



# **RACE AND ASSESSMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

**From Conceptualising Barriers  
to Making Measurable Change**

**PAUL IAN CAMPBELL**

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BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

# CONTENTS

<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
1. Introduction	1
<b>Part 1: Exploring the Lived Experiences of Race and Assessment in HE</b>	
2. White British Students' Experiences of Assessment	17
3. Black British Students' Experiences of Assessment	35
4. British South Asian Students' Experiences of Assessment	49
5. Conceptualising Inter- and Intra- Race-Based Barriers in Assessment	59
<b>Part 2: What Difference Does Racially Inclusive Assessment Make, and For Who?</b>	
6. The Effects of Racially Inclusive Assessment on the Race Award Gap and on Students' Lived Experiences of Assessment	73
7. Racially Inclusive Assessment and Academic Teaching Staff	101
8. Discussion and Concluding Comments	115
Afterword: 12 Years a Black Race Inclusion Academic – Some Reflections on Working in a 'Postracism' Space	133
Appendix. 'Policy Shorts': Mapping and 'Tackling' Racial Inequities in HE Assessment – Summarising the Case Study	151

<i>References</i>	175
<i>Index</i>	185

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AFL—Assessment for Learning  
APP—Access and Participation Plan  
FE—Further Education  
FIF—First in Family  
HE—Higher Education  
HEP—Higher Education Provider  
OFS—Office for Students  
PrAS—Pre-Assessment Support  
QAA—Quality Assurance Agency  
RAG—Race Award Gap  
RIPIAG—Racially Inclusive Practice in Assessment Guidance Intervention  
STEM—Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics  
TASO—The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes

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## INTRODUCTION

At the most rudimentary level, this book has two objectives: (1) to sketch out the assessment experiences of British-born undergraduate students of colour compared to their White peers, and (2) to provide an account of the measurable quantitative and qualitative effects of making assessment more racially inclusive on undergraduate students' and staffs' experiences in HE.

In doing so, this monograph is different from the majority of current education and sociology books that are focused on inclusion. It is not simply about providing a 'thick' description of a problem and using social theory to make sense of it (this is of course a noble objective in its own right, but too often seems to be the finish line for many education and inclusion-based studies). This book does more. It also provides you, the reader, with empirically substantiated guidance for what works in addressing the problem. In this case, it tells you how and why the experience of assessment is unequal for global majority undergraduate students in the UK *and* what we can do to change it. But this leads us to an obvious and important question, which might even be the initial reason why some of you picked up this book in the first place: What has race got to do with assessment? In my experience of leading race inclusion change across the higher education sector for the last half-decade, this is a surprisingly common question that must be addressed here at the outset. My own story is a useful place to attempt to formulate the answer.

My parents relocated to the United Kingdom from Jamaica in the 1960s. They were part of the movement of thousands of young British citizens from the Caribbean who answered the call to help rebuild the ‘mother country’, which had been quite literally battered by the Third Reich. Upon arrival, however, the Black women and men from the Caribbean faced blanket processes of race-based structural ghettoisations predominantly in employment and housing (Campbell, 2016). Their children faced structural and overt racisms in the British education system, which formally and informally classified them as educationally ‘subnormal’ (Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2021).

This backcloth meant that I, like many Black children during the 1970s and 1980s, grew up in a working-class household located in a socioeconomically challenged and racially diverse inner-urban locale. In my case, this was an East London Borough called Newham, which since the 1980s has been one of the country’s most racially diverse wards. This meant that my time in compulsory education was spent in classrooms with student populations where people of colour were the numerical majority. This was, however, where the racial diversity that characterised my early educative experiences started *and stopped*. For example, during my time in infant, primary and secondary school, I was taught by 4 Head Teachers, 3 Deputy Head Teachers, 10 Heads of Year and Deputy Heads of Year, 11 Form Tutors, 46 classrooms teachers and 10 teachers who doubled as sports-coaches. Out of the 84 teachers who spanned my 11 years in compulsory education, only 3 were people of colour. In addition to this, a largely racially intolerant education system and a predominantly middle-class, White and Eurocentric curriculum meant there were few opportunities to relate the education that I received to my own life and cultural identity in the same way that many of my White peers could.

These cleavages between my own biography and the educational diet offered, contributed to a general sense of disaffection throughout my school years. It, ultimately, culminated with me leaving compulsory education having sat only two GCSE exams and with no formal qualifications. This was despite the fact that I was in all ‘top set’ classes and frequently described by my teachers

as ‘extremely bright’ – albeit seemingly uninterested in my studies (This was an apt observation, I might add).

Returning to education to study sociology as a mature student of colour, nearly a decade later in 2003, little appeared to have changed in relation to the general Whiteness that characterised the British education system, the curriculum (in HE), and assessment processes. During 7 years as an undergraduate and postgraduate student, for example, I was never taught by a single person of colour. Moreover, despite its claims to explore aspects of our social identities such as gender, class, and race, there were few opportunities to relate, read about or apply my undergraduate training and burgeoning sociological imagination to my own lived experiences as a Black and working-class student in either the course readings, content, practice, or *assessment*.

