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Rotten from all that came before? How interest convergence has informed and usurped initiatives for racial progress in the UK

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This discussion paper examines how British Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) approach anti-racist and decolonial initiatives through the lens of Interest Convergence (IC). It highlights how institutional actions, largely sparked by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in 2020, align with existing neoliberal and capitalist priorities—therefore limiting their transformative potential. While efforts to participate in the Race Equality Charter (REC) and decolonise the curriculum have gained traction, they are often implemented in ways that fail to properly address systemic inequalities. Finally, a case is made for ritual theory as a potential vehicle to educate staff and students about IC, as ritualised activities can promote community building and wider cultural change.

KEYWORDS

anti-racism, critical race theory, decolonisation, interest convergence, race equality charter, ritual theory

Introduction

Over the course of the last decade, an increasing number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom (UK) have initiated various projects to progress racial equality. More recently, such work has been complemented with efforts to decolonise academia, commonly by targeting the contents of the curriculum to eradicate White western biases. While it is positive that such projects are finally being pursued, the timing and manner in which they have developed indicate that they might be a consequence of Interest Convergence (IC), which means that the pursuit of anti-racist and decolonial work currently aligns with the neoliberal and capitalist interests of the status quo, which will ultimately limit their transformative potential.

This discussion paper critically examines the manifestation of IC within UK HEIs, with a particular focus on its relationship with anti-racist and decolonial initiatives. It situates institutional responses within the broader socio-political landscape of the past decade, including movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the recent encampments for Palestine, and considers how these reflect the neoliberal and capitalist ideals that have become ingrained with academia. Finally, a case is made for ritual theory as a potential vehicle to educate staff and students about IC, as ritualised activities can promote community building and wider cultural change.

Interest convergence: what is it and how does it manifest in UK HEIs?

The term 'interest convergence', first coined by Bell (1980), posits that "the interests of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of Whites." This explains the slow progress towards racial equality in western nations, as racism advances the material interests of the White elites, while also providing psychological benefits to working-class White people through a shared understanding that White middle-class people will support them, should their educational or employment prospects fall below those of certain ME groups (Gillborn, 2010; Delgado and Stefancic, 2023). This provides the White majority in western nations with little incentive to challenge systemic racial inequalities (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023), thus allowing them to gate-keep racial equality and drip feed it to ME groups in a way that does not threaten the existing racial hierarchies.

In HEIs, IC often manifests itself through instrumentalist approaches to diversity that justifies inclusivity through perceived educational benefits—such as preparing students for careers in a globalised market, rather than being informed by diversity as a moral principle (Starck et al., 2024). However, this rationale primarily benefits White students, providing them with marketable and CV-friendly 'diversity skills', while rarely resonating with ME groups - as it often fails to prioritise their welfare, nor does it actively reduce discrimination against them (Shih, 2017; Starck et al., 2021; Pierson-Brown, 2022). This highlights a disconnect between HEIs' stated intentions to support ME students, and the impact of their actions - which is a key indicator of IC (Pierson-Brown, 2022).

Similarly, HEIs have often favoured 'colour blind' approaches to diversity, which diminish differences and overlook systemic oppression (Starck et al., 2024)—thus failing to address anything but the most egregious forms of oppression, while maintaining structures that subordinate minorities (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023). This is exemplified through the individual deficiency models that, until recently, were used to explain away persisting racial attainment gaps by blaming them on personal shortcomings (Singh, 2011; Codiroli McMaster, 2020). Such approaches also align with neoliberal ideals that emphasise "market efficiency, individual responsibility, and a reduced role for the state in economic and social life" (Gasser, 2024), as they utilise a meritocratic lens that reinforces harmful stereotypes about ME students as lazy or incapable (Martini and Robertson, 2022; Rana et al., 2022). Fortunately, these approaches have faced growing criticism (Singh, 2011; Rana et al., 2022) - partially due to the arrival of Critical Race Theory to the UK, which challenges neoliberal justifications and encourages new pathways to equality (Zamudio et al., 2010; Cowley, 2022).

Distract them with reading lists: decolonialism and interest convergence

While decoloniality has a long history as a political and epistemological movement, it has generally been overshadowed by the Euro- and US-centric hegemony (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015)—at least within the context of the Global North. However, over the past decades, calls to decolonise campuses, public spaces, and academia in general have gained traction—with an increasing number of western HEIs adopting decolonial projects to reflect these conversations (Moosavi, 2020).

