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An Evaluation of the Racially Inclusive Practice in Assessment Guidance Intervention on Students' and Staffs' Experiences of Assessment in HE:

A Multi-University Case Study

By Dr Paul Ian Campbell and Dr Benjamin Duke



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Executive Summary

Overall summary

The Racially Inclusive Practice in Assessment Guidance intervention (RIPIAG) was developed by the inaugural Director of the University of Leicester Institute for Inclusivity in Higher Education (ULIHE), Dr Paul Ian Campbell (Campbell et al 2021). In the academic years 2020/21 and 2021/22 the RIPIAG was piloted on 7 modules across three partner Higher Education Providers (HEPs) in the UK and on 175 undergraduate students.

This report provides an evaluation of the RIPIAG that measures its efficacy against the following three tests:

1. Its capacity to improve/develop/progress the levels of racial literacy and understanding of racial inequities in assessment among teaching staff
2. Its capacity to improve students from minority-ethnic backgrounds' experiences of assessment
3. Its capacity to foster a reduction in the race award gap in student outcomes in assessment at the module level

A summary of the findings are as follows:

The efficacy of the RIPIAG for improving the levels of racial literacy among HE teachers, staff and lecturers

- The qualitative data demonstrated that the RIPIAG intervention had a direct, positive and tangible impact on enhancing the racial literacy of participants in a general sense. It was highly effective as a process for advancing teaching practitioners of all raced backgrounds, career stages and disciplines' understandings of how, where and the range of racial inequities that can manifest in HE curricula and related practices.
- Exploring race inequities in education through the frame of 'racial inclusion' instead of 'decolonizing' enhanced staffs' ability to think more broadly and outside of the 'box'. It stimulated a broader range of thinking, which enabled lecturers to start to think beyond course content as the primary – or sole- site for race exclusion in taught programmes. It also prompted participants to consider how things such as the processes and practices that wrap around their modules are also spaces that can contain specific race-based barriers too.

- Working with the RIPIAG intervention directly enhanced teaching participants' ability to identify racial inequities that existed specifically in assessment. It helped them to be more aware of the complex and multiple ways in which assessment success and grade outcomes were often predicated on various social and cultural currencies that certain raced groups were more or were less likely to possess. It also improved lecturers' comprehension of how racial exclusions work in their own assessment practice. White staff participants noted that the process was constructive and useful. It was described as a process that made them more aware of their complicity in a system that racially excludes students in a way that did not make them feel guilty.
- Working with the guidance helped to plug a general lack of institutional guidance on best race inclusion practice, by providing clear support and guidance that enhanced practitioners' ability to better understand and rapidly respond to the racial inequities that manifest in their own assessment practice.



- It helped to move the concept of race inclusion from an amorphous concept to a set of clear actions. This was described by some teaching staff as ‘empowering’.
- The training was especially helpful for enabling staff to translate what was often complicated inclusion discourse into actionable instructions.
- Staff participants reported the following changes in their students’ behaviour, competencies and attitudes in relation to assessment on modified modules:
 - Students displayed noticeably higher levels of independence in their ability to ‘get on’ with their assignments on the modified modules without continuous direct support from lecturers.
 - Students on the modified modules demonstrated higher levels of understanding of the assessment and of what constituted stronger and weaker pieces of work, why they were and what they looked like.
 - There was a reduction in the levels of stress about assignments reported by students.
 - There were noticeable improvements in the quality of their students’ work.

The impact of the RIPIAG on undergraduate students’ lived experiences of assessment

Enhanced learning and comprehension of assessment

- The RIPIAG had a positive and transformative effect on enhancing Black, South Asian and White undergraduate students’ levels of assessment literacy and comprehension.
- Data showed that the Assignment Brief (AB) enhanced all participants’ ability to better make sense of their assignment questions and specifically, to be better able to identify exactly what assignments wanted them to address in their responses. Testimonies illustrated how this changed students’ overall perceptions of assignment questions from instructions that were unclear and daunting into smaller sub-questions, which were seen to be more straightforward and manageable.
- The modified seminar workshops enhanced students’ ability to breakdown the total sum assignment into a set of smaller sub-activities. This was a more deconstructed, scaffolded and modelled approach to completing assignments. It was considered an essential blueprint for success by students. It was described as an essential ‘kit’ for ‘surviving’ the assessment process by some. The exercises within

the modified seminars were also transformative in enabling students to better ‘see’ and learn what assessment terminology meant and looked like in their everyday practice and work.

- Data indicated that the active group marking exercises had high efficacy for developing Black, South Asian and White students’ assessment literacy, from being able to complete the broken down and compartmentalized aspects of an assignment (learned in the modified seminar) to comprehending how these dislocated aspects all joined together to form a coherent narrative in a full assignment.
- Participants explicitly reported that the AB was effective for enabling them to have a clearer comprehension of what the question wanted them to demonstrate and thus, reduced the jeopardy that accompanied assignment questions. This meant that students were less likely to be faced with the prospect of having to choose between answering questions that they better ‘understood’ over questions on an area that they were particularly interested in, passionate about, or more knowledgeable on.

Improved student confidence in their assessment efficacy and reduced levels of stress and anxiety

Confidence

- The accounts demonstrated how the RIPIAG directly and successfully transformed students’ experiences of assessment from something which was ‘individual’ to one which was social and dialogic.
- Participants asserted that they felt significantly higher levels of comfort and confidence in their assessments when assessment literacy was learned through a dialogic and social learning approach when compared to learning it through the more didactic and individualized lecture style approach that was often employed on other modules.
- The marking exercise had a direct impact on improving students’ perceptions of their own efficacy to complete their assignment and importantly on their confidence of being able to produce higher level responses.

Reduced Stress

- Data demonstrated that pre-assessment exercises and resources, such as the Assignment Brief, were successful in making the parameters of the assignment more transparent for students. This appeared to directly reduce their levels of anxiety and fear of including or discussing the ‘wrong thing’

or going 'off topic' in their assignments. Equally important, was that this served to enhance students' confidence to be even more creative within the confines of the assignment instead of stifling it.

- Inter-marker variables were another significant cause of stress and anxiety in assessments reported by all students. The RIPIAG enhanced students' ability to better understand the module specific expectations of the assignment tasks and better understand the parameters of the assignment. This facilitated a more clear-eyed understanding of what constituted work in each grade boundary and how they were marked in that specific module. All this served to mitigate against inter-marker variables and reduce levels of stress caused by this issue.

Directly improved the assessment experience for students of colour

- Data demonstrates that the increased levels of comprehension brought about their engagement with the RIPIAG intervention meant that South Asian and Black students were less likely to endure the unique psychological traumas that accompanied the experience of assessment in HE reported previously by students of colour on other non-modified modules (see Campbell et 2021).

Limitations of the efficacy of the RIPIAG

- The data demonstrates that the intervention has a high efficacy for mitigating against the specific race-based inequities that manifest within HE assessment and related practice. However, it also shows that the intervention is less effective for mitigating against the anti-Black inequities that shape the wider lived realities of Black heritage students.
- We recommend that to eliminate race award gaps for all students of colour, the academe needs to develop and employ interventions that specifically address the

wider and anti-Black barriers in addition to employing interventions that address the race-based inequities that are specifically located in HE assessment practice and pedagogy, such as the RIPIAG.

The impact of the RIPIAG on assessment performance of students and on the race award gap at the module level

- Overall, the quantitative data indicates the RIPIAG intervention's capacity to impact positively on reducing the aggregate RAG between domicile students of colour and their White peers.
- The average RAG difference between students of colour and those who defined as White across all treated modules was 6.97%. The narrowest gap reported was 1.25% and the widest 18.7%. In all cases, the RAG on modified modules were below the overall RAG reported at their respective HEPs for 2022, with 83% reporting a RAG difference that was lower than the national average.
- It is also important to note that where recorded, in almost all cases the RAG for Black students remained wider than those recorded for all other minority groups.
- The findings do not account for important anomalies that can all influence the veracity of the quantitative findings here and in future such as, changes in the overall number of students of colour within any minority ethnic group in any particular year. Nonetheless, the triangulation and repetition of consistent patterns of RAG reduction reported in the performance data from across all the modified modules from different courses, levels, and partner HEPs provide the basis for confidence in the RIPIAG intervention's potential for reducing the aggregate RAG differential in the assessment performance between undergraduate students of colour and White peers.





Introduction

At the time of writing, this study represents the first holistic and mixed-methods evaluation of its kind to test the effectiveness of an intervention designed specifically to reduce the racialised barriers that exist within assessment and related practice at the undergraduate module level. Specifically, it reports on the efficacy of the Racially Inclusive Practice in Assessment Guidance Intervention (RIPIAG), which was developed from the 8 'Pre-assessment support' recommendations provided in Campbell et al's (2021) Tackling Racial Inequalities in Assessment in HE report.

The intervention was trialed between September 2021 and December 2022, in 7 modules, in 3 partner Higher Education Providers (HEPs) (1 research intensive and 2 teaching focused). The sample consisted of 175 undergraduate students and module leaders (approximately at least 35% were domicile undergraduate students of colour). Partner institutions self-selected a module or modules from a course or courses to trial the intervention. Modules selected were at the discretion of the partner HEP. However, for validity purposes, all modules consisted of at least 25 students.

Background and rationale for the intervention

Nationally in 2020, the aggregate race award gap in students achieving a good degree (2.1 or above) (henceforth RAG) for between domicile undergraduate students of colour and their White peers in the UK

was 9.9% (see AdvanceHE 2021). At the University of Leicester (UoL) this gap was 10% in 2020. In response, UoL set itself the target of eliminating the RAG between its domicile minority ethnic and White students by 2025. So far, this response has followed the sector and focused largely on targeting the racial inequalities that manifest in course content or on 'decolonizing the curricular'. Conventional thinking at the time, posited that curricula were the key and direct causal factor for the disparities discussed above. The result of this laser-focus on curricula, however, is that thus far, seldom have assessment and related practices been meaningfully explored as part of the processes that exclude students of colour and contribute to the RAG (see Campbell et al 2021, and Campbell 2022 are noteworthy exceptions).

Campbell et al's (2022) seminal evaluation of an intervention for making HE curricula racially inclusive underscores the importance of race-inclusion work focused on curricula in a general sense but suggests caution for using this approach as a sole or specific response to RAGs. Their findings indicate that interventions aimed at pluralising course content were effective for increasing the quantitative levels of student satisfaction recorded in module evaluations. They were also efficacious for enhancing the relevance of course materials to the lives of students of colour and for improving their qualitative senses of belonging on their degree programmes. However, their findings also showed that the curricula-based intervention was less effective for directly reducing RAGs in a quantitatively significant

way. They conclude that addressing the racial exclusions and barriers experienced by students of colour in UK HE assessments were likely to be more directly impactful here.

By mapping the race-based barriers experienced by students of colour across social science and Science, Technology and Medicine (STEM) based subjects, Campbell et al (2021) provided the following recommendations for best assessment practice (within a tri-based framework for change). Their (2021) recommendations for Pre-Assessment Support are as follows:

- Introduce signposts in module guides and weekly schedules for when students might begin to prepare for assessments, especially for students at Level 1 and 2. Or consider introducing formative exercises and activities that prompt students to prepare for assessments
- Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work
- Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration
- Introduce more modelling and grading exercises that clearly explain how the marking process works
- The inclusion of an Assignment Brief, or exercises that 'unpack' essay questions (if the assignment question requires unpacking, perhaps rephrase it to avoid unnecessary confusion)
- Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do list' and a list of common mistakes

- Introduce more even levels of pre-assessment support for all assessments and across all modules
- Pre-assessment support should be employed especially during the transition from FE to HE stages. However, it is worth considering employing these support mechanisms during all, and any, transition stages, where expectations of what is required to secure higher level grade outcomes change, even if the mode of assessment does not. For example, changes in what is expected between a first-class essay at Level 1 and at Level 2, and so on.

