

Black Lives Matter and the student voice

One year on, what can equality, diversity and inclusion practitioners in UK higher education learn from actions that followed the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020?

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1. Introduction

This report examines a sample of statements and actions undertaken by UK universities in response to Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that occurred in the UK and around the world from May 2020. One intention of this report is to ensure that momentum gathered during the summer of 2020 is not lost and that, more than one year on, universities are encouraged to evaluate their response to BLM and explore the need for further work in terms of anti-racist initiatives and their applicability to other types of intersectional injustice such as homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

Rather than assess to what extent universities took meaningful action in response to BLM or attempt to compare and contrast activities (or lack of activities), this report explores seven themes brought to the fore by BLM:

- + Culture and history
- + Listening and wellbeing
- + Training
- + Research funding, scholarships and internships
- + Tackling the awarding gap
- + Diversity and data
- + Race Equality Charter.

This report presents content analysis of statements made by universities in response to BLM followed by a presentation of activities designed to respond to the issues raised by the BLM movement. Its intention is to showcase some examples of activities undertaken in response to BLM, or already underway, and suggest how these activities might be adopted by other universities and/or expanded upon to address other types of intersectional injustice.

Importantly, what we might learn from BLM has implications for other equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives that seek to advance intersectional injustice in higher education (HE). BLM is a movement that seeks to address intersectional inequality and the oppression of Black people. While expanding work to address racial inequality, the proliferation of BLM initiatives in universities provides us with ideas and entry points to address other EDI challenges. The report concludes with a discussion of how BLM initiatives might similarly respond to issues of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia among university staff and students.

2. Black Lives Matter and higher education institutions in the UK

As a movement, Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013 in response to the fatal shooting of Black teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. A global network of liberators evolved with the mission to eradicate white supremacy and take action that advances freedom, liberation and justice for Black lives. At its core, the movement is intersectional and affirms the lives of ‘Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum’ (Black Lives Matter, 2021). It is also decentralised so when we speak about BLM we are not necessarily referencing the actions of an official or bounded organisation but an umbrella of activities and approaches.

George Floyd was murdered in the US city of Minneapolis on 25 May 2020, after a police officer pinned him to the floor, knelt on his neck and failed to move after repeated exclamations of ‘I can’t breathe’. This sparked a series of protests in major US cities and other locations around the world, galvanised under the campaign banner of Black Lives Matter. Floyd’s murder was not an isolated incident. Two months’ prior, aspiring nurse Breonna Taylor was shot dead in her house in Louisville, Kentucky by police in what they described as a ‘botched raid’. These incidents are just two examples of police brutality against Black people that inspired the need for change. In the UK, there are also examples of people of colour killed in incidents with the police, including the killing of Mark Duggan in North London in 2011 (a catalyst for subsequent riots across London and other English cities) and the death of Sheku Bayoh after being restrained by police officers in Kirkcaldy, Scotland in 2015 (for a more comprehensive discussion, see Adam Elliott-Cooper, 2021). More recently, and not related to the activities of the police, the death of transport worker Belly Mujinga, after being allegedly [spat on by a customer at Victoria Station in London](#), also raised questions about the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and racism.

Following Floyd’s murder and the eruption of BLM protests, several universities published statements on social media and their websites that expressed solidarity with Black students and staff. As more universities published statements, those that remained silent were put under pressure by students to ‘say something’ – with institutional silence read as support for the status quo. These developments were partly driven by students who – through student societies and representative groups – used social media, open letters, marches and gatherings to hold their universities to account and demand action on how they intend to address racial injustice in HE. A study conducted by Osaro Otopo, for the research Consultants Halpin, found that among respondents to their 2020 survey, the majority of universities issued an institutional statement, though this took many forms:

“Some decided to take a more personal approach with messages from leaders, including Vice-Chancellors, Pro-Vice Chancellors and Student Officers. The statements varied in length and content. Many used it to show that the values of the university do not support racism. Some directly referred to ‘Black Lives Matter’, some referred to racism, others spoke about BAME communities and some referred to diversity generally.”

