National Civic Impact Accelerator

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Developing the Civic University Mission:

Lessons from Race Equality Initiatives in Higher Education

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About NCIA:

The National Civic Impact Accelerator (NCIA) is an ambitious three-year programme to gather evidence and intelligence of what works, share civic innovations, and provide universities with the framework and tools to deliver meaningful, measurable civic strategies and activities. The programme, partly funded by Research England, will create collaboration and policy and practice innovation involving universities, local government and business groups, and the community sector to drive place-based transformations.

About CRESR:

Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) is one of the UK's leading policy research centres. It seeks to understand the impact of social and economic disadvantage on places and people.

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Summary

The civic university and anti-racist university missions are long-term abstract concepts, representing a sense of purpose, and an appropriate response to wider societal inequalities. In the context of the United Kingdom, these challenges encompass discussions regarding the value of higher education and broader societal disparities.

This paper sets out to understand the factors and systems driving race equality changes in UK universities with the overarching purpose of providing insights to facilitate the development of the civic university mission. To achieve this goal, the paper utilises Donella Meadows' leverage points approach as a lens through which to examine systems change in Higher Education Institutions (HEI). I also draw from personal reflections as a researcher in the Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) field, to observe factors and systems that have led to race equality changes in UK universities that the civic university mission could replicate or learn from.

The paper is structured as follows:

- It introduces the anti-racist university and civic university missions as long-term concepts, with a central aim of driving positive societal change.
- It then provides a review of Donella Meadows' leverage points approach as a lens through which to examine systems change.
- The next section outlines three areas of change in race inequality in universities: equality legislation, addressing the BAME attainment gap, and decolonising the curriculum. Using the leverage points framework, I will consider which aspects of system change they sought to address, and whether change happened or not.
- Section four draws from my personal reflections as a researcher in the Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) field.
- Finally, the paper considers transferable learning for the civic university mission.

1. Introduction

The anti-racist university and civic university missions are long-term abstract concepts, an expression of purpose, and an appropriate response to wider societal inequalities. In the UK context, striking similarity between the two missions can be found within the social impact domain of the civic university framework[1], which examines potential ways universities can bridge and reduce social divides and improve the quality of life of different communities, including the most disadvantaged (Civic University Network, 2021).

Inequality within higher education mirrors the disparities in the broader UK society. This is evident on university campuses, where broader political and social realities influence the experiences and behaviours of both staff and students (UUK, 2019). While institutions like the NHS have made strides in addressing injustices and inequalities faced by ethnic minorities, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have struggled to tackle these issues (UUK, 2019). A notable disparity within higher education is the gap between White students and students from Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds in obtaining a 'good degree', defined as a first- or upper-second-class degree. Among 2017-18 university graduates, the gap was 13% (UUK, 2019).

The above figures make an urgent case for re-making the academy into a more racially equitable space. Within the last decade, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives in higher education have responded by focusing on calls to decolonise the curriculum - to reflect a greater representation of non-Eurocentric views in the modules taught at universities, and promoting a greater awareness of some of the inequalities within higher education relating to access, representation, and the attainment gap. A related area in the context of re-making the university is the civic university mission. The mission is described by John Goddard as follows:

[1] The civic university framework was created by the civic university network as a way to assess universities' civic activities. See https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Civic-Activity-Framework.pdf

> *We understand universities' civic mission as their commitment to bettering the local and regional communities of which they are part. A civic mission is an acknowledgement that universities have an obligation to act in this way, and civic engagement is the process by which this is achieved (Goddard et al., 2018).*

The civic university mission is a commitment to re-shape universities' roles and responsibilities to their communities, by working with strategic partners to ensure that a university's geographic role is used more effectively as an agent to drive positive societal change. As the civic university mission continues to evolve, there are factors and systems that have led to race equality changes in UK universities that the civic mission could replicate or learn from.

