

# SMALL AND SPECIALIST UNIVERSITY APPROACH TO EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY - THE GUILDHE ANTI-RACISM PROJECT



KATE WICKLOW, GUILDHE

Distinction and Diversity  
in Higher Education



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GuildHE is an officially recognised representative body for UK Higher Education, championing distinction and diversity in the sector. Our 55+ members include universities, university colleges, further education colleges and specialist institutions. Member institutions include some major providers in professional subject areas including art, design and media, music and the performing arts; agriculture and food; education; business and law, theology, the built environment; health and sports.

## Executive Summary

This brief considers how small and specialist higher education providers in England have approached creating an inclusive learning community, particularly focusing on ethnically diverse students. It is written from the perspective of a white, working-class woman who has worked as a policy advisor on the student experience for 15 years and is an ally to students and staff of colour. It notes that sector efforts are surrounded by controversy and sometimes viewed by politicians or the media as either misunderstood, deliberately positioned as “wokery” or against the principles of free speech. Yet there is substantial evidence and a regulatory requirement to improve the student experience and outcomes of diverse students. Through the models of anti-racism and allyship, GuildHE has created a package of support for small and specialist institutions to navigate the complexities of institutional change. This brief provides examples of how our members have made positive steps to become more inclusive, thoughtful, knowledgeable and impactful and provides recommendations to government, HEIs and individuals to continue to improve experiences and outcomes for students.

Emerald Group Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane  
Bingley BD16 1WA, United Kingdom

**T** +44 (0) 1274 777700

**F** +44 (0) 1274 785201

**E** [emerald@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:emerald@emeraldinsight.com)

## Introduction

There is a strong evidence base to show that students of colour do not have a student experience comparable to white students. The black attainment gap in England currently sits at 18.3% and, whilst this has narrowed since 2015, there is still a great deal more to do to improve the student experience for our diverse student body. To support this work, GuildHE is supporting small and specialist HE institutions to navigate the complexities of institutional change to tackle the awarding gap; this brief provides examples of how our members have made positive steps to become more inclusive, thoughtful, knowledgeable and impactful.

## The Political Background

Since the murder of George Floyd in the United States of America sparked an international conversation on systemic racism, there has been a widespread reflection on organisational policies and practices in HE to ensure they are more impactful in reducing disadvantage. Yet the British government has continually pushed back on organisations and activities which aim to address the barriers to equality, and has given the impression of preferring a “culture war” that pits appeals to freedom of speech over honest conversations about structural racism. The Minister of State for Universities, Michelle Donelan, wrote to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in June 2022 warning that participation in the Race Equality Charter might be at odds with creating an environment where “free speech and academic freedom can flourish” (Donelan, 2022). The new Minister for Higher Education, Robert Halfon, also used his first speech to reference the ongoing conversations in the media surrounding sector attempts to ensure academic curriculums are diverse by calling it “decolonising nonsense” (Halfon, 2022).

## The Evidence Base

Whilst there is an ideological battle between the media, politicians and the sector regarding our actions to address historical racial prejudices and inequalities, the data shows there is a clear disparity between the academic experience and outcomes of ethnically diverse students in comparison to their white peers. Official statistics from the HE regulator the Office for Students (OfS) show a clear degree awarding gap for non-white students and, as a consequence, the sector is being monitored through Access and Participation plans to ensure this gap is closing (OfS, 2021):

**Table 1: Percentage difference between students of colour who gained a 1st or 2:1 compared to white students in England 2019-20.**

Student group	Full-time gap	Part-time gap
Black	18.3pp	37.8pp
Asian	7.7pp	30.3pp
Mixed	3.6pp	17.0pp
Other	9.9pp	28.0pp

Progress, whilst slow, has been impactful and the gap has narrowed from 24.7% in 2015-16 to 18.3% in 2019-20.

Further evidence of a problem is captured in the Equality and Human Rights Commission research which found

widespread evidence of racial harassment on UK Campuses (EHRC, 2019). Therefore, we cannot as a sector stop our work on racial equality simply because of a political ideology and a misrepresentation of the principles of free speech.