(Otobo, 2020, p 8)

Although the substance of public statements differed, some expressed general solidarity whereas others noted specific initiatives underway or in development, there is nothing intrinsically good or bad about either approach. However, [when it was felt that these statements were not followed](#) by concrete actions they began to be interpreted as superficial and hollow. This was particularly true as none of the issues raised by BLM are new; they have existed for decades and are documented in multiple studies that senior leaders in the HE sector have historically failed to address. This evidence base of race inequality includes, but is not limited to, experiences of harassment and hate crime (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019); award, retention and success in undergraduate degrees and progression to postgraduate research (Advance HE, 2020b); underrepresentation of staff in certain job-types, contract-types, disciplines and seniority (Advance HE, 2020a); different racialised experiences of professional progression and recognition and award (Rollock, 2019); and different experiences of ‘othering’, belonging and safety (Arday and Mirza, 2018).

By focusing on a small sample of activities undertaken in response to BLM, this report does not suggest that this is ‘mission accomplished’ nor that the patchwork of responses across UK universities were adequate to address the scale of challenges that were brought to light. In her account of diversity work in HE, Sara Ahmed (Ahmed, 2007, p 591) described the activities of EDI practitioners and asked ‘How do the policies get translated into action in different contexts? What is the relationship between ‘doing the document’ and ‘doing the doing’? Or even, more simply, what do these documents do?’. If we think of universities’ BLM statements and supporting web pages and blog posts as ‘documents’, it becomes possible to review any gap between intentions and actions. When we view BLM public statements, web pages and blog posts as ‘documents’, institutional responses to BLM during the summer of 2020 can sit under this broader critique of diversity work in HE. In particular, when there exists a failure to backup ‘documents’ with actions, public statements on BLM become little more than institutional performances. As Ahmed, explains ‘we can see that documents create fantasy images of the organisations they apparently describe. The document says “we are diverse”, as if saying it makes it so” (Ahmed, 2007, p 607). The focus of this report is not to unpack gaps between statements and actions but acknowledge the existence of these gaps.

3. The voices of students and staff

To apply pressure on universities to engage with BLM, students and staff drafted and shared open letters that highlighted the silence of their institution and/or their frustration with the unwillingness of universities to take action. This bottom-up call to ‘say something’ also took the form of emails sent to Vice-Chancellors and other senior leaders, activity on social media and campus protests. For example, at the University of Nottingham, eight student societies [penned an open letter](#) that noted:

“Silence is compliance and this is no longer an option, it is time for the University to do more and do better.”

Another [high-profile letter](#) was organised by researchers Keston Perry, Richard Itaman and Angelique Golding and sent to the UK government, the Office for Students, Universities UK, funders, learned societies and Advance HE. Signed by over 380 Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) academics, students, professional support staff and allies who work or have recently worked in UK HE. The letter explains:

“We note that a number of UK higher education institutions have used the occasion of the brutal murder of George Floyd to publish statements indicating their commitment to the Black Lives Matter movement.

“We are aware of and welcome efforts by the sector to address racial harassment and narrow the gap in degree outcomes between white students and those from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. However, while these and other racial inequalities remain, statements that Black lives matter can at best be regarded as tokenistic and superficial.” (Perry et al, 2020)

Importantly, the voices of students and staff continued to scrutinise the words and actions of universities after their initial response to BLM and challenge tokenistic expressions of solidarity. Universities such as [Queen Mary](#) and the [University of Aberdeen](#), for example, were criticised in open letters from student representatives and societies in response to BLM statements published and the extent of racism experienced during their studies.