Scholars of race equality have called for transformational change to the prevailing inequalities in higher education. One framework that could facilitate such transformative system change is Donella Meadows' leverage points approach to systems change (Meadows, 1999). Drawing on this framework and my observations and experiences within the EDI field, this paper demonstrates how leverage points could be used to study race equality changes in UK universities, and examines whether the civic university mission can replicate or learn from these changes. In the following section, I will explore the leverage points framework as a way of thinking about system change, with a focus on how it can be applied to study change in higher education. Section 3 will apply the leverage points framework to three areas of change in race inequality in universities. The three areas are: equality legislation, addressing the BAME attainment gap, and decolonising the curriculum. Section 4 will discuss my personal reflections based on observations and experiences as a researcher in the EDI field. In the concluding section 5, I identify learnings to be transferred into universities' civic activities.

2. The leverage points framework as a way of thinking about system change

The leverage points framework for system change was created by Donella Meadows in 1999, who defined leverage points as places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything (Meadows, 1999). Meadows (2008) explores how to improve the effectiveness of interventions to improve systems' behaviours and concludes that the key to successful intervention is identifying the leverage points where relatively minor alterations can effect a substantial change to a system's behaviour. The leverage points framework describes the most and least effective types of interventions in a system (Meadows, 2008, 145-165).

The following are Meadows' (1999: 3) 12 leverage points in order of effectiveness:

1. Power to transcend paradigms.
2. Mindset or paradigm that the system — its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters — arises from.
3. Goals of the system.
4. Power to add, change, evolve, or self-organize system structure.
5. Rules of the system (such as incentives, punishment, constraints).
6. Structure of information flow (who does and does not have access to what kinds of information).
7. Gain around driving positive feedback loops.
8. Strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the effect they are trying to correct against.
9. Length of delays, relative to the rate of system changes.
10. Structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport network, population age structures).
11. The size of buffers and other stabilizing stocks, relative to their flows.
12. Constants, parameters, numbers (such as subsidies and standards).

While the framework can help us understand how to create fundamental systems change, there are challenges associated with defining some of the leverage points and using them

effectively (Koskimäki, 2021). This is unsurprising, giving that Meadows' use of the leverage points focuses on all systems at an abstract level, identifying common shared properties that could be used to change the dynamics or outcomes of the systems.

For this reason, this paper will focus on using the leverage points with clear relation to systems change within higher education institutions. In the next section, I will look at three areas of change in race inequality in universities: equality legislation, addressing the BAME attainment gap, and decolonising the curriculum. Using the leverage points framework, I will consider which aspects of system change they sought to address, and whether change happened or not. The areas of change considered here will not be examined as leverage points in themselves. Rather, I will examine how these areas tap into leverage points when they influence one or more aspects of the ('racially unequal') university system structure.

3. Applying the leverage points framework to race equality initiatives

The BAME attainment gap is the most visible indication of racial inequality in higher education institutions in the UK. The gap refers to the difference between the number of White students and students from Black, Asian, or minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds in obtaining a 'good degree,' defined as a first- or upper-second-class degree. Among 2017-18 graduates, the gap was 13% (UUK, 2019). The collective efforts of academics, professional staff, and students to address the gap illustrate the power to change and transcend paradigms, and power of a system structure to add, change, evolve, or self-organise (leverage points 1, 2 and 4). Meadows argues that paradigm change is the most powerful tool in whole-system change, but the hardest shift to achieve: 'people who have managed to intervene in systems at the level of paradigm have hit a leverage point that totally transforms systems' (Meadows, 1999: 18). In implementing paradigm change, Meadows suggests effective collaboration with open minded people and active change agents:

> *'In a nutshell, you keep pointing at the anomalies and failures in the old paradigm, you keep coming yourself, and loudly and with assurance from the new one, you insert people with the new paradigm in places of public visibility and power. You don't waste time with reactionaries; rather you work with active change agents and with the vast middle ground of people who are open-minded.' (Meadows, 1999: 18).*

