



INSTITUTE  
for EQUITY  
UNIVERSITY CENTRE

Focus On EDI ©

# SOLIDARITY IN A TIME OF GLOBAL UNREST: THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Issue 11  
November 2025

Dr Tamsin Bowers-Brown

# Dr Tamsin Bowers-Brown



Fellow and Head of Engagement, Institute  
for Equity, University Centre



*Tinkering at the edges  
is no longer enough;  
only structural change  
can dismantle the  
deeply rooted  
inequities our  
institutions continue to  
reproduce.*

## Introduction

As a child I was given a card by my older sister which had been produced by the African National Congress; the picture on the card depicted a scene of resistance in the time of apartheid, the accompanying slogan read 'An injury to one is an injury to all'. I pinned the card on my wall. I understood neither the picture, nor the words. I would regularly look at it, trying to make sense of its meaning, by the time I figured it out and it took quite some time what with being a child in the 'white cocoon' of privilege, it shook me, because I felt its power. I have often returned to the words on that card, and I have questioned whether a global society that aligns with those values will ever be possible.

Rather than society aligning to the philosophy of 'an injury to one is an injury to all', the current global unrest and binary populist politics seem to follow the opposite path. Having societal awareness, using evidence-informed decision making, and recognising the importance of our unique identities are factors deliberately diminished by those who seek to perpetuate a culture of division rather than solidarity. bell hooks writing in 1994 articulated her concern that 'we were witnessing the opposite of what it is to develop a world perspective' she argued that 'a return to narrow nationalism, isolationisms and xenophobia' were seeing a resurgence (hooks, 1994, 28). Not dissimilar to the current context, hooks attributes this in part to the 'collective cultural consumption' of lies, misinformation and 'a lack of meaningful access to truth' (hooks, 1994, 29). 'Returning' suggests that at some point it was different, indeed there have been movements where a surge of progress provided hope for change and of course these have felt monumental.

These moments of progress show us that division or isolationism is not inevitable but require significant time and resource by those with malintent, to prevent them being sustained. 30 years on, hooks' words remain pertinent; the movements of hope quickly reduced to a 'moment', to be quashed and returned to their box amidst the fear of loss or erasure that 'whiteness' fears and which 'drives the necessary social policies to maintain the status quo' (Andrews, 2023, 131).

Despite improved access to multiple sources of information and the ability to connect across continents at the blink of an eye, the multiplicity of voices has been diminished through the amplification of the views of a chosen few. This is not to say that the world is lacking compassionate people, rather the significant resistance to the dominant discourse of anti-woke propaganda has not been able to break into the mainstream in a way which substantiates its authority. As Andrews (2023, P130) argues 'the left has been taking a knife to a gunfight for the last forty years' insofar as 'making sense is illogical when irrationality is the nature of the debate'- tackling irrationality with measured argument is apropos to nothing. Rather than accepting the premise of the argument, we need a paradigm shift which begins from the point of non-acceptance of human suffering, and which refuses to engage with a discourse of irrationality.

## Higher Education is not an island

What then is the role of higher education? Is there a collective responsibility for inculcating ways of knowing that support the sustainability of humanity? University will be a place where many students begin to question what they have learned to date or find ways to articulate it

through research and co-creation of ideas. Collaboration, reasoned thinking, critical evaluation, data and information literacy are the skills and ways of being that humanity so desperately needs, and indeed are espoused in many subject benchmark statements, validation documents and course handbooks. Whilst higher education may be teaching these skills well, it competes against the minimisation of robust and rigorous evidence which is bemoaned as ‘fake news’, a prevailing narrative that casts aside the value of the very skills that universities set out to inculcate. Furthermore, the integrity of higher education is questioned by those who benefit from its portrayal as a propaganda machine for left of centre politics. The irony being that whilst universities may be seeking to become more socially-just or equitable they are riddled with disparities in terms of access, continuation, attainment and outcomes of students in protected characteristic groups. There are also significant disparities in the experience and progression of Black and brown colleagues. At face value the structural inequality within higher education suggests the sector is also a protagonist in the cast of those maintaining the systemic injustice of the status quo despite many working within them who seek to counter it.

The significant changes that have been implemented in universities, many of which take what Miller (2019) conceptualises as an emancipatory activist approach, have been important. Many colleagues are working to create equitable learning spaces, leading the way in anti-racist scholarship and practice, encouraging colleagues to reflect on their position and ontological stance and to seek ways to ensure that their students thrive. The philosophy of ‘Ubuntu’ – I am because we are, - the notion that our humanity to others is what

supports us to thrive has been owned by student activists and scholars fighting against injustice. The lack of progress therefore, is not an issue of inertia, rather it is an issue of inequity that is so deeply rooted that changes being made to curriculum, pedagogy and assessments can only go so far. As Belluigi, Arday and O’Keefe argue the emotional labour, intensive approaches to mobilising change has fallen largely on active scholars and ‘for matters of the public and global common good, the recourse to scholars within universities ‘calling out’ inequalities is unsustainable and unethical without ‘an expectation of institutional accountability’ (2024, 323).

