Intersectionality is the understanding that social inequalities are mutually constituting: ‘race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena’ (Collins 2015:2). Intersectionality recognises that social inequalities interact, so people’s identities and social positions are shaped by multiple factors. Among others, a person’s age, disability status, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, religion or belief, sexual orientation and socio-economic background contribute towards their specific experiences and perspectives.

Intersectional perspectives recognise that understanding the experiences of, for instance, black disabled students, requires understanding how the combination of race/racism and disability/ableism creates specific circumstances. This is different from understanding race and disability separately.

The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by black feminist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, drawing on ideas elaborated within rich traditions of black, women of colour and indigenous women’s theorising of, and activism on, the synthesis of structures affecting their experiences. Race continues to be central to intersectionality, and these realms of thought and activism are the primary sites that intersectionality continues to be developed. For more background on intersectionality and why it is important, please see Equality Challenge Unit’s (ECU’s) previous briefing on intersectionality, as well as the resources listed at the end of this briefing.

The relevance of intersectionality to equality and diversity work in higher education is increasingly acknowledged. Apart from general growing interest in this area, this trend is also driven by institutional and procedural requirements, such as ECU’s equality charters principles, and requirements on intersectionality in outcome agreements in Scotland.

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Advancing equality and diversity in universities and colleges
Yet, operationalising intersectionality in organisational equality and diversity practice is not necessarily straightforward. In fact, identifying ways of applying intersectionality on a practical level has been described as a priority across different sectors and research disciplines.

The UK’s equality and diversity policy landscape creates both opportunities and challenges for applying intersectionality. The Equality Act 2010 brings together nine protected characteristics. Bringing the protected characteristics together in a single Act may better facilitate consideration of the interactions and relationships between the characteristics, compared with when these were legislated about in isolation (or in the case of some, not at all). At the same time, within the Act the protected characteristics are conceptualised separately for the most part, and its provisions on ‘dual discrimination’ and socio-economic inequalities have not been brought into force (however the Scottish Government intends to introduce a socio-economic duty called the ‘Fairer Scotland duty’ from April 2018).

Due to the backgrounds of equality movements, legislation, and institutional structures