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 **Kaushika Patel’s Introduction**

“The Freedom to Achieve project was established to work towards the closing of the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) attainment gap.

This is a sector wide issue where each year the topic comes to life again when the sector degree outcomes are released and each year we see a significant difference in the percentage of BAME students achieving a good honours degree (good honours being 1st or 2:1) in comparison to their white counterparts.

The current sector gap is just over 13%.

At the release of the data there is much hand wringing and discussion and debate about this issue and then after a few months it dies down again once universities provide reassurance that they will tackle it, however, come the following year the gap is seen to still be in existence.

The debates around the reasons for the gap have always focused on the student deficit model, whereby the reasons are always attributed to students and either the qualifications they come to university with, their socio economic background, the programmes they chose to study or that they are the 1st generation in their family to entre Higher Education….this model has allowed universities to shift the blame fully to students without having to examine their own practices, methodologies and structures.

The project we participated in was funded by the Office for Students and allowed us to partner with 5 other universities to utilise tools and methods which took the focus away from the student deficit model and so allowed us to consider other reasons as to why the gap may exist.

We utilised a tool called the Value-added metric which allowed us to close down most of the questions and statements that focused on the student deficit model and allowed us to move to thinking more about the curriculum and wider factors within the university as the focus for change.

Over the last 2.5 years the project has worked in a pilot mode with 40 programmes and has contributed to closing the gap at DMU by just under 5%.

This is a great success but our gap remains at just under 9% and so there is much more for us to do. And so DMU have committed to a strategic aim to close the gap by an average of 2% each year.

The next phase of the project will see the work extended to all programmes across the university.

The co-creation work, research and evaluation of the project has identified that there are factors beyond the curriculum which impact on the attainment for BAME students.

The factors identified included the place and space of study alongside those who teach and support students and those in positions of power, authority and influence. The main consideration being: do all of these factors provide an institution within which BAME students can see themselves, their identity, image, history and story reflected and so enabling them to succeed.

The evaluation identified the need to continue addressing teaching, learning and assessment methodologies and ideologies but also move to developing a much broader, institution wide approach working with not only our academic staff but also engaging our professional services colleagues. This would allow us to operationalise our public willingness and action to recognise the existence of institutional racism and the need to identify, own and tackle the structural, cultural and individual factors which lead to that.

On the basis of this, phase 2 will move forward with the identity of ‘**Decolonising DMU’.**

Many universities are engaging in work to decolonise the curriculum however as our evaluation has identified this is too narrow a focus and we are taking a bold step in engaging in the work of Decolonising DMU to demonstrate our commitment to directly tackling racial disadvantage and discrimination within the sector.

There is both an appetite and need in the HE sector to re-imagine how universities can deal with wider histories of exclusion/erasure and challenges of inequality in the present, as typified by a range of widely reported campaigns including ‘Rhodes must fall’, ‘Why is My Curriculum White’ and ‘Why isn’t My Professor Black’. Decolonising seeks to create a positive vision of education guided by an epistemological paradigm that is based on the contributions of a global population, humanity and democracy.

Decolonising DMU will be a powerful, challenging and substantive step forward to realising DMU’s vision as an institution that is fully inclusive and socially progressive.

There will inevitably be people who will be profoundly opposed to this approach because it is existentially opposed to widely adopted world views however Decolonising DMU recognises the need to **not** be limited by existing practice, but build a wider dialogue and consensus.

Decolonising DMU will work with and support the many initiatives which we already facilitate that are aimed at tackling racial disadvantage both addressing the student attainment gap but also within our infrastructure.

The work of the race equality charter group will be directly influenced by Decolonising DMU and will bring to the forefront the work we have already done around our infrastructure, staff and students and support accelerating and broadening that work.

Many people will be hearing the term decolonising for the first time and others will have definitions for it which may make them question what and why we are doing this. We recognise that many people in this room and across campus will have questions, concerns and reservations about what we are doing and why.

We welcome all of these queries…

We are at the beginning of a journey…

A journey which will require a lot of conversations, some of which will be uncomfortable and challenging for ALL people across the university.

But in this moment in time we have a real opportunity to discuss and tackle a subject which can create real tangible change and make a real difference to our staff and students and not just BAME staff and students but ALL staff and students.

We are in a moment in history where the rise of race hate crime has escalated significantly post the 2016 referendum, the rise of far-right ideologies and the normalising of far-right language is present and accepted by many in British politics and across the globe and where the ripple effect and influences of Trumps blatant racism can be felt from across the Atlantic.

Now is the right time for us, as a university with nearly 54% BAME students, to open this dialogue…

To look at our histories and deconstruct the prevalent colonial centred pedagogies and power structures and draw out the histories and stories of the global south to influence change across our university.

To support this conversation the team have been developing a **working framework** for decolonising DMU:

“Decolonising DMU recognises that racial inequality in Britain originates from colonialism. In seeking to decolonise, we are creating an anti- racist university which allows all to succeed, and which celebrates the rich heritage and diversity of DMU. It shifts the burden and conversation away from one of deficit, blame and shame, to recognise that racial inequality has been built over centuries on the dominant western and northern hemispheres and patriarchal interpretation of values and merit. This in turn has created systems, hierarchies and behaviours that create disadvantage and fail to recognise the rich history and world contributions of the global majority.

Different to the strategies of many HEIs, Decolonising DMU stretches far beyond the curriculum. It acknowledges that the scale of the challenge runs deep into examining the everyday norms of university life and will require all DMU staff and students to acknowledge, identify, discuss and seek to understand issues. It is critical that we work collectively, with respect and dignity in order to work for institutional solutions underpinned by the reality that our staff, students and communities will benefit from the anti-racist university”.

This is the starting point for conversations which we will be generating and facilitating across campus.

Thank you all for listening to me.