

Project 1: Anti-racist Glossary

1. Background information		
Strand	Black British students	✓
	Disability/Mental Health student	
Topic	Assessment & Feedback	
	Teaching & Learning	✓
	Learning development/skills support	
	University/College systems and processes	
Specific research question	Does the language used in discussions about race at Cambridge (in teaching and other contexts) negatively affect the academic performance of Black British students?	
Student co-researcher	Rianna Davis, undergraduate student, History and Spanish	

2. Executive summary
<p>The focus of this project was gauging the impact and extent of racist language within educational contexts at Cambridge, and the impact this might have the academic performance and attainment of Black British students. Two qualitative research methods were used: focus group questions with the student co-researchers and an online survey distributed to black British students across Cambridge. I asked participants if they had encountered any racist language in teaching contexts during the course of their studies at Cambridge, what terms were used and in what context, and what might be the key terms to they thought students and staff should be educated about, and what value students saw in a collation of these terms in something like a glossary.</p> <p>Of concern is the large proportion of respondents to this project who indicated they had experienced racist language in lectures and supervisions (approximately 50% of the survey). Respondents speculated that this was to do with the general lack of accountability around teaching practices across the collegiate University. Of the respondents who had encountered racism in the teaching (in content, delivery of lectures, interrelations with teachers), over 60% indicated that it had a continuing negative impact on their academic performances, affecting their self-confidence and heightening feelings of inadequacy and imposter syndrome. Those students who did not believe they had experienced racist language in an academic context often attributed this to their discipline (for example, as STEM subjects use technical language there is little scope for quoting or using offensive language in lectures). They also suggested that although they may not have encountered “explicitly racist language”, they had experienced an accumulation of implicit or subtle micro-aggressions throughout their studies which had an equally negative impact on their self-image and confidence in their abilities to perform academically.</p>

3. Rationale
<p>The impetus for the topic about racist language and the development of an anti-racist glossary came from my personal experience at Cambridge. As President and student representative for the BME</p>

Campaign, I have had recurring discussions with other Black students who have also noted racist incidents in lectures and supervisions, but who have been uncertain about their ability to articulate to non-Black supervisors and lecturers why these incidents were racist or otherwise offensive. For example, drawing on my own experiences, I was asked in a Spanish Literature supervision if English was my native language because “another language is interfering with [my] syntax” – this was based on an assumption that, as a Black student, I spoke an African language despite being of Caribbean heritage and having English as my first language.

Other students have reported to me occasions where their non-Black supervisors using the n-word in supervisions and lectures, both in quoting material and in casual discussion, which made them wildly uncomfortable. We found it difficult to address these incidents - for example through informal feedback or formal complaints to supervisors, lecturers or Faculty staff, largely because the burden then fell on students to explain why the terms used were offensive, and why it had a negative impact on the student. This would inevitably lead to a discussion that required some background knowledge into how race functions and manifests itself in an academic context, as well as the different forms of racism and how they work.

Additionally, I noticed a lack of consideration of the power and impact of language in University-wide discussions about the attainment gap and racism in Cambridge. The investigations of racist incidents in the university that do take place – however few and far between – tend to pay attention to incidents of explicit discrimination, for instance when a student or staff member in Cambridge is directly addressed with a racist slur, or are the victim of a violent attack. In this way, the cumulative impact of every-day racism in choices of language in teaching and learning contexts is overlooked, or considered as less significant.

I felt it would be somewhat futile to ask about experiences of general racism, because the wide majority of Black British students here have experienced it in some capacity and are open about it these encounters (e.g. with Porters, university staff, other students). My project therefore investigated the ways in which language and its use or misuse in teaching and learning contexts had an impact on Black students and their engagement with their studies at Cambridge, and then analysed institutional racism from this lens.

