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LOST IN THE CLOUD: ADVANCING INCLUSIVE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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In this piece, I explore my journey as an international student and academic tutor in UK higher education (HE). Feeling lonely and lost in a strange academic world can be daunting. Being a mature student complicates the issue even more, juggling work with academic studies, in a hostile UK educational environment that has failed to decolonize, or is merely making tokenistic gestures towards decolonization. Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) students beginning their studies suddenly find themselves in a peculiar HE environment filled with inequality, diversity, and non-inclusiveness.

Understanding students' lived experiences in HE while considering their culture, disability, learning difficulty, maturity, religious belief, and educational background is paramount to the successful decolonization of our curriculum. The diverse range of students should be reflected in our curriculum. Good pastoral care has been found to assist in the retention and attainment of international students.

My experience during my undergraduate and postgraduate studies was filled with negativity. While this improved my intersectional identity, it had a detrimental impact on my academic progression. The latter prompted my passion for becoming an academic to influence future students' experiences.

Decolonization can only be achieved when there is a good mix of lecturers and senior managers in HE institutions (HEIs), with multiple identities. HEIs need to accommodate the educational, pedagogical, clinical, language, social, and cultural needs of the international and 'disadvantaged' home and overseas students, and consider different social classes and their impact on students' learning and education.

Introduction

Racism is a public health crisis. The murder of George Floyd (The New York Times, 2021) has raised mass awareness of the importance of racism in our world. It also triggered the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Black Lives Matter UK, 2020) that led to various government parastatals worldwide to start recognizing systemic racism. Although we may assume that blacks and other ethnic minority groups are generally accepted in the Western world, this is likely a wrong assumption, as systemic racism exists in all UK systems. Within HE, the number of black professors in the UK is just 160 out of 22,855 as of February 2022, only slightly higher than the 155 black professors recorded as working in 2019/20 by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (Francis, 2022). The HESA UK staff dataset shows that 2.8% of total HE staff are black, lower than the 3.3% of the total population that are black, as recorded in the 2011 Census for England and Wales (Advance HE, 2021). Furthermore, out of 21,135 HE academics whose

ethnicities are known, 1,580 are professors of Asian origin—or 7.47%, compared with 0.7% who are black.

Relocating to the UK

I grew up on the South Western coast of Nigeria in West Africa, where I acquired my primary, secondary, and higher national diploma certificates in general nursing (registered nurse) and psychiatric nursing (licensed practical nurse). I relocated to the United Kingdom many years ago to improve my experience in the profession and progress my career in nursing. Working in the healthcare sector in the UK taught me various lessons of living in a place where racism is part of day-to-day life—at work, in the community, on the bus, on trains, and even when shopping. After three years working as a nurse in the UK, I commenced my undergraduate top-up degree in nursing at one of the universities in England's North East. This started my feeling of loneliness, due to the difference in the UK's approach to HE compared with my background in Nigeria.

I was lost in this strange academic world, complicated by being a mature student, juggling work with academic study, and a family to look after. Things became more difficult when essay deadlines approached, a system I had never experienced back home. We had to do summative presentations in front of everyone in the class. This wouldn't have been an issue if the system had accommodated 'us'—the international students—and recognized the background we came from, to ensure that we were offered adequate coaching. This was not the case.

During the course, I realized that there is discrimination between a black and white-skin person. This means that blacks are more racially minoritized and discriminated than those who are non-British but white skinned. Reflecting back now, this lack of accommodation is hardly surprising, as I was never taught by a black lecturer in all my time studying in the UK. The obvious thing that was massively lacking throughout my studies was 'good' pastoral support.

