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## Chapter 2

# A Liberating Curricula as a Social Responsibility for Promoting Social Justice and Student Success Within the UK Higher Education Institution (HEI)

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities as part of a higher education institution (HEI) organisational strategies and practices to address economic and social inequality is no longer a new phenomenon. This promotes increased levels of involvement, choice, and diversity, and is aligned with recent initiatives to widen participation improve representation and promote attainment. CSR may also be encapsulated within frameworks through which HEIs may identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers that impede minority ethnic (ME) staff and students' progression and attainment. This chapter is informed by discussions concerning CSR within higher education in relation to the aims and objectives of education; student progression and attainment as a university's socially responsible business practice and act of due diligence, to improve representation, progression and success for ME students; curriculum vs. education and the function of a liberating curriculum as a vehicle to enhance academic attainment and promote student success.*

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*A Liberating Curricula as a Social Responsibility for Promoting Social Justice***INTRODUCTION**

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), formerly coined as social responsibility (SR) has a longstanding history, dating as far back as the 1930's (Barnard, 1938; Clark, 1939; McWilliams, Siegel, & Wright, 2006). By virtue of its multidimensional use in a diverse range of settings, primarily among business practitioners and academics, this nebulous concept is viewed as a socially constructed discourse that attracts variances in its definition, dependent upon the lens through which it is viewed.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) outlines their approach to CSR, which is fueled by an “appreciation to balance organizational priorities against [their] social, environmental and economic responsibilities” (HEFCE, n.d.). Equally, the Department for Trade and Industry declares that CSR “is about the integrity with which a company governs itself, fulfills its mission, lives by its values, engages with its stakeholders, measures its impacts and publicly reports on its activities”. Berger and Luckman (1996) underlined the complexities associated with the concept of CSR and highlighted the impossibility of achieving an unbiased definition. According to the ISO Business Standards (International Organisation for Standardisation, 2010), CSR offers guidance to organisations, which governs their delivery of ethical, transparent actions that contributes to the health and welfare of society. Essentially, social responsibility dictates accountability or responsibility towards society. Hence, in the absence of an objective methodology for achieving an unbiased, robust definition of CSR (Van Marrewijk, 2003), a contextual approach to defining CSR is often adopted.

The contemporary higher education institution (HEI) operates within a globalised milieu, populated by citizens from a diverse range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This “offers rich potential to develop a sense of global responsibility and citizenship” (Trahar, 2011, v11). HEIs possess a range of social responsibilities (SR) and endeavours to fulfil these purposes by delivering excellence in teaching and learning, then potentially producing graduates for the global economy, who meet the needs of businesses, the industry, employers and their respective professions (HEFCE, n.d.). It is the expectation, that HEIs conduct their business as social institutions, propagating knowledge that develops human capital, advances the legitimate pursuits of the state/nation, promotes individual learning and maintain political loyalties (Gumport, 2000). Similar to other business organisations, universities strive to achieve sustainability, in order to maintain operation and procure adequate funding for current and future initiatives. Hence, universities “cannot be sustainable without being socially responsible”; this entails making higher education accessible to students of all socio-economic backgrounds (International Organisation for Standardisation, 2010).

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Given the diversity of student populations in HEIs, the milieu in which they operate and the impact of the curriculum on the overall intellectual/social development of students, it may be naïve to assume that sustainability within the HE sector can be achieved without incorporating a “liberating curriculum” within its CSR strategies. A liberating curriculum is essential to the realisation of a holistic learning experience, as it may be seen as the main instrument to promote cultural competence, retention and success in HE. A Liberating curriculum represents one that aims to “reverse the effects of structural oppression in society” (Collector, 2007). A liberating/liberalised curriculum in this context, is defined as one that promotes social justice and enhances the social, moral, political, intellectual, and spiritual faculties of every student by connecting them with knowledge that prepares them for engaging and making decisions that further the social and political world. It is with this in mind, that universities are challenged to liberate their curricula, in realising their SR.

The ISO defined CSR’s 7 core tenets, which constitutes 36 potential areas of work by an organisation of SR, namely: labour practices; the environment; fair operating practices; organisational governance; consumer issues; development of the community and society and respect for human rights (International Organisation for Standardisation, 2010). This chapter therefore conceptualizes the notion of CSR beyond the corporate business sector, to the HE sector. It presents an investigation of the concept of CSR, in relation to a liberalised/liberating curriculum and HEI’s egalitarian, philanthropic, ethical and legal responsibilities to fulfil these responsibilities to society. Guided by the Critical Race Theory (CRT)<sup>1</sup>, as a framework, it will explore facets of CSR and suggest how a liberating curriculum may be seen as a HEI’s responsibility for promoting social justice, and student success.