This wave of decolonialism can be attributed to the *Rhodes Must Fall* (RMF) movement in South Africa, which demanded the removal of plaques and statues honouring White supremacists from campus, decentring western traditions and perspectives from the curriculum (RMF, 2015). RMF inspired global discussions on colonialism's lingering presence within academic institutions through statues, monuments, and names of buildings (Doherty, 2017; Holson, 2019; Croft, 2020), and how coloniality in academia reinforces the racialised hierarchy between the 'developed' Global North and 'developing' Global South (Narayanaswamy and Schöneberg, 2024). In the UK, the conversation quickly honed in on the contents of the curriculum, with many institutions committing to apply a decolonial lens when reviewing their curricula (Charles, 2019). This particular aspect of decoloniality gained momentum via *Why is my curriculum white?* (UCL, 2015), a project that saw students openly discussing the lack of diverse perspectives presented within British institutions, thus promoting Eurocentric perspectives and ideas of White and western superiority through the elimination of blackness (Peters, 2015; Jivraj, 2020).

Addressing physical representations of colonialism and reviewing curricula are often the first steps taken to decolonise education (Tamimi et al., 2023), perhaps due to the historic failings to recognise the works of ME scholars, or the validity of non-English literature, being easily identifiable sources of injustice (Enslin and Hedge, 2023). However, such initiatives barely scratch the surface of the systemic racism present in academia. Real change demands radical systemic transformations (Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021) that threaten the neoliberal and capitalist nature of current academic systems (Kerrigan and Nehring, 2020)—which are likely to be met with resistance. The focus on statues, reading lists, and the names of buildings or lecture theatres indicates the presence of IC, as such projects effectively function more as appeasement strategies to mitigate threats to the already established hierarchy (Chow et al., 2013).

However, to better understand how and why decoloniality has become financially, strategically, and reputationally important to UK HEIs - we must consider the cultural and societal context that these initiatives have sprung from.

Why now? A decade of racism and xenophobia

Conservative columnists have pointed to the successes of Sunak and Badenoch, and the diversity of their predecessors' cabinets as evidence of a post-racial Britain (Timothy, 2022; Ehsan, 2023), where racism is a 'sin of the past' and any lingering inequalities can be attributed to other factors (Seikkula, 2019; Meghji, 2022). However, these individual success stories do not erase systemic racism or its enduring impact (Gines, 2014). The consequences of which have been laid bare to the public over the last decade (Shain et al., 2021)—notably through the Brexit referendum and the Covid-19 pandemic, which both caused surges in hate crimes against ME groups (Lusher, 2016; Awan, 2018; Cox et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023; Gram and Mau, 2024).

On the Brexit campaign-trail, politicians employed Islamophobic rhetoric to frame a potential Turkish EU membership as a security threat, while also racialising the acts of migration and asylum seeking through the now infamous *Breaking Point* poster (Stewart and Mason, 2016; Worrall, 2019; Abbas, 2020). Similarly, Trump's references to Covid-19 as the 'China Virus' and 'Kung Flu' fuelled sinophobic hate crimes (Pei and Metha, 2020; Gram and Mau, 2024). ME communities were also disproportionately affected by the virus itself due to medical racism having eroded ME communities' trust in the NHS, while frontline staff of diverse faiths were provided with inadequate protective equipment - thus leaving them more vulnerable to infection (Aldridge et al., 2020; Public Health England, 2020; Phiri et al., 2021; Razai et al., 2021).

Finally, years of media sensationalism have stoked racism and xenophobia across the UK (Guru-Murthy, 2024; Sultana, 2024). This came to a head in 2024, as racist riots, fuelled by online disinformation campaigns, erupted across the country—leading to violent attacks on mosques, refugee accommodations, and ME people (Fox, 2024; Specia, 2024; White, 2024).

Why now? Student movements in the 2020s

While Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic heightened insecurities for ME communities, the 2020 lockdowns appear to have acted as a catalyst for activism - as exemplified by the global turnout for BLM protests (Otobo, 2020). In the UK, staff and students pressured HEIs to respond, as silence was equated to complicity in White supremacy (Advance, 2021). Many did issue statements, but few explicitly mentioned BLM and opted for 'colour-blind' language—referencing diversity, which failed to acknowledge the persisting racial inequalities within their own institutions, or the sector's past failures, thus rendering them performative (Choudhery, 2020; Otobo, 2020; Perry et al., 2020). More recently, student encampments that 'occupied' university campuses demanded that HEIs end partnerships with the Israeli state and divest from companies that are complicit in the state's actions in Gaza (Buheji and Hasan, 2024; Nagesh and McSorley, 2024; Palestinian BDS National Committee, 2024; Scialom, 2024; UCU, 2024). Again, HEIs responded cautiously, issuing non-specific statements or reiterating commitments to free speech, debate, and protest within the legal boundaries (UUK, 2023).

