

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

---

Volume 1  
Issue 42 *Advancing Professional Values  
through Cross-Community Reflective Practice*

Article 3

---

January 2024

## The Stirrings of Change and Quiet Revolution: A Commentary on 'The Only' and 'Identity-first Education'

Alex Standen  
*London School of Economics and Political Science*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Standen, Alex "The Stirrings of Change and Quiet Revolution: A Commentary on 'The Only' and 'Identity-first Education'," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 42 (2024), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss42/3>

**THE STIRRINGS OF CHANGE AND QUIET REVOLUTION: A COMMENTARY ON 'THE ONLY' AND 'IDENTITY-FIRST EDUCATION'**

*Dr. Alex Standen, Head of Academic Development, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK*

How to select just one or two pieces from this brilliant collection of student-led scholarship? How to synthesize in a short commentary the impact that these thoughtful, engaged, and impassioned contributions might have on my thinking and practice as an academic developer?

I remember feeling similarly overwhelmed when I worked with Vincent Tong on a previous collaborative scholarship project between students and staff. That project, which began in 2015 and resulted in an edited volume (Tong, Standen & Sotiriou, 2018), was transformative in making me re-evaluate the ways in which student-staff partnership could (and should) be a cornerstone of educational development work. Since that project, I have sought to advocate for student-staff partnership to be embedded in academic development work, co-leading institution-wide projects with students and ensuring the values of partnership work, including reciprocity, empowerment, trust, and challenge (Healey et al., 2014) are present in my thinking and practice. Felten et al. (2019) assert that creating environments in which students have greater agency in academic development engenders a more equitable and inclusive approach in meeting the needs of the whole academic community, and this collection serves—once again—to underline this for me.

In the end I came down on two pieces from two different sections of the collection, each representing a different perspective. That these two became my final choices was in no way a reflection on the quality or power of the remaining pieces; rather, I sought balance and diversity in the range of pieces I would comment upon and was deliberate in seeking contributors whose experiences and backgrounds were different from my own (a white, able-bodied, heterosexual, cis woman). I approached the pieces with curiosity and openness, mindful of my privileges and seeking to avoid making assumptions.

The first piece was Nkumbu Mutambo's "The Only" (Mutambo, 2023). Mutambo's beautiful image and sparse prose ("Being the only, the other, the exception, leaves one empty, voiceless, breathless") were confronting, exposing the stark juxtaposition between the ways in which universities portray themselves ("selling a dream of diversity and inclusion") and the everyday lived experiences of their minoritized students:

Just like in a museum where one is instructed emphatically to look but not touch, the academy is ultimately a place where one is welcome to visit for a short time, but not a place one is welcome to shape, become a part of, or to remain in.

Mutambo's piece reinforced for me the importance of focusing not only on the data (as powerful as this is) when we are seeking to foreground questions of race and academia, but on the individual lived experiences and the "entangled and complicated" feelings of our students experiencing being "the only." That Mutambo, a doctoral student, perceives that she can only ever be a visitor to academia, that is not a place she can stay, let alone shape, should be evidence

enough that change is needed. Additionally, for me, the piece held specific resonance due to the work I am involved in developing supervisors. I am lucky enough to have a platform that allows me to speak to new and existing doctoral supervisors and while I already bring in questions of equality, diversity, and inclusion to workshops, this piece has pushed me to reflect further on ways of centering students within these and making space for the voice of minoritized students in this (and indeed all) academic development work.

The second piece was Annabel Lee's "Identity-First Education" (Lee, 2023). Lee's piece was expansive, moving dynamically between the scholarly and political debates around person-first and identity-first language, Lee's own experiences, and implications for higher education. It resonated with conversations I have had with students and colleagues about the limitations of the language that circulates in UK higher education, typified in terms such as, "the student experience." A recent article about international students (Deuchar, 2022) critically engages with the implications of taking 'student experiences' as a conceptual starting point, arguing that it is problematic because it only partially illuminates students' agency and can reproduce understandings of particular groups of students as vulnerable. Likewise, in their piece Lee explores how "centering people's identities and experiences does not always come from the intent to include, but to exclude." They have experienced this in both the curriculum:

I have sat through hours and hours of lectures about men and women, what they like, their needs and desires, and how they are cardinally different from each other. I have been taught to pattern cut and style, again for men and women, and at no point was I given the education to appeal to my community of non-binary people.

And in their experiences of university support services:

No one told me who to speak to regarding my access needs. I was denied a Disabled Student's Support Recommendations (DSSR) report, as a letter from my surgeon wouldn't suffice. Goalposts were constantly moved.

Lee's piece concludes with a call for identity-first education. Much as Deuchar (2022) challenges us to move the conversation from 'experiences' to 'practices,' Lee reminds us that "I cannot just be a student with disabilities, a student who identifies as transgender, a student with caring responsibilities. [...] Regardless of whether we prefer identity-first or person-first language, we must focus on identity-first education."

Both pieces demand change—indeed, every piece in this collection of student-led scholarship demands change. But the power of these pieces doesn't come from slogans, politicizing, or the loudest voices; it comes from reflection, empathy, compassion. They are a reminder that for change to happen, we must listen to our students' stories, genuinely hear what they are telling us about what they have encountered, advocate for them, and be their ally.

## References

- Deuchar, A. (2022). The problem with international students' 'experiences' and the promise of their practices: Reanimating research about international students in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 48, 504–518. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3779>
- Felten, P., Abbot, S., Kirkwood, J., Long, A., Lubicz-Nawrocka, T., Mercer-Mapstone, L., & Verwoord, R. (2019) Reimagining the Place of Students in Academic Development. *The International Journal for Academic Development*, 24(2): 192–203.
- Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). Engagement through Partnership: Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. York: The Higher Education Academic. Available at <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/engagement-through-partnership-students-partners-learning-and-teaching-higher>
- Lee, A. (2023). Identity-First Education. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 40. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss40/17/>
- Mutambo, N. (2023). The Only. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 40. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss40/9/>
- Tong, V. C. H., Standen, A., & Sotiriou, M. (Eds.) (2018). Shaping Higher Education with Students: Ways to Connect Research and Teaching. London: UCL Press. <https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/95121>