In most cases, the faculty of educators that taught me possessed neither the racial diversity, racial literacy and/or the race-based pedagogical training to help me synthesise my general sociological training through the prism of race, class and late-modern Britain. My learning in HE took place at what I describe as an ‘epistemological distance’ (Campbell, 2022a, 2023). Put simply, for the most part, I had to learn about other people and from the perspective of other people.

In addition to this, and perhaps the most challenging aspect of this situation for me, was that when it came to ‘doing’ assessments, I had to construct answers to examinations and tests in ways that resonated and fitted with the Eurocentric world view of a White faculty, whose understandings of academic excellence, rigour and ‘accepted’ knowledge were often the product of their own raced and classed biographies and their location in the global north. This experience of assessment was expertly explained by the African Caribbean heritage, Labour MP, Dawn Butler (2023), who recalled that she once failed an oral presentation, because her White British teacher did not believe her that cockroaches could fly. She explains that she would have passed the presentation if her teacher’s own knowledge base extended beyond the confines of the White British experience. Put another way, if her teacher was not White and born in the UK but was Black and raised in the Caribbean, they would have known that Dawn’s story was true. *In Jamaica, cockroaches*

*fly!* Like Dawn, my eventual successes in assessment and in education in HE more widely took place in spite of, and not because of, my undergraduate sociology training.

Research on the sociology of race, inclusion and education demonstrates how these experiences described here were not localised to me, or to Britain in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. *The Guardian* newspaper, for example, reported that a 2023 study by Durham University found that students of colour are still unlikely to be taught by at least one teacher who ‘looks like them’ during their entire time in compulsory education (Ofori, 29 August 2023). My own work (Campbell, 2016, 2020; Campbell et al., 2021) and that of others, such as Wallace (2017), Bhopal and Myers (2023), and Advance HE (2021), make transparent how the experience described above still characterises the educative experiences of many students of colour in HE today, and manifests in unequal experiences of happiness and belonging.

The academe has been sensitive to *some* of the processes that I describe above. For example, significant attention has been given to the effects of studying a White and Eurocentric curriculum on differences in degree award outcomes and satisfaction between White and Black and racially minoritised students in higher education (see TASO, 2022a). However, seldom has attention been given specifically to the ways in which assessment is experienced unevenly by students of colour compared to White peers. This is despite assessment being arguably one of the most crucial of processes in education that determine student successes, failures and future opportunities for social mobility. Put another way, seldom has scholarly attention been given to critically examining the place of assessment within the colonial systems, processes and practices that impact unevenly on undergraduate students of colour. Neither has it been given to providing empirically substantiated guidance to help educators identify and mitigate these processes within their practice. This book is the first sociological case study to respond directly to this absence.

To achieve this, this case study draws on qualitative and quantitative data gleaned from two large three-year projects. The first, explored the contrasting experiences of assessment between students of colour and White peers and used this to develop the

*Racially Inclusive Assessment Guidance*. This was 20 recommendations for making assessment practice more racially inclusive. The second, developed the *Racially Inclusive Assessment Guidance* into the *Racially Inclusive Practice in Assessment Guidance Intervention* (RIPIAG). The intervention consisted of 4 practice-based teaching resources that were designed to be embedded into undergraduate modules (see Chapter 6 for full details). This study evaluated the effectiveness of the RIPIAG for improving the lived and everyday experiences of assessment for students of colour, and for reducing the race award gap that exists in assessment outcomes between students of colour and White peers, across three UK Higher Education Providers (HEPs). This project was generously sponsored by the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA's) Collaborative Enhancement Fund. The combined studies included focus group and semi-structured interviews with over 111 undergraduate students and 7 teaching staff, and the assessment performance data of over 175 undergraduate students.

Drawing on this body of research, this book represents an original and world-leading contribution to the discussion on race and education in three novel ways: (1) It is the first to empirically map the contrasting experiences and barriers experienced by British students of colour in assessment in UK HEPs. (2) It is the first to use these experiences to provide practitioners, policymakers and general audiences with empirically substantiated guidance on what works in relation to best practice in racially inclusive assessment. (3) It is the first scholarly work to offer an empirical account that details the impact of making assessment racially inclusive on racially minoritised students' qualitative experiences of assessment, and to equalising the quantitative race award gaps that they currently experience.

In sum, this monograph provides a much-needed starting point for a more meaningful and empirically substantiated discussion of what works and in what ways with regards to tackling race-based inequities in assessment. It is for educationalists, scholars, policymakers and anyone who is interested in how education works unevenly for people of colour in the UK and importantly, for those who want to know how to go about making assessment and HE more equitable for all. It is ultimately for those who endeavour to

see students of colour succeed because of, and not in spite of, how assessment and related practices work in HE.