As a result of the development of equitable partnerships, and collaboration among academics, professional staff and students, the BAME attainment gap has closed since the publication of the Universities UK (2019) report, which recommended that the higher education sector must form meaningful partnerships to address the problem. In the latest data from Universities UK (2022: 3), we see a reduction of the gap by 4.4%, from 13.2% in 2017/18 graduates to 8.8% in 2020/21. The new report suggests that a whole-university approach, with creation of equitable partnerships between students and staff, has been an effective way of removing the gap. It is worth noting that the concept of equitable partnership is used in the higher education sector to describe the need for fairer global north-south research relationships. In the context of tackling racial inequality in higher education, it seeks to address power imbalances and ensure there is mutual participation and equal value placed on the contributions of partners

seeking change. Referencing the positive impact of forming partnerships, recent reports on equality in higher education illustrate how the BAME attainment gap is closing (Aldercotte, 2022). In addition, the number and proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds at university continue to increase (AdvanceHE, 2020). Buttressing this point is the overall representation of individuals identified as Black, Asian and minority ethnic, which has increased from 8.6% of all staff in 2003-04 to 16.3% of all staff in 2020-21 (Aldercotte, 2022). In undergraduate studies, the proportion of students identifying as Black is 4.9%, surpassing the 3.0% representation of the Black population in the UK (Missing Elements, 2022).

While these figures represent positive changes, it is important to note that existing studies continue to raise concerns about racial inequalities in higher education (Arday and Mirza, 2018). Black representation at higher academic levels is low. Among all postgraduate research students, 16.8% are from BAME backgrounds, just 4% of which are Black (Leading Routes, 2019: 4). The underrepresentation is particularly pronounced in the chemical sciences. A recent report funded by the Royal Society of Chemistry revealed that only 1.4% of postgraduate chemistry students, 1.0% of non-professorial academic chemistry staff, and 0% of chemistry professors identify as Black.[2] In addition, BAME students continue to be more likely to be disengaged, isolated, and less motivated than white students, and have the feeling of not belonging in the university (Bunce et al., 2021). So, while efforts to address the BAME awarding gap have seen some positive results relating to Meadows' leverage point 4 (change, evolve, or self-organize system structure), the figures cited above speak to Meadows' caution that paradigms are difficult to change (leverage points 1 and 2). As she indicates, paradigms might be changed by repeatedly and consistently pointing out anomalies and failures in the current paradigm to those with open minds. It is thus important for universities to not become

[2] Note that while we have more information on attainment gaps at undergraduate level and significant ethnic and racialised disparities, there is relative lack of information for Black students on postgraduate study. National statistics on undergraduate degrees awarded by UK higher education institutions are collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). HESA does not collect data on the attainment of postgraduate students, and hence little is known about the attainment of postgraduate students from ethnic minorities.

complacent in their mission to close the attainment gap. The collective effort and conversations must continue.

While the question of addressing the BAME attainment gap has gained support from academics, professional staff and students, the commitment to decolonise the curriculum (another initiative created to support the anti-racist university mission) has received relatively little support from the academic community. The movement to decolonise the curriculum is predominantly viewed as student led. It involves examining the Eurocentric limitations and biases of the current curriculum; the omissions in teacher education and training; and the political and societal legacies of colonialism and how they have influenced education policies. As with the BAME attainment gap, decolonising the curriculum illustrates the power to change and transcend paradigms, and the power of a system structure to add, change, evolve, or self-organize (leverage points 1, 2 and 4). While the decolonisation movement has raised awareness of the Eurocentric limitations and biases of the university curriculum, there is little to no indication to suggest change has happened. As of 2020, only a fifth of UK universities had committed to decolonise their curriculum.

This section has observed how universities have responded to demands for racial equality and access in the academy, and attempted to make internal changes by addressing the BAME attainment gap and decolonising the curriculum. Though these approaches have become increasingly common in UK universities, it is important to note that academic studies on diversity within higher education have been critical. Arday (2018) suggests that university efforts to promote ethnic equality are frequently given low priority by senior university stakeholders who are responsible for advancing equality initiatives. More so, universities have been accused of prioritising the equality agenda when tangible rewards and positive external exposure are to be gained (Tate & Bagguley, 2017). This raises concerns about the effectiveness of current strategies in addressing racial inequalities.

