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Racial gaps without racism: How English universities frame inequality in access and participation plans

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Abstract

Racial inequalities are pervasive in higher education despite concerted efforts to redress issues of access, progression and continuation. Little attention has been paid to how universities themselves construct race within their policy texts. Drawing on a QuantCrit framework as its interpretive lens, this paper analyses Access and Participation Plans produced by English universities between 2018 and 2024 to investigate the discursive construction of Blackness and Whiteness within regulatory widening participation discourses. Using a corpus-assisted discourse studies approach, we generate and qualitatively code 1200 concordance lines for the terms *White* and *Black*. The analysis identifies a notable asymmetry in racial framing. Whiteness is typically classed and personalised, most often through the figure of the 'White working-class boy', who is positioned as vulnerable and in need of aspiration-raising interventions, while also functioning as a yardstick against which other groups are measured. Blackness, by contrast, is largely constructed relationally and in deficit terms, frequently aggregated into broader categories, and framed through quantified and 'unexplained' attainment gaps. We argue that these institutional framings enable universities to acknowledge racial disparities while decentring structural explanations such as racism and institutional responsibility. This constrains how institutional responsibility for racial inequality is understood and acted upon within higher education. Through highlighting the role of quantification in

shaping racialised meanings, this paper contributes to debates on racial inequalities and governance in English higher education.

KEYWORDS
access, equity, higher education, race

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper examines how English universities construct racial inequalities within Access and Participation Plans, focussing particularly on how racial categories (Whiteness and Blackness) are discursively framed and how quantified policy language impacts on debates surrounding racial inequalities.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Universities frame Whiteness and Blackness differentially. Whiteness is a personified category, predominantly tethered to class or used as a benchmark against which to compare other groups. Blackness is constructed through a deficit lens, and through quantified 'gap' narratives, enabling superficial engagement with racial inequalities and moving responsibility away from institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Access and Participation Plan (APP) documents are central regulatory mechanisms through which English higher education (HE) institutions demonstrate their responsibility to identify disparities in access, progression and attainment between groups of students, and outline their intentions for addressing said disparities. Introduced by the Office for Students (OfS), these documents function as technical planning outputs from universities as well as policy texts, which are produced within a marketised and highly regulated sector, where institutional compliance and reputational considerations shape how commitments to 'fair access' are articulated. Simultaneously, the wider context within which these documents are produced is one where Black students continue to experience poorer degree outcomes than White students, and where this 'White-Black awarding gap' is emphasised by the OfS as a disparity requiring attention.

Against this backdrop of persistent racial inequality in English HE, and particularly the explicit focus on the White-Black awarding gap, APPs cannot be understood as objective reflections on inequalities across the sector. Instead, they are a key discursive site in which racial inequalities are framed and, ultimately, how meanings are constructed. The focus of this paper is therefore not on *whether* inequalities are reported in APPs, but *how* racial categories are constructed in this domain. By drawing on a QuantCrit lens, we examine the differential framing of the racial categories White and Black to explore how institutions use discursive mechanisms such as quantification and aggregation to shape the meanings attached to racial inequalities and where responsibilities lie.

The title of this paper deliberately reflects the title of Bonilla-Silva's (2014) classic work on the internalised underlying rationales often used to displace responsibility with regard to the persistence of racism. Our analysis echoes some of these insights by investigating the tactics English HE institutions use to construct racial categories in policy documents.

Widening access to higher education

Access to HE has been a central topic of education discourses in England over the past two decades (Thompson, 2019) due to the underlying social equity implications, yet despite the academic, political and media focus on this issue, differential patterns of entry and achievement between ethnic groups persist. These disparities do not originate at the HE level. At A-level in the academic year 2024/2025, 8.9% of Black or Black British students achieved three A*–A grades, compared to 14.3% of White students (Department for Education, 2025). Such differences are also visible at the university level, where Black students, despite being overrepresented at university (as a sector average), are substantially *under*represented at selective universities (Boliver, 2016), and are less likely to obtain a first or upper-second class degree (see Arday et al., 2022 and Richardson, 2018 for effective overviews). Indeed, OfS statistics show that, for the academic year 2023–2024, the difference between Black and White students when investigating this metric was 20.44 percentage points (Office for Students, 2026). Recent qualitative work also demonstrates that racial inequality in English HE extends beyond numerical disparities in outcomes. Wong et al. (2021) showed that Black and minority ethnic students regularly encounter interpersonal and institutional racism at university, which impacts on their participation and sense of belonging. This growing evidence calls for a better understanding of how universities themselves are conceptualising racism, as something that is occurring on their campuses, within institutional policy documents.

