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Addressing racial inequalities in higher education: equity, inclusion and social justice

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ABSTRACT

Inequalities in higher education continue to exist in access to certain types of universities and in degree attainment. Despite significant changes in policy making and the student body such inequalities remain pervasive. In this essay, I explore how inequalities in access to elite universities continue to exist for those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, in both the UK and the USA. I suggest that gaining a place at an elite university is related to access to social and cultural capital. In order to address these inequalities, we must question and challenge a system that values class and status which continues to serve the needs of the few rather than the many.

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Inequalities in higher education continue to exist in access to certain types of universities and in degree attainment. Despite significant changes in policy making and the student body such inequalities remain pervasive. The type of university students attend and the classification of degree they achieve have a significant impact on transitions from university and access to the labour market – which affect social mobility. Recent evidence suggests that there has been an increase in the numbers of black and ethnic minority students attending universities in the UK – and in the USA – but there are clear ethnic differences in the types of universities they attend (Equality Challenge Unit [ECU] 2016; Warikoo 2016).

The increase in the numbers of Black and minority ethnic students attending universities in the last ten years has been significant, with recent statistics showing that the greatest increase has been in the numbers of black students attending (ECU 2016). However, black students are less likely to receive a first class degree compared to their white peers and they are less likely to attend elite, Russell Group universities (Equality and Human Rights Commission [EHRC] 2016). In 2016, the Independent Schools Council estimated that 6.5

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per cent of school children in the UK attended independent schools compared to 93 per cent who attended state schools, yet of those attending independent schools a total of 40 per cent secured a place at Oxbridge (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/education-37250916>).

In the USA, recent statistics suggest that there has been an increase in the numbers of minority black and ethnic groups who are attending universities. In 2014, a total of 17.3 million undergraduate students were attending universities, of these 9.6 million were white, 3.0 million were Hispanic, 2.4 million were black, 1.0 million were Asian, 0.1 million were American Indian/Alaska Native and 0.1 were Pacific Islander. Between 2000 and 2014, there has been an increase in the numbers of Hispanic students attending universities (the numbers have more than doubled from 1.4 to 3.0 million). Those attending from black backgrounds also increased by 57 per cent (from 1.5 to 2.4 million) and the participation of white students increased by 7 per cent (from 9.0 to 9.6 million) (http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cha.asp).

As in the UK, there is evidence to suggest that elite universities in the USA are dominated by white students. Black African American and Latino students remain underrepresented in elite universities, in particular, black and Latino students are underrepresented in Harvard, Brown and other selective universities (Reardon, Baker, and Klasik 2012). Given the persistence of such inequalities in both the USA and UK, it is important to ask, why do these inequalities persist despite significant changes in the study body? In her new book, *The Diversity Bargain: And Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions and Meritocracy at Elite Universities*, Natasha K. Warikoo explores how elite universities have inclusive policies in place, yet those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds continue to be disadvantaged in access to elite universities. Warikoo suggests that the main ideals of success in the USA are founded on the belief in a meritocracy – that is to say that individuals should be rewarded for their achievements in which merit serves as a democratic ideal. It can be argued that the concept of meritocracy as one that is used to reproduce and legitimise class privilege or indeed a system that enables those already in positions of power to maintain their elite position and ensure that it is passed down from one generation to the next. But Warikoo suggests that Americans are more likely than others to believe that their society rewards merit which is defined by success in higher education. This in turn, will determine one's income and position in the labour market, and in society more generally.

Warikoo explores unequal access to elite universities through the use of “race frames”. Race frames are different ways of seeing the world through lenses. They explain how we observe, interpret and respond to the world around us. Our race frames are influenced by various different factors which include our history and our family experiences. Race frames can change over time and universities play a key role in shaping race frames, hence

they contribute to how we see the world and how we interpret it. Warikoo draws on four race frames; colour-blindness, diversity, power analysis and a culture of poverty.

A colour blind race frame is based on a perspective that ignores the role that race plays in perpetuating inequalities in society, despite evidence which suggests that this is the case in all areas of life. A diversity race frame views race as a cultural identity that shapes an individual's worldview and their cultural practices in positive ways. This race frame views people and cultural practices in positive ways and as members of racial and ethnic groups which are assumed to influence their cultural practices and ways of understanding the world. A power analysis is one that views the significance of race in society according to unequal power relations between different groups. It emphasizes the ways in which power operates through different racial inequalities. A culture of poverty race frame explores how the disadvantages faced by minority ethnic groups stem from a belief in different cultural characteristics that are attributed to the groups by the majority culture. Warikoo suggests that understanding the different race frames that students use is essential to understanding how they themselves understand and justify a system of meritocracy.