The response to these movements also highlighted the presence of IC within UK HEIs. BLM spurred institutions to engage with the REC, and to launch anti-racist and decolonial initiatives (Advance, 2021; Douglas Oloyede et al., 2021). These disparities have been reported on since the turn of the millennium (Singh, 2011) and it is therefore unlikely that it was the BLM protests that alerted institutions to their existence. Indeed, Shain et al. (2021) highlighted how a commitment to eradicating racial inequalities has become financially, reputationally, and strategically important to UK HEIs, as this can be beneficial when competing for the recruitment of students - especially international students from the Global South. The initiatives therefore seem to be driven by capitalistic self-interest, fuelled by an increasing reliance on international student fees to cope with government funding cuts (Lewis and Lally, 2025) - which, in itself, dehumanises these students by reducing them to a 'cash cow' (Bennett et al., 2023).

The desire to protect capitalist interests were also evident in HEIs' responses to the student encampments for Palestine, as the protesters' demands, as well as their methods of protest, threatened these - thus resulting in diverging interests. Some encampments were successful in prompting policy reviews, promises to rebuild academic institutions in Gaza post-conflict, and the creation of Palestinian scholarship programmes (Goldsmiths, 2024; SOAS, 2024). However, in some instances these were made while threatening advocates for Palestinian freedom and motioning to forcibly shut the encampments down (Adams, 2024; Leeds, 2024; UCU, 2024; Siddique, 2024; SOAS, 2024).

Why now? The race equality charter and an instrumentalist approach to decoloniality

The introduction of the REC incentivises HEIs to pursue racial equality work, as it allows them to align post-BLM commitments with an accreditation that can be used for promotional purposes. The tiered nature of these accreditations also reinforces academic capitalism by creating comparative metrics that disadvantages more resource-limited institutions—not dissimilar from how global ranking tables disproportionately benefits western HEIs that gained wealth and power throughout the colonial era, compared to institutions in the Global South (Enslin and Hedge, 2023). This suggests that the motivation behind the REC is motivated by the same financial interests identified in the previous section.

While further comparative studies are required to establish the true impact of the REC, Nwosu (2024) found that, to date, participation has not had a significant impact on ME staff representation. The lack of impact might be explained by 'equality work' not always being recognised by workload models, which would negatively impact ME staff at REC-participating institutions, as those who are meant to benefit from equality initiatives often end up doing the labour associated with them (Bhopal and Henderson, 2019; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020; Douglas Oloyede et al., 2021; Yarrow and Johnston, 2022). This also indicates that the REC aligns with IC, as it remains an effective promotional tool that disproportionately benefits the White people that are already better positioned within HEIs than their ME peers, regardless of whether it effectively combats racial inequality at participating institutions or not (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020).

The REC also injects IC into decolonisation projects, as it does not ask applicants to undertake decolonial work (Johns, 2022), and while the current guidance makes no reference to the curriculum (Advance, 2023), previous iterations emphasised 'diversity' over 'decoloniality' (Advance, 2019). It therefore fails to highlight that increased diversity does not eliminate western biases (Race et al., 2022; Ahmed-Landeryou, 2023), nor does it dissuade HEIs from pursuing watered-down approaches to decoloniality (Batty, 2020) that ultimately relegates many non-Eurocentric perspectives to the 'null curriculum' - signalling that these hold less academic value (Milner, 2008).

Moving forward: a case for ritualised awareness raising practices

The impact of IC on anti-racist and decolonial work is evident, as Otobo and Greaves (2024) highlight how the BLM momentum has

already been lost, and that conversations on anti-blackness have been diluted into broader and more generalised discussions of racism. It is therefore important that we continue to hold institutions to account by exposing the obstructive effects of IC, i.e., by educating staff and students about IC and its presence in HEIs.

This can be achieved through ritualised awareness-raising events that incorporate a variety of ritualised elements (see Table 1), as this can encourage a wider culture shift through community building - which promotes unity in the face of identified challenges (Fenn, 2009; Krishnan et al., 2021). To achieve this, the event must be set up in a way that makes it distinct from the routine of everyday life within the institution (Bell, 1997), a setting that tends to be highly routinised with clearly defined social hierarchies and structures (Neergard and Refslund Christensen, 2017). As such, it might be more effective to treat the event as an 'anti-ritual' that seeks to remove and break down the already established conventions of the 'ritualised' academic environment that the participants operate within, as opposed to add additional layers of formality and symbolism.

