

Student blog post: Symposium July 2022

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In November 2021, the Office for Students (OfS) and Research England (RE) awarded funding to 13 projects working to improve access and participation for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students in postgraduate research study. In July 2022, teams from four of these projects came together at the University of Oxford to consider the theme of Strategies for Improving Equity in and through Research Degree Admission and Selection. They were joined by postgraduate research students who contributed their views and experiences throughout the day.

This blog post has been written by Tyra Amofah-Akardom and Dami Folayan, both students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge.

As writers of this post, we hold common ground in navigating the fields of Education and Black Feminism synonymously. We acted as student consultants on the funding proposal for the Close the Gap project, and we were invited to attend the symposium in Oxford with project staff and postgraduate students from various institutions. As two Black women, we are uniquely positioned to share our experiences and learnings from the symposium, and that is what this post seeks to do.

Tyra: I am just about to embark on the journey of PhD, having just completed my MPhil this academic year. My proposed project explores the lives of Black Women engaged in student activism at 'elite' British and American universities. This will be conducted through the lens of interpreting universities as colonial cities that serve as playgrounds for the nation-state. Viewing politics as a war, I want to understand how Black Women navigate this particular battleground utilising love as their weapon of choice, and construct a counterpublic political identity.

Dami: I am a second-year PhD researcher in the Faculty of Education. My project is focused on exploring space-making at Oxbridge. I seek to understand how we, Black women, can do Black womanhood in these colonial spaces of academe. Understanding universities as colonial cities, I explore the tangible and intangible features of space and space-making. Through the use of narrative production and creative arts-based research methods, my project seeks to centre the experiences of Black women at Oxbridge working to understand how we cannot merely survive, but thrive within Oxbridge.

Symposium Overview

The symposium, hosted at St Anne's College, Oxford, was organised by teams from the Close the Gap project and the [Yorkshire Consortium for Equality in Doctoral Education](#) (YCEDE). The symposium was attended by postgraduate students, project staff and notable academics from various institutions. The symposium was an opportunity for attendees to gather around the theme of 'Strategies for Improving Equity in and through Research Degree Admission and Selection'.

The Blueprint of Suffering

Talks were kicked off by Professor Jason Arday who enlightened attendees on the 'Blueprint of Suffering' that aspiring academics from underrepresented backgrounds are often forced to tread. Professor Arday's talk was focused on this Blueprint of Suffering that forefronts the experience of Black and underrepresented academics in these university spaces. This was a powerful and necessary reminder that the hardship is not confined to the PhD alone. In actuality, the struggles faced during the PhD are only the beginning of what academics from underrepresented backgrounds will face, should they choose to continue their journey within the academic world.

Professor Arday reminded us that social and cultural capital is a significant aspect of the journey of academia. For underrepresented academics, there is no such thing as just 'stumbling into' academia, but it is rather a journey of sacrifice. There is a fight one has to undertake in order to prove one's legitimacy. Underrepresented academics are often not recognised as academics in their own right, but are rather seen as tokens and tools of diversification. It is understandable why some decide that this journey is not for them, given all of the struggles that accompany it.

But for those who choose to undertake the journey of academia, it is only natural for them to look for others that they can relate to, in order to make the journey seem less isolating. What becomes obvious, however, is that the few underrepresented academics who make it into the field represent the Blueprint of Suffering that underpins our experience.

This Blueprint of Suffering is a sequel to the 'Path of Pain', two journeys that are unfamiliar to those from overrepresented groups within academia, who have the privilege of completing their academic work free from reckoning with the double-edged sword of their identity. We, from underrepresented groups, often experience our selfhood as a double-edged sword which can open doors by unlocking small windows in glass ceilings sometimes left ajar by tokenism. Yet, for underrepresented academics, identity can also act as a self-mutilating weapon. A weapon used for cutting our hearts open so that we may conduct affective labour.

Referencing Professor Winston Morgan, Professor Arday highlighted the 'Lost 300'. A generation of Black academics that was lost due to systematic injustice and lack of opportunity. This lack of opportunity did not end with the generation of the Lost 300 but permeates the present day with precarious employment contracts. Professor Arday highlighted that underrepresented academics are often forced into a permanent state of survival through precarious employment. Considering that 71% of precarious employment contracts within Higher Education are occupied by BAME staff^[1], one might assert that the Blueprint is not only one of suffering, but survival. We, however, prioritise ensuring that underrepresented academics move beyond suffering and surviving within academia and towards thriving.