## Supporting Sector Progress

GuildHE, the formal representative body for smaller and specialist HE providers in the UK, has been playing our part to support the sector in improving the experiences of staff and students through our Anti-Racism and Allyship programme. Our members are a little different from traditional ideas of a university in that many of them are much smaller and are often situated in rural/coastal locations, which means they have different diversity issues from large providers in big cities. Our work has included training and discussions on allyship for all staff in our member institutions, briefings capturing the evidence base for systemic inequalities, storytelling, student engagement and governance.

## Small and Specialist Activities

Many of our HEIs are smaller and therefore have very small data to develop research hypotheses. The [University of Winchester](#) has been working collaboratively with two large HEIs on a joint research project to better understand the lived experience of black and Asian students, which has enabled them to develop specific targeted support to improve the student experience in their institution.

We have also found a key feature of successful EDI programmes has been to ensure openness and transparency on what is being committed to, such as the approach taken by [Buckinghamshire New University](#) and [Arts University Bournemouth](#). This ensures that the institution stays accountable to its diverse population and enables conversations across the institution.

Storytelling and understanding the lived experience of a diverse academic community is vital to impactful change. Importantly, intersectionality - for example highlighting how the lived experience of a black man is different from a black woman - should help allies to recognise structural bias and therefore challenge exclusionary behaviours. Many of our members, consequently, have inclusion strategies which recognise the intersection between various personal characteristics as well as the role economic disadvantage plays in the equality of opportunities and outcomes for students more broadly.

[Leeds Arts University](#) has also been clear that those with lived experiences of oppression should take the lead in developing the actions which are needed to address systemic barriers, supported by the genuine engagement of the wider staff and student population. Whilst black voices should drive forward change, we must also recognise the substantial emotional load we place on our ethnically diverse colleagues, especially where in the past little action has been taken as a result of their feedback and engagement. There must therefore be a balance between understanding lived experiences of staff and students, putting in the work ourselves to better understand oppression and inequalities, and making a genuine commitment to cultural change.

## Implications

Since the programme's inception we have learned much about how to embed meaningful change. Simply put, we

need high-level buy-in from senior leaders and governors, but it is as important that all staff and students need to be actively learning and reflecting in order to make substantial changes to behaviours that embed a truly inclusive culture. We need to create academic communities that are comfortable talking about personal experiences and be open to new ways of thinking. We must also be mindful of the emotional load we place on people from diverse backgrounds to tell their stories and drive forward change. Inclusion is everyone's responsibility, not just the HR director or the black staff/students committee and it's important that this work is recognised as ongoing, not a time-limited project group.

There are many different charters and expectations placed on universities to create inclusive learning environments and, as we recognise that everyone's lived experience is slightly different, intersectionality has played an important part in our conversations thus far. Therefore, we think that viewing race in isolation is not the best approach.

We must also, of course, ensure we have the right balance between freedom of expression and safety for students and staff.

If you would like to find out more about GuildHE's work and to read our briefings, please visit:

<https://guildhe.ac.uk/guildhe-anti-racism-project/>

## Recommendations

Government and the HE regulator must:

- Recognise that there are systemic barriers to equality of educational opportunities and outcomes, and acknowledge that balancing our duties to ensure free speech and academic freedom whilst addressing these inequalities is complex.

HEIs must:

- Take a whole institution approach to culture change and empower staff and students to learn, reflect and improve their understanding of inequalities, be transparent, and take action where required.
- Look specifically at how diverse communities can actively help shape organisational strategy and influence practice and create a learning environment where all students regardless of background feel safe, supported and valued.
- Ensure everyone, including those from marginalised groups, should be free to speak up without fear of harassment or discrimination - which should never be tolerated or excused.

We all must:

- Take responsibility for our own knowledge and understanding of issues of equality and commit to learning in order to become effective allies and compassionate citizens. It is not enough to simply 'not be racist' - action is needed to ensure we are effective allies.

## Contact details

Dr Kate Wicklow, GuildHE

[kate.wicklow@guildhe.ac.uk](mailto:kate.wicklow@guildhe.ac.uk)

## References/Further Reading

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