Postgraduate Journey

On completing my undergraduate degree, I did a professional graduate certificate in education and a postgraduate certificate in Learning and Teaching in HE. I got a job as an academic tutor in a university in the North East of England. This kick-started my career in HE. My first experience was while trying to make my delivery more inclusive, as the program included students from all over the world, as well as home students. With my passion for using inclusive practice, I encountered a learner who was on the verge of withdrawing from the program. This was because most of her assessments in Africa were in the form of exams and objective questions, whereas in the UK she was required to submit essays, with minimal exams. I organized a tutorial that turned into pastoral care. I mapped the student's journey, and together we identified her needs. I signposted her to where she could get help with academic skills, IT support, regular personal tutoring, coaching, and time management skills. We worked out ways to meet her needs using a 'mind map' (Buzan, 1993). The student completed the course with first-class honors. I believe this result was achieved because I was able to facilitate the co-construction of her learning experience (Ajibade & Hayes, 2020).

I developed a learning strategy based on the above methodology to enhance students' learning experience. It has yielded good results, with international students' grades improving since the strategy was introduced. Yet the issue of non-inclusiveness continues. Even during my Masters degree (work-based learning), I saw evidence of inequality and non-inclusiveness. Yet my mostly negative experiences have given me many insights, and my own intersectional identity has strengthened as a result. I have used these insights to understand various social identities, which has led to my capability to accommodate students of different race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, ability, sexual orientation, and caste—particularly those students who are marginalized. This pastoral support has empowered the students—because I supported their voices to be heard.

HE Jobs: Huddles and Breakthrough

My tenure as an academic tutor came to an end when I was informed that there was no longer a need for my services to deliver on the program. After a few years, I realized that this was simply not the case: there was never a time when there was no need for an academic tutor on that program, nor on other related programs in the university.

Similarly, towards the end of another program that I undertook at the university, during one of the study sessions we were told about an upcoming lecturer job that might be of interest to us. The role would be ideal for someone on our program, as it required someone with practical experience who could transfer their skills and knowledge to the HE sector. I was the only person in the group interested in teaching as a profession. However, I was not informed when the job advert was posted.

Reflecting on my career in academia as a lecturer, I experienced an extended episode of bullying, harassment, discrimination, and racism from someone supposed to uphold equality. This went on for several years until I successfully took action to deal with it. I advise everyone from a BAME background to take action when there is any form of racial discrimination. BAME groups face many micro-aggressions daily, most of which are not perceived by the perpetrators as intentional, but their impact on the receiver is immense. There is still a lot to be done in the HE sector to attract more people from the BAME community if true decolonization is to be achieved.

The above has had a negative effect on the BAME community's academic progression. People of a BAME background are disproportionately affected by slow progression and advancement within HE.

The Way Forward

For effective decolonization to occur, universities need to understand students' lived experiences by considering their culture, disability, learning difficulty, maturity, religious beliefs, and educational background. This is of paramount importance to the successful decolonization of our curriculum. HE institutions need to accommodate the educational, pedagogical, clinical,

language, social, and cultural needs of the international and ‘disadvantaged’ home and overseas students. They must also consider different social classes and their impact on students’ learning and education.

Therefore, decolonization requires the HE sector to critically reflect on and eradicate its assumptions. The sector must unlearn and reconstruct these assumptions, beyond the reading list and classroom, resulting in a paradigm shift (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2021). Furthermore, each HEI needs to explore their course design, module development, and the possibilities for staff development. Students and staff from BAME backgrounds should be involved at every level of curriculum development and assessment design. The diverse range of students should be reflected in our curriculum. Decolonization can only be achieved when there is a good mix of lecturers and senior managers in HEIs with multiple, intersectional identities. More role models are required for the racialized, minoritized groups among the current black professors, to encourage other black academics and attract new ones.

Good pastoral care has been found to assist in the retention and attainment of international students because it enables student support throughout a program. It also helps to prevent trauma, improve well-being, and improve students’ safety and satisfaction. Therefore, good pastoral care should be at the heart of all HE in the UK. Care should be taken to ensure that BAME students are allocated to likeminded lecturers who have intersectional capability and who put equality at the heart of what they do.

In conclusion, decolonization should not be seen as a tokenistic exercise but as a safeguard for equality, inclusivity, and diversity measures in HE. Students from BAME backgrounds should be involved in the co-construction of knowledge across the sector and not be dictated to when it comes to curriculum design.

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