Beyond Widening Participation, Access and Recruitment

During group discussions, which featured a range of students and Higher Education (HE) staff from various institutions, we explored the need to move past simply a recruitment-centred approach to access to HE. In stopping the conversation at recruitment we fail to effectively engage with the breadth and depth of institutional structures that prevent underrepresented groups from having successful careers within academia. Recruitment-centred approaches to increasing the number of underrepresented students and academics hinder efforts to create space for thriving through reproducing a 'job-done' mentality. Said mentality perpetuates notions that the work of reforming the HE workforce and student populations is complete once a sufficient number of academics from underrepresented groups are visible within these traditionally white, ableist and violent spaces.

As Black and underrepresented students, like many Black and underrepresented staff, we tread the Path of Pain, navigating the thorns of academia so that we may leave behind a Path of Petals for those who walk the path we have trodden. We hope that those who walk the path behind us will encounter fewer choking thorns and be left with room to thrive, even in traditionally violent spaces.

Hence, it is imperative that we move further our widening participation aims by journeying toward space-making. Widening participation welcomes underrepresented groups into a space where violence can be freely perpetrated against us with little to no consequence for those on the assault. Space-making, however, creates environments in which we have no need to worry about violence. Space-making and widening participation is the difference between merely surviving and greatly thriving.

Student Panel: The Path of Pain

The symposium was concluded by us, alongside seven other PhD students sharing our experiences of applying for doctoral study. Though our stories differed, given we applied for various courses at different institutions, what became apparent was the struggle entangled in all of our stories.

Pursuing a PhD is a Path of Pain from the moment the thought of applying enters your mind. The flood of questions begin almost immediately. Will I get in? Will I get funding? Am I good enough? Never mind the additional internal battle you face when your identity is deemed abject or 'Other'. We walk this Path, coated with thorns in the hope of being able to cut down some of the weeds. Then comes the question of what happens when we reach the end and enter the battleground of academia.

Particularly as people from underrepresented backgrounds in the academy, we look to those who have come before us as examples of who we can be and what we can aspire to. The academics that we see from underrepresented backgrounds quickly become our inspirations, and in some cases, our mentors. But what becomes apparent is that the examples we have within this battleground are all entangled in suffering which inevitably leads to even more questions. Is this the path for me? Do I even try? Getting onto our programmes and completing our doctoral journeys is just the beginning of this journey.

During the panel, students spoke honestly about the challenges of embarking on doctoral study and shared an insight into the determination and perseverance needed. As reiterated in the symposium's closing comments, institutions must commit to taking the agenda forward and create a social movement for change. We, as students, should not have to fight, sacrifice or suffer in order to achieve our goals.

Conclusion: The Legacy and Promise of These Spaces

These university spaces are sites of violence, particularly for those of us who have not been afforded the same level of social and cultural capital as our peers. Our journeys begin with the Path of Pain, which contributes to the seemingly never-ending Blueprint of Suffering present within academia.

There is a conscious effort being made to try and change the way that privilege impacts the academic world. The investment offered by the Office for Students and Research England, as well as this very symposium, are proof of this fact. However, it must remain at the forefront of everyone's minds that access does not begin and end with admission. This is less than half of the story.

Universities are a microcosm of society. They are influenced by the hegemonic conventions of wider society, which are then (re)produced in all aspects of university

life. Understanding such conventions are entangled in many violent and oppressive legacies, we must recognise that the same pattern occurs in these university spaces.

Education is often seen as a liberatory process. Many of us are encouraged to pursue a university education, with the promise that if we engage in this process, we will be limitless upon our completion. But we must recognise that this is not a risk that many are willing to take. After all, how can we trust Higher Education's promise for the future when it is not reflected in the present?

The precedent set by the Close the Gap and YCEDE symposium should not be underestimated. Sharing a space with like-minded people within university spaces across the world is a grounding experience. As we continue on this journey, let us keep in mind those who are not able to pursue their dreams for various reasons, and acknowledge the power that we have to change this fact.

[1] Arday, Jason. "Opening Remarks." Close the Gap Conference. 8th July 2022. Oxford

Symposium designed and organised by Close the Gap and YCEDE. Image courtesy of St Anne's College University of Oxford (symposium venue only).