#### ATTEMPTS TO CLOSE THE RACE AWARD GAP

Nationally in 2020, the aggregate race award gap (henceforth RAG) between the percentage of domicile undergraduate students of colour and their White peers achieving a ‘good degree’ (2.1 or above) in the UK was 9.9% (see Advance HE, 2021). Influenced by the Office for Students’ (OFS’s) decision to place the responsibility of addressing the RAG on individual HEPs in 2018, the last half a decade has seen the sector largely respond with efforts to neutralise the racial inequalities that manifest in course content or to ‘decolonise’ their curricula. This was also influenced by what Codioli-McMaster (2021) describes as an empirically unsubstantiated academic consensus, which holds that making taught curricula more racially inclusive will directly reduce the RAG (Advance HE, 2021; Arday et al., 2020). One consequence of the sector’s laser-like focus on curricula is that thus far, seldom have assessment and related practices been meaningfully explored as part of the processes that exclude students of colour and contribute to the RAG (Campbell et al., 2021).

My seminal report for the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO, 2022a) on the effects of making curricula racially inclusive underscores the importance of race-inclusion work focused on curricula *in a general sense*. Importantly, I also recommend caution for using this approach as a *sole or specific* response to RAGs (Campbell et al., 2022). The findings indicated that interventions aimed at pluralising course content are effective for increasing the quantitative levels of student satisfaction recorded in module evaluations. They are also efficacious for enhancing the relevance of course materials to the lives of students of colour and for improving their qualitative senses of belonging on their degree programmes. However, the findings also showed that the curricula-based intervention was less effective for directly reducing RAGs in a quantitatively significant way. In turn, I concluded that ‘tackling’ the racial exclusions and barriers that

manifest specifically within assessments were likely to be more directly impactful for achieving this outcome. Thus far, this book is the first case study to test this assertion.

## ASSESSMENT, RACE AND RACE AWARD GAPS

What do we know about how race-based barriers in assessment contribute to the race award gap in HE, so far? There is a burgeoning body of work that points to a direct causal relationship between assessment and related practices and the RAG in a general sense. Singh et al. (2022, p. 229), for example, proffer that UK HEPs are directly responsible for the RAG, and particularly through their ‘discriminatory styles of assessment and marking and insufficient support from scholars who can be biased’ against students of colour (see also Bunce et al., 2021; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Cramer (2021) points to the overuse of particular forms of assessment as another causal factor for the RAG in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)-based subjects. She elucidates that students of colour do not perform as well in exams as they do in coursework and thus, the alacrity of STEM subjects to employ exams as their primary mode of assessment contributes greatly to this situation.

The RAG and race-based inequities in assessment in particular are also influenced by racialised inequities within the wider educative experiences of undergraduate students in UK HEPs. Khuda and Kamruzzaman (2021), for example, highlight how a lack of racial diversity in course reading lists and materials place non-White students at a disadvantage in assessment (see also Abu Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021; Arday et al., 2020). Rana et al. (2022) draw attention to the role of academics within assessment inequity. They assert that the general lack of racial literacy and awareness of their own unconscious racial biases among teaching staff in HE directly contributes to minority ethnic students’ under and unequal performances in assessment – and to the RAG more widely.

Pointing to a lack of empirically substantiated explorations into the causes of RAGs and into what works for mitigating them, Codioli-McMaster (2021) argues that much of what the academe

currently knows about the relationship between race, assessment and RAGs are drawn from academic assumptions – and not from empirically substantiated interventions or evaluative data. This position is contrasted with a growing body of work and activity that have begun to map the causes – and offer some empirically substantiated solutions – for inequalities in assessment in relation to other protected characteristics and social divisions, such as social class, disability, mental health and (class-related) language barriers within HE assessment (Advance HE, 2022; Bianco, 2022; Hockings, 2010; TASO, 2022a).

The theme of assessment has featured, to varying degrees, as a part of the broader conversation on the experience of students of colour in UK HEPs. For example, studies have examined the influence of teacher (racial) bias(es) and stereotyping (Burgess & Greaves, 2013), Whiteness (Bhopal, 2018), and lower teacher expectations and lower feelings of belonging when compared to White students, on students of colour's assessment performances and outcomes (see MacNeill et al., 2015). Cousin and Cureton (2012) and Hinton and Higson (2017) have both highlighted the limited efficacy of 'anonymous' marking policies in mitigating the impact of these processes on assessment and degree outcomes. However, at the time of writing, there exists little empirical data on the ways in which assessment is experienced unevenly by students of colour or on why this inequity occurs. There is also a lack of evaluative work on the effectiveness of interventions for *measurably* improving the assessment experience of minority ethnic students in UK HEPs or for reducing the award gap. To our knowledge, this book is the first to provide a direct and empirically substantiated response to these gaps in the canon. To achieve these three objectives, the book is organised in the following way.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

To achieve the first two objectives, the first part of the book (*Chapters 2, 3 and 4*) deals with the following more specific research questions: What are the disaggregated assessment experiences of students of colour in UK HEPs, how are these complicated