I proceed in three steps. First, it is deemed necessary to explore the aims, objectives and social ends of higher education, through which effective learning and teaching may positively influence a HEI’s practices in order to fulfil elements of their CSR – fair operating practice, human rights, consumer issues and development of the community and society.

It can be argued that a HEI’s mandate may encompass the improvement, representation, progression and attainment for all its students. Therefore secondly, I will explore how the progression and attainment of students from underrepresented groups, particularly students from minoritised groups, should be considered as an act of due diligence by HEIs in realising their SR.

Finally, a critical discussion around the function of a liberating curriculum as a vehicle to enhance academic attainment and promote student success in HE will close the chapter, along with a conclusion, which outlines the implications of a liberating curriculum on current practice.

*A Liberating Curricula as a Social Responsibility for Promoting Social Justice***The Aims, Objectives, and Social Ends of Higher Education**

*Like other organizations, educational institutions have epistemologies. They hold conceptions of what counts as legitimate knowledge and how you know what you claim to know. These theories of knowledge need not be consciously espoused by individuals (although they may be), for they are built into institutional structures and practices. (Schon 1995, p.26).*

In the eighteenth century, a liberal thinker and German man, Wilhelm von Humboldt asked the question, “what is education good for?” (Mueller-Vollmer, 2016). This provides the impetus for our exploration of the aims, objectives and social ends of higher education. In the perusal of this question, it may be essential, in order to achieve plurality in understanding, not to discredit eclecticism, due to the complexity of previous approaches adopted.

According to the classical Greek pedagogy of *eleutherios paideia*, the aim of liberal education is to “free the pupil from habit so as to become fully human by cultivating an inquiring mind and virtuous character committed to pursuing public good” (Axelrod 2002, pp.11-13). Education historically is seen as a public good that inspires edification, the development of human capital, individual employability, and national technological progress. But which public good is it supposed to serve? Is it that of the citizen, or state?

John Henry Newman provided a positive manifesto in support of a liberal education in stating that education should aim to cultivate the “habit of mind” in the development of a virtuous character (Newman, 2008). This corroborates with Axelrod’s thoughts. Sentiments that the inculcation of new generations into pre-existing knowledge of society by educators as a SR proves contentions as an explanation (Arendt, 1954; Williams, 2016). Kant (1798) proposed that universities become allies to national governments and promote the pursuit of empirical truth, which he believed facilitates enlightenment. Still, by Alerod’s stance, once could assume that in the presence of habit, a pupil not be classified as “fully human”. Or can they?

Lord Robbins and colleagues, in their 1963 Higher Education report (Robbins, 1963), specified four essential objectives to any balanced educational system. Fundamentally, the report stipulated that engagement in higher education should provide

*Instruction in skills suitable to play a [sic] part in the general division of labour. What is taught should be taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind, as it facilitates the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship ... [in order to] provide in partnership with the family, that background of culture and social habit upon which a healthy society depends.*

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Furthermore, according to Robbins, engagement in higher education should aim to achieve its aims “by providing [the former] in the atmosphere of the institutions in which the students live and work, influences that in some measure compensate for any inequalities of home background” (p7). From Robbins’ report, education may be seen as a vehicle to promote social/vocational mobility, intellectual liberation and the development of culture. This is assuming that “the subject”, is devoid of all these attributes, prior to exposure to higher education. Yet Matthew Arnold, a gazetted Inspector of English schools and pre-eminent English cultural theorist of the nineteenth century emphasised that culture is a mechanism that could utilise knowledge to realise the social and moral passion for doing good (Arnold, 2003). Arnold believed that culture had the power to convert the “raw person” from “the rule by which he fashions himself” towards “what is indeed beautiful, graceful and becoming” (pp. 17-18). This corroborates with Robbins’ aims to convert and inculcate those who were ill prepared for public life because of their home backgrounds. It also echoes similar sentiments to Axelrod and John Newman in promoting acculturation. Arnold also believed that culture could be socially ameliorative. Most notably here, within the implicit declaration of the university’s SR, is the absence of an acknowledgement of the variance in cultural norms for some people, which may have been promoted by migration into Britain of peoples from its ex colonies. Sheila Trahar’s opinion that “the Western academy can be seen as a colonising institution, through its treatment of those who do not belong to its dominant culture” (Trahar, 2011, p3) prompts us to approach with caution, when attempting to “free the pupil from habit so as to [make them] become fully human” in order to “cultivate [a healthy] habit of mind”.