Students at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art went further and, in July 2020, published a comprehensive [Anti-Racism Action Plan](#). The authors of the document explained that the student body had “been empowered to unite in light of the Black Lives Matter movement” and that “it has fallen to students to create this document due to a lack of faith in RADA’s management and their lack of active desire for change”. The document includes a detailed list of recommendations with information on who is responsible for delivering this action and a completion date. In response, [RADA agreed](#) to “make the Student Body Anti-Racism

Action Plan a priority in work we do next, and agree a process with students to ensure their full involvement in shaping and implementing the plan and holding RADA to account on its implementation”.

Returning to the critiques raised by students and staff one year on, it is vital to ask: ‘What can we – EDI practitioners, senior leaders and the HE sector – learn from Black Lives Matter?’ By foregrounding actions that address problems, rather than further documentation of existing problems, it seems likely that those working under the banner of BLM have helped raise awareness in the UK of concepts such as intersectionality, critical race theory, decolonisation and anti-racism (for more detailed definitions and further discussion of these approaches and signposting to key sources, see [Understanding Structural Racism in UK Higher Education: An Introduction](#)):

- + **Intersectionality** highlights how traditional approaches to addressing inequality limit the terms of enquiry to a single axis that favoured the interests of individuals who experienced inequality because of one factor, such as gender or race. Scholars, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, have described intersectionality as a tool of analysis that can help us understand how other forms of structural oppression and marginalisation (for example, sexism) interact or reinforce specific forms of racism (Crenshaw, 1989).
- + **Critical Race Theory (CRT)** brings together a range of insights, methodologies and critiques to ‘race’ equality work that include (but are not limited to) understandings of power relations, how change is effected and the centring of lived experiences. CRT is critical of liberal responses to racism, such as ‘colour blind’ approaches or faith in the neutrality of institutions such as the courts and police.
- + **Decolonisation** possesses a long history and different understandings, particularly across national contexts. In the UK, it is generally understood as a transformational process that seeks to critique and reform structures that were built on foundations of racism, colonialism and exclusion. For example, this might include the design of course curriculum or assessment practices.
- + **Anti-racist** discourses, practices and policies in UK HE date back to at least the 1980s and highlight the need to actively tackle racism, as complacency and inertia perpetuate a status quo that allows structural racism, as well as all ‘overtly’ racist actions, to continue.

Although these concepts and approaches have different and varied histories, and the activities of BLM predate 2020, the murder of Floyd sparked an uptick in interest that has multiple impacts on the practice of race equality and wider EDI work in HE.

4. How did some universities respond to Black Lives Matter?

In late May and June 2020, many universities published statements in response to BLM. Statements were also published by national HE organisations and funding bodies including the [National Union of Students](#), [UK Research and Innovation](#) and [Advance HE](#).

Otobo's research into institutional responses to BLM was based on interviews with 25 senior leaders involved in responding to BLM and/or engaged in supporting Black lives in HE, as well as a survey of university staff and students that returned 79 responses. However, among survey respondents, Otobo found that only 26% felt that their university's response to BLM was appropriate or sufficient (Otobo, 2020).

Scepticism therefore exists as to the purpose of these statements and what, if anything, they served to achieve. To help position this challenge in a wider landscape of EDI work, it is helpful to consider Ahmed's writing on diversity activities in UK HE around the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000, in which she describes the operation of 'diversity work'. Ahmed explains:

“Documents become forms of institutional performance in two senses. They are ways in which universities perform an image of themselves, and they are also ways in which universities perform in the sense of ‘doing well.’” (Ahmed, 2007, p 594)

Looking toward the future, there is value in examining and building upon concrete actions that followed (or were cited in) public statements. Following this report's investigation into the activities noted in BLM statements published by universities, it is apparent that many of the examples discussed were not introduced in direct response to BLM and were, in fact, a continuation or expansion of initiatives that were already in existence. This is not a critique of what is noted in BLM statements, as the continuation or expansion of practices that demonstrate positive impacts may bring greater benefits than starting something afresh. However, it is important to highlight that this confuses any causal relationship between BLM and subsequent statements if most activities discussed were already underway. It also forces us to question to what extent the activities of summer 2020 signify a rupture in institutional approaches to racial justice or reflected a continuation of 'business as usual'.

