetuate existing assumptions about racial and ethnic group differences in education.

Put the subject at the centre of university teaching

If universities are serious about addressing the racialisation of campus relations, they will need to move away from student-centredness and learning process-oriented teaching and start putting the subject at the centre of university teaching. A learning process that focuses on personal rather than intellectual development underrates students as human beings because it fails to recognise that students are rational, resilient agents.

Oakeshott rightly pointed out that a new undergraduate student 'has learned enough, morally and intellectually, to take chance with himself upon the open sea' (1989: 100). Students enter university after at least 10 years of compulsory schooling and are more than capable of taking charge of their own learning. What will drive them and unleash their academic potential is subject-based education. Students want to be intellectually challenged and they are capable of dealing with those challenges.

Subject-based teaching respects students as rational human beings capable of acting in pursuit of conscious goals. It aims at educating students and providing them with

intellectual challenges. By bringing subject-based teaching back in to universities, universities will address the rise of the new type of deficit talk that underrates the students' resilience and capacity to pursue their own learning. Subject-based teaching, unlike student-centredness, does not downplay the human potential in students – which is why it does more to bring about ethnic equality in education than treating students as vulnerable and in need of extra support.

There is nothing more a university can do to counteract ethnic inequality in education than to provide an academic education across the board. Universities have to be committed to the pursuit of knowledge if they are to fulfil their unique educational function of teaching and advancing knowledge.

Summary and conclusion

There is a real danger of racialising campus relations at universities in that policies and practices implemented to address the 'ethnic' attainment gap adopted a process that attaches meaning to racial and ethnic groups.

Four issues that contribute to the racialising of campus relations have been outlined in this report and recommendations to address these driving forces are made in the next section. These issues are:

- universities need to address the misreporting of statistical data on attainment;
- the racialising practice of grouping higher education students by their skin colour and ethnicity for policy purposes;
- the diminished perspective of students as unable to take charge of their own learning; and
- the rejection of knowledge and subject-based teaching in favour of process-oriented teaching which disadvantages all students.

If universities want to challenge the racialisation of campus relations and the educational status of students from minority ethnic backgrounds, they will need to treat students as individuals rather than group members and provide them with knowledge-based education rather than adopt a student-centred and process-oriented approach to learning.

It is very easy to dismiss the argument put across in this report that students should be treated as individuals and not as group members as complacent; but this dismissal can only be based on the ready acceptance of the suppositions that this report criticises.

Recommendations

To address the current drivers behind the racialisation of campus relations, universities will need to:

- Firstly, re-examine the reporting of statistical data on attainment that has contributed unjustly to the perpetuation of the diminished educational status of students from minority ethnic backgrounds.
- Secondly, reject the practice of grouping and referring to higher education students by their skin colour and ethnicity in policies and practices.
- Thirdly, recognise that students are not vulnerable and have agency and can take charge of their own learning.
- Fourthly, refocus on subject-based teaching and provide students with the academic education they desire and deserve.

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The author of this report, Ruth Mieschbuehler, argues that there is a real danger that campus relations at universities will become racialised. The term 'racialisation' – referring to the process of emphasising racial and ethnic grouping – is discussed to show how higher education policies and practices implemented to address the 'ethnic' attainment gap are driving this trend. The result of these interventions is that students are 'minoritised'. In short, they are held to be in need of special treatment.

The 'minoritisation' of students has driven racialisation on campuses because the higher education sector is trying to understand and address disparities through ethnic grouping. Racialisation, in turn, minoritises students because it denies students their individuality by emphasising their group identities.

By reflecting on the so-called 'ethnic' attainment gap in higher education, the report finds that what appears to be a significant gap when attainment is reported by ethnicity has been shown to be significantly reduced when other factors known to impact on attainment are taken into account. There is no statistical evidence that 'ethnicity' determines educational attainment of higher education students.

Yet, as the author argues, policymakers and practitioners believe in the ethnic attainment gap and introduce measures to address it with adverse consequences. Students from minority ethnic backgrounds are believed to underperform academically when they do not. This stigmatises students based on their ethnicity and contributes to the racialisation of campus relations.

The practice of defining and grouping students by their skin colour and basing attainment policies and practices on these divisions drives a wedge between people and removes any sense of our common humanity. Meanwhile, the continued rise of a new type of 'deficit talk' depicts students as being vulnerable – and ultimately, it denies students the opportunity to develop fully academically while accommodating them to failure.

Ruth Mieschbuehler suggests a long-overdue change in approach. Universities need to re-examine the reporting of statistical data on attainment that has contributed unjustly to the perpetuation of the diminished educational status of students from minority ethnic backgrounds. The report concludes by rejecting the practice of grouping higher education students by their skin colour and ethnicity in future policies and practices.

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