This has led to an increase in sector-wide attention to the awarding gap in recent years, as universities (e.g. University of Southampton, n.d.; University of Reading, n.d.) and the OfS (Office for Students, 2018) have acknowledged persistent disparity between White and Black students. In response to these trends, the HE sector has continued to invest in widening participation, which has included national programmes such as Aimhigher, the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) and UniConnect. In terms of policy, the introduction of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) has served to complement these efforts to 'improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education'. (Office for Students, 2023). APPs serve as a regulatory requirement for English universities to annually produce a document, which explains their efforts and targets for improving equity in HE. Despite some of these efforts, the patterned inequalities that shape access, continuation and awarding still remain.

Text as discourse

Analyses of Access Agreements and APPs show that institutions often orient their statements around market concerns, reputational positioning or compliance (Hart, in press) while making little reference to the structural conditions that contribute to ethnic inequalities (Bowl & Hughes, 2013; McCaig & Adnett, 2009). McCaig and Adnett (2009) show that bursary and outreach commitments largely reproduced sectoral stratification, with more selective universities deploying financial support as a marketing device and less selective institutions using additional income to stabilise enrolments. Bowl and Hughes (2013) similarly find that stated widening participation commitments often sit alongside ambivalent or selective interpretations of fair access, shaped by institutions' market identities. This accords with

more contemporary research which has suggested that in the current marketised HE system, institutions are required to make themselves stand out from competitors within the market, and may use their widening participation commitments as a signal to do so: 'WP has been drawn into institutional positionality as HE providers are encouraged to differentiate themselves in the market. This can play out in differentiated approaches to WP; "fair access" for the selective institutions; "aspiration-raising" outreach and ongoing student support for those enrolled for the recruiters' (McCaig et al., 2022, p. 9). These previous studies also demonstrate that the language used in these documents is largely technical vocabulary, which can in turn obscure the racialised nature of disparities by framing disparities as technicalities or performance shortfalls. This is particularly significant given the evidence that racism in HE frequently manifests in subtle ways (Wong et al., 2021). Other evaluations of APP guidance further suggest that regulatory language itself encourages a performative rather than transformative approach to inequality, focussing on quantifiable indicators over structural explanations and reflexive institutional practice (Clements, 2023; Hart, 2024). Collectively, these studies indicate that APPs directly contribute to the active construction of the underlying issues they are intentioned to address.

Equally, it is important to recognise that APPs are not produced in a vacuum; indeed, they are shaped by the regulatory expectations of the OfS. Therefore, the narratives that universities present in these documents are partly influenced and structured by the regulator and, by extension, national policy directives. Nevertheless, while this regulatory context may shape certain parameters within which the APPs are written, universities retain the liberty to interpret these expectations at their discretion and highlight in the documents what they deem salient. This leads to meaningful differences between institutions and why APPs have been previously used as relevant documents for analysis (Boliver & Powell, 2023; Bowl & Hughes, 2013; McCaig & Adnett, 2009; Hart, in press). Moreover, as Ahmed's (2007) analysis of race equality documents shows, universities often enact their commitments to change through documents, which signal their compliance rather than act as mechanisms for change. Therefore, documents can shape how universities present themselves and how they position racialised groups within their institutional narratives (Ahmed, 2007). More recent work by Bhopal (2023b) offers further evidence for this process, whereby they highlight that institutions treat their work towards racial equity as compliance and reputational management, rather than transformative action. By extension, these dynamics make APPs an important site for analysis and closer scrutiny, as these documents do not only report on inequalities descriptively but actively contribute to the construction of the racial categories they use.

Race and higher education

Public discourse in England has given substantial prominence to the label 'White working-class'. The use of this phrase has expanded beyond academic discourse, but can be found in political, media and educational policy discourse (Crawford, 2019). However, as a label and category it lacks a clear and coherent definition and is often interpreted through different proxies such as free school meal eligibility or POLAR. This is particularly of issue when there is a mismatch in the proportion of adults identifying as 'working-class': 'Using 'working class' narratives and frames which relate to 10% of the population is misleading. This is because 60% of the population view themselves as working class' (Runnymead Trust, 2020). This, in turn, causes the term to have limited analytical precision and can thus create a false equivalence between socioeconomic inequalities and racialised inequalities (Crawford, 2019). As Crawford (2019) further argues, there can be unintended consequences when even the Department for Education separates the categories 'White British' and 'White

working-class'. By assigning group status to categories that do not operate consistently as ethnic or cultural groups in other domains. It is, therefore, of interest to examine how 'Whiteness' is discursively constructed also within APPs, and whether the popularised term 'White working-class' is equally used in these documents. This is important given that discursive framings can influence how inequalities are interpreted, and importantly, how responsibilities for addressing them are allocated.