And so, Professor Robbie Shilliam, in his exploration of the aims and methods of liberal education through the notes of a nineteenth century Pan-Africanist, articulated his views that “modern liberal education wishes to suture and save a public culture that is racially exclusionary [and] complicit in committing epistemic injustice” (Shilliam, 2016). In expounding on this, Professor Shilliam declared, “such an injustice refers to the ways in which some racialized groups are deemed competent to cultivate the public sphere while others are deemed incompetent to do so.” According to Steven Schwartz, the goal of higher education is to help build a fairer, more just society. Universities contribute to a just society in two ways: by producing graduates who improve social life and by promoting social mobility (Schwartz, 2016).

Higher education aims to play “a major role in shaping a democratic, civilized, inclusive society” (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997, p. 72-81). Harvey and Knight (1996) believed “the primary role of higher education is increasingly to transform students by enhancing their knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities while simultaneously empowering them as lifelong critical, reflective learners”. Equally, engagement in higher education should provide a platform for

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students to promote and celebrate their own identities (McArthur, 2009). It should provoke thought and inspire thought, in contributing to the social, cultural, economic and political enrichment of the entire society. Still, we have no consensus on the purpose of higher education.

Therefore, the aims and objectives of higher education may be aligned with the amelioration of social injustice, promotion of epistemic justice, development of a culture and social habit upon which a healthy society depends, as well as edifying its pupils in the advancement of knowledge. As Professor Edward Du Bois declared, “Education must not simply teach work, it must teach life” (Du Bois, 1903). Perhaps this may be a starting point in unpacking the aims, objectives and social ends of higher education, in relation to their SRs by HEIs to promote social justice.

### **Socially Responsible Business Practices as an Act of Due Diligence: A HEI’s Mandate to Improve Representation, Progression and Success for Students From Underrepresented and Minority Ethnic (BME) Groups**

Universities may be seen as repositories and generators of knowledge, dedicated to the learning and development of their members “students”, in promoting egalitarianism, social mobility and a just and fairer society. The equality of access and ability of under-represented pupils, primarily those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, people from specific ethnic groups and people with disabilities to access higher education remains a concern, despite government initiatives within the UK to widening participation. The Higher Education Council for England declared that:

*Participation in HE will equip our citizens to operate productively within the global knowledge economy. It also offers social benefits, including better health, lower crime and a more tolerant and inclusive society... Widening and increasing participation must therefore be a permanent goal for the higher education sector. (HEFCE, 2003, p.11).*

Broader socio-economic changes within the British society has promoted a drive to widen participation within the HE sector. This has mandated that HEIs act with due diligence in expediting their social responsibilities to promote diversity and access to HE. This poses a challenge to those who promote cultural democracy/integrity and the universalism of the liberal state (Williams, 2016), since the contextualisation of a HEI’s social responsibilities can be encapsulated in its operating practices, human rights and consumer issues. According to Steven Schwartz, “If higher education can be made available to students from diverse backgrounds, it can become an

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instrument for progress toward egalitarian objectives” (Schwartz, 2016). It can be argued that HEI’s have egalitarian, philanthropic, ethical and legal responsibilities to ensure that they employ socially responsible business practices in order to improve representation, progression and success for all students, particularly those from underrepresented groups.

### **Fair Operating Practice**

In the current post-Brexit climate, marred by insecurity, risk and fragility, HEIs need to communicate their wider social responsibilities and commitment to engaging with diverse communities of students and staff, as a means of demonstrating fair operating practices.

Within the UK HE sector, there are 14,130 professors, 76.9% of whom are men and 23.1% women; just 75 are black; among this cohort, alarmingly 17 are black female (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016). Equally, data produced by the Equality challenge Unit suggests that across the sector, 70.5% of professors are white men and 21.8% are white women; 6.1% of professors are BME men and 1.6% are Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) women; correspondingly, senior managers in higher education are more likely to be from a white background 67.5%, white male and 28.3% white female, with 3.3 per cent BME male and 0.9% BME female (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016).

Congruently, disparities in student attainment “attainment gap” has been persistent over the last decade. In 2014-15, 21% of the total UK domiciled students in HE was from a BME background (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016). Equally, 50.8% of UK-domiciled black students received a “good degree” in comparison to 77.1% of white British students (a 26.3% attainment gap). When disaggregated by ethnic group, students of black origin fared worse (a 26.3% gap), followed by Pakistani students (a 19.0% gap), then Chinese students (a 9.3% gap), followed by Indian students (an 8.8% gap) (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016). This persisted, even after controlling for entry qualifications.

Since minority ethnic students comprise 20% of the overall student population in the UK, and many graduate level jobs and postgraduate courses require a “good degree”<sup>2</sup> as a prerequisite for entry, this inequality in academic outcomes may prove costly for students and ultimately the society, in light of increases in tuition fees in line with inflationary increases. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that there is a similar disparity in postgraduate study, as reflected by the variance in first year BME undergraduate students (22.5%) vs first year postgraduate BME students (19.2%). This clearly demonstrates a need to promote fair operating practices within the CSR strategies of HEIs, as a possible means of mitigating these disparities.