A proliferation of institutional value statements and strategic plans that seek to stress their civic commitment, community involvement, and transformative experiences as aligned to social justice or equity is promising, yet potentially harmful if the rhetoric fails to move to action. The need to remain vigilant, to ensure that the claims of social justice and equity can be seen as a lived reality by those within those organisations is imperative to avoid gaslighting those who are victim to a lack of action (see Ahmed 2018). We must hold institutions accountable for their claims of equity and social justice when the injury to some as evidenced through their data is clearly not seen as an injury to all. The significant structural changes required to reverse disparities require a radical rethink of what is possible and whilst institutional changes are a critical actor in this change, for parity across the sector it is at the level of government policy and regulation where an insistence on eliminating inequity must happen, and perhaps therein lies the root of the problem.

Successive regulatory requirements that have

sought to 'eliminate' or 'reduce' inequity have done little to reverse the structural inequality festering in our institutions which sits in plain sight. Despite multiple iterations of regulation to monitor access and then access and participation there has been limited sustained sectoral progress that can demonstrate that the pernicious problem of inequitable student disparities has been resolved. The revision of Access and Participation Plan requirements in 2023, demonstrates a much-improved approach to sectoral consistency, particularly in relation to the significance placed on evaluation and understanding impact. However, the lack of ambition in terms of the speed of progress demonstrates a regulatory acceptance that inequity is too thorny an issue to regulate beyond an expectation of a target for gap closure and an evaluation of progress and a seemingly high threshold for greater scrutiny. The recent government proposals, to give the Office for Students greater powers still fails to address the structural issues which are at the root of the inequity and institutions will therefore continue finding their own ways through what needs greater collective action. The Post 16 Education and Skills White Paper (2025) whilst asserting the necessity for a 'reset' fails to directly address the significant racial disparities that exist within the sector. Whilst promising greater regulation around access and participation the paper merely refers to 'opportunity and outcomes for all' with a broad statement of a need to 'reduce the persistent gaps in outcomes for the most disadvantaged students'. The 'most disadvantaged students' being an opaque category which fails to acknowledge that the issue for some groups is that they are disadvantaged by the institutions themselves.

The value and the potential of higher education remains but it needs active and urgent change to propel us to a place where we genuinely engage in dismantling the processes which maintain inequity- this has to be structural change rather than tinkering at the edges and failing to name the problem of white supremacy identified in 'the insidious and embedded nature of racism' within the system (Walton, 2021, 121). Equity is fundamental to realise the possibilities of the 'collective transformation of human activity' that higher education holds (Lotz-Sisitka et al, 2015:75). Acknowledging the broader ethical role as a sector in contributing to social justice in society is part of that process; the graduates who leave our institutions play an important role through their professional careers in either mitigating or perpetuating inequality but we have little moral high ground to espouse these values when our own house is not in order. The higher education sector is changing, multiple factors are driving how we view our students, how students perceive the purpose of a degree and the societal and cultural climate is one which is being felt through the classrooms and corridors of our learning environments. The future of solidarity, collaboration and compassionate resolution in society rests in part on our sector questioning what we are willing to accept and what we are willing to change (McMahon, 2025). If we continue to operate through a model that fails to act urgently in seeing the inequity within our institutions as an injury to us all, we have little hope in stemming the wave of populism that is a threat to our humanity.

# References

Andrews, K. (2019) *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century*. London, Bloomsbury Publishing.

Andrews, K. (2023) *The Psychosis of Whiteness. Surviving the Insanity of a Racist World*. London, Penguin.

Bellugi, D. Z., Arday, J., & O’Keeffe, J. (2024). The routes to intellectual authority in a prior colonial empire: continued racialised, geopolitical inequalities in the academic staff composition and employment conditions of UK universities. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 28(2), 303–329. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2024.2398491>

Department for Education (2025) *Post 16 Education White Paper*

LotzSisitka, H., Price, L., & Price, L. (2015). *Critical Realism, Environmental Learning and Social-Ecological Change*. Routledge.

McCalmon, T. (2025) 'Leaning into Discomfort' [Workshop]. In: *Leading with a Love Ethic: A Conversation*, Northern School of Contemporary Dance, 10th April 2025

Miller P, Hill-Berry NP, Hylton-Fraser K, Powell S (2019) Social justice work as activism: the work of education professionals in England and Jamaica. *International Studies in Educational Administration* 47(1): 3–18.

Walton, S. (2021). A prolegomenon to a critical race theoretical Marxism. *Power and Education*, 13(3), 116-133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17577438211020769>

# Focus On

# EDI ©

**Disclaimer:** Focus of EDI © is a brand of the Institute for Equity, University Centre. The author of this article retains copyright, and views expressed are not necessarily those of the Institute.

**Citation:** Bowers-Brown, T. (2025) Humanity, The Role of Universities – Issue 11, Institute for Equity, University Centre.