In contrast, research which has documented the experiences of Black students in HE largely points to racialised institutional environments that influence students' belonging, academic confidence, attainment and mental health (Arday et al., 2022; Osbourne et al., 2021). The curriculum, as well as assessments, can enforce White norms where Black students often do not feel represented (Schucan Bird & Pitman, 2020). Another common practice is using aggregated terms such as 'BAME' (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), which erases important distinctions between ethnic groups, particularly Black Caribbean, Black African and other groups (Gill, 2024; Lawrence et al., 2025). Taken together, this previous literature demonstrates that racial inequalities are reproduced through institutional practices, including the categorisation and representation of racialised groups. The wide use of broad aggregate categories such as BAME illustrates how institutional data practices can obscure important heterogeneity. These tensions between lived experience and institutional categorisation highlight the importance of examining how racial categories are constructed within policy texts such as APPs, where the language used has consequences for what is brought to the forefront and the actionable consequences of this. Furthermore, recent research suggests that institutions can use minority groups to signal the effectiveness of their practice. Peart and Race (2025) find that, for example, Black women can be used tokenistically to 'prove' that an organisation is meeting its equality goals.

The present study focusses specifically on the framing of the terms *White* and *Black* within APPs. The focus reflects both the structural disparities in English HE and the centrality of these two categories in national policy reporting. The awarding gap most frequently emphasised by the Office for Students is precisely the White–Black gap. Therefore, this has inadvertently positioned White students and Black students as the primary racialised subjects within widening access discourse. While it is acknowledged here that other ethnic groups experience inequality, we felt that it would be a disservice to all groups to investigate the broad BAME category, and beyond the scope of a single empirical paper to investigate also other ethnic groups. As a consequence of these multiple factors, the White and Black categories carry particular discursive weight and often operate as anchors with which institutions explain and narrate their responsibilities as they pertain to widening access.

QuantCrit approach

This paper primarily draws on the emerging critical tradition of QuantCrit (Crawford, 2019; Gillborn et al., 2018), which acts as a heuristic for understanding the role of numbers and 'datafication' (Williamson et al., 2020) in racialised education discourses. In this paper, QuantCrit is not applied as a statistical method in its own right, but as a critical framework for highlighting how quantification and metric-oriented language operate within policy documents to construct racialised meanings and frame institutional responsibilities. Before outlining the key tenets of a QuantCrit lens that are most usefully applied in this research, we must briefly explain the broader theoretical landscape in which we situate ourselves.

It has been argued that race is a social category, constructed by discourse, whose meanings are liable to shift and change over time. Hall (1997) referred to this as characteristic of a 'floating signifier', where the signifier (race) remains the same but the signified (its social construction) is constantly negotiated, and renegotiated depending on a variety of

social, political, economic and material conditions. This suggests that racial categories acquire meaning through context and prevailing ideological factors, and are actively produced through the language we use to describe and characterise them. The active discursive construction of meaning has particular relevance for policy texts, given that they are produced in regulatory atmospheres which demand the use of certain categories of reference. Ball's conceptualisation of policy as text encapsulates this function of discourse, where policies are both texts and action (Ball, 1994). This framing highlights the performative (Austin, 1973) nature of policy, where texts actively constitute the categories which are their subject: when applied to race, this means that, through naming, texts directly help to construct the meaning of racial categories. In the context of APPs, institutions actively produce the categories to which they refer, they 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault, 1972, p. 52).

QuantCrit places a focus on how numbers shape racialised meanings, noting that, for example, the quantified language of benchmarks and targets construct the categories that they are intending to measure and describe (Gillborn et al., 2018). In APPs, quantified language may enable or constrain racialised discourse, and consequently actions to address racial inequalities. Gillborn et al. (2018) outline five key tenets of the QuantCrit approach, which are: (a) the centrality of racism; (b) numbers are not neutral; (c) categories are neither 'natural' nor given; (d) data cannot 'speak for itself'; (e) using numbers for social justice. Several of these qualities are self-explanatory and so will not be detailed here; however, what is perhaps the most useful characteristic of this theoretical lens, for this paper, is the focus on how a reductionist quantitative approach to statistics normalises a deficit approach towards racialised subjects. Specifically, it is noted that one of the primary challenges of QuantCrit is to 'challenge the past and current ways in which quantitative research has served White Supremacy e.g. by lending support to deficit theories without acknowledging alternative critical and radical interpretations; by removing racism from the discussion by using tools, models, and techniques that fail to take account of racism…' (Gillborn et al., 2018, p. 170). Thus, through this critical lens a QuantCrit perspective is directed at the HE sector in its construction of race through numbers, and corresponding language.

The present study

While persistent inequalities exist between the experiences of White and Black students, little attention has been placed on the racialised policy discourse produced by universities themselves. Existing analyses of APPs, as highlighted earlier, have produced important insights into their various different foci but have not examined how racial categories, specifically 'White' and 'Black', are constructed within these documents and texts. Yet, institutional framings play a critical role in shaping how race is understood, addressed and possibly obscured.