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Fair operating practices may be reflected by promoting SR within the value chain, and integrating and embedding ethical, social, environmental, racial and gender equality within their recruitment and provision of opportunities for progression. This may alleviate accusations of capitalising on social conditions. A typical example of this is the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which was introduced by the government in 2016, to rebalance the relationship between research and teaching in higher education (House of Commons Business Innovation and Skills Committee, 2016). It is proposed that the TEF will act as a barometer to assess the quality of teaching in universities in England, and be rated against teaching quality, learning environment and student outcomes and learning gain<sup>3</sup>. “Teaching excellence matters – not only for students as taxpayers, but also for social mobility – helping to address inequality by allowing students to fulfil their aspirations and progress onto their chosen careers” (Department for Education, 2016). Hence, institutions who are successful in demonstrating a high quality, will gain a TEF award – gold, silver, bronze. But what exactly does this mean for staff and students in HE, in terms of fair operating practice, considering the current degree attainment gap and disparities in progression intersectionally? While the government has sought to depoliticise the TEF, there is a more fundamental set of political and ethical questions about the purposes and social value of higher education that needs to be at the heart of this debate. This is summarized in by the Office For Fair Access, in their letter:

*... any increase in your higher fee income will provide a valuable opportunity to increase your spend on access, student success and progression activity, in order to ensure that widening participation activity and infrastructure are protected from the planned reductions in ... student opportunity funding. (OFFA, 2016).*

Since higher education is an important driver of social mobility, and an instrument to promote social justice, it necessarily follows that embedding fair operating practices should be at the heart of HEI’s CSR strategies. Equally, since the TEF has been identified as the latest instrument within the sector to assess quality in higher education, it is of paramount importance that the achievement of a TEF award through the quality assessment review process, is seen less as a justification to apply higher tuition fees, but more a call to action for HEIs to fulfill their social responsibilities. But still we are presented with some pertinent questions in relation to the TEF and its implications on curriculum diversification and social justice pedagogy.

## **Human Rights**

An organisation’s SR in relation to Human rights is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948). This mandates

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that businesses/organisations respect the human rights of their stakeholders in conducting their operations. Within the context of the HEI, the primary human rights that will be considered within this chapter are equality of opportunity and non-discrimination. Within a HEI setting, inclusive policy making could be attributed to the marginal gains experienced thus far. This is governed by two primary pieces of legislation that amalgamated previous discrimination laws and provided a framework to explore and address discrimination – Race Relations Amendment Act, 2000 and The Equality Act 2010. Equally, two charters – the Race Equality Charter and the Athena Swan Charter – focusses on addressing discrimination and promoting equality and attainment the academy.

The Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 mandates that all institution have a positive duty to proactively take actions to promote race equality (“Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000,” n.d.). The act clearly outlines the social responsibilities to: (1) eliminate unlawful discrimination (2) Promote equality of opportunity (3) Promote good race relations between persons of different racial groups. In addition, HEI’s have to fulfil specific duties, which helps them to meet their general duty. For example, implement a race equality policy, monitoring the admission and progress of students; monitoring staff recruitment and career progression by racial group; assess the effect of all institutional policies for their impact on different racial groups; publish the results of monitoring and assessments on race equality, as well as the race equality policy itself (Collector, 2007). Within this context, it is prudent to acknowledge that there may be discrepancies in praxis in relation to these acts and policies.

Additionally, the Equality Act 2010 provides a legal framework to protect the rights of individuals, by advancing equality of opportunity (HMSO, 2010). It outlaws any form of discrimination – direct, indirect, based on association, based on perception – and outlines nine protected characteristics<sup>4</sup>. The act “contains provisions for education providers to take [positive action] to tackle ... disadvantage, meet different needs, or address disproportionately low participation of particular student group” (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2010). This provides justification for current initiatives to “widen participation” in HE.

Equally, the Race Equality Charter (REC) and Athena Swan Charter awards serve to demonstrate a HEI’s commitment to valuing equality, diversity, inclusion and gender equality. The REC “provides a framework through which institutions work to identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers that impede the progression of minority ethnic staff and students. It aims to improve “the representation, progression and success of minority ethnic staff and students within higher education” (ECU, 2017).

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Likewise, the Athena Swan Charter recognizes efforts to address gender equality and progression of students/professional services staff into academia, and not just barriers that affect women, in relation to their representation, progression and journey through career milestones. It primarily encourages the advancement of women's careers in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM), as well as work undertaken in arts, humanities, social sciences, business and law (AHSSBL) and professional support roles.

The Race Equality Charter works in a similar way to the Athena Swan Charter, but focuses on race diversity and covers academic, professional and support staff as well as student progression and attainment as well as diversity in the curriculum. This provides justification for promoting student success through a liberating curriculum. This charter also embodies the principles of the Critical Race Theory (CRT), which acknowledges the role that race and racism plays in perpetuating social disparities between marginalised and dominant groups. Demonstrating the efficacy of the REC in making a difference in how HEI's achieve their SR through their CSR strategies may prove difficult. As a result of this, it has taken in excess of ten years to identify progress and impact made by the implementation of the REC. Does this signify an act of due diligence by HEIs? What has become apparent, is that if the implementation of these charters and legislation in support of human rights is tied to funding (as in the case for Athena SWAN Charter) then many universities will be encouraged to apply/implement them. The adoption of the principles of the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000, the Equality Act 2010, REC and Athena Swan Charter as mechanisms to guide HEI's CSR frameworks, may stimulate a departure from the deficit approach to student progression and attainment, diversity of the curriculum and representation among professional and academic staff, towards a more holistic approach to challenging inequality and promoting social justice at a strategic level.

### **Student Issues**

Developing strategies around student issues may enable universities to meet their SR and create an understanding of their role in their respective communities. This may also enable them to gain a competitive advantage, in light of the recent removal of student number controls (Hillman, 2014). This reinforces the Robbins principle<sup>5</sup> and may promote the liberalisation of the English HE. The development of strategies around student issues aims to increase social mobility and increase HEI's income. Issues such as sense of belonging; micro-inequality; and reduced prospects of graduate employment, have been cited as elements that affect the learning, teaching, retention and success of students in HE. Institutional racism and endemic unconscious

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bias<sup>6</sup> continues to be an issue in HE. Socially responsible business practices may provide a barometer on which to gauge if Individual HEIs act with due diligence in promoting the human rights of their stakeholders, primarily those from minority ethnic groups. In light of this, it is prudent that in upholding their CSRs, HEI refrain from patronizing minority ethnic groups, but enable them to develop as culturally competent, global citizens.

**Sense of Belonging**

Professor Liz Thomas, in her final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success Programme found that students identify a range of reasons for contemplating leaving university, chief among them, feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in “Belonging”<sup>7</sup> (Thomas, 2012). The research subsequently found a correlation between sense of belonging and engagement. At this point, it is appropriate to draw on the work<sup>8</sup> of Pierre Bourdieu, whose theories of cultural capital and habitus<sup>9</sup> perchance highlights the possible modus operandi of universities, in maintaining class-related discourses and behaviours (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

According to Professor Liz Thomas:

*Students whose habitus is at odds with that of their higher education institution may feel that they do not fit in; that their social and cultural practices are inappropriate and that their tacit knowledge is undervalued; they may be more inclined to withdraw early. (Thomas, 2012).*

This is indicative of a sense of “double consciousness”, a feeling of two-ness, where students of minority ethnic origin are often at conflict in aligning their culture with that of the institution (DuBois, 1903). This may be symbolic of an intersection between race and property, as articulated by (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) in their exploration of educational inequality. Ladson-Billings and Tate identified “the absolute right to exclude”, which sees minority ethnic students harnessing feelings of “an intruder who has been given special permission to be there” (p. 60). This provides a rationale for HEIs to reinforce the development of an inclusive environment within their CSR strategies. The presence of a liberating curriculum may mitigate against a lack of “sense of belonging” and “Double Consciousness” by embedding inclusive learning and teaching practice, as well as diversity in the staff and support services offered by the institution. Could enable all students to develop an increased sense of belonging and cultural competence<sup>10</sup>?

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## Micro-Inequality

(Harvey & Knight, 1996) believed “the primary role of higher education is increasingly to transform students by *enhancing* their knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities while simultaneously *empowering* them as lifelong critical, reflective learners”. Equally, engagement in higher education should provide a platform for students to promote and celebrate their own identities (McArthur, 2009). Despite this, students still experience acts of micro-inequality that serve as barriers to attainment and progression. This may be motivated by deficit thinking, which reinforces the notion that some students – primarily students from minority ethnic backgrounds – enter university without the normative cultural/academic capital. This capital may be seen as the “x-factor”, the ingredient that enables the student to traverse the “swampy lowlands” of higher education. Contrary to this, cultural capital enables the dominant groups in society to maintain power by limiting access to the acquisition of strategies for social mobility. It may be argued that racial disparities are “ordinary, not aberrational – normal science” and “the common everyday experience of most people of colour” (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017, p.8). This corroborates with the second basic tenet of the Critical Race Theory – “interest convergence” (p. 9); racial disparities may ultimately negatively impact on the HE sector and subsequently, the economy, despite its ability to promote advancement for some groups materially and psychically. In light of this, Prime Minister Theresa May has launched an audit of public services (including the education sector) to reveal racial disparities with a view of ending the injustices that people experience across Britain (Gov.uk, n.d.). But is this possible, in the presence of micro-inequalities and unconscious bias, which manifests itself covertly? An appreciation of the inputs of our diverse populations is necessary, when considering the institutional gains that are achieved. It is with this in mind, that a HEIs CRS policies and practices should equitably promote access, attainment and progression for all stakeholders.

## Graduate Employment

The equitable provision of the requisite knowledge and skills to enable students to maximize their potential could be seen as the university’s social responsibilities to achieve utilitarianism in promoting progression and success for its students. This is aligned with the intended outcomes of education – preparing students for employment, creating intellectuals and developing global citizens (Hager & Holland, 2006). With that said, graduate employment may be considered one of the primary aims of higher education (Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009; Robbins, 1963; Schwartz, 2016). While this may be deemed true, the national picture suggests that

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BME graduates are two and a half times more likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts (Runnymede, 2014).

Conversely, BME students who graduate from Russell Group universities tend to have access to good employment opportunities; although they are less likely to gain entry to these universities than their counterparts (Boliver, 2013). However, more people from ethnic minority backgrounds get degrees than their counterparts, despite earning 23% less on assumption of employment (Commission, 2016). This corroborates with the proposition by critical race theorists that the curriculum represents a form of intellectual property, which varies proportionately to the property value of the school (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). It follows that if you are a graduate from a “school”/university with a higher property value, such as a Russell Group university, you would have been equipped with the material resources and status to successfully transition to graduate employment. But what if you are not?

The retention, attainment and progression of BME people who traverse higher education has attracted scrutiny in light of a growing concern around inequality in HE. This has been fueled by research examining the obstacles faced by BME people seeking progression within the labor market. Notably, a review by David Lammy into the treatment of and outcomes for Black, Asian and ethnic minority individuals (Lammy, 2017) and Baroness McGregor-Smith’s review examining the progression of black and minority ethnic people within the labour markets (Brown, 2016) may both be seen as catalysts for exploration of inequalities in HE. This has subsequently mandated that universities routinely publish admissions and retention data by gender, ethnic background and socio-economic group.

In 2016, data from the Department for Work and Pensions highlighted a disparity in the annual employment rate between people of BME origin (62.7%) and their counterparts (75.4%) (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016). Equally, the Annual Population Survey, conducted by the Office for National Statistics, highlights the disparity in unemployment rate between black male graduates in London (18%), in comparison to their white counterparts (10%) (OFFA, 2013). This corroborates with the Prime Minister’s Disparity Audit (previously mentioned), that aims to tackle racial disparities in public sector outcomes; it highlights that the employment rate for ethnic minorities is 10 percentage points lower than the national average (EHRC, 2016). This suggests that there are generally barriers to progression into employment for people of BME origin, which may render them economically inactive. This provides justification for the pledge by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2015 to increase the employment rate of BME graduates by 20%, as part of his 2020 vision. Subsequently, the Department of Work and Pensions has established a guidance to assist Job Centres and local partners achieve the Prime Minister’s vision (EHRC, 2016). But, is this enough? If we assume that Robins’ principle holds true, in justifying equity of access to higher education and subsequently promoting

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graduates who can “playa [sic] part in the general division of labor” (Robbins, 1963), it necessarily follows that all graduates, irrespective of their race, gender, (dis)ability or ethnicity should have an equal opportunity to become economically active. According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, “...we will not make sustainable progress in reducing the ethnic minority employment gap unless we address the educational attainment gap” (EHRC, 2016, p.12).

Therefore, it is imperative, in promoting the principles of social justice, that HEI’s demonstrate socially responsible business practices, as an act of due diligence, in realizing their corporate social responsibilities. These should acknowledge fair operating practices, observe human rights principles and address current student issues that may compromise social justice.

### **The Function of a Liberating Curricula as a Vehicle to Enhance Academic Attainment and Promote Student Success**

The HE landscape has been populated by institutional and government initiatives to sustain, or improve access, attainment and progression among people from disadvantaged and under-represented groups (OFFA, 2017). This would appear to satisfy conditions of a HEI’s social responsibility. In spite of this, there is some scepticism, fuelled by arguments proposing that this provides justification for HE providers to charge higher tuition fees, in light of the TEF matrix (Department for Education, 2016). Is there a dissonance between planned and prospective initiatives? A liberating curriculum is aligned with a university’s CSR, and is as a counter hegemonic educational process aimed at creating intellectuals, by offering a transformative educational experience to students and educators in order to prepare them for employment and to achieve global citizenship (Schoorman, 2000).

A liberating curriculum encourages the creation of a HE curricula which aims to provide learners and teachers with the facilities to embrace their cultural situatedness; it motivates “...the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2008, p.2). Despite this, the concept of curriculum diversification, and subsequently a liberating curriculum has attracted a plurality and complexity of understanding by students and academics alike; this may be reflected in the framing of curriculum diversification within the marketization of academia which constructs the HE curriculum around a neo-liberal social imaginary<sup>11</sup> (Taylor, 2004). A liberating curriculum is allied to key performance indicators of the TEF, Race Equality Charter, and Equality Act, 2010 (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016; Equality Challenge Unit, 2016; HMSO, 2010), which mandates attention on the diversification of the curriculum, in order to benefit from the talents of diverse student

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population. A liberating curriculum is a vehicle to enhance academic attainment and success. It promotes cultural competence, by situating discourses and nuances beyond their parochial boundaries to create processes that can interrogate neo-liberal narratives about the curriculum. A liberating curriculum promotes “a shift from the comfortable spaces of knowing to the uncomfortable places of learning” (Phillips, Harris, Larson, & Higgins, 2009, p. 1455). This is essential, as students have found that engagement with their curriculum has not satisfied their socio-cultural needs, as the curriculum is outdated and associated with an economic agenda; the curriculum seems to resist certain pedagogic discourses and demonstrates a use to perpetuate the Western illusion of improving and civilizing other cultures.

It can be argued that historically, curricula in HE has built their foundations on a model that accommodates the “traditional student”, and Westernised principles, inadvertently delimiting the influences of non-traditional epistemologies. Historically, that saw universities awarding degrees in conventional academic subjects, such as medicine and law, in addition to traditional professional subjects (Anthony, 2016). Lord Robbins, in his Higher Education Report, reiterated this and added,

*...the ancient universities of Europe were founded to promote the training of the clergy, doctors and lawyers; and though at times there may have been many who attended for the pursuit of pure knowledge or of pleasure, they must surely have been a minority. (Robbins, 1963).*

Furthermore, according to Robbins and colleagues, “the search for truth is an essential function of institutions of higher education. It would be untrue to suggest that the advancement of knowledge has been or ever will be wholly dependent on universities and other institutions of higher education. But the world, not higher education alone, will suffer if ever they cease to regard it as one of their main functions” (p8). Despite this, some teachers maintain the standpoint that the Western pedagogy is ‘traditional’ and does not necessitate change. This provides justification for the imperialistic nature of Western university’s curriculum, to appropriate education as a hegemonic device, in order to colonise other parts of the world. The absence of a liberated, diverse curriculum presents an avenue for education to be misappropriated as a “hegemonic device”, thus stagnating student success. Josef Mestenhauser, in 1998 argued in favour of challenging the paradigms upon which HEI curricula are based, and thought this essentially may promote an inequitable experience and ultimately, occupational deprivation<sup>12</sup> for graduates, particularly those from BME backgrounds, whose social imaginary may not be reflected in the teaching and learning processes and services that support these processes (Taylor, 2004, p.24).

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Morey (2000) also reiterates the importance of a liberating curriculum, in stating that “nations can no longer afford to be ignorant of other cultures, societies, and political systems...global and international education can prepare students to have the knowledge, the skills, and the attitudes to function effectively in this interconnected world” (p. 25). It is important at this point to highlight that “... the relationship between teacher and learner ... is completely different in higher education from what it is in schools. At the higher education level, the teacher is not there for the sake of the student, both have their justification in the service of scholarship” (von Humboldt, 1810). The curriculum is at the heart of education; it is prudent to note that ultimately, the university experience should provide educational and social gains, in keeping with the holistic development of the student. Graham Gibbs, in expressing his opinions on the importance of educational gains thought that entry standards are a predictor of educational performance, and can be quantified by the increase in competence before and after the student experienced HE (Gibbs, 2010). This depicts a deficit approach, to promoting student success. There seem to be some frailty with the use of entry standards as a predictor of educational performance, as undermines the importance of the holistic student experience in developing global citizens, as well as the CSR of universities to create an environment conducive of this development. Since globalisation now sees university’s population becoming ever more diverse, a greater consideration needs to be given to students who enter HE with(out) varying “habits of the mind”. Featherstone declared that

*One paradoxical consequence of the process of globalisation, the awareness of the finitude and boundedness of the plane of humanity, is not to produce homogeneity but to familiarise us with greater diversity, the extensive range of local cultures. (Featherstone, 1993, p.169).*

Globalisation presents scope for HEIs to diversify their curricula in upholding their CSR and promoting social justice, organisational and student success. Diversification of the curriculum for this purpose is aligned with Betty Leask’s concept of curriculum internationalisation, which is:

*The incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension into the content of the curriculum as well as the teaching and learning processes and support services of a program of study. [This] will engage students with internationally informed research and cultural and linguistic diversity. It will purposefully develop their international and intercultural perspectives as global professionals and citizens. (Leask, 2009, p.209)*

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Since the formal and informal curriculum are seen as integral ingredients within the teaching and learning process and experiences within the milieu of HE they may be key drivers in enabling students to develop the knowledge and skills to transition into the society, upon completion of their studies, as global citizens. The promotion of a liberalised, diverse curriculum may be a proactive strategy to realise the university's CSR, mitigate the attainment gap in promoting organizational and student success.

## **CONCLUSION**

In light of the aforementioned, I am cognizant of the defensive posture assumed by some custodians of the HE curriculum, who maintain that liberating the curriculum may be seen as a step too far by those interested in 'cultural policing', or 'censoring history, literature, politics and culture'. A step to qualify all knowledge as intellectually competent, at the expense of epistemic purity. But why are some of the gatekeepers of the 'traditional' academy reticent to the idea of the multicultural academy?

Taken in context, the aims, objectives and social ends of the 'traditional' academy may have sufficed previously. Equally, in a monocultural milieu with no commitment to CSR. However, in the contemporary milieu, where HE institutions are governed by legislation, institutional charters, Key Performance Indicators and ethical/moral contracts in support of egalitarianism and social justice, it is fair to say that the paradigms and philosophies may be in need of revision. A liberating curriculum offers a facility to re-curate the current curriculum, while realising the SRs of HEIs; a liberating curriculum provides an opportunity to develop cultural competence, epistemic justice and cultural democracy. Does a re-contextualisation or re-curation of the white curriculum compromise the initial aims, objectives and social ends of higher education?

Universities have been keen to cast their nets of recruitment further and further afield, in search of international students, from whom they can command a higher tuition fees, or the UK domiciled 'non-traditional student' who they invite into the academy through initiatives such as Widening Participation (Moore et al., 2013). Further, in support of this, some HEIs have clearly defined access agreements that outline their plans to facilitate these students (as well as provides justification to charge higher tuition fees). Do these students enter the UK higher education academy 'with pronounced social and cultural deficits gathered from their familial upbringings' (see Shilliam, 2017)? Do HEIs have a responsibility to ensure that in upholding their CSRs, they "cater to the dietary requirements of the patrons they invite to the

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banquet”, or should they continue to assume that all patrons should “partake of the same menu”? Does the introduction of diverse cultures and epistemologies into the academy offer an opportunity to redefine the paradigms and philosophies of the academy?

In this chapter, I have ensued a discussion relating to how a liberating curriculum may be embedded within a higher education institution’s CSR policies, as a medium to promote social justice and student success. The discussion was informed by a dialogue concerning the aims, objectives and social ends of higher education, how HEIs can demonstrate socially responsible business practices as an act of due diligence in realising their CSR and how a liberating curriculum can be used as an instrument to realise optimum outcomes for the student, society and organisation.

I have argued that the realisation of fair operating principles and upholding human rights can be seen as tangible contributions towards the realisation of an organisation’s CSR. I have highlighted how student issues, such as sense of belonging, microinequality and graduate employment are seen as a matter of social justice. I have subsequently presented a liberating curriculum as a proactive strategy to realise the aims, objectives and social ends of higher education; “education must not simply teach work, it must teach life” (DuBois, 1903).

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**ENDNOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a framework to explore and challenge the prevalence of racial inequality in society; it posits that social thought and power relations promotes racism and racial inequality, which is maintained through the operation of power structures.
- <sup>2</sup> Good degree – First Class (I) or upper second class 2(1) degree.
- <sup>3</sup> Learning gain refers to degree of work-readiness, improvement in knowledge or skills that students gain throughout their time at university.
- <sup>4</sup> Protected characteristics of the Equality Act 2010 – age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity.
- <sup>5</sup> “courses of higher education should be available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so” (Robbins, 1963: p7).
- <sup>6</sup> Unconscious bias – associations we hold, outside our conscious awareness that influences our behaviours and attitude.

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- 7      Sense of Belonging – Subjective feelings of connectedness, or relatedness to the social milieu.
- 8      Cultural capital incorporates discourses, behaviours and ways of interacting, learnt through engagement with one’s social/cultural environment.
- 9      Habitus – inclination to act in ways determined by cultural capital.
- 10     Cultural competence – ability to communicate, interact effectively and understand people of all cultures.
- 11     Social Imaginary – common sense ways in which people see themselves in relation to others.
- 12     Occupational deprivation is a state where a person, or group is/are precluded from engaging in what is meaningful to enrich their lives, due to external restrictions beyond their control.