An effective way for the 'anti-ritual' to separate itself from the status quo would be to 'attack' the elements of formality and sacral symbolism—as academic spaces are often littered with both through academic jargon, corporate buzzwords, long-standing traditions, heraldic weapons, school mottos, and special ID-cards and lanyards that indicate one's membership and position within the institution (i.e., staff, student, and researcher). For example, by covering or defacing institutional symbols (i.e., emblems and letter-headed paper), or by having attendees remove and lock away their ID-cards, thus altering the dynamics between participants (Uche and Atkins, 2015).

However, if respected academics and heads of department, whose names and faces are well-known within the institution, are in attendance, removing an ID-card may not be sufficient to change these dynamics. The performance element can therefore be drawn on to push people away from the 'roles' they normally assume within the institution. Firstly, in line with the anti-ritual, participants should be encouraged to communicate in a way that feels natural and authentic to them, without fear of professional scrutiny or expectations to code-switch to better fit in with the socio-cultural linguistics of the status quo (Nousak and Harvey, 2023). Additionally, performance can be built into the foundations of the event structure through a bottom-up approach that centres students and frontline staff, where learning is facilitated through collaborative methods, as opposed to delivering knowledge from the top-down through a lecture or similar (Kim et al., 2014; Brailas et al., 2017). This will help establish the event as a space that exists outside of the regular conventions that govern academic and professional life (Smith and Stewart, 2011).

Ritualisation also demands a certain level of recurrence, both in the temporal and spatial sense, as this creates both a special time and place that is associated with the event (Stark, 2019) - further cementing it as a space that exists outside of the everyday academic space. Repeating the event on a regular basis (i.e., the first Friday of every month) would also enhance the aforementioned ritualistic removal of symbols and expectations of formality. These changes in behaviour would then become symbolic of the event starting and ending - not dissimilar from how a child may associate the ringing of a bell with the start or end of the school day, or how corporate meetings might be structured using standing agenda items (Bell, 1997; Smith and Stewart, 2011).

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the presence of IC within UK HEIs and its influence on contemporary anti-racist and decolonial initiatives. This is particularly evident when looking at the institutional responses to movements such as BLM and encampments for Palestine. In the former, universities incorporated anti-racist initiatives as a strategy to protect their reputational and financial interests, while the latter exposed their reluctance to engage when faced with demands that directly threaten their capitalist and political interests.

It is certainly positive that anti-racist and decolonial work is being conducted on a larger scale, but the mainstreaming of such initiatives will inevitably hamper their potential for radical change. It is therefore crucial that we question the motivation that drives 'equality work', and to push HEIs to go beyond superficial engagements that prioritise metrics, marketing, symbolic gestures, and 'colour blind' policies. This might be achieved through

TABLE 1 Ritualised elements and definitions.

Ritualised element	Definition (Bell, 1997)
Formality	Ritualised formality contrasts with the casual and informal, both implicitly and explicitly, by restricting our manner of speaking and moving. Often in ways that replicate or enforce overarching social hierarchies and values.
Traditionalism	The act of synchronising the ritualised activities with an older precedent or evoking a link to the past through archaic language, folk dress, or similar. It often manifests in tandem with formality.
Invariance	The process of repetition, either in terms of precisely replicated series of actions that follow a specific rhythm or pattern, or through scheduled recurrence.
Rule governance	The rules that are imposed upon participants which they must play by and are held accountable to. These can define when, how, and who can perform certain actions, which behaviours are or are not acceptable, or similar.
Sacral symbolism	Places, people, or things that have been granted a special status of some sort. They represent something greater than their own individual parts, often associated with a larger collective, and the ideals and values that govern them.
Performance	An acknowledgment of the theatrical elements of ritualised activities where certain symbolic actions are 'performed' with or before others. These often include multifaceted sensory experiences that can shape other's perception and cognitive ordering of the world.

ritualised awareness-raising practices that seek to expose and disrupt IC in academia, as these can help build communities that can act collectively to hold institutions accountable whenever they pursue performativity over meaningful change.

Suggestions for future research

This paper highlighted how educators could draw on ritual theory to develop an 'anti-ritual' that can be used as a vehicle to raise awareness about IC. Future research should pilot a series of awareness-events using the 'anti-ritual' strategy to evaluate its impact and collect feedback from participants to further refine its as an educational tool.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

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