The present study, therefore, addresses this gap by examining how racial categories White and Black are constructed within APPs, with particular attention to the role of quantification in shaping these constructions. By utilising a corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) approach, combined with QuantCrit, the study contributes to discussion on race and HE by investigating how regulatory metrics contribute to the construction of racialised language and by extension how structural qualities are foregrounded or obscured in policy texts. QuantCrit, therefore, informs the interpretive lens of the analysis, by focussing on how quantified and numerical language is expressed and mobilised. Thus, our research questions are as follows:

TABLE 1 Sampling and coding procedure for concordance lines.

	Stage	Sample	White (*n*)	Black (*n*)	Total lines	Coded by
1.	Joint coding	Initial sample used to develop coding scheme	200	200	400	Both authors
2.	Independent coding	Random sample 1	200	200	400	Author A
3.	Independent coding	Random sample 2	200	200	400	Author B
	Total unique concordance lines	–	600	600	1200	–

Note: As the initial 400 lines were coded by both authors, the total number of coding instances was 1600, although 1200 concordance lines were unique.

1. How are the racial categories *White* and *Black* constructed by universities in contemporary English HE?
2. How does quantification influence the ways in which racialised categories are constructed?
3. How are structural inequalities addressed (i.e. racism)?

METHOD

This article draws on APPs produced by English universities between 2018 and 2024, corresponding to the period during which the OfS has served as the regulator of HE. Since the regulatory framework and associated discourses differ significantly across the devolved nations, only APPs from English institutions were retained. All APPs are publicly available documents, freely available on the OfS website. The analysis conducted utilised a CADS approach, in which concordancing is used not for lexicographic descriptions but instead to examine the social meanings that are accumulated around particular terms (in our case White and Black) (Gillings & Mautner, 2024). Following CADS conventions, concordance lines were generated for the terms White and Black, and examined qualitatively in order to identify recurrent discursive patterns and framings. This approach treats concordance lines as analytic artefacts that help reveal patterned descriptions of social groups, rather than neutral linguistic fragments. This allows for an interpretive mode of analysis to be undertaken. This position aligns with earlier CADS work, which argues concordance lines require qualitative interpretation rather than numerical counts alone (Baker et al., 2013).

As an initial step, we extracted every instance of the racial categories White ($n = 4888$) and Black ($n = 3607$), together with a contextual window of 200 characters on either side of the keyword. These concordance lines provided the basis for a qualitative analysis of how racialised categories are framed within HE policy discourse. In order to develop a joint coding scheme, 400 concordance lines were initially selected for joint coding (i.e. 200 White and 200 Black). The sample was drawn randomly from all available occurrences in APPs of each racial category, following established practice, where each concordance line had an equal chance of being selected: 'Traditionally, random samples are often used in CADS work because sorting concordance lines alphabetically hides salient patterns' (Gillings & Mautner, 2024, p.43). The random sampling procedure was conducted in R. A fixed seed was set to ensure reproducibility, after which a complete list of White and Black concordance lines was generated. Concordance lines were then randomly sampled without replacement using the dplyr package (Wickham et al., 2026). Random sampling provided an unbiased cross-section of concordance lines while keeping the dataset manageable for detailed interpretive reading. This rationale aligns with qualitative text policy analysis seeking to explore the construction of students within discourse (Brooks, 2018), which emphasises balancing depth of interpretation with coverage.

Each concordance line served as a unit of analysis and was read within its immediate policy context (the contextual window of 200 characters) to examine how the categories White and Black were discursively constructed within institutional texts. Both authors independently inductively coded these first 400 concordance lines, identifying recurrent linguistic patterns and common framings about race. Following this initial coding phase, the authors met to compare initial codes and notes in order to develop a shared coding scheme to use as a framework for the second coding stage.

Subsequently, each author independently coded an additional random sample of 400 concordance lines (200 White and 200 Black). In total, this procedure allowed us to have 1200 uniquely coded concordance lines (and 1600 coding instances overall), see Table 1 below. In this second coding phase, the corpus was coded using the agreed-upon framework. The total analytic sample contained concordance lines from 105 unique English

universities and 265 unique APPs. Although the curation of the concordance lines was done computationally, the analysis was qualitative and interpretive, guided by a QuantCrit lens and, because of this, emphasis was placed on both what was explicit in the text and what was absent. The QuantCrit approach was used to illuminate the epistemic authority (or lack thereof) of numbers and metrics within the texts rather than to analyse these using statistical techniques. Furthermore, we focussed on the way in which data-centred terminology was utilised in relation to the two racial categories. The collaborative and iterative nature of the multi-staged coding process meant that interpretations were inter-subjectively validated; reflexivity between researchers was key to the analytic process. R was used for curating the corpus and producing our concordance documents; NVivo was used by both authors for coding.