Although many universities used their statements to document how research undertaken within their institutions shaped discourse and activities around racial justice in the UK and other parts of the world, the activities discussed in this section focus on internal actions to improve the opportunities and experiences of students and staff.

4.1 Culture and history

Several universities used their statements to note the establishment or existence of strategic, senior-level groups to address race inequality. For example, the University of Warwick established a [Race Equality Taskforce](#), which consists of academics, professional staff and student union representatives. Similarly, the University of Aberdeen convened a working group on [Tackling Racial Harassment](#) to respond to recommendations in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's report [Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged](#). At some institutions, actions took the form of senior-level appointments. For example, the University of Manchester [appointed a University lead for race equality](#), a role that includes dedicated time to help develop initiatives that support race equality ambitions at the university.

In several institutions, BLM accelerated demands for the renaming of buildings and statues. One of the most famous examples is at the University of Oxford, where BLM drew further attention to the 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign which calls for the removal of the statue of nineteenth-century imperialist Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College. The university subsequently established a commission to examine Rhodes' legacy and a [majority of its members supported the removal of the statue](#). However, citing costs and planning processes, Oriel College decided to maintain the statue. Goldsmiths, University of London faced similar criticisms with statues at [Deptford Town Hall](#) and have undertaken a community consultation to explore how best to respond to the issue. Similarly, the students' union at Warwick University have called for the [campus hotel and conference complex](#), named after Cyril Radcliffe who was involved in the design of the partition of India, to be renamed. To proactively explore problematic aspects of the university's history, the University of Aberdeen decided to [fund a new research post](#) to explore the university's connection to the slave trade and expose how the North East of Scotland benefitted from its proceeds.

4.2 Listening and wellbeing

A recurring theme in BLM statements published by universities was the need for senior leaders to listen to Black students and staff. Several statements mentioned listening exercises or the undertaking of surveys. For example, in November 2020, the University of Sussex embarked on an [institution-wide survey of race equality](#). Sent to all staff and students, the survey intends to gather people's views and ideas as to how to address racial discrimination and advance race equality. Throughout 2018 and 2019, the University of Birmingham also undertook a [consultative exercise with more than 5,000 staff and students](#), which involved having conversations about race with insights gathered used to inform the university's Race Equality Charter application. Also in 2019, the University of York undertook a [staff listening exercise](#) to understand their experiences and feedback ideas on how the university can increase the recruitment of BAME staff and support progression.

As well as listening, statements also made clear the importance of providing students with adequate care and support. The University of Oxford, for example, noted that it had [advised tutors and welfare staff](#) to 'reach out to any Black students who may be experiencing difficulty at this time'. Although any changes were a matter for individual discussions between students and their tutor, the university was open to a reduction in workload and an understanding of mitigating circumstances in assessments.

4.3 Training

Several universities described efforts to improve or expand their provision of training. For example, all members of Council, Council Committees, Academic Board and Academic Board's sub-committees at Goldsmiths were to [undergo unconscious bias training](#). This followed racial awareness training for members of the university's senior management team. At the University of Nottingham, a 'You Said, We Will...' output was published that promised to provide [anti-racist training](#) in a way that all staff can access by July 2021.

An approach adopted by the University of Birmingham differed somewhat as, using funding received from Advance HE, they developed a [toolkit for those working in universities to highlight the impact of microaggressions and to find ways to address them](#). The project is named 'Drawing it Out' and is based on a four-stage framework that provides ways for targets, allies and bystanders to work together to combat microaggressions with microinterventions.