Racial equality changes in higher education can be seen as a process which involves not only institutional factors but external factors. An illustration of this process can be seen in the role of equality legislation in effecting change. Two relevant legislative instruments serving this purpose are The Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) and the Equality Act (2010). These laws are not only useful in addressing inequality in the society, but they have also become instruments of regulating universities' modus operandi, serving as a yardstick to measure

equality and diversity. To this end, equality legislation taps into Meadows' leverage point 5, the rules of the system.

The Equality Act 2010 was enacted in the UK against the acknowledgement of prevailing inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage that previous legislation failed to eradicate (Equality Act 2010, Part 1). The Equality Act lists nine 'protected characteristics' that lead to discrimination, which include 'race'.[3]

The Race Relations Amendment Act (2000), on the other hand, makes promoting race equality a duty under law, meaning that all public bodies must have a race equality policy, which must be made available as public documents. The Act thus places a specific statutory duty on public institutions to prepare, maintain and fulfil a written statement of their Race Equality Policy, and assess and monitor the impact of these policies.

While the existence of this legislation illustrates Meadows' leverage point 5, i.e. rules of the system, race equality scholars have questioned its effectiveness. Despite the existence of the Equality Act (2010), evidence suggests that BAME staff and students continue to experience significant disadvantage in HE in comparison to their white counterparts (Leading Routes, 2019; Mirza, 2018). Pilkington (2013) observes that these 'superficial' approaches often serve as a facade, concealing the underlying issues that enable racial inequality to persist and thrive within institutions, through both overt and covert discriminatory mechanisms present in the institution. Similarly, Ahmed (2012) argues that equality legislation, tasked with dismantling inequality and discrimination, often fall short of its objective. According to Bhopal (2014), legislation fails because the infrastructures for implementing equality initiatives by university institutions are often weak, as this issue has historically had low priority. Bhopal's (2014) study examines the experiences of male and female professors from BAME backgrounds who hold senior leadership positions in universities in England and the USA. The report produced asserts that despite recent policy changes in the UK, such as the Equality Act 2010, a significant majority of participants consistently faced marginalisation and exclusion based on

[3] The other eight characteristics are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

racism. The BAME participants in this study described their experiences within academia as being positioned as ‘outsiders’ and ‘others’ (Bhopal, 2014).

Beyond critiquing the efficacy of the Equality Act 2010, a sustained critical assessment of university policies and approaches to equality is found in Ahmed’s (2007) *Politics of documentation, Race Equality Charter and Race Relations Act*. Ahmed examines how the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000) has shaped a new politics of documentation, which takes diversity and equality as measures of institutional performance (Ahmed, 2007).

The study concludes that documents are taken up as signs of good performance, as expressions of commitment and as descriptions of organisations as being diverse, but ultimately work to conceal forms of racism. It is however worth noting that some national schemes that specifically target racial inequality seem to have produced more promising results in changing system rules. A good example is the AdvanceHE Race Equality Charter, which provides a framework for university institutions to examine, identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers which disadvantage minority ethnic staff and students. It is encouraging to note that a growing number of universities in the UK have expressed their dedication to eliminating racism and structural inequalities by joining the charter. As of 2023, a total of 101 universities in the UK are members of the Charter. By becoming members of this charter, the universities demonstrate their long-term commitment to promoting race equality.

4. Personal reflections as an EDI researcher

My experience as a researcher in the EDI field has shown that race equality in universities will not be achieved easily, and it is unlikely to be attained through the implementation of one-size-fits-all initiatives. The limitations of the all-encompassing approach can be seen in the use of the 'BAME' grouping when identifying disadvantaged communities and designing appropriate initiatives - certainly not all groups who identify as Black, Asian or minority ethnic can be characterised as disadvantaged. There is a need to formulate initiatives for individual ethnic groups. It is also imperative to create an anti-racist culture within higher education institutions, where anti-racism becomes part of the professionalism of staff, the code of conduct for students and is embedded in working relationships with the external community. The anti-racist university would ensure staff from ethnic minority backgrounds have equitable opportunities in terms of recruitment, retention, and success. Also, students from minority backgrounds would be given equitable opportunities to succeed, the curriculum would be decolonised to reflect the increasingly diverse student populations, and the BAME awarding gap would be closed.

The anti-racist university must have a decolonised curriculum. In section two, I examined the commitment to decolonise the curriculum, and noted the limited support it has garnered from the academic community. The movement to decolonise the curriculum is generally seen as a radical movement within race equality studies. A notable barrier faced by this movement to achieving university-wide appeal, as I have written while working at the Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence, is the danger that it may become politicised and appropriated to an adversarial 'for and against' movement. Indeed, with the Black Lives Matter and Rhodes Must Fall movements, we have seen how the media has divided public opinion over issues of race and Britain's colonial past. Within the academy, the call to decolonise the curriculum remains controversial, and not particularly popular. The opinion of one academic, which is not uncommon according my personal experience, is that decolonisation is 'a campaign to promote ethnic minority thinkers in place of 'male, pale and stale' academics'.

A further hindrance to change is the lack of a clear (and shared) understanding of the problems of racial inequality in higher education. From personal experience, a significant number of staff and students in universities have ambivalent or hostile attitudes to anti-racist and race equality strategies. They often perceive the existing system as fair and are concerned that new measures may be biased in favour of minority ethnic groups over white staff and students. This

is not unrelated to the attitude of universities being risk-averse when making anti-racist statements. My experience of the first anniversary of the murder of George Floyd exemplifies this point. Because of a lack of shared understanding on race equality strategies among staff, the university where I was a member of its Equality unit in 2021 failed to reach a consensus on whether to make a public statement to mark the event. The members of staff who objected argued that the statement would pander to and favour a fraction - i.e., Black students and staff - of the university's minority ethnic groups, and make the majority White students and staff feel uncomfortable.

5. Transferable learning for universities' civic activities

As the civic university mission continues to evolve, it is important that it learns from the anti-racist university mission, that change is less common within the academy when an intervention lacks substantial support and struggles to foster partnerships. Another lesson to learn is to highlight the importance of international networks**.** The anti-racist university movement in the UK has struggled to adapt learning from other parts of the world (Law, 2017). An international network would allow for learning from other countries, for example the work of the decolonising the curriculum movement in South Africa, and developments in affirmative action in the United States.

Another key learning point for the civic university mission, which is related to the importance of legislation, is that external initiatives tend to promote a culture of box-ticking and bureaucracy instead of change. On the other hand, national schemes such as the Race Equality Charter provide a more conducive atmosphere for change to occur. The strength of a national scheme is the opportunity it gives institutions to form partnerships – to examine, identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers which disadvantage minority ethnic staff and students.

Finally, diversity and equality within the university context have become 'things' that can be measured, along with other performance outcomes. A good example of this process is the creation of equality units and the production of toolkits, both viewed as exemplifiers of good practice. This can create complacency on the part of universities, making it difficult to address the real issue of racial inequality. As the civic university mission continues to evolve, it is important that a lot of thinking be put into how and whether to 'quantify' the civic impact of universities. As observed, given the diverse ways that civic missions are conceptualised and operationalised, league tables and assessment of universities' economic impact fail to capture either the breadth or the depth of universities' civic engagement (Civic University Network, 2021).

The civic university mission should be receptive to change in its conceptualisation and understanding. Race equality is a fluid concept with different interpretations and understandings that constantly change. Practitioners and researchers in this field have in recent years argued for the adoption of the concept of 'equity' to replace equality, and that

equity (and not equality) is needed if we are to create diverse, inclusive cultures, where everyone feels they belong. While both equality and equity attempt to correct systems and remove barriers, equity recognises that we are not all the same, that needs are different, sometimes as a consequence of previous exclusionary practices and policies.

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