Researcher positionality

Our analysis is shaped by our own location within the English HE landscape. The first author is a male, ethnic minority researching HE policy in England. The second author is a white European female, who is familiar with the English HE system. We acknowledge that our racialised, gendered and professional positions have informed how we read the APPs and consequently interpreted the constructions of Whiteness and Blackness. We do not claim to speak for Black students or other minoritised groups; rather, our analysis interprets institutional policy texts in dialogue with existing scholarship and empirical evidence on racism in HE.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Through a qualitative examination of 1200 concordance lines referring to both racial categories, we find that the framings differ significantly: Whiteness is presented as a personified and moral category, regularly in the form of the construction ‘White working-class boys’, or implicitly through euphemistic phrases for the same group; the other usage of Whiteness include as a yardstick with which to measure ethnic minorities against. Blackness, on the other hand, is predominantly framed in deficit and relational terms, either: through the quantified underperformance of this group in terms of continuation, progression and outcomes (as compared with White students); or subsumed into a broader group of ethnic minorities (e.g. BAME).

Whiteness as classed and euphemised

Whiteness rarely appears as a stand-alone racial category, except when used as a benchmark. Instead, in many instances it is classed, referring implicitly or explicitly to the category of ‘White working-class boys’. Notably, though, the referencing of this group is not always explicit, and universities often rely on euphemisms when referring to the same population, most commonly, POLAR, Free School Meal status or IMD:

> white males from low participation areas
>
> white males from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2
>
> white males from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds

> young white males from low participation neighbourhoods

The effect of this is that Whiteness is commonly discursively accompanied by the language of socioeconomic disadvantage. In this coupling, it is very easy for Whiteness to be constructed as the root cause of this groups' underrepresentation at universities, rather than a complex composite of structural issues. Crawford (2019) supports this point by arguing that this framing 'provides a dangerous veneer of White-ethnic disadvantage that fuels a sense of siege' (p. 437) and contributes to broader confusion about the structural mechanisms underlying racial disadvantages which is dangerous in its reconceptualisation of class bias as racial bias (Gillborn & Kirton, 2000).

Indeed, the use of the term 'working-class' found throughout the corpus is problematic given the widely acknowledged dislocation between the proportion of those who belong to this group and the proportion of people who *view themselves* as part of this group (Runnymede Trust, 2020). Furthermore, through using this coupling of race and socioeconomic status, institutions discuss racialised differences without engaging with race explicitly; the focus is on socioeconomic disadvantage even though Whiteness is invoked. Gillborn (2010) argues that the focus on the 'White working-class boy' may be partially attributed to solidarity between the White middle-classes and the White working-classes: 'solidarity of the White middle classes ensures that the spectre of racial violence (both symbolic and real) will be mobilised if, for example, their educational or employment prospects dip below those of key (especially Black) minoritised groups' (p. 21). This accords with the findings of the present study where discussions of the White working-class are prevalent: middle-class White institutions with solidarity for working-class White boys.

In addition, the group appears moralised through use of the term 'boys', which signifies some level of vulnerability, and the need for protection:

> …underrepresentation of white working-class boys in higher education. The programme will be redesigned in collaboration with the community in order to address local issues and, in line with the [University] WP strategy …

> …key themes of improving pre-entry attainment, sparking subject interest, the importance of creating pathways to progression and the particular challenge of white, working class boys.

> the project is aimed at using football as an activity that engages white working class boys in thinking about future options.

This has previously been described as a process of victimisation, where the White working-classes are suffering *because of* minority ethnic groups (Gillborn, 2010). A further rhetorical effect of this is that the 'White working-class boy' is a figure deserving of *special* attention, and in need of 'inspiring', when the same cannot be said of the Black students referenced within the corpus. Institutions frequently refer to interventions that aim to raise aspirations and generally motivate this population, which frames their underrepresentation as a problem of individual drive rather than any form of systematic exclusion.

> …white, working class boys are to be inspired to enter HE after A levels…

> …standing to develop educational initiatives that can be used across the region to support other young people in schools. The project is intended to advise,

> inspire, support and inform young white disadvantaged boys who may face challenges in progressing in education.

We do also acknowledge that most commonly the term 'boys' is in reference to students younger than 18, as this is the age group that widening participation activities primarily target. While, in some cases then 'boys' may be the 'accurate' description of this group, within our subsample of APPs we also found instances where the same label is applied to those already at university:

> White working-class boys – we have a good representation of working-class students among our male students.

> young women in the least advantaged areas are 66% more likely to apply to higher education than young men, leaving a significant participation gap both nationally and at the [University] for white working class boys.