4.4 Research funding, scholarships and internships

Several universities described the provision of ring-fenced funding to explore and advance issues related to racial justice. For example, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at King's College London [awarded six rapid response grants to scholars](#) (inclusive of staff, postgraduate and undergraduate students) engaged in projects about BLM or anti-Asian racism connected to the Covid-19 pandemic. Nineteen submissions were received in response to the call and funded projects explored topics including African philosophies; the invisibility of Asia in culture, media and creative industries; and the development of an abolitionist curriculum in the English department. Some universities also noted the provision of targeted postgraduate studentships for UK BAME postgraduate taught students ([Queen Mary](#)), UK BAME postgraduate research students ([University College London](#)) and UK BAME and international research students ([SOAS](#)). All scholarships cover the cost of fees and provide a stipend/maintenance allowance.

Initiatives also included the development of funded research internships. For example, the University of Bristol [established an Anti-Racism Steering Group](#) and one action noted by the group was the provision of funded research internships for BAME students. These opportunities were intended to offer paid experience in research and boost the number of BAME students that progress into postgraduate education.

4.5 Tackling the awarding gap

One of the most endemic issues that impact Black students is the awarding gap (Advance HE, 2020b). It was therefore no surprise to see this issue noted in several statements. For example, the University of Warwick intends to [close the Black Attainment Gap](#) across the institution by 2025. This will involve a multi-layered and evidence-based approach to change departmental curricula, teaching practices and the provision of ring-fenced funding. UCL has also [targeted the BAME awarding gap](#) through the provision of funding of up to £25,000 per intervention to eliminate awarding gaps between UK domiciled BAME and white undergraduate students. This funding can be used to buy out staff time, fund student internships, towards capital costs or use of external experts.

4.6 Diversity and data

Another area of activity noted in statements was the publication of staff and student data. The University of St Andrews, for example, published [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Progress Reports](#) (which covered topics including staff and student diversity and the ethnicity pay gap) as a means to demonstrate evidence and measure progress. The collection and analysis of data would serve as a tool to drive change and address gaps. With this in mind, the University of Nottingham noted its plan to 'work towards having no less than [20:80 BME:White staff representation](#) within all teams and at all levels' by September 2025. Also focusing on recruitment, the Anti-Racism Steering Group at the University of Bristol called on the UK government to [amend the Equality Act](#) 'to enable specific ethnic groups to be treated more favourably in employment than other ethnicities where we reasonably think that the specific ethnic group experiences disadvantage'.

At the University of Glasgow, in response to their report *Understanding Racism, Transforming University Cultures* (Virdee et al 2021), the Senior Management Group [publicly committed to a list of anti-racist objectives](#). This included a review of data on postgraduate researcher recruitment to assess any disparities between ethnic minority and white researchers.

Some universities specifically highlighted the collection of data related to hate crime and harassment. For example, the [University of Manchester](#) and [Newcastle University](#) noted the use of report and support tools to help capture information about hate crime incidents on campus or involving staff and students.

4.7 Race Equality Charter (REC)

Research conducted for Advance HE found that, as a result of the BLM activities, university leaders had experienced pressure to commit to EDI and pursue membership of the REC (Douglas Oloyede et al, 2021). This finding is supported by references to the REC in several statements, such as the [University of Bristol](#) and the [University of Manchester](#), that explain how they had become members of the REC, intended to submit an application in the near future and/or had received a Bronze award (the highest level of award currently achieved).

5. Where do we go from here? The student voice, BLM and LGBTQ rights

Racism is just one manifestation of injustice in UK HE and operates in tandem with other levers of power, including patriarchy (where society is organised so that men hold power) and heteronormativity (where heterosexuality is the assumed default sexual orientation, gender is understood as a binary and the nuclear family is positioned as the ideal way to organise society). One area of particular concern is increased reports of transphobia among staff and students in higher education. For example, Amnesty International has noted:

“Amid growing transphobic rhetoric and fear-mongering in the media, the government’s proposed amendments to the outdated Gender Recognition Act in England and Wales fell short of human rights standards.” (Amnesty International, 2021, p 380)