4. Existing evidence

In the UK sector, BAME attainment gap reports indicate that the largest attainment gap is between Black and white students, with the 2017-2018 statistics indicating the largest attainment gap in subjects was ‘Education’ (20.1%) followed by ‘Combined subjects’ (19.7%). This is often a continuation of A-Level and BTEC results, the figures of which demonstrate that white students outperform students of all other ethnicities. This, of course, goes beyond merely suggesting that white students are the smartest sitting exams or that ethnic minority students are incapable, but rather highlights a wider problem of various barriers which prevent or impede BAME students from achieving their potential. One of said barriers is institutional culture; with only 16% of all academic staff in Higher Education Institutions identifying as BAME, and within this only 0.6% of professors being Black (as of 2017-2018), “discussions on race and ethnicity can be difficult conversations to have.” As a result, conversations about race have played a large part in BAME student life in terms of feelings of belonging, and even the issue of lumping together BAME into one category without considering how this is far from a homogenous group, as it encompasses every ethnicity which is non-white effectively, and fails to consider the different intersections of identity within this overarching and often unhelpful misnomer.

Another problem identified was that of the curriculum; content, design, and delivery. “42% of BAME students said that they did not feel that the curriculum reflects issues of diversity, equality, and discrimination” and thus problems regarding content and Tripos emerge; if students do not feel understood or adequately represented in specific relevant content, this disengages them from learning and being an active participant in learning environments. Curriculum delivery was noted by 82% of institutional respondents as the second most relevant contributing factor to ethnic attainment gaps at their respective institutions.

The literature about the power of language in the hands of white teachers is extensive. For instance, Bree Picower recognised how white teachers’ life experiences inform their understanding of race, and how these ideas are hegemonic. Whiteness and its inherence in scholarship has implications for the “role white teachers play in creating patterns of racial achievement and opportunity.” In other words, the impact of white teachers and their influence can have profoundly negative and long-lasting effects on Black students. Although Picower was using American society and culture as an example of how racism is engrained into everyday life, institutional racism and its manifestation in higher education in Britain works in a functionally-similar way, which means it is easy to draw comparisons between the two: “in a white supremacist society, many of the privileges that flow to whites are invisible, unearned and not consciously acknowledged.” As such, with race not a real or common consideration amongst white academics, the needs and realities of Black students are not taken seriously, and the white experience is assumed to be a universal one; when Black students voice their concerns and experiences, they are disregarded not for being invalid but for not matching the assumed universal experience of their white counterparts and academic or teaching staff. As Ladson-Billings adds, “typically, white, middle-class prospective teachers have little to no understanding of their own culture. Notions of whiteness are taken for granted. They rarely are interrogated.” Thus, a lack of understanding or the necessary interrogation of ideas of whiteness, how it functions, and how it manifests itself in an academic environment is often sorely lacking in British institutions.

Within a British context, a review of work carried out at the University of Leeds regarding racism and higher education also identifies the underlying problem of the need to interrogate whiteness and contemporary processes of “racism, whiteness, and Eurocentrism that operate in universities around the world, and particularly in the UK.” Once again, problems arise of the focus of educators (seeking to promote multi-culturalism, which is not, as Law notes, an effective aim or solution, or focusing on individual cases and interpersonal relationships).

In order to understand the impact of racial language on students, the quality of dialogue and discourse on race needs be enhanced. However, a universally agreed language on issues relating to racism is non-existent as even the most frequently used words in any discussion on race can easily cause confusion, which leads to controversy and hostility. For a start, what it means to be “racist” is still very much contested and, as this project’s findings foregrounds, the concepts of “whiteness” and “white privilege” are still inadequately understood within a Cambridge educational context. . But it is essential to achieve some degree of shared understanding, particularly when talking about issues of race, as a common vocabulary is essential to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations. To that end, a number of institutions have begun to set up anti-racist glossaries to respond to the language needs of different people (UCL, SOAS, Goldsmiths). As the Scottish Association for Minority Ethnic Educators observes:

Unless a group seeking social justice comes to a shared understanding of key terms, such as “race” and “racism,” it is difficult to be very productive. When key terms are explicitly shared and agreed upon in a group, there is a powerful foundation for knowledge and action (The Anti-Racist Education, 2019)

References:

1. Anti-Racist Educator (2019) Glossary <https://www.theantiracisteducator.com/glossary>
2. Picower B (2009) The unexamined Whiteness of teaching: how White teachers maintain and enact dominant racial ideologies, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 12:2,197-215, DOI: 10.1080/13613320902995475
3. Law I (2017) Building the Anti-racist University, action and new agendas, *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20:3, 332-343, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2016.1260232