In these cases, the term 'boys' is not referring to pre-university students under 18, and in these cases, the categorisation is less clearly age congruent. This also suggests a level of discursive slippage, whereby the figure of the 'White working class boy' moves between pre-university and university contexts. The effect of this slippage is that the moralised connotations of the group remain, and in turn reinforce the framing of this group as in need of unique guidance.

Moreover, in this way, Whiteness is framed as a group that suffers from a lack of aspiration, which institutions can mediate through interventions centred on behaviour and attitude. A tension emerges, though, since on the one hand, Whiteness is coupled with socioeconomic status and deprivation, but on the other hand, it is the yardstick against which other ethnic groups are measured against. Bhopal (2023a) notes that the frequent use of Whiteness as the unspoken norm against which others are measured is 'seemingly invisible to White groups because it is constructed as a normative baseline…' (p. 113). APPs describe progress of ethnic minority groups against the standard of Whiteness, which is then simultaneously discursively constructed as a benchmark *and* as a characteristic of the most vulnerable population. The difference between these two constructions is that one is implicit (as the comparator) and the other is explicit (in the White working-class boy formulation):

> …reduce the difference in degree attainment (1st and 2:1) between white and black students to 10% points

> …gap in non-continuation rates between black and white full-time students…

> The university has been committed to reducing the attainment gap between white and BAME students for several years.

Blackness as deficit and relational

Blackness appears in the corpus most commonly in relation to a reported deficit, typically in terms of lower continuation or attainment. These discourses are often framed in such a way to suggest that there is a clear problem and solution where gaps need to be 'closed' or attainment needs to be 'raised':

> …halve the gap between white and black degree outcomes by 5% by 2024/5 and remove by 2038.
>
> …percentage point difference in the proportion of white and BAME (particularly black) first degree leavers (ft/pt) awarded a first or upper second class degree classification

The persistence of this deficit framing, particularly in terms of a 'gap' between Black and White students, is longstanding in educational discourses. Indeed, Ladson-Billings' presidential address to the American Educational Researcher Association addressed this very issue. In the address, it is argued that the 'gap' should be reframed as a debt; that underrepresented students in education have been subjected to multiple exclusions (economic, moral, sociopolitical) which cumulatively impact on them negatively (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Gap discourses promote short-term thinking, rather than any structural analysis of broader issues, which impact on students. Similar to the White concordance lines, these framings of Blackness as a deficit often neglect to take a nuanced approach to any structural issues. The specific experiences and exclusions faced by Black populations are not mentioned.

While Whiteness is coupled with socioeconomic status in the corpus, Blackness is coupled with other ethnic groups and is hardly discussed on its own. It is often compared to the yardstick of Whiteness, which is most noticeable through the aforementioned White–Black attainment gap discourse:

> …tackle attainment gaps affecting this student group. This work will support both local and institutional progress in relation to our targets to reduce the attainment gaps between our white, black and BAME students.
>
> We have signed the UUK pledge to work collaboratively to tackle racial inequality and close the BAME attainment gaps by adopting the principles outlined in the recent report…
>
> 2017–18 highlights that 47% of part time BAME students achieved a good degree in 2017-18, compared to 73% of white students.
>
> We have successfully reduced the gap between % of white and BME students achieving good honour degrees (1st or 2:1), from 19% in 2014/15 to 16.3% in 2015/16. The percent of BME students achieving a good honours degree has increased from 56% to 62%…
>
> In 2016/17, black students had the highest rate of non-continuation (8.3%), compared to 5.5% for white students…

A further consequence of the prevalent comparison of Blackness to Whiteness discursively positions the latter as the norm, or standard, and the former as the outlier Bhopal (2023a). Furthermore, Blackness is often subsumed into aggregated categories such as BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) or ABMO (Asian, Black, Mixed and Other) in APPs. Aggregation serves to diminish the real differences between ethnic groups, such as between Black and Asian. The effect of this aggregation and comparison means that Black students are rarely discussed as a group with specific needs or facing specific issues; such as those relating to academic skills, and mental health (Arday et al., 2022; Osbourne et al., 2021). That is not to say that this group is the only group to experience these issues, but that specificities exist. In addition to this, Lawrence et al. (2025) note

that the effect of the aggregation BAME can create a 'tendency to shape sector-wide politics that are sometimes well intentioned but ultimately promote an unhelpful "White people and the rest" type dualism' (p. 129). This is well-reflected in APPs where BAME and White are regularly contrasted:

> Black and minority ethnic groups – [University] has a positive track record in recruiting and supporting students from BAME backgrounds. Work with local schools with high BAME populations is increasing…
>
> …in terms of graduate level employment, there is a 3.7% gap between white and BAME graduates…
>
> …identified more years where there are statistical differences in the gap between BAME students and white students…