The Pilot

For the pilot, Campbell et al's (2021) original Recommendations were mined from 8 to the 6 RIPIAG Recommendations below.

RIPIAG Recommendations

1. Introduce signposts in module guides and weekly schedules for when students might begin to prepare for assessments, especially for students at Level 1 and 2. Or consider introducing formative exercises and activities that prompt students to prepare for assessments
2. Introduce exercises which translate marking criteria jargon into accessible language and provide examples for illustration
3. Introduce more modelling exercises that critically assess examples of previous work
4. Introduce more modelling and grading exercises that clearly explain how the marking process works



5. The inclusion of an Assignment Brief, or exercises that 'unpack' essay questions (if the assignment question requires unpacking, perhaps rephrase it to avoid unnecessary confusion)
6. Include FAQs, which might include a 'to do' list and a list of common mistakes

The RIPIAG Recommendations were then developed into the following 4 components:

The Assessment Schedule (AS) is an active learning and detailed timetable for students that sets out the key points/tasks in the assessment process for each assignment, from start to submission. It also provides the dates (weeks) in the semester for when students should ideally have started/completed each various task.

This component relates to RIPIAG Recommendation 1.

The Assignment Brief (AB) is a 3-page document (maximum) that contains at least all of the following information:

- Submission Deadline
- Grade Weighting of Assignment
- Assignment instructions
- Assignment Questions
- Tips and Essential Things to Include when completing each assignment question
- Learning Outcomes
- Referencing Instructions
- What is Academic Misconduct
- Non/late submissions

This component relates to RIPIAG Recommendation 5 and 6.

The Modified Seminar Workshop (MSW) consists of a series of (inter)active and group-based learning exercises that cover at least the following areas:

- What do I need to get started?
- Structuring the Assignment
- Formulating an Introduction
- Assignment Do's and Don'ts
- Key Advice: What are the differences between stronger and weaker assignments?
- Learning the difference between anecdotal, evidence and critical assignments?

This component relates to mined RIPIAG Recommendation 2, 3 and 4.

The Active Group Marking Exercise (AGME) is a group-based activity where students mark previous scripts. Using a combination of the assessment content covered in the MSW and the marking criteria, students have to come to a consensus about the grade score for each previous script. In each case, they provide a rationale for the awarded grade using the descriptors in the marking criteria and the lessons learned in the seminar to justify the grade given. They also have to suggest one thing that the assignment could do to improve the assignment with an example.

This component relates to RIPIAG Recommendation 3 and 4

The RIPIAG Workshops for Staff

Our previous evaluative study on the efficacy of race interventions in education showed that the efficacy of interventions are influenced greatly by a lack of standardization in the extent to which they are embedded into practice by module convenors (see Campbell et al 2022). To avoid this issue, module convenors were provided with 2 training workshops and with templates of each of the 4 teaching resources (listed above), to ensure a more consistent level of embeddedness of the intervention into their practice across modules.





The Evaluation

This report provides an evaluation of the RIPIAG. It measures their efficacy against the following three tests:

1. Its capacity to improve/develop/progress the levels of racial literacy and understanding of racial inequities in assessment among teaching staff
2. Its capacity to improve students from minority-ethnic backgrounds' experiences of assessment
3. Its capacity to foster a reduction in the race award gap in student outcomes in assessment at the module level

Assessment and race – the picture so far

How do race-based barriers in 'assessment' contribute to the race award gap in HE? There is a burgeoning body of work that points to a direct causal relationship between assessment and related practices and the RAG that exists between students of colour and their White peers (in a general sense). Singh et al (2023, 229), for example, proffer that UK HEs are directly responsible for the RAG, and particularly through their 'discriminatory styles of assessment and marking and insufficient support from scholars who can be biased' against students of colour (see also Thomas, 2012, Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015, and Bunce et al., 2021). Cramer (2021) points to the overuse of particular forms of assessment as another causal factor for the RAG in STEM based subjects. She elucidates that students of colour do not perform as well in exams as they do in coursework and thus, the alacrity of STEM subjects to employ exams as their primary mode of assessment contributes greatly to this situation. Campbell's (2022) qualitative study, however, found that there were no inherent, direct or 'essentialised' connections between the performance of certain race groups and particular forms of assessment. Conversely, his findings highlighted that in some STEM

subjects, students of colour had a greater preference for exams over essays (Campbell et al 2021). Campbell argues that their differing outcomes in - and preferences for - certain forms of assessment were connected to the uneven levels of support and preparation (or lack of) that accompanied particular modes of assessment. He concludes that this was one of the key determinants for whether students of colour had a more equitable experience of assessment.

The RAG and race-based inequities in assessment in particular are also influenced by racialised inequities within the wider educative experiences of undergraduate students in UK HEs. Khuda and Kamruzzaman (2021), for example, highlight how a lack of racial diversity in course reading lists and materials place non-white students at a disadvantage in assessment (see also Arday et al., 2020, Abu Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021). Campbell (2022, 6) elucidates:

"[T]he lack of a sufficiently inclusive or decolonised curricula (and faculty) meant it was often difficult for Black students to be able to connect content and assessments directly to their own lived realities [in the same way that many of their White peers could]. It was argued that to do so would facilitate more interest in study and foster a deeper understanding and synthesis."

Rana et al (2022) draws attention to the role of academics within assessment inequity. They assert that the general lack of racial literacy and awareness of their own unconscious racial biases among teaching staff in HE directly contributes to minority ethnic students' under and unequal performances in assessment – and to the RAG more widely.

There are also a number of wider social inequalities that contribute to race-based inequities in assessment. For example, students of colour are the most likely to experience mental ill-health and are less likely to have positive experiences of Personal Tutoring and Student

Wellbeing Services. They are also students who are statistically most likely to come from socio-economically challenged households, require additional income to supplement their time as students, and are more likely to need to travel to university rather than be able to afford to live on campus. Additionally, students of colour also experience microaggressions and overt racism while at university (see for example, Botticello and West 2021, Farquharson et al., 2022, TASO 2022). All of these present unique challenges that impact negatively on students' ability to perform equitably in assessment (it is important to note that while students from different racial backgrounds do not experience all of these factors in the same way or to the same extent, for the most part, they are statistically more likely to experience these factors more acutely than their White peers).

The relationship between race and assessment is clearly complex, multifaceted and multi-layered. Pointing to a lack of empirically substantiated explorations of the causes of RAGs and to what works in mitigating them, Cordioli-McMaster (2021) argues that much of what the academe knows currently about the relationship between race and assessment and the relationship between them and RAGs, are drawn from academic assumptions – and not from empirically substantiated interventions or evaluative data. Put another way, we still know very little with regards to 'what works best' for 'improving access for students', according to The Office for Students' Director for Fair Access and Participation, John Blake (<https://twitter.com/officestudents/status/1655933572262563843>). This position is contrasted with a growing body of work and activity that have begun to map the causes – and offer some empirically substantiated solutions – for inequalities in assessment

in relation to other protected characteristics and social divisions, such as class, disability, mental health, and (class-related) language barriers within HE assessment (Hockings 2010, Bianco, 2022, Advance HE 2022b, TASO 2022).

The theme of assessment has featured, to varying degrees, as a part of the broader and general conversation on the experience of students of colour in UK HEPs. For example, studies have examined the influence of teacher (racial) bias(es) and stereotyping (Burgess & Greaves 2013), Whiteness (Bhopal 2018), lower teacher expectations and lower feelings of belonging when compared to White students (Campbell 2022) on students of colour's assessment performances and outcomes (see MacNeill et al 2015, Arday and Mirza 2018). Cousin and Cureton (2012) and Hinton and Higson (2017) have highlighted the limited efficacy of 'anonymous' marking policies in mitigating the impact of these processes on assessment and degree outcomes (also see Richardson 2008). However, at the time of writing, there exists little evaluative data as to the effectiveness of each for measurably improving the assessment experience of minority ethnic students in UK HEPs or for reducing the award gap.

Currently, there exists very few empirically substantiated answers to routine questions, such as: What can HE lecturing and teaching staff do to identify and measurably mitigate against the barriers in HE assessment and related practice that unevenly impact on the students of colour that they teach? This evaluative report is the first study of its kind and offers a direct and empirically substantiated response to this current lacuna.





Methods

The project employed a mixed-method approach for the following reasons: Positivist approaches and quantitative based examinations are especially useful in education-based studies that seek to numerically capture/examine the relationship between one variable or intervention (the RIPIAG) on other variables, such as the performance of students of colour in assessment (see Campbell et al 2022). However, trying to capture the lived and everyday experience of race and exclusion in assessment and related practice is widely accepted as being ontologically problematic if solely an objectivist and in turn positivistic approach is utilised. According to Solomos (2003), racialised identities are widely recognised as dynamic and not salient at all times (see Campbell 2015). The fluidity of racialised identities, according to Gunaratnam (2003), means that race and related lived experiences often exist beyond the scope of quantitative measurement alone.

Consequently, a mixed-method approach was employed to offer a more holistic evaluation of the intervention's effectiveness for making measurable change in relation to students' qualitative and quantitative experiences in assessment in HE. The following data collection methods and datasets were utilised:

Qualitative data

The qualitative data were utilised to respond directly to Research Questions 1 and 2: 'What is the impact of the RIPIAG on staff levels of racial literacy?' and 'What is the impact of the RIPIAG on students from minority-ethnic backgrounds' experiences of assessment?', respectively.

A qualitative approach was employed for a number of methodological, analytical and theoretical reasons. Racialised and ethnic identities are widely recognised

as ontologically fluid and thus complex aspects of peoples' lives. Consequently, the lived experiences and daily realities of minority-ethnic groups in social - and in this case educative - environs and processes are often inadequately captured by quantitative data alone (Gunaratman 2003, Campbell 2015, Wallace 2017). The consensus among sociologists and educationalists is that to obtain a critical comprehension of minority-ethnic students' lived experiences in education, researchers should employ qualitative approaches, such as in-depth questioning in addition to quantitative data sets.

Consequently, data are drawn from a total of 12 focus groups interviews with 60 current undergraduate students and the convenors of 7 modules.

The students in our sample were all domicile and self-defined according to three different ethnic communities (1: British African and/or British African-Caribbean heritage (14), 2: British South Asian heritage (17) and 3: White British (29)). Students were purposively selected from seven modules, from three different degrees across three universities (University of Bourne, Meadow University and Wiseman University) of which 1 was research- and two were teaching-focused.

Where possible, focus groups were organised along these ethnicity themes. Interview data was drawn primarily from semi-structured interviews with module convenors. The sample also included an additional module convenor who trailed the RIPIAG in a research intensive HEP in Canada (State University), for comparison. However, this module was not included in the quantitative sample because the quality processes in the Canadian HE system does not recognise or record race award gap data (see the Afterword for full discussion).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. All qualitative data are coded, key words extrapolated and collated. Emergent themes were identified through a process of ‘pattern coding’, where coded data are reconfigured into more compact and meaningful groupings. All data are anonymised, and pseudonyms were used in place of students’, faculty members’ and HEPs’ real names and other signposts in accordance with the ethical guidelines set out by the University of Leicester’s ethics committee.