5. Generation of evidence

Two stages of data collection were used for this project:

1. A focus group discussion with participants in the second forum of the APP PAR project. This involved 8 student co-researchers. The focus of the discussion was on: the kinds of language by students while at Cambridge; the contexts where the language was used and the students' responses to it; whether the racism was overt or implicit; the impact on wellbeing and academic performance; and the co-researchers impressions about whether encounters with racist language was widespread across the black British student community in Cambridge.
2. A survey was then developed from the focus group discussion, as this was determined to be an appropriate method of developing an evidence-base of black British student experiences in different educational contexts across the collegiate University. The questions were developed from the initial discussion and disseminated via a Qualtrics survey which was set up to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of respondents, and was circulated to the members of the African and Caribbean Society and the BME Campaign, this was determined to be the most effective way of reaching black British undergraduate students. There were 38 individual hits on the survey; in the current academic year, there are 230 black British undergraduate students enrolled in Cambridge, so this makes a response rate of 16.52%. While this is not a large or statistically significant number of respondents, the responses generate do indicate patterns in experience across the black British cohort, from ten different STEM and Arts/Humanities courses. The survey was a combination of multiple choice and short/long answers; students were asked 'yes/no' questions about if they had experienced racist language in teaching and learning contexts, and were also given the option of responding to questions with a more detailed answer. The final question asked about whether students thought an anti-racist glossary of terms made available to academics would be useful, and what terms they think should be included, in order to gauge specific understandings, they believed were lacking.

Additionally, at the final forum for the APP Project, I reported on my project to my fellow student co-researchers and senior staff members of the University (including the PVCE for Education, the Director of Educational Services, the Head of Equality and Diversity, the Head of the Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning, as well as other key staff from Cambridge Admissions Office, Student Registry, Colleges and Departments/Faculties. Their responses to the survey findings and proposed anti-racist glossary have informed this report and the recommended action.

6. Small project research findings

Prevalence of racist language in teaching and learning contexts:

Of the 38 survey respondents, who were all current Cambridge students, 63% said that they had encountered racist language or terms in a teaching and learning context (7 of these mentioned the use of explicit terms such as 'blacks', 'nigger', 'negro', and/or 'kaffir' by lecturers or supervisors). These results indicate that encounters with racist language in teaching and learning contexts is prevalent at Cambridge, and needs urgent attention.

Impact on Black British students:

Of importance for the University's commitment to narrow the attainment gap for black British students, it is worrying to find that 65% of the respondents believe this language has a negative impact on their academic performance. Respondents explained the various impacts on academic performance:

- Racism and the use of racist language *"provokes the feeling of imposter syndrome"*
- *"It creates a sort of hostile and uncomfortable environment that just makes me want to not speak up and interact with - this means that I am less likely to want to take part in discussions or conversations with my supervisor/lecture because I know that that is how they think."*
- *"[racist language] undermines our learning environment"*

One student noted how even in writing essays and preparing materials for supervisions that questions and material used is racist; having to encounter this and draw upon it with no support, understanding of the psychological impact this can have or a lack of space for critical analysis is challenging:

- *"I think that unconscious bias is one of the main reasons for black students not doing as well overall. Not just the support they might get from supervisors, but the support they get in their dissertations. And what happens when the examiners mark dissertations or exams that refer to critical race theory or challenge the centrism of the Empire?"*
- *"I've been warned to 'play the game' and avoid topics that give away my blackness if I want to do well. I've even been told what papers to avoid. I think the university has work to do to become less racist, rather than black students having to find ways to avoid racism."*

No racist encounters

Eight survey respondents indicated that they hadn't experienced direct racism themselves. This was attributed to the discipline:

- *"The academics that my degree attracts and in particular that supervise students from my college (one of the least prestigious) tend to be very self-reflective, anti-racist etc"*
- *"I do a STEM subject so it shouldn't be up from a content point of view although from an informal discussion with teaching staff it could"*

It was also attributed to the quality and awareness of the teachers:

- *"Academics have been sensitive and empathetic on how they discuss race"*

However, even when students answered 'no' to the question about whether they had encountered racism in teaching contexts, there were some 'weird' interactions:

- *"Because nothing has been explicit. I've had conversations with my supervisor who assumed I was mixed heritage, because of my skintone, and then I've had conversations about my hair, but they all took the form of the recipient being extremely interested in my culture, maybe to a weird point, but I've not experienced anything from my lecturers or supervisors that has had racist undertones to my knowledge."*
- *"There's a lot of well-meaning racism that comes out of ignorance, which is ironic when the users of racist language are often the ones teaching classes about race."*

Cambridge encounters:

The most notable form of racism that respondents encountered in teaching and learning environments was the use of slurs and otherwise inappropriate terms in lectures and supervisions. A number of students agreed that there was a slight difference in the racist language and incidents encountered in

Cambridge and elsewhere. Comments about this difference noted that at Cambridge the use of racist language include:

- *“I think the racist language in Cambridge is different in the sense that it is seen as valid and legitimate and unquestionable because it is apparently substantiated by knowledge and academia. Thus, they feel that they CAN say it and not receive any backlash because they are supposed academics who speak in such a way as a result of their research.*
- *“I feel as if the use of racist language is deemed more acceptable and normalised at Cambridge than elsewhere. I also think that academics here are not held accountable for their actions and there is little students can do if they are made uncomfortable by the language used.”*
- *“It is more insidious here. People are clever and polite and can make you feel worthless without being outright rude. It is still racist to be told that your interest in 'race' means that you have a one track mind. It colours everything I do and read, and the way people interact with me. Why I should I perform as if it doesn't?”*

Challenges in responding:

It can be a challenge to find ways of responding to racist language or engagements, whether explicit or implicit. Some students indicated that they don't respond:

- *“At this point I'm used to racism”*
- *“I've encountered microaggressions from my Director of Studies but you learn to accept that racism will manifest itself differently and get on with your studies, unfortunately”*
- *“I don't want to be known as a trouble maker”*

Other respondents noted some challenges to responding in the Cambridge context:

- *“In Cambridge, people that do say offhanded slight remarks do so almost ignorant of the effect, and then calling them out is harder. Back home in South London, I encounter less racist interactions, maybe due to the people I converse with or the multicultural nature of the city. But in Cambridge, a lot of people just do not have that exposure to a wide variety of cultures, and as such they make jokes or comments that are racist but they've never been called out on it before.”*
- *“I think the use of such language fosters an uncomfortable environment for Black students and undermines our learning environment. It also means that those of us who want to engage with race academically are hindered from doing so, as our lecturers do not have the range to engage with.”*

Some students noted they had raised the issue to their lecturers or supervisors but were told by these academics that they had been “quoting material” and this did not reflect their own personal views.

- *“It creates a sort of hostile and uncomfortable environment that just makes me want to not speak up and interact with - this means that I am less likely to want to take part in discussions or conversations with my supervisor/lecture because I know that that is how they think.”*

Those who said they have not encountered explicit racist language/terms in a teaching and learning context did still mention having experienced racism in other forms or commented on the impact everyday racism had on their wellbeing.

- *“Perhaps not huge one but it can knock me for a couple of days and then I need to bounce back.”*

Attainment gaps and academic performance

Students made persuasive connections between the racist language they and their peers encounter in educational contexts and the attainment gaps between Black British students and their white peers:

- *“When you live a life that uses certain terms and also express yourself in a certain way, but then enter an environment where none of that is recognised, accepted or legitimised, it makes it extremely difficult to be yourself and perform at 100% of your potential.”*

- *“We deal with racism all the time, we just don't bother taking note. It colours everything we do. It's not a surprise that it feeds into why we don't do as well”*

One student indicated the overall impact of inappropriate language:

- *“I think that people underestimate how the misuse of language pertaining to race in an academic context has an alienating impact on Black students and makes us lose confidence in our place in institutions like Cambridge, as well as our academics' ability to engage with topics surrounding race with nuance (particularly concerning with those of us who wish to study race in any given context). Furthermore, being on the receiving end of racist language is a very hurtful experience and is detrimental to the emotional well-being of black students, which in turn undermines our ability to perform academically.”*

Value of an anti-racist glossary for teachers and fellow students across Cambridge:

All students who responded to the survey agreed with the value of the development of such a glossary (100%). Additionally, the participants and audience members in the final Forum for the APP Project agreed with the proposal for the development of such a glossary, including:

- *“Would be a brilliant thing to see an example of this spread around the university (Faculties and Colleges)”*
- *“Totally necessary as an addition to anti-racism training [though] should not replace it”*
- *“Great idea – would be really useful for academic/non-academic staff alike, + students”*

Some further comments with additional recommendations included:

- *“Is a glossary sufficient? E.g. would guidance on best practice for handling racist teaching and learning be useful? Not just defining microaggression/white guilt but support/guidance for removing these from teaching and learning?”*
- *“The only barrier would be getting people on board with taking this anti-racist glossary seriously”*

7. Outcomes of research/implications for Cambridge practices and processes. Please identify any application or outcomes of your research project and detail the implications for policy and practice for different stakeholder groups

Overall, respondents were unanimous in the value of developing and disseminating an anti-racist glossary for teachers and students across Cambridge. It was accepted that this would be an invaluable resource for teaching staff who were interested in understanding how to navigate language choices, and could serve as a resource to refer staff and students to when they challenged Black student’s responses to offensive language. Mandatory training of all supervisors within Colleges, and lecturers within Departments/Faculties, about would be ideal.

Beyond the development of the glossary, there is a need for targeted interventions and guidance. A discipline-specific focus is needed in implementing changes or further investigation; the findings from my research highlight how Arts and Humanities students are most impacted by this linguistic racism. The majority of student co-researchers as well as respondents to the survey read Law, HSPS, History, PBS, English, or Education. These subjects tend to rely on interpersonal and subjective engagement with content and materials in supervisions.

The one clear outcome of the research is that most students, regardless of subject, feel there is a fundamental lack of understanding of race and how it functions, which creates longer-term issues regarding imposter syndrome, feeling inadequate, constant self-doubt, and feelings of isolation – as such they are unable to express their concern as they worry they are not taken seriously or feel intimidated by the positions of, or limited by the understandings of, those who they seek to correct.

This highlights the need for a shift away from the focus on individual intentions and interpersonal relationships between and amongst teachers and students. What is needed is a perspective that critically examines educational experiences within a framework of race and ethnicity.

8. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

1. That an Anti-Racist Glossary be developed and disseminated to teaching and student-facing staff on the Cambridge website, with integration into teaching online modules, and links in Faculty guides and resources.

The university should promote an anti-racist glossary with teaching and other student-facing staff on a central website, and this be linked to in supervisory training modules and handbooks. The glossary would be compiled using a combination of pre-existing materials (some American institutions have very similar resources which could be drawn upon) and further investigation into UK-specific understanding and applications for these terms and their various manifestations and impacts. Most students who responded in the affirmative that they had experienced racism mentioned that they were often assigned reading materials or had to listen to things which were triggering in nature from a racial standpoint (hearing the n-word in a lecture, for example, without any warning can be shocking and cause flashbacks or remind a student of a particularly traumatic encounter with this word) – any materials provided with slurs, triggering statistics or facts should be noted just as with any other sensitive materials.

2. That the University refines its processes to respond to both constructive feedback and formal complaints about racist language in teaching and learning contexts

Ultimately, discussions need to be fostered around the reality of having lecturers, academics, professors, and other faculty using certain terms especially slurs; students noted that there is a casual attitude towards the reading of these racial terms in material, which make them uncomfortable. This should not be the case. The focus is also not on the 'accusation' but rather the victim; in other words, the concern of faculty should not be about being called racist, which is often the case, but rather they should be concerned about the wellbeing and achievements of the impacted student demographic here. There should be more care taken by faculties in vetting the content of lecturers and supervisors to ensure it is genuinely appropriate, something which is otherwise impossible without taking the complaints of students seriously. In addition, certain students have expressed their constant frustration with racist incidents in which specific names of faculty members have mentioned, and the problem which several noted in the survey was that there were little or no levels of accountability. This must be addressed; named faculty members should be consulted outside of the circumstance with specific students, as students do not want to feel singled out or that a certain academic will believe they are creating issues.