Another pattern evident in the corpus is the use of successful Black students as a marker of institutional success and to indicate the universities are already successful in supporting this group. Black students are therefore used by institutions as a metric to demonstrate their institutional successes in widening participation, often compared to the sector average. This is particularly interesting when compared to the framing of White working-class boys outlined earlier, who are instead portrayed as a group who institutions need to provide for:

> [University] has the third highest proportion of home undergraduate BME entrants across Russell group institutions, the highest outside of London, with a similar statistic for the proportion of black entrants.
>
> … this performance is replicated at the detailed level, with Asian, black and students of mixed and other ethnicity all having absolute continuation rates above the sector…

Peart and Race (2025) problematise this performative use of demographic groups as a mechanism through which universities display their successes. Though their argument is specifically made in relation to Black women in HE, our findings support the extension of this to an aggregated category of Black women *and* men: 'Black women exist in a contested space in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom where they can be used in a tokenistic way as a visible confirmation of how well an organisation is realising its organisational aims of equality' (p. 1).

(Un)explained gaps between groups

White students are constrained within class framings, with a clear focus on the category White working-class boys that emphasises aspiration and motivation as the key barriers behind their underrepresentation. They are therefore framed as a group whose lack of progression to HE is understood and explainable through motivational issues, and ultimately a group who is portrayed sympathetically. The 'problem' of White working-class boys' underachievement is both identifiable and actionable:

> the university will continue to work to ensure the participation of white males from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in all of the activities and interventions committed to in this access agreement.

> the widening participation department commissioned LKMCO to produce a piece of research into the underrepresentation of white working class boys in higher education. The report explores why this particular group are underrepresented (only 10% of the most disadvantaged white boys participate in HE)
>
> in 2016/17 we intend to investigate whether white British boys from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are under- represented in our core widening participation outreach programmes.
>
> to provide focused and targeted campus days and sessions to care leavers, BME and Q1 & Q2 students. Local research has reiterated the need to continue outreach activities through to year 13 if more 'white, working class boys' are to be inspired to enter HE after A levels, as opposed to employment, as currently the case.

Blackness, on the other hand, is mentioned in relation to other groups. In this context, the lived experience of this group is lost, and instead a focus is placed on quantified participation and comparative metrics. This is found most frequently in terms of gaps, and leads to a lack of personality within the framing of APPs. A key theme from the framing of Whiteness and Blackness in APPs is in the purported *reasons* for underrepresentation and 'success' of each ethnic category. While the lack of representation and 'success' of White working-class boys is implicitly treated as explainable, the same cannot be said of the treatment of Black students. The gap between White and Black students in terms of degree awards is frequently described as 'unexplained'. Though it is the case that this framing does not necessarily only derive from universities' thinking regarding ethnicity, and is partially from the regulatory body, it is nevertheless striking:

> …eliminate 'unexplained' non- continuation gap for black students…
>
> …we have been able to establish that the gap between BME and white students is unexplained – having controlled for subject choice and prior attainment.
>
> The gap in attainment between black and white students at [University] is an unexplained one. Black students enter [University] with the same grades as their peers, yet their degree outcomes are not as good.
>
> …to eliminate the unexplained gap in good degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white and black students by 2024/25…

The proclamation of the 'unexplained' nature of the difference between groups can be attributed less to a lack of knowledge about the issue per se and more as a mark of limited institutional inquiry. The consequence, though, is a purportedly explainable underachievement of the White 'working-class' and an unexplainable underachievement of ethnic minorities. This therefore means that action can be oriented towards the former to remedy underachievement, which is suspended in the case of the latter, where effort must instead be directed at understanding issues. This is the mechanism through which institutions can justify their inaction with regard to Black students. It is more striking, then, that structural issues, which are well documented in the literature to affect racially minorities students, are neglected within APPs.

Silence on structure

One particularly striking feature apparent from our analysis is the *lack* of discussion of the structural impediments faced by different ethnicity groups, which impact on student access, success and progression. This is a finding that is easily lost since it is impossible to illustrate such an absence through illustrative quotes, but particularly important from a QuantCrit perspective where a key tenet is the centrality of racism—an inherently structural issue. There is limited acknowledgement of structural racism, and limited discussion of the lived experiences of ethnic minority groups. The most explicit example of a discussion of race and racism in the sample concordance lines demonstrates an asymmetry of recognising the impact of racism on BAME students, yet the reference to attainment and lack of representation only corresponds to the Black ethnic group:

> Racism in higher education continues to have a detrimental impact on the lives of BAME students and staff in higher education and may contribute to lower attainment rates of black students and lack of black professors and senior managers in higher education.