Limited data exists into the experiences of LGBT+ staff data in higher education and related sectors, outside of discipline-specific reports in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM) subjects (Aldercotte et al, 2017; Institute of Physics et al, 2019) and history (Royal Historical Society, 2020). Whereas, slightly more information exists on the experiences of LGBT+ students (Stonewall, 2018). However, several recent developments have brought the subject of transphobia – and wider hostility towards LGBTQ+ staff and students – into the spotlight. The provision of [gender neutral toilets on campus](#) and claims that decisions to not host speakers who share views understood as ‘anti-trans’ is an infringement of academic freedom of speech. In another recent example, in April 2021 the EHRC intervened in an Employment Appeals Tribunal to state that ‘gender critical’ views should be understood as a philosophical belief with protections under the 2010 Equality Act, a claim explored by Sean Morris and Sharon Cowan (Morris and Cowan, 2021) and criticised by [trans and LGBTQ+ organisations](#). Among EDI practitioners within universities, this has also materialised through an [orchestrated campaign against LGBTQ+ charity Stonewall](#), in which Freedom of Information requests are used to scrutinise all engagements with the charity and exhaust available resources.

Initiatives to address racism in universities will not always translate to other strands of EDI work. However, when we view anti-racism and anti-homophobia/biphobia/transphobia measures side-by-side some commonalities are apparent. For example, the view that poor quality data about staff and student experiences hampers targeted actions; the publication of institutional statements not followed by meaningful action during Pride month and in response to BLM; media hostility towards public figures taking the knee and anti-trans coverage in many newspapers; and the use of accreditation schemes to respond to some of the issues identified in Stonewall's Diversity Champions programme and Advance HE's REC.

This report therefore calls on EDI practitioners, and those with oversight of strategic EDI decisions, to expand and develop initiatives that improve the experiences of Black students and staff but position this work as part of a broader approach to address inequality and injustice, which also includes challenges such as homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. This might include thematic activities that challenge precarious employment for staff and students, create a culture that does not permit hate speech, foster a diverse and decolonised curriculum, interrogate the role of the police and surveillance practices on campus, provision of effective mental health support, and distribution of direct funds to address past injustices. These activities are also advanced through bottom-up pressure and the voices of students and staff, calling on universities to take action now. This intersectional approach, working across multiple equality strands, underscores the potential for BLM tactics to apply more widely across EDI work in higher education and reshape the experiences of marginalised and minoritised students and staff.

6. Conclusion

Much has changed since May 2020 but much has also remained the same. The differential impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on different ethnic groups has become increasingly stark (Nazroo and Bécaries, 2021); Derek Chauvin was convicted on all charges in the death of George Floyd; and the UK Government published its controversial report into race and ethnic disparities (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021), which was subsequently condemned in an [open letter signed by 21,882 people](#) and the [British Medical Journal](#).

The focus of this report is to investigate how activities in response to BLM might drive other EDI activities in explicit ways. This pressure to 'say something' was partly driven by students, social media activities and communication with senior leaders in their institutions. As an example where the student voice was used to drive positive change, there is much to learn from the activities of summer 2020. As we witnessed, as more universities published statements, pressure grew among those who had not published a statement to say something on the matter. However, it is also the case, that BLM has likely shaped activities across the sector in many implicit ways. This might include the allocation of funding, distribution of staff time and general approach to student and staff wellbeing.

This report does not answer criticisms about how universities responded to BLM nor does it evaluate which universities did what. Rather, it functions as an accessible introduction to how staff working in HE, whether as senior leaders or specifically as EDI practitioners, might 'build on' initiatives associated with BLM to advance structural change within their university. The examples identified are not intended as a comprehensive nor representative cut of the HE sector but as an illustrative launchpad for future work. The showcasing of particular initiatives is intended to highlight tactics, wedge points and themes that might inform the design and execution of future actions to address injustice in the sector more widely.

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