Quantitative data

Quantitative data were utilised to respond directly to Research Question 3: ‘What are the quantitative impact(s) of the RIPIAG on the race award gap in student outcomes in assessment at the module level?’ The sample included data from the assessment performance scores of undergraduate students taken from the 6 treated undergraduate modules. Only one module could be selected to be modified from a level on a degree programme. For example, a HEP could only select one module from their portfolio of modules at level 1 on their sociology degree. Selected modules had at least 25 students and were selected from programmes that had a student body which consisted of at least 35% of students who self-describe as belonging to a minority ethnic community. Unforeseen local issues, meant that out of the original 8 modules selected across 4 HEPs, 6 from 3 HEPS met the criteria and were included in the final quantitative sample.



Summary of the impact of the RIPIAG intervention on the assessment performance of students of colour and their White peers

A tool for reducing the general RAG difference between students of colour and White peers

Table 1: Race Award Gap in Student Assessment Performance on Modified Modules				
University and Module Code	Module RAG	Module RAG Average for Previous 2 years	Course RAG at that Level	University RAG
University of Bourne M1	1.25%	6.97%	1.20%	10.00%
University of Bourne M2	1.80%	4.11%	2.85%	10.00%
University of Bourne M3	7.38%	7.63%	-0.30%	10.00%
Meadow University M1	4.70%	30.25%	23.20%	22.00%
Meadow University M2	18.70%	37.0%	20.10%	32.00%
Wiseman University M1	8.00%	10.95%	12.00%	18.60%

Overall, the quantitative data demonstrates the RIPIAG intervention's capacity and potential to impact positively on reducing the aggregate RAG between students of colour and their White peers at the module level.

The average RAG difference between students of colour and those who defined as White across all treated modules was 6.97%. The narrowest gap reported was 1.25% and the widest 18.7%. In all cases, the RAG on modified modules were below the overall RAG reported at their respective HEPs for 2022. In 83% of modified modules, the reported RAG difference was lower than the 8.8% national average in 2020/21 (<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/features/closing-gap-three-years/introduction>).

To measure 'differences within difference' we tested the following:

1. The impact of the modified modules on students' assessment performances against their performance on non-treated modules.
2. The performance of students in the current treated iteration of the module against the performance of students on the previous and non-treated iterations of the same module.

The results showed a similarly positive picture of efficacy. For example, 66% of treated modules reported narrower RAGs when compared to the average RAG score recorded for all non-treated modules on that course and at that level. Also, 100% of treated modules reported narrower RAGs when compared to their aggregate RAG performance for the previous 2 years.

Of course, the findings do not account for important variations and considerations such as, a cohort with an unusually large cluster of stronger or weaker students within a particular minority ethnic background in any given year. Nor can it account for variations in the overall number of students of colour within any minority ethnic group in any particular year. These uncontrollables can all influence and skew slightly the veracity of the quantitative findings here and in future. They also remind us that it is unlikely and unrealistic to assume that the intervention will lead to a seamlessly consistent and linear annual reduction in RAGs.

Nonetheless, the triangulation and repetition of consistent patterns of RAG reduction reported in the performance data from across all the modified modules from different courses, levels, and partner HEPs provide the basis for confidence in the RIPIAG intervention's potential to positively reduce the aggregate RAG.

While the overall patterns of reduction in RAGs on the sample are encouraging it is important to also note that in most cases where disaggregated data for the performance of students from specific minority ethnic

groups were available, in almost all cases the RAG for Black-heritage students remained wider than those recorded by all other minority groups. Students who self-defined as 'other', which included East Asian students, reported the lowest RAG in some cases outperformed White peers. This group was followed by students who self-described as South Asian and then those who defined as 'mixed'.

Summary of the impact of the RIPIAG intervention on the assessment experiences of students of colour and their White peers

The qualitative data showed that the RIPIAG intervention was almost universally effective for improving Black, South Asian and White students' experiences of the assessment process on modified modules. The impact of each specific RIPIAG teaching resource on students' learning experiences are outlined below:

The impact of an Assessment Schedule on students' experiences of assessment

An effective tool for helping students to know when to start planning, preparing and completing their assessments

The inclusion of an Assessment Schedule (AS) helped students from all backgrounds develop a better understanding of when to begin the process of working on their assignments. This was novel and particularly helpful for students for whom university and in turn, assessment at the undergraduate level, were new or alien. These were often students who were the first in their family (FIF) to attend HE and thus, were less likely to have access to the kinds of kin- and social-networks that provide essential 'insider' knowledge that makes it considerably easier to successfully navigate academic life. This includes information on when to start working on assignment tasks. Without access to this bank of knowledge, FIF students are often left to rely on their own 'commonsense' solutions to problems, which often ran contrary to good assessment practice.

Against this issue, the inclusion of an AS that clearly set out by what week in the semester students should ideally start thinking about the assignment question, when to settle on the question, when to have a first draft complete, and so on, had high efficacy for helping students guard against their (frequently inaccurate) commonsense plans for completing their assignments. For example, students remarked that when they first saw that they 'only' had a 1,500- or 2,000-word essay, they rationally thought that it would only take them a

few days to complete. Consequently, they believed they would only need to start preparing and working on their assignment a few days before its due date – instead of long before that. The AS was especially effective at helping students learn how to mitigate this common mistake.

Like, when we first start, obviously we don't know what's ... to be expected, essentially. So I think it gives us a good idea of how early we should be thinking about assignments. I'm not gonna lie, I have done some assignments, like, last minute. [Black Student, University of Bourne]

So, I think it does help in terms of giving us guidance on where we should be starting ... 'Cause we wouldn't have known how much time to put into them ... without that ... Obviously in the handbook it tells you how many words you have to do. And it's like... all right, 1,500, that's fine. Like, we can do that in two days, no worries. [Black Student, University of Bourne]

The impact of Assignment Briefs on students' experiences of assessment

Assignment Briefs were an effective practical resource for maximizing the time and effort students spent on demonstrating comprehension

The Assignment Brief (AB) was remarkably effective at enhancing student participants' ability to reduce the time that they spent on locating the key information that related to their assignments. Students reported that they often spent – even wasted – copious amounts of time that they had ringfenced for completing assignments on locating information for their assessments. This often meant searching through relatively large module handbooks or within counterintuitive and non-standardised online module platforms. Testimonies from Black, South Asian and White participants illustrate how, on a practical level, the placing of all the key information, alongside suggestions for unpacking assignment questions and Frequently Asked Questions all within a short-hand 2/3-page document, was particularly useful for reducing the time that they typically spent searching for this information and in turn, maximized the time they spent on completing assignments.

[The AB is] a good thing. Because ... you don't have to look through notes, or anything. All the points are there ... it's just the fact that it's all in one place. [South Asian Student, Wiseman University]

[The AB makes things] way easier! ... The module handbook isn't a short document [is it?] [The AB] has everything in there ... I downloaded the assignment briefs, and we'll just print that out. And then just go through that. And it was just way easier. [Black Student, University of Bourne]

[I]t is helpful having it on a printout where you've got everything that's already there in front of you ... I think it's like two or three pages. And within that, we literally have the essay question, the structure, the learning outcomes ... So, I think everything we need to have an understanding of what we have to do for the essay. We have it already right in front of us. [White Student, Wiseman University]

Enhances students' ability to understand what their assignment questions want them to demonstrate

The AB enhanced students' ability to make sense of their assignment questions and specifically on what it wanted them to address. It did this by enhancing their ability to successfully deconstruct assignment questions that were often verbose, into a set of shorter and more specific sub-questions. Students remarked that this changed their overall perceptions of assignment questions from instructions that were often unclear and in turn daunting, into smaller sub-questions, which were more straightforward and manageable.

[On other modules] you don't really know what they're asking for... [But the AB] helps 'cos then you have a clear idea. I at least have, like, a path... So it does give us that. It creates a little less panic, if you will. And it does help you build your assignment – [It] gives you a starting place... [South Asian Student, Meadow University]

So I think it's helpful that it gives you the 'write down' of how the essay needs to be laid out ... For me, it helps reduce the stress. Because you can break it down into smaller sections ... Rather than thinking, I've got a 2,500 word essay that I need to do. So, okay, well I can concentrate on this section and then break it down that way. So I think that helps reduce stress as well. [White Student, Wiseman University]

I think those [ABs] were quite good because it gave me a sense of what you need to actually talk about. Um, so that was helpful when planning what you were going to say and linking it to the questions that were there. I think it was really good because it just gives you, like, a bit of a prompt. So you're not, like, completely clueless about what and where to start. [South Asian Student, University of Bourne]



I looked at [the AB] and I was like, am I hitting this point? Am I getting that one? Like, it made it a lot easier. Whereas, for example, I'm working on an essay [on another module] now, which is due in a few days. [All we have been given is] just a question [and no AB]. And ... I'm planning it ... And I'm making points. And I'm [asking myself]: 'is this [what she's writing] really relevant?' [White Student, Bourne University]

[Without the AB] It's harder... Yeah, it's like we, kind of, play a guessing game with everything else. Like, with the [assignment for another module] ... I had no idea what I was doing for that one ... [Black Student, Bourne University]

Clearly, the AB was remarkably effective for providing students with a blueprint for how to deconstruct their assignment questions and for making clear the minimum knowledge/content requirements that were expected to be covered. The qualitative narratives above show that this aspect of the AB had a particularly positive impact for raising students' confidence in their ability to succeed and, importantly, on reducing their general feelings of anxiety and stress that were usually brought on by assessment.

Reduced the jeopardy that accompanied assignment questions

Our initial scoping exercise illustrated that students of colour particularly found the language used in assignment questions to be verbose and confusing (this was connected to wider social factors and not the result of any inherent inability). This made knowing what specific knowledge or skills the task

wanted them to demonstrate difficult. To some, this made assignments and essay questions high jeopardy (Campbell et al 2021). The participants in this study echoed similar barriers to comprehension and resultant anxieties.

All the participants reported that the inclusion of an exposition within the AB, which clearly outlined what each question was specifically tasking was effective in reducing the time they spent on trying to 'figure out' what the question wanted them to demonstrate. In doing so, it enabled students to maximise the time and energy spent on showcasing the required knowledge or skill. This also meant that students were less likely to be faced with the prospect of having to choose between answering a question that they understood over a question on a topic that they were particularly interested in, passionate about, or knowledgeable on.

[W]ith a broader question, you, kind of, need an, assignment brief to guide you 'cos anyone can go on a different tangent. And then you don't know which one's right and which one's wrong! [Black Student, University of Bourne]

Yeah, I found [the AB] helpful. Like, even before I started [my assignment], it gave me an idea of what each question entailed. So, I could choose a question... and have more idea what question to do. [Rather] than if I had just been [given] the question [without any exposition] ... It's not like the plan's done for you ... You're able to pick out the one [question] you want ... Cos if it wasn't broken-down like that ... I don't think I'd be that confident in doing it. [South Asian Student, Meadow University]

[The AB had] tips on how to approach a question. That helped a lot 'cause it's like ... okay: 'This is what the question's asking you to do.' And I think that helped 'cause the whole guidance thing was more like, okay: 'So this is roughly how you should approach the question.' And, you know, this is where you should be going with it. So, yeah, that helped a lot! [Black Student, University of Bourne]

Reduced student dependency on lecturing staff to complete their work

Students reported that the AB enabled them to rely less on direct input from staff for reassurance about whether-or-not they were 'on the right track' for success and enhanced their ability to function as independent learners (this was corroborated by the staff testimonies below). It also meant that they did not have to go to lecturers who they were not comfortable in seeking out or having to overcome the vulnerability that came with exposing any perceived lack of understanding for the task and any negative judgements that might be made about them.