The silence on structural matters is particularly noticeable in the context of a broad literature investigating these very issues; the gaps between White and Black students are quantified in APPs but not explained. The absence of structural explanations within APPs has, knowingly or unknowingly, an important discursive function: through only reporting on numerical differences between groups, institutions can superficially acknowledge inequalities without addressing issues comprehensively. Quantification provides the veneer of engagement with issues but effectively masks a lack of true engagement. Indeed, universities are not positioned as a site within which racialised inequalities are (re)produced despite the fact that much academic evidence suggests they *are* a key site of this (Arday et al., 2022; Osbourne et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2021). Furthermore, in framing issues in such a neutral and 'objective' way, institutions appear to have a 'view from nowhere' on the issue of racism, ignoring that they are major actors.

While it is true that APPs report numerically on the disparities between groups, the wider social conditions which are widely acknowledged and evidenced in the educational and sociological literature are largely ignored. Given that race is 'more than just a variable' (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 3), the overt (and apparently uncritical) quantification of gaps through different metrics is alarming. Indeed, if we were to be reminded of the key tenets of a QuantCrit perspective: (a) the centrality of racism; (b) numbers are not neutral; (c) categories are neither 'natural' nor given; (d) data cannot 'speak for itself'; (e) using numbers for social justice, we find that the institutional treatment of race fails on *all* fronts. Racism is decentred; numbers are treated with reverence as objective; categories are treated as neutral and not problematised (e.g. the White working-class boy); and data are presented abstractly as speaking for themselves.

Through the pervasive quantification and positioning as a neutral observer, merely reporting quantitatively on racial inequalities, HE institutions overtly signal their care and attention to addressing issues of race in HE, without making good on this signal: this is clearly evidenced in the lack of addressing structural issues such as racism in APPs where inequalities are acknowledged and quantified, but not confronted.

Limitations and future directions

While this paper investigated the framing of Blackness and Whiteness in APPs, it is acknowledged that there are several limitations which lead to important directions for future research. First, we focus explicitly on two groups of students, while this was theoretically chosen due to their centrality within national policy discourses; it necessarily leaves the framing of other ethnic groups underexplored. Future research might usefully extend our approach to other ethnic groups, for example to examine how Asian, mixed-heritage and other minority groups are constructed within APPs, as well as how race intersects with other social categories. In particular, further work is needed to investigate the intersectional framing of ethnicity and gender, not least given the dominant framing of Whiteness identified here as gendered through the figure of the 'White working-class boy'.

Second, the present research is limited to APPs produced within a specific regulatory time-frame and regulatory environment, which provides useful insight into how race is framed in contemporary discourses. This might usefully be expanded to encompass a wider time span to investigate how constructions of Blackness and Whiteness have shifted over time and in response to changing social and regulatory environments. Such work might require advanced methodologies from the discipline of corpus linguistics, for example, to track changes in collocations over time. Finally, future research could productively triangulate the findings of our research by conducting a close reading of APPs to investigate the framing of Blackness and Whiteness. Alongside the benefit of triangulation, this might also provide fresh insights into how racialised framings fit into the narrative structure of HE institutional policy documents.

CONCLUSION

This research has shown that APPs act as a powerful discursive site of meaning making, through which racial categories are produced in contrasting ways; furthermore, they orient HE institutions' plans with regard to widening participation and access for different groups. Though these documents are constrained by the expectations of the OfS regulatory body, who help to direct efforts across the sector, this does not diminish the power they have in constructing meanings (Ahmed, 2007). The realities of racial inequities in the HE system, as evidenced in much previous literature (Arday et al., 2022; Boliver, 2016; Richardson, 2018; Wong et al., 2021), mean that the question of framing is vitally important to understand, since it can facilitate the enabling or constraining of future action for minority groups.

The key contribution of this paper is found in the demonstration that quantification functions as a discursive mechanism within widening participation discourses to displace institutional responsibility for racial inequalities. These findings contribute to the QuantCrit literature in illustrating that HE institutions construct Whiteness and Blackness in fundamentally asymmetrical ways: Whiteness is personalised, treated as worthy of inspiring, and used as a benchmark against which ethnic minorities can be measured, whereas Blackness is aggregated, quantified and treated as a puzzling category, the root of whose inequalities is little known. Universities maintain the mirage of engagement with issues of race and ethnicity through superficial and quantified acknowledgement of different outcomes for different groups, but this is simultaneously a mechanism through which they absolve themselves of responsibility. They do not confront the active role they play in the (re)production of racial inequalities. Institutions are thus failing Black students, in treating them as a group who little is known about, and failing to confront either structural issues such as racism, or the responsibility they hold as HE institutions to help to address these inequalities.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data is public and available via the Office for Students Website: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/search-for-access-and-participation-plans/#/AccessPlans/.

ETHICS STATEMENT
This study used publicly available institutional policy documents. No human participants were involved, and no personal or sensitive data were collected. Thus, formal ethical approval was not required.

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