Warikoo's research argues that in elite universities in the USA, students are aware that racial diversity is important for their learning experiences, whilst they are at college. Furthermore, some even suggest that diversity programmes should be explicitly used in order that students can understand the roots and effects of racial inequality in the US society. Warikoo suggests that students have complex ideas about admissions processes and most believe that evaluations of merit should be calibrated according to the applicant's individual circumstances. White student's beliefs about race and meritocracy lead to what Warikoo refers to as the "diversity bargain".

In the USA (unlike in the UK), racial diversity is considered to be one of the defining features of a university, particularly how universities are ranked in terms of their curricula and how they address issues of equity and diversity. Of course in the USA (unlike the UK), affirmative action policies exist in universities to address discrimination based on race and gender. Many selective private and public universities use affirmative action policies and there is evidence to suggest that there are significant benefits for all students when affirmative action is used (Lowery et al. 2006). In Warikoo's research, students of colour expressed support for affirmative action in order to calibrate evaluations of merit and rejected the colour blind frame. Whilst many of the white students supported affirmative action, they did so as long as it did not disadvantage them or threaten their position at university. Warikoo suggests that,

... there are academic and civil benefits to racial diversity on campus, showing that cross-racial interactions are associated with increased self-reported intellectual abilities, increased self-reported ability to get along with other race groups, increased interest in promoting racial understanding, and reduced inter group prejudice for students of all racial backgrounds. (2016, 18)

Within university practices, a diversity bargain is taking place.

Underrepresented minority students can be admitted under affirmative action with lower ... scores as long as those students then contribute to the educational experiences of their peers by not getting rewards "over" white peers and by integrating so that collective merit of the cohort can enrich everyone's education. (2016, 14)

This further perpetuates the belief that many white students who attend elite universities feel that they are there because they have earned their place and right to be there, rather than a belief that they inherited it. "... the focus on personal benefits of affirmative action in contrast to a more compensatory goal ignores the historical and structural discrimination that continues to affect racial minorities today and suggests that racial inequality and discrimination are no longer significant" (Warikoo 2016, 111).

When exploring the moral imperatives of diversity, Warikoo focuses on analysing student's moral identities. Students own moral identities were focussed around *not being racist* which led to particular ways of seeing and doing. Many of the students were aware of the heightened sense of race on campus, yet interracial dialogue about race inequality was rare because of the fear from whites of being seen as racist. As Warikoo pertinently says,

The shame of our collective history, and the desire to avoid identification with that history leads whites and people of color alike to identify strongly as "not racist". This imperative is especially salient for whites, because their white identities link them to racism historically, hence their status as "not racist" can quickly be questioned. (2016, 116)

The fear of being seen as racist, indicates that white students are less likely to interact with students of colour due to their diversity frame, because their diversity frame suggests that race will shape their world view. Students of colour are seen as holding authoritative and legitimate views on race, consequently white students feel they are not qualified to define racism,

In other words, the mere fear of being perceived as racist can lead whites to shy away from interacting with whites ... these perceptions are potent because the stakes are high: behaving or speaking in a racist manner is seen as a moral failure, akin to the moral failures of slavery and segregation. (Warikoo 2016, 117)

Warikoo suggests that such negative feelings can lead to segregated social networks on campus which signify the impact of social inequalities in society.

Warikoo also discusses access to elite universities in the UK such as Oxford. She argues that like those students in the USA, students in the UK elite universities also employ race frames; particularly, a colour blind race frame. British students were less likely than USA students to express positive feelings about diversity on campus, they were however more than twice as likely to employ a culture of poverty frame. Warikoo argues that a power analysis frame was absent at Oxford. She suggests that this may be due to the lack of institutional support for diversity at Oxford. Students at Oxford supported the notion of meritocracy and most believed that universities should not consider the background of applicants when making admissions decisions. British students did not support affirmative action whether by race or class. Rather, students at Oxford tended to frame meritocracy in the language of absolute, individual merit.

Unfortunately, the lack of expectation that the university will accommodate non-traditional students and their needs maintains a model for meritocracy at Oxford that reproduces social inequality. In other words, students imagined no role for Oxford in changing the pattern of minority and working class under enrolment and left it to the broader British society and education system to address the problem. (Warikoo 2016, 158)

According to Warikoo's research, the majority of white respondents in the USA spoke about a process of reverse discrimination in which they felt those from minority backgrounds were given special treatment. However, white students at Oxford did not feel the same moral imperative as students in the USA to *appear* non-racist or to fear the moral judgement of *being* racist. Warikoo argues that the different race frames that students navigate in the UK and the USA are used to defend the legitimacy of admissions criteria used at elite universities, as well as affirmative action and enabling students to make sense of what they see as being fair and just. Many students at Oxford felt that it was the primary and secondary education systems that were at fault in contributing to the under representation of minority students at elite universities, rather than Oxbridge itself.

What is clear in Warikoo's study is that elite universities in the USA are seen as examples of meritocracy. There is a belief that competition to attend elite universities is based on the belief that the system is fair and just. Whilst there is clear support for the system, there is also a lack of acknowledgement of the disadvantages that some students experience. By seeing the admissions process as being fair, students do not see the inequalities it perpetuates. The admissions system fuels a belief in fairness and vulnerability, whilst virtually guaranteeing privileged students a place to study at an elite selective university.

However, what is needed is a much fairer system of admissions which addresses merit, equity and inclusion. Warikoo suggests that firstly, we

must be clear in how we define the goals of meritocracy, secondly, we must address issues of race in admissions processes and thirdly, we must recognize that the process of meritocracy will always be incomplete. In the USA, calibration should be according to race, class and other circumstances in affirmative action, whereas in the UK we need a closer examination of the interview process to address bias at elite universities. For example, gaining a place at Oxbridge is not just about achieving the correct "A" level entrance grades, this is just part of the process. Warikoo also suggests that students have a responsibility themselves to think about and engage in issues of racial inequality, discrimination and power in elite universities in order that they themselves can develop tools for engagement and dialogue across racial lines. Finally Warikoo reminds us that a process of meritocracy will never be completely democratic, rather it will always be partial. Warikoo argues for a radical shift in the admissions process by adopting a lottery system. This is highly unlikely given the privileges associated with attending an elite university, furthermore, those from white middle-class backgrounds are hardly likely to give up their position of privilege and entitlement to one that is open to the many rather than the few.

As discussed, there is evidence to suggest that black and minority ethnic groups remain disadvantaged and experience discrimination in relation to their representation at elite, Russell Group universities. Elite universities work to maintain and protect their position of elitism and power. Consequently, they maintain their status by representing themselves as white and middle class, spaces reserved for those who are just like them. Inequalities in admissions processes such as unconscious bias maintain and preserve elite universities as the preserve of the white middle class. Indeed, it is not just the admissions processes that fail black and minority ethnic students. A recent report found that many black students feel rejected and let down by higher education institutions, particularly in relation to the Eurocentric curriculum, biased marking practices and hate crime on campuses, particularly racism (Bouattia, 2015).

Universities must listen to and address the challenges that black and minority ethnic students face in higher education. There is ample evidence to suggest that black and minority ethnic students' experience disadvantages at different stages; from admissions, their experience, whilst at university and in the class of degree they are awarded. However, few universities have policies and strategies in place to address these disadvantages. Universities must address the racism that takes place in their institutions which exists as part of the social structure of their organizations, and move away from a deficit focus which blames individuals rather than examining the institutional racism that forms part of the structures of higher education. A failure to acknowledge that racism and exclusionary practices exist in higher education, results in a failure on the part of universities to take action to address such

practices. Furthermore, universities must consider introducing mandatory unconscious bias training for all staff, at the very least staff who are involved in admissions processes such as interviews and other selection processes.

Access to good schools and colleges is related to access to cultural and social capital which enables the formation of social networks to reinforce those already in privileged positions to maintain, perpetuate and pass on these privileges to their children. Access to elite universities will always remain unequal and will continue to be dominated by elites who feel they have an entitlement to be there, it is their right and according to them one that they have earned. If we are to move towards an education system that values equity and social justice, we have a moral duty as educators to continue to disrupt and dismantle a system that continues to value class and status which serves the needs of the few, rather than the many.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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