Yes, so you've still got something to refer to back to. You've got the structure in front of you. Even if I don't go back to the lecturer, I could look at that. [South Asian Student, Wiseman University]

[The AB] kind of shows you what someone expects from that assignment. But for the other modules that we had to do an essay with, I think it was just harder because it was just the questions. And even the questions were just very hard to understand what they meant. And there wasn't really any other advice that it gave us after that. [South Asian Student, University of Bourne]

I feel like the assignment brief was very useful. The fact that the question was there, but then it also broke down the question for you, made it easier for you to do your introduction. Because you knew what you had to talk about, and then style your essay ... And then, at the bottom [of the AB], it would have an extra point, which is the stronger essays would do 'blah blah blah'. I thought that that part, as well, was very useful because it, kind of, allows you to try and push yourself to see if you can reach what those stronger essays would do. [Black Student, University of Bourne]

A resource for facilitating even higher levels of student creativity in assessments

Concerns centred on the negative effects of too much support are often raised by educators. They proffer that assignment support reduces students' ability to be innovative or to demonstrate creativity



and excellence in their assessed work. The qualitative data, however, suggests the opposite outcome was facilitated through the employment of the modified AB.

The following participant testimonies suggest that the AB, in addition to the other RIPIAG exercises and resources discussed throughout, were successful in making the parameters of the assignment more transparent for them.

The clear-eyed understanding of their assignments' objective(s) and boundaries that the AB helped to facilitate appeared to help create and clearly set out the pedagogical conditions and boundaries of the task, within which students felt more confident and reassured. This provided the platform for them to be more creative without the fear of going off task – and ultimately failing their assignments.

Discussing the 'wrong thing' or going 'off topic' was one of the most commonly cited reasons for the participants' reluctance to be expressive in their assignments in other modules. Consequently, the AB enhanced students' confidence to be even more creative within the confines of the assignment, instead of stifling it.

I think with the creativ[ity] thing it's like [the AB] does both. Because it's like if you have less guidance, it's obviously [leaves you] open to more avenues [to explore] ... At the same time you're also stressing about, is this the correct avenue I should be going down? [Black Student, University of Bourne]

[H]aving some sort of guide when you're writing an essay is so important! It just helps you. It just helps you guide your thinking. It's not supposed to stop you from adding anything else. Like, as long as it connects and is valid ... Then it's fine. [Black Student, Wiseman University]

Not to name names or point fingers, but in a certain other module we had to write an essay. It was incredibly vague [question] on what the essay should even be about. That was traumatising to say the least! Because ... If it's not specific, in order to guide your thinking, then you could end up writing an essay that maybe is not even related and then perhaps you get a bad grade, because [the answer] was not supposed to be on that point. [White Student, University of Bourne]

I think [the AB] definitely helped guide my thinking. Seeing especially where it said to address the limitations. I already thought to do that, but seeing it written down, like, confirmed it for me and helped me

to stay on that track and confirm what I was going to do. And it just helped me have more confidence when I was writing because I knew that it was on the focus of what [the lecturer] expected from us and wanted. [White Student, University of Bourne]

The impacts of the Modified Seminar Workshops on students' experiences of assessment

An effective resource for facilitating a deeper and more accurate understanding of the assessment process

The modified seminar workshops consisted of a series of what we describe elsewhere as group-based 'active learning' activities (see Campbell et al 2021). These are 'activities which provide module specific and 'hands on' assessment support, which make clear what it is that makes work successful and how this relates to the marking criteria' (Campbell 2022 p8).

The accounts below demonstrate how the active learning activities within the modified seminars directly transformed students' experiences of assessment from something which was 'individual' to one which was social and dialogic.

Not everybody understands marking criteria exactly the same... I think engaging in group work helped a lot to reflect off each other. [Black Student Wiseman University]

It helped to see multiple perspectives – but also [to see] multiple ways of doing the assignment [Black Student, University of Bourne]

You, like, have your own ideas, but then when you can speak with others [students], it just develops them [their ideas and comprehension] more. And with certain modules, you don't really feel like you can do that. [White Student, University of Bourne]

I feel that when you're just doing your assignment, you're just in a bubble [on their own] and you don't realise it [South Asian Student, University of Bourne]

The testimonies highlight that the active learning exercises required students to explain (the aspect of the) assessment to each other, challenge each other's response, and required them to either modify or defend their views to reach a group consensus. This approach to learning aligns with what Alexander (2008) described a 'dialogic' pedagogy.

Dialogic pedagogy is the idea that effective learning is achieved through a process of ‘meaningful talk’, similar to that described above. A ‘deeper’ knowledge/understanding is reached through justification, challenge/defence, modification and then re-comprehension). Importantly, meaningful dialogue can only take place if both learners are of relative equal status (if any two people can be equal). Put another way, meaningful talk cannot take place between lecturer and student because the power imbalance removes the student’s ability to engage in ‘meaningful talk’. This is because they will typically accept the lecturer’s assertion as valid. This is what usually happens, for example, when assessment learning takes place through a more transmissive and passive mode of delivery, such as in a lecture. However, when the dialogue takes place between peers in a group exercise, students are more inclined to engage in meaningful dialogue where, using evidence, they discuss, challenge justify, modify or confirm their understanding.

This approach is routinely employed in compulsory education and in HEPs to varying degrees, especially in relation to the kinds of comprehension building exercises employed within seminars. In contrast to their general taught educative experiences in HE, assessments were things which students largely did on their own and in silos (unless it was group assignment).

It is unsurprising given this background that the students here found the siloed nature of learning and of doing assessments to be alien, stressful and often unhelpful. Conversely, they reported considerably higher levels of comfort, comprehension and confidence when learning assignment literacy through the more social and dialogic approach taken within the modified seminars.

Enhanced students’ ability to make sense of the marking criteria and Learning Objectives and turn them into meaningful instructions

Participants reported that they often found the terminology used in their module’s Learning Objectives and in the marking criteria to be opaque, abstract and in some cases incomprehensible. They recognised that terms such as ‘critical argument’, ‘logical structure’ and anecdotal evidence were all important – and frequently rehearsed - ‘things’ that needed to be demonstrated or avoided. However, in practice these terms meant very little to them when completing their own work. The testimonies below demonstrate some of the ways in which

the exercises within the modified seminars were transformative in helping students to translate and in turn, ‘see’ and learn what this terminology meant and looked like when it came to completing their own assessments.

There was one bit where [the seminar] actually – as silly as it sounds - explained what critical analysis was. So I’ve had formatives before where they’ve [other lecturers have] been like you need to be more critical. But she actually gave an example [and exercises to learn it]. And as silly as that sounds, [now] that [I have seen what critical analysis is, it] makes so much more sense. [Black Student, Wiseman University]

Not everybody can interpret that document [marking criteria] in the same way... Therefore [the seminar] gives us different options and different ways to understand what we need to do to receive a First. [Black Student, Meadow University]

There’s so [much] jargon in the mark schemes ... and with[in the] Learning Objectives... [Other Lecturers will] say follow the Learning Objectives... And sometimes I look at them, [and] I’m like, I still don’t know exactly what that means! So, yeah, kind of going through it [in the seminar helps] ... [White Student, Meadow University]

So now we know [how to] write and meet the Learning Objectives that are given to get the high[er] grades. Whereas if we didn’t have that and we just got given the assignment to do, I don’t think... because I’m got dyslexia personally, so I don’t think I would have understood how to structure each paragraph and get the higher marks [without the seminar activities]. I probably would have 40 or 50% max, if I didn’t get this [the help in the seminar]! [White Student, Wiseman University]

Enhanced students’ ability to breakdown the assignment from an overwhelming activity into a set of smaller sub-activities

Students from all three different racial backgrounds and across all partner HEPs reported that they often found the prospect of completing assignments (on other modules) to be ‘overwhelming’. The following accounts illustrate how the modified seminars were especially helpful for modifying student attitudes towards assessment. The active learning exercises within the pre-assessment seminar were particularly effective at enhancing students’ ability to identify, separate out – or ‘break down’ the ‘total’ sum of the assignment task (essay, presentation, report and so



on) into a series of smaller and in turn, less daunting set of actions (e.g., ‘Structuring the Assignment’, ‘Formulating an Introduction’, ‘Learning the difference between anecdotal, evidence and critical assignments’, and so on). Furthermore, it provided active and group-based exercises for each section, which taught students how to complete each contained component of the assignment. It also (actively) taught them what constituted a stronger or weaker sub-section and why it was.

Students proffered that this deconstructed and more scaffolded approach to completing assignments acted as a ‘baseline’ ‘checklist’. Others went further, describing it as an essential ‘kit’ for ‘surviving’ the assessment process. In almost all cases, it was seen as a core contributor for success, and for making them feel at ease and confident when doing their assessments in modified modules.

The [seminar] broke it down essentially. Like, okay, this is what you need to tackle. These are the questions that you needed to ask yourself. That’s helped. I think that’s one of the reasons why we have the grades we have ... [W]e’ve done okay [in our assessment] because of those templates and that guidance. I think it’s helped a lot. [Black Student, University of Bourne]

[The seminar] really breaking it down. I liked the group work as well. It was really helpful. [South Asian Bangladeshi-heritage Student, University of Bourne]

The workshops and seminars that we’ve had around assessments have been really helpful. [B]ecause it gave us like a baseline on what to do. Seeing, like, a structure ... it really helped for me to form my own essay. Like the [others have already] said, about [being] thrown in at the deep end [on other modules]. It didn’t feel like that [with the seminar]. It felt like we had that support and it was very helpful. [White Student, University of Bourne]

I think it was good having the seminar on, specifically, the essay we had because it was almost like a checklist when you’re going back and referring to it. Making sure I was on the right lines just made me feel more confident about my actual essay when I was writing, where another module didn’t have that support. And I was, kind of ... second-guessing what I was writing. I wasn’t too sure if I was on the right track! [White Student, University of Bourne]

I liked the how to structure your essays. Like breaking it down on what is a good paragraph, [and] what is not. I liked that. [Black Student, University of Bourne]

‘Cause I’m more of a visual learner, I’ve got more of a picture in my head of how to lay it out [and] what to include... What to put in the main body. How to link everything back... Like, through the example paragraphs. This is an example of an anecdotal [argument]... [White Student, Meadow University]



The impact of the Active Group Marking Exercise on students' experiences of assessment

Enhanced all students' comprehension of 'best' assessment practice

Testimonies indicated that the modified and active marking exercises had high efficacy for developing Black, South Asian and White students' comprehensions of assessment from being able to complete the smaller compartmentalized aspects of the assignments (learned in the modified seminar workshops, see above) to comprehending how these dislocated aspects all joined together to form a coherent narrative in a full assignment.

[The exercise] puts it in perspective. Like oh! That's a 70 or that's a 60. And then you could think: 'Oh there's the references and that's something that I can use in my own words'. And then put it in to get that higher mark ... So yeah, I think it puts [the whole assignment] in[to] more perspective [and makes what it looks like] more clearer. What they're looking for. [South Asian Student of the Islamic Faith, Wiseman University]

Sometimes when a tutor's explaining something or a lecturer's explaining something, it can get a bit muddled. I'm a visual learner, so listening is really hard for me ... But when I see it ... It's like that makes way more sense to me... I can apply what you said. [White student Meadow University]

The exercises also appeared to enhance students' ability to better understand the module specific expectations of the assignment and mitigate against inter-marker variables. These are the potential and different ways of 'doing' the sum or aspects of the assignment that can often vary and are dependent on the preferences of individual lecturers (such as the differences in what is expected in an 'introduction' or a 'conclusion', that may differ between markers). This issue was cause for high anxiety across all student groups.

Being able to look at an example answer, especially with your first assignment. Or even going forward, because it sets the basis of where you should be at, when you're going further. You're able to add more information to that because you [see] what's expected of you. [White Student, University of Bourne]

I do find example essays and how it's done well. I find those good, because I find, like, different lecturers expect different things. [White Student, Meadow University]

Enhanced students' ability to organize their thinking

Students remarked that the active group marking exercise was particularly useful for helping them to see, learn and know what assignments at different levels looked like. Additionally, it was also helpful for improving their ability to see and discuss the different ways in which they might approach the task, and the different ways in which assignments were structured.

For students who were unsure of how to approach the task, they proffered that the exercise helped them to organise their thoughts. It also helped them to structure their ideas and formulate how they might approach the assignment activity. This appeared to be particularly useful for both students for whom the mode of assignment was completely new, or for when the expectations of what constituted a higher-grade response had changed from one year to the next.

I think for me, it definitely helped to structure [my work] and I found [it helped me to see] how it should be laid out. [South Asian Student, Wiseman University]

One thing I always struggled with personally is actually writing my ideas on a piece of paper. Like, the style of writing. And when I did it [the marking exercise], I thought okay, this is the difference! This is how they portray their ideas. This is how you're meant to structure it. [South Asian Student of the Islamic Faith, Meadow University]

It's just [seeing] the ideas that you [can] implement into your work ... does help you. Even for me to start my essay 'cause I never know how to start my essay... Like, I never even know how to end my essay. It's always the introduction, the conclusion for me [that's the hardest]. The middle bit I'm fine with. [South Asian Student of the Islamic Faith, Meadow University]

Improved students' confidence in their ability to succeed in assessment

The marking exercise had a direct impact on improving students' perceptions of their own efficacy to complete their assignment and importantly on their confidence of being able to produce higher level responses.

The overwhelming majority of participants remarked that the marking to the grading criteria component of the marking exercise challenged their instinctive ideas of what constituted good assessment practice and excellence at the undergraduate level. This was often at odds with best assessment practice as set out within the marking criteria and learned in the seminar activity.

Some students admitted to having to fight to resist their original and instinctive ideas of what assessment excellence looked like when marking previous assignments for the first time (and even after taking part in the active seminar). Their instinct here was to score exemplar work much lower and

more harshly than the module convenor. In turn, the grading exercises helped underscore the lessons learned in the active seminar and facilitate a more accurate comprehension of what was required of assignments to be placed within each grade boundary.

Subsequently the exercise provided a double function. (1) It reinforced a more accurate comprehension of what constitutes higher level work (learned in the seminar). (2) Seeing that what constituted higher standard work was often lower than their initial expectations, served to reassure students of their own aptitude and ability to succeed. (3) That producing a higher-level response was not beyond their own capability.

In turn, the activity had a direct impact on raising student confidence. This appeared to particularly be an issue for students of colour or who were White and self-defined as working-class. These are students who have historically found HE an alien space which runs contrary to their own race and classed habitus (See Campbell 2022).

It was very easy to know where we'd be scoring ... [against] those assignments. [Black Student, Meadow University]

I would say that when we had those essays, it made me feel a lot better about the assignment. Because the ones that I thought were bad were actually quite good. And it made me feel a bit better thinking that, you know, if I was to do an essay to this standard, I wouldn't fail. And I just think it was like a big, reliever when I read them. I think it was very helpful to, like, understand where I could put myself in terms of those essays (scores). [White Student, Meadow University]

I just think it helps because I was a bit stressed at first, but seeing someone else's work and realising it is actually manageable and it can be done, that helped. [White Student, Wiseman University]

Enhanced students ability to guard against their inaccurate 'commonsense' assumptions of good assessment practice

Many students of colour remarked that they were the first in their family to go to university and that when in the Whiteness university space, they tended to seek out and socialize with people from similar raced and class backgrounds. They also commented that they would only seek out their lecturers for assignment support as 'a last resort'. Indeed, no students who were Black reported

being comfortable going to staff for assessment assistance. As such, students reported that typically they often drew on kin and friendship networks for answers to issues relating to their assessments – the course WhatsApp group was a key resource here. However, in most cases, solutions to problems would often be anecdotal or commonsense. One popular position originally proffered by students, for example, was that cramming in as much information learned during the module into a singular essay as possible – what they described as a ‘scatter gun’ or ‘waffly’ approach – was a formula for success. Ironically, of course the reverse is often the case: that to score highly, students often have to demonstrate depth and not breadth of understanding. However, it is not difficult to see why ‘intuitively’, this approach might be thought to be one which demonstrates high(er) levels of engagement, knowledge and comprehension.

The accounts below illustrate how the active group marking exercise directly enhanced students’ ability to mitigate against these kinds of miscalculations. It also provided a direct reference point for students to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their own assignments and assessment practice:



[The Lecturer] showed us one [essay] that was really extensive ... And then one that was really short. But the shorter one got more marks! Because it still went into detail, but the [previous] one didn’t go into detail ... So you can kind of tell... Not ‘cos of how big it is, but because it needs to back up your point - Your explanation. So all of that, I feel like it just really helped. [South Asian Student of the Islamic Faith, Meadow University]

I think, looking at the different assignments and looking at the different grades that each one got, you compare it to what your writing is like. So, if you read through it and it turns out to be 40%, you know that from the other higher examples, what you sort of need to [do to improve] ... your writing, to achieve that high grade. [White Student, Wiseman University]

I would say that particular exercise when we had to mark the different essays didn’t necessarily tell me what I should do to get a first, but it told me what I shouldn’t do to not get a first, if that was the right way to say it? ... It didn’t show me what I needed to do, it showed me what I didn’t need to do. [Black Student, Meadow University]

Before I used to waffle in my introductions and I just found out that’s not what you need to do! [South Asian Student of the Islamic Faith, Meadow University]

Contrasting experiences of assessment between racialised students on modified modules and students of colour on non-modified modules

Students of colour in this study were keen to press that the intervention had made them more clear-eyed and confident about what assignments at different levels required and looked like.

I think we both kind of knew the ballpark of where we were gonna get all of our grades [when I submitted] ... I think it was very much like, like I knew where my weaknesses were immediately, kind of thing. So I was like, okay, have I developed the point fully? Like, I think I could tell where I’d done well and I could tell where I hadn’t done as well... And it’s like, have I answered this the best way? Maybe I haven’t referenced enough or I haven’t developed this point fully, etc. So I think it was made very clear. I think that’s the reason why the grades weren’t a surprise ... [Black Student, University of Bourne]

I think that when the paper was laid out what the grading system was [taught to us], it helped us a lot, too. ‘Cos we didn’t even know how our assessments



were going to be graded until we came to that seminar. [South Asian Student, University of Bourne]

So, yeah, I like everything on there [the RIPIAG] to be fair. So it does help us in that sense. So we don't need to go to him [the lecturer] 'cos he's already provided it. [South Asian Student of the Islamic Faith, Meadow University]

When you get a grade that isn't what you think relates to your effort... that it's not because the lecturer doesn't [like you]... You can actually start to see how and why you got that grade ... [Black Student, University of Bourne]

The accounts clearly illustrate how the increase in transparency of the assessment process brought about by the RIPIAG meant that Black and South Asian students better understood how they were being assessed and what was required to achieve desired grades. It also facilitated a stronger sense of trust between faculty and students of colour.

This was in stark contrast to the experience of Black and South Asian students in previous studies and on non-modified modules, who were often left unaware of how they were assessed. The lack of transparency in the assessment process and of

what constituted stronger and weaker work, often left students of colour on non-treated modules to speculate when assessment grade scores did not match their effort. This situation often fostered feelings of racial foul play and distrust between faculty and students of colour (see Campbell 2022).

Limitations of the toolkit

An intervention for mitigating racial inequalities in assessment but not for addressing anti-Black racial inequities in HE

The following testimonies from Black students point to the multiplicity of wider and acute anti-Black challenges and barriers in HE that impact negatively on their chances of achieving outcome parity in assessment.

When it comes to academic writing, like I need a lot of reassurance, like I think it might be just me being anxious ... Yeah, it [the RIPIAG] helps. But it's not the only [thing I need] ... I need more! If that makes sense? [Black Student, Meadow University]

[The module convenor of the modified module] is the only one, or one of the only lecturers, that actually

supports you. In terms of tries to explain things in different ways because he understands, or I can only assume that he understands, that not everybody understands academic language the same way ... And he's one of the only people that will do it! So if you wanna say dumb it down, yeah, he does dumb down the mark scheme for us... Whereas I've had [other] lecturers that you can tell from their background, that they don't have that ability to, I'm not gonna say dumb down again, but ... to make things transparent. Because that academic language is their normal language... [Black Student, Meadow University]

The testimonies illustrate the limitations of the intervention's ability to mitigate against the wider anti-Black inequities in HE that stymie Black students from achieving grade outcome parity with other raced students and White peers. Black participants asserted that if the academe is serious about trying to eliminate race award gaps, then it will need to also address these wider anti-Black barriers too.

I think if those ... [RIPIAG] resources and the help we get in this module and if the support, was module-wide, it'd be really useful. But I think again, [the ability to do well in assessments is also] based on your attendance or based on... how [well] you know your [and get on with your] lecturer, as well! [Black Student, Meadow University]

I think yeah [the RIPIAG intervention] increase[d] my confidence a bit ... I think it's good. It most definitely will help if it was all across [all our modules]. But I don't think that's the only thing that needs to be included! [Black Student, Wiseman University]

[The intervention is helpful] 'Cos In a sense, you don't have to worry about not understanding what you need to do [in the assessment] if that makes sense ... It takes away one struggle! 'Cos now you just have to worry about understanding your course and translating that into a first... So yeah, it just takes away that issue [but not all of them]. [Black Student, Meadow University]





Summary of the impact of the RIPIAG intervention on staff

High efficacy for improving Staff Racial Literacy

The qualitative data demonstrated that working with the RIPIAG intervention and attending the training workshops had a transformative impact on enhancing the racial literacy of participants in a general sense. It also had high efficacy for advancing individuals' understandings of how, where and the range of racial inequities that manifest in HE assessment and related practices, which resulted in clear and tangible changes in their own everyday assessment practice.

Some limits of employing a 'Decolonizing frame' for enabling staff to identify race-based exclusions within module content and practice

The testimonies highlighted that prior to completing the race inclusion in assessment training, teaching participants original ideas of what constituted decolonizing work were often narrow. To 'decolonize' was largely considered to be something that applied to modifying curriculum content and in turn, redressing the ways in which HE curricula in the UK typically prioritised certain voices, canons and viewpoints (and the related racialised power imbalances). Put simply, for them, decolonizing work was primarily an exercise in pluralising course content. This position echoed a wider and more general academic consensus view of 'decolonizing' teaching (Arday and Mirza 2018, Meghji 2021).

I think decolonizing is bound to knowledge and power. So we are thinking about, or at least being very aware and critical of, who has power in certain situations to define a topic. [Or] to define what is the canon [and] the way of doing research. [Lecturer, State University]

It is a place which only presents certain knowledges, certain histories and prioritises those. It presents those [stories] as the authority over others. [Lecturer, University of Bourne]

[Before taking part in this, decolonizing] meant two strands for me, I guess. One, was about trying to diversify the curriculum in terms of bringing in voices from people of colour. Bringing in resources written by people of colour ... The other strand is about acknowledging and illuminating the ways in which ... colonialism ... or White privilege ... has been enacted throughout history and the impact that has had on our curriculum. [Lecturer, Wiseman University]

So I might say [decolonizing] involves changing your literature. Looking at who the authors are. Looking at the content. Looking at the history. [Lecturer, University of Bourne]



The benefits of using a racial inclusion frame for enhancing the understanding of racial inequities in education

The conscious decision to re-frame how we defined and categorized the project from decolonizing to an activity concerned with being racially inclusive, had a transformative impact on participants. It served a key educative function for widening their comprehensions of what, how and where the undergraduate education that they delivered might work unequally for students of colour.

Exploring race inequities in education through the frame of 'racial inclusion' instead of decolonizing, enhanced the ability of the educationalists in our sample to think more broadly and outside of the 'box'. It stimulated a wider range of thinking that enabled them to start to think beyond course content as the primary site and cause of race exclusion in taught programmes. It enabled staff to begin to consider how things such as the structures, processes and practices that wrap around their modules can also contain specific race-based barriers too. It was particularly helpful in enabling non-race specialists to adopt a broader-based thinking when it came to the exclusions that their students of colour might face when in the academe.

[Being] racially inclusive is about the person's race ... [and] listening to those who are racially marginalised. Listening to those who are not included. Making sure they have the space and opportunity. And that it's fed [into our practice] either collaboratively, in a co-production [or] co-design ... [So t]hat they feel included. [Lecturer, University of Bourne]

['Racial Inclusion'] It's made me think about racial inequality in a different way. That it's not just where I'm on the curriculum. It's also about ... those enactments of privilege. [Lecturer, Wiseman University]

Facilitated a more comprehensive understanding of race exclusions in assessment among staff

Working with the RIPIAG intervention specifically and directly enhanced participants ability to recognise racial inequities in assessment and related practices. Some reported that they had previously considered that assessment might contain some racially exclusionary processes, but this had often been in an ephemeral way. Their thinking here was typically in relation to how the language used in assessment might present barriers for some students – although none had quite worked out how or why this might be a particular issue for students of colour.

I was interested in how students might not do as well from non-white backgrounds, but I hadn't beyond sort of thinking about, you know, the topics that they could do essays on in my modules. I hadn't really thought about the form of assessment or the assessment support before, in terms of racialised and ethnic identities ... For me, that has really helped me to sort of understand ... and it's completely changed my understanding of assessment and the role it plays in terms of inequities and things like that. Yeah, hands down! [Lecturer, Meadow University]

I hadn't really thought about the ways in which all the processes effect assessment. The assumptions of what students can and can't do. What kind of currencies

and capitals they bring ... The kind of support available in assessment. The kind of feedback in assessment. How all of these kinds of things ... make the process of navigating assessment much easier for you know, for for White majority students. And this isn't something that comes out of ... some inherent link to their skin colour. It comes from when we think about the kinds of independent activities that students have to do in preparation for the assessment ... Which students are gonna have the time to do this? Just take, for example, when we talk about ... if you don't come to class, then you're not gonna get all the information on the on the assessment. Well, OK. What students are gonna be those that are most likely to be travelling? What students are gonna be most likely to those that have care responsibilities? What students are those that are likely to kind of have all those other social conditions that make attendance difficult? ... So you know all of these processes effect students of colour in assessment. But you know, prior to this [process], I hadn't really joined the dots. [Lecturer, University of Bourne]

The lecturers' experiences of attending the training workshops, working through the guidance and embedding this into their practice made them more familiar with the complexity, and multiple ways in which assessment success and grade outcomes were also and often predicated on various currencies that certain



racial groups were more or less likely to possess. It also improved their understanding of how racial exclusion worked in their own assessment practice.

Importantly, some White participants were keen to press how the RIPIAG guidance and training workshops provided enabled them to engage in a process of critical self-reflection of their own complicity as part of an academe that excludes students of colour, in a way that was constructive, useful and did not make them feel guilty.

It's given me a better understanding, without me feeling attacked as a White person. To recognise that my practice and also the practice of the institutions that I've worked at. That I work in. Are in many ways institutionally racist, and do have elements of oppression in there ... I think becoming comfortable with the fact that as a White person I have White privilege, and I've always had White privilege, and I will always have White privilege and recognising how that's enacted within higher education, and how I can challenge that within my practice. I feel like this project has helped me on a journey that I was already on, [and] that I wanted to be on. [Lecturer, Wiseman University]

A core tool for helping staff to move from 'inclusion' discourse to racially inclusive assessment practice

Participants explained that universities were placing increasing importance on reducing the RAG. They noted that while their own institutions were developing ever-more sophisticated tools for identifying quantitative gaps in the assessment outcomes for students of colour when compared to White peers, they were less forthcoming when it came to providing them with specific instructions and guidance for how to address these exclusions in their teaching and assessment practice (beyond repeated calls to decolonize their practice). They proffered that working with the RIPIAG helped them to plug this gap in institutional direction and support, and enhanced their assessment practice in the following ways:

Provided clear guidance and prompts for change

Participants asserted that the format of clear, unambiguous and user-friendly prompts for change enabled them to quickly grasp (the basics of) the issue and identify some of the more obvious ways in which their practice excluded students of colour. By the same token, it provided them with a clear blueprint for how to operationalise this guidance in their practice.



Staff explained that when instructed to decolonize their practice by their institutions, they often had little idea of what this looked like in practice. This situation often left them feeling 'lost' and 'helpless' with regards to how and where to start to make changes in their modules and related assessment practice. These anxieties were compounded by the annual publication of school- and course-level data that often showed the widening and unequal quantitative-experiences between students of colour and White peers on their programmes. Frustrations were also caused by time-based pressures, such as not having enough time to reflect on or to modify their modules to the extent that would ideally want or in a way that was meaningful. Consequently, the RIPIAG enhanced their ability to see and to respond rapidly and meaningfully to the racial inequities that manifest in their assessment practice. This was described as 'empowering', for some.

I think some of these things were in the back of my mind, but I hadn't really put together a plan of how I could support students who were kind of going through it. So this ... gave me an opportunity to actually put some things into practice that I feel politically committed to ... And yeah, like empowered me. It gave me very concrete tools that I could put into place. [Lecturer, State University]

I was given the modules last minute dot com. [The RIPIAG] was accessible and easy for me to quickly

implement without having to think: 'God, do I need to go through curriculum changes?' I think that's helpful. [Lecturer, University of Bourne]

What I found really beneficial with the project is that the recommendations are really specific in terms of pedagogical practice. They're not vague at all, which sometimes can be the case, I think, with [decolonizing] research. They're very specific ... Personally, as a lecturer, I find them so helpful just in developing my own pedagogical practice and helping me to really reflect on how I as an educator can make my students as comfortable as possible with assessment. [Lecturer, Wiseman University]

I'd say, as a whole, there's very little training in relation to [making our practice racially inclusive]. There's a focus on gaps. But not a clear focus on the different ways in which these gaps can be tackled. And certainly this project's focus on assessment specifically is very much a useful tool in addition to a range of other tools. [Lecturer, Meadow University]

Translated complex inclusion discourse into practice

Participants who were non-race specialists asserted that they often found the language and terminology used in race inclusion discourse

to be a particular barrier that inhibited some from making change – or knowing what positive change looked like in practice. It was often vague and amorphous. The training here was especially helpful for translating complicated inclusion discourse into actionable instruction.

They argued that this was unlike other inclusion-based initiatives, such as Curriculum Consultants, or Reverse Mentoring. The purpose and impact (the measurable difference) of these on changing their practice and making it more inclusive were not always obvious to them – beyond showing White staff the trauma that their students of colour routinely experience in HE. By contrast, the guidance here had a more obvious function and use-value for staff. It helped them to operationalize complex language into visible change in their taught content, exercises, and taught lessons.

I think the guidance is really helpful on the number of levels. One: Anything that gives you some clear... considerations for practice is always helpful in the hectic nature of the academic year... This is one of the problems with the conversation on race and inclusion. It's often quite nebulous in terms of what do things like 'having an inclusive curriculum' [actually] look like? Where do you even start? What does that look like when you're putting together a module for the for the semester? So it was really helpful in that it provided clear instructions. And Two: The framework ... helped really focus ... your mindset when you're putting this together. What do I need to think about before they [students] even get to the assessment and then, what do I need to think about after the assessment and then, what are the kinds of things that I'm doing during this entire process that might impact unevenly on different students ... Even for those, like me, that are quite well versed in the practice of theorizing and conceptualizing race, the guidance for giving us something as a reference point as to what good practice looks like and something to continually go back to and evolve. I think that was really helpful in just providing a schemata for putting this together. [Lecturer, University of Bourne]

I care about students in higher education. So, I've read a lot of journal [articles], and, you know, research and 'blah, blah, blah' ... And the conclusions are always, you know! Well actually it's higher education that needs to change and not the students that need to change. And we need to fit around them, not they need to fit around us. Which is lovely in a really vague

way But doesn't necessarily help me as an educator know specifically what to change in my practice to make things better ... Um, and that's a frustration that I have often with journals [articles] and with research. Is that this is wonderful, but what I need is actually the same as what students need. Actual, specific, clear recommendations. Kind of bullet pointed out that these are the things that you can do to help in this area. And that was the key thing for the project for me. It was the clarity of the interventions, and the recommendations. I think having those, kind of, just, you know, numbered one to six pre-assessment support. [Lecturer, Wiseman University]

Changing perceptions of assessment: From a standalone activity to an ongoing learning process

Working with the RIPIAG shifted participants' perceptions of assessment from activities that were standalone and that existed outside of the taught curriculum to a skill-set or knowledge-base that needed to be cultivated and developed throughout their students' undergraduate journey. Training students in the business of assessment was now seen by the staff-participants as an important part of the curriculum that needed to be actively taught to their students. It was viewed





to be a part of their responsibility, as module convenors, to teach their students assessment practice/skills in the same way that it was their responsibility to teach them course content.

So what we're trying to do is really... move assessment into the learning process... Often when we teach, we think of course content as the stuff that we need to teach our students, but the assessment is something that exists outside of that, particularly at the module level. We might have a standalone module that deals with assessment... But what we're trying to do and clearly articulate is really to recognise that the learning process is also about learning how to do assessment at undergraduate level. What often has happened in the past is that there's been a gap around that, and that's been left for students to really figure out on their own. [Lecturer, University of Bourne]

Assessment isn't this big, scary punishment at the end of the module. It's not a punitive exercise. It's actually part of the learning process. Building that into our teaching. Not just at the end of the module, which is something that I used to do. So I'd always do a kind of assignment workshop near the end of the module ... But the recommendations build assessment in right the way through [the semester]. So week on week, you're talking to students about what they should be doing to work on their assignment and breaking it down, and drip feeding that information

week on week has made it much more transparent for students, I think. And [it] has made lecturing actually more enjoyable for me, because I can see that it's more enjoyable for them and they're much less anxious. [Lecturer, Wiseman University]

I think assessment also felt like: 'Right! The learning process is over and now you're gonna be assessed'. Whereas actually what strikes me now, and despite some initial resistance around: 'Oh God, am I spoon feeding them here? You know that that initial sort of resistance. But actually once they started doing this, I thought on a purely pragmatic level, hopefully it means better assessments outcomes in that they aren't way off the mark. But actually, now I increasingly see assessment as part of the wider learning process. [Lecturer, Meadow University]

Teaching staffs' perceptions of the qualitative impact of the RIPIAG on their students

Staff reported that they had noticed clear and positive changes in their students' attitudes and behavioral responses to assessment on modified modules. These changes included the following:

Modified modules had enhanced the levels of independence and confidence in students

Staff reported noticeably higher levels of independence in relation to their students' ability to get on with their assignments without continuous direct intervention from them (as their lecturers). They also noted that conversations about assessments with students on modified modules were less about 'how to do them?' 'What does the lecturer want me to do?' Or 'how to get started?' Students, instead, used these sessions simply to 'touch base' with lecturers to 'check in' for confirmation.

They also reported that students on the modified modules generally demonstrated higher levels of understanding of the assessment and of what constituted stronger and weaker pieces of work, why they were, and what they looked like. Consequently, participants reported that this translated into much higher levels of confidence among students when approaching their assignments on the modified modules. This was in stark contrast to the lower levels of confidence that they displayed when doing assignments on non-modified modules.

I've seen less reliance upon me to give them the answers to how to do this and that they're more confident in just getting on with the task and with the resources. They just kind of touch base with me. There's less questions [on] what are we doing? But it's more: 'This is what I'm doing. And this is what it [the guidance] said to do ... I just want to double check? ... So now they're almost using me as a kind of [person just for] double checking, and not as the kind of fountain of all assessment knowledge... Particularly when I speak to students or hear students, saying things like: 'I'm happy with this module. I'm happy with this assessment. I'm not worried about this assessment. I'm good for this one.' I've noticed that difference. [Lecturer, University of Bourne]

I think for me, my students have been overwhelmingly positive, and very vocally so ... And even this week, I've done one-to-one tutorials with all my students, and they've all said, I'm fine with this assignment. This is the one I feel confident on. This is the one I really understand. I feel like I really know what I'm doing with this one. And that has been a consistent theme ... The mid-module evaluation has been overwhelmingly positive about how well equipped they feel about the assignment, how much they understand what they've got to do, that it's been made really clear to them ... So I think definitely I've seen it develop their confidence, and, alongside that, their enjoyment of the module and the content as well. So definitely positive from my experience. [Lecturer, Wiseman University]

Students have been overwhelmingly positive about it. They've got a greater sense of clarity, I think, on the modules where these interventions have been introduced. [Lecturer, Meadow University]

They enjoy their assignments. I think that's the biggest thing and that really speaks to the fact that they seem to feel more safe and secure in what they're doing. [Lecturer, University of Bourne]

... If I could summarise a sentence of student feedback from the module ... it would be, 'I know what I'm doing with this assignment, it's the other one that I'm struggling with' [Or] 'It's the other module that I'm not sure.' It's the dissertation that's stressing [me], but I know what I'm doing with this module.' [Lecturer, Wiseman University]

Modified modules reduced the levels of stress about assignments reported by students

Staff reported that all students on the modified modules appeared to be much more relaxed and assured about their assignments when compared to their experiences on non-modified modules. Staff asserted that this was a direct consequence of the RIPIAG and related learning sessions, resources and activities that staff had embedded in their modified modules. Staff participants uniformly rehearsed, when asked: 'how they were



getting on with their assignments?’ That their students’ responses were more-often-than-not that they were ‘fine’ with assessment for the modified module. It was the assessments for their ‘other [non-modified] modules’ that they were ‘struggling with’.

I mean, you know, I did tutorials last week, um, all day with them, one-to-one tutorials online. And that came through again, and again, and again. They might have had really specific questions about, you know, I've put this here, is that okay, or I just wanted to check out I've done this all right. But there was nothing... They were all quite short or we'd spend it chatting about how they were getting on generally and their plans when they graduate. Because they were like, I feel good about this one [assignment]. I feel confident on this one ... So, I think anecdotally, definitely less anxiety, less stress. [Lecturer, Wiseman University]

Well, and this was across the board. This wasn't just for my racialized students. They loved it like. They loved having someone who was talking explicitly and regularly about the assignments. Making it very clear to them what it was that I was looking for. When it comes to doing the assignments, like very clear guidance on how to do the assignment. It's been overwhelmingly positive, I would say. [Lecturer, State University]

Noticeable improvements in the quality of their work

Staff reported that the modified modules had resulted in what they felt was the production of better standard of work. My students performed really well, and again, I've been kind of told off for like marking them [highly]. But that's not my fault! [Lecturer, State University]

I find myself less having to comment less on things like structure [an area covered in the modified seminar]. Students seem to be sort of saying: ‘Right, OK! I know what an introduction is. I know what the main body should kind of do.’ ... Before this intervention, I was ... having to comment more on those kinds of basic things like structure, you know. Try and get your introduction to do this. Try and get a paragraph to do that. Whereas now on ... I'll find my feedback is more about higher level [issues] than those kinds of basic [things] ... These kinds of things, which were shrouded in mystery. Seemed to be something that all the students are kind of... getting, and putting into their work [Lecturer, University of Bourne] [Lecturer, University of Bourne]

[S]o far I'm finding a generally better level of assessment coming in ... You know, we've had a few more firsts ... I would say the general level of even the middling essays, are at least hitting the mark in terms of content. [Lecturer, Meadow University]





Discussion and concluding comments

In 2018 the Office for Students (OFS) placed the responsibility for monitoring and addressing the RAG in student degree outcomes within the Access and Participation Plan (APP) framework. This prompted the launch of a plethora of decolonizing and racial inclusion curricula activities/interventions across the sector (this was largely informed by the prevailing academic assumption that there exists a direct causal link between assessment performance and curriculum content). Despite this flurry of activity, there has been relatively little consistent or meaningful reduction in the RAG. In some instances, the gap has widened for students from specific minority ethnic communities, such as those who self-define as Black heritage (Douglas Oloyede et al 2021). Half a decade on from universities formally taking responsibility for reducing the RAG, the sector remains unclear as to the causes of this particular manifestation of race-based inequity and importantly, what works with regards to mitigating its uneven impact on students of colour.

Sabi (2023) argues that this situation is partly due to the overly narrow and simplistic ways in which HEPs have tended to frame, conceptualize and approach RAGs. She elucidates that the knock-on-effect of this is that the metrics and methodologies employed by HEPs are often too narrow in their scope and sophistication to adequately identify and account for the full range of variables that contribute to the

RAG. Put simply, existing ideas and approaches for eliminating the RAG have thus far been too reductive and narrow. They lack a sufficiently intersectional framework to allow us to see and tackle RAGs holistically and in a way that can account for the internal (organizational) and external (societal), as well as cultural and structural variables and barriers that all contribute to the inequities in the degree outcomes experienced by students of colour in UK HEPs.





Additionally, RAGs are too frequently ‘thought of’ as unintended and unconscious consequences of policy, practice or individuals, respectively. Of course, this can be true. However, RAGs are also manifestations of colonial processes and cultures that explicitly maintain and reproduce the kinds of race, gender, class and ablism hegemonies that characterize all areas and levels of the academe. The consequence of employing interventions and metrics based on the former ontological position, is that they are unable to see or account for contributing issues such as institutional and conscious racial biases that are deeply embedded within the structures and cultures of UK universities.

Clearly, RAGs are complex and the sum mosaic of multiple layers of overlapping systemic, social, economic and cultural racisms. This reality has led some anti-racism scholars such as, Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting (2022), to describe RAGs as a ‘wicked problem’, which has ‘no determinable stopping point’.

This context is useful for understanding the scope and limitations of the efficacy of the RIPIAG intervention in relation to improving the assessment experiences of students of colour and for reducing the RAG. For example, the scope of this intervention

does not extend to include structural race-based inequities that manifest in assessment quality processes, such as moderation. Nor does it account for the influence of a Whiteness and Eurocentric curricula (see Campbell et al 2022) or the influence of an imbalance in representation between diverse student bodies and Whiteness academic faculties on assessment performance. The scope of the intervention applies solely on its impact on (1) addressing the exclusions experienced by students of colour caused by the pedagogy and practice of assessment at the module level, and (2) its ability to enhance teaching practitioners’ ability to identify racial inequities in their assessment practice and make meaningful changes for inclusion that do not require major module modifications.

Within this context and in relation to this specific setting, the data shows the intervention was highly efficacious for measurable, meaningful and positive change. For example, the report showed us that module convenors and their familiarity with – and understandings of – race-based inequities in their assessment practice (their racial literacy) have a direct impact on their students’ ability to access, engage and succeed in their assessments.



Data indicated that the intervention had a direct and positive impact on enhancing the racial literacy of staff participants in a general sense and in relation to assessment. It fostered a greater understanding of the complex and multiple ways in which the assessment successes and grade outcomes of students of colour are often predicated on various social and cultural currencies that certain raced

groups are more or less likely to possess. It enabled staff to move beyond perceiving race-inclusion in assessment as an amorphous concept to actionable changes in their practice, which resulted in a noteworthy enhancement in their students' competencies, attitudes and performances in assessment on modified modules.





The positive accounts of the impact of the intervention on their pupils' assessment experiences were corroborated by the quantitative data, which showed a consistent reduction in the RAG in student assessment performances at the module level. This reduction was apparent in the majority of the assessment performances on modified modules against the assessment performances of students on previous non-modified iterations of each module, the RAG performance of the modified module against the other non-modified modules at that level, and against the national average.

The positive impact triangulated with the accounts of the student participants. The qualitative data indicated that the intervention was almost universally effective for improving Black, South Asian and White students' comprehension of what was required in all aspects of the assessment process.

Importantly, it had a transformative impact on improving student comprehension of what was required to score highly in their assessments and for reducing the levels of stress and anxiety that accompanied assessment. The intervention also facilitated the construction of a pedagogical environment in which students felt safe and

confident to be innovative and to show wider thinking on their assignments in modified modules than they did on assignments in non-modified modules.

There were also noteworthy differences in the experiences of students of colour here when contrasted with the experiences of students of colour on other modules, and between them and their White peers.

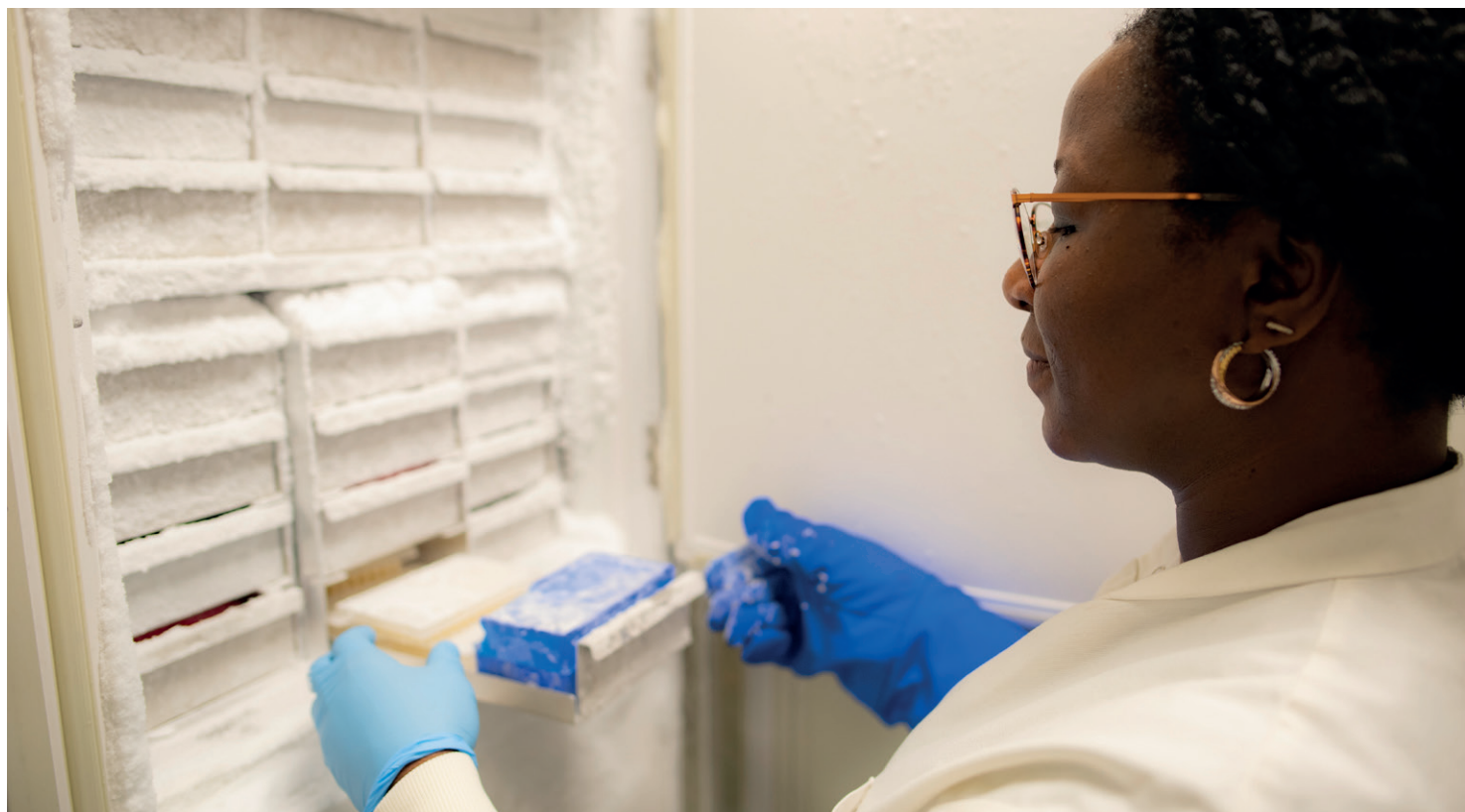


Firstly, we had previously found that the lack of active preassessment support in module content meant that students were often left with only a partial understanding of the marking scheme and how assignments were scored. This general lack of assessment transparency meant that Black and South Asian students of the Islamic faith in particular, like all students, were often left to speculate the reasons when grade outcomes did not correspond or reflect the effort they had invested into their assignments. However, for students from these two backgrounds, who are more likely to experience systemic and everyday racism in the UK: ‘anomalies in grade outcomes were understood as simply being another example of the inequalities that they had to endure in UK education systems and in a British society, which is routinely and systematically hostile to them’ (Campbell, 2022, 7- 8). In the absence of being meaningfully taught how grades were assessed, when submitting their assignments, the previous students of colour could only ‘pray’ that the person marking their work was not a racist if they wanted ‘to do well’ (Campbell 2022).

Secondly, we found that the Black and South Asian Muslim experiences in assessment were characterized by lower levels of entitlement when compared to White peers. This resulted in a higher sense of underserved-ness among students from these backgrounds compared to White peers.

This was especially the case when it came to requesting or approaching staff for additional assessment support or clarity. They were also more likely to be concerned about the potential negative consequences that asking for help might have on their lecturer’s perceptions of their intellect – or lack of. The resultant unwillingness to expose themselves in this way stemmed from a racialised habitus’, which installs within many students of colour a reluctance to approach staff as a form of psychological and racial self-preservation.

By contrast, the accounts of students from these backgrounds in this study showed that the increase in transparency of the assessment process directly brought about by the modified modules meant that Black and South Asian students better understood how they were being assessed and what was required to achieve desired grades, when compared to their peers on other modules. The knock-on-effect of this was that participants here no longer needed to resort to ‘praying’ that their marker did not harbor racial biases (this is not to say that that this resource eliminates the possibility of students having a marker who may hold racial biases). It also meant that they had a better understanding of their assessment and thus did not need to expose themselves to their lecturer to be able to complete the task.



Testimonies from Black students in particular highlighted the ‘wicked’ nature of RAGs (Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting 2022) and demonstrated the limitations when employing pedagogy focused interventions as the sole response to addressing the RAG. Student accounts shone light on the multiplicity of acute anti-Black challenges and barriers to achieving outcome parity in assessment that were uniquely faced by Black students in HE. The limited amount of disaggregated quantitative data also showed that Black students continued to experience the widest RAGs when compared to all other groups.

Both sets of data point to the multiplicity of acute anti-Black challenges and barriers to achieving outcome parity in assessment that were uniquely faced by Black students in HE. They remind us that students from this minority ethnic background are most likely to need to find additional income to support their studies and are most likely to need to commute to campus (both impact negatively on attendance). British African- and African-Caribbean heritage students are also statistically more likely to come from socio-economically challenged locales, be the first in their family to go university, or to have received a state-education when compared to British South Asian Indian and White British heritage peers. They are also most likely to face

micro-aggressions and overt and structural forms of discrimination in- and outside of the academe (Butler 2023). They are also more likely to feel lower levels of belonging and higher levels of alienation in HE, have fewer role models in their faculties that look like them, have a less positive experience of Student Wellbeing Services and Personal Tutor support, and are at a greater risk of experiencing mental ill health than their peers (Douglas Oloyede et al 2021).

This backcloth of social, cultural, economic and structural race-based barriers impacts negatively on the assessment performances of Black-heritage students and on their ability to achieve outcome parity with students from other race and ethnic groups, who are less likely to face these challenges or to face them in the same- or in such acute ways. This may go some way to understanding why despite the universal and positive impact of the intervention across all of our student participants, its ability to ensure parity in award outcomes is buffered by the fact that students from different raced and ethnic backgrounds do not start from the same position in relation to the challenges that they face.

Clearly, race is a proxy for wider social inequities, which are more salient in specific social and educative contexts and more acute for students from different backgrounds. The data shows that the intervention can mitigate against some of the specific raced inequities in assessment practice. However, it also highlights the intervention’s limitations with regards to its ability to mitigate against the wider anti-Black inequities within HE (and wider social life in the UK) that specifically stymie Black students from achieving grade outcome parity with other raced students and White peers. They remind us that there is no simple or singular remedy for RAGs.

The positive and measurable impact of the intervention is clear. It has high efficacy for improving the assessment experiences of all students, and especially students of colour. It is an intervention that has the potential to contribute to a reduction in RAGs in UK HEPs. However, it is also clear that it cannot eliminate them on its own. To eliminate the RAG requires a suite of interventions designed to forensically target the different and various social, structural and pedagogical barriers in assessment and within racially minoritised students’ wider HE experiences that all contribute to RAG. It is only within a forensic and co-ordinated approach that addresses each thread of the race-inequity mosaic that underpins the RAG, will this challenge cease to be a ‘wicked’ problem.





Afterword: Reflections on working collaboratively across Higher Education Providers to find solutions for the RAG Discussion and concluding comments

The QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project Fund provided us with a unique opportunity to trace the efficacy of an intervention designed to make assessment more racially inclusive and to reduce the RAG across three UK HEPs. This overview shone further light on the existence of a number of cross institutional marginalisations experienced by students of colour and challenges to doing race inclusion work for HE practitioners. In all three HEPs, for example, we saw evidence of a dearth of guidance for teaching practitioners and lecturers on how to identify race-based inequities in assessment and a lack of training to equip them with the skills and tools to tackle the barriers that impacted unevenly on their students of colour. Against this, working collaboratively facilitated the construction of an important forum for race inclusion experts and practitioners from each partner HEP to come together and reflect on the impediments to

race inclusion in assessment, upskill, share best-practice and to find organic solutions. In doing so, the project illustrated the value of cross-institution collaborations for meaningful Continual Professional Development for practitioners in HE.

Various scholars have demonstrated the extent to which similar or the same kinds of racial exclusions are experienced universally by students of colour across the HE sector - the RAG is one example of this (see Douglas Oloyede et al 2021). Despite this situation, the educative experiences of race and racial exclusions are too often only considered to be context and organisation specific by HEPs. So much so, that many universities have tended to delay implementing race inclusion action, policy and interventions until they have collected their own context-specific data, and until it shows them the existence of racial inequities within their own institutions. This process is often long and



frustrating, especially for our student body who continue to experience race-based exclusions during these periods of data collation.

Working, collaboratively provided a unique bird's-eye perspective that further illustrated how many of the same types of exclusions in assessment faced by students of colour in one institution existed across all three partner HEPs. This situation was further evidenced by the universal efficacy of the RIPIAG for improving Black and South Asian students' quantitative and qualitative experiences of assessment in both research and teaching intensive institutions.

The key takeaway point from this case study for educationalists and policy makers is that our findings suggests that HEPs might not always need to wait until they have context specific data to acknowledge the existence of racial inequities in their organisations. Nor do they always need to wait for data before they act, policy borrow or implement an intervention for making their practice, cultures or systems more inclusive – providing that the efficacy of the intervention for positive change has been already empirically verified elsewhere (of course, any intervention that is tailored to the municipal challenges within a specific organisation or department will be more suitable and efficacious). Put simply, the general findings indicate that when it comes to race inclusion work, we do not always need to start from the very beginning (source new data) and that working collaboratively and building

on the evidence-base generated at one institution is an effective way to generate more rapid responses to race exclusions across the sector, especially in the current economic climate where human and economic resources are stretched.



Working in partnership has also highlighted a number of challenges to sharing and borrowing policies and interventions for race inclusion in assessment, especially when attempting to do this across international contexts. Originally, the pilot included two additional HEPs from Canada and New Zealand. While the general principles of best race inclusion practice were subscribed to by all international partners, it became apparent that to successfully implement and test the RIPIAG intervention outside of the UK required a degree of political and administrative alignment first. In this case, there were significant differences with regards to who and what constituted an ethnic minority group in

each nation state. Nor was there a shared concept of the race award gap. This meant that neither HEP in New Zealand or Canada possessed the Quality Assurance and/or administrative infrastructure to identify and trace any differentials in the assessment performances and degree outcomes of their raced- and indigenous-heritage students when compared to their White peers either historically or currently. This meant that at the time of conducting the project it was impossible to test the efficacy and impact of the RIPIAG intervention on the assessment experiences of indigenous and students of colour in both nations, beyond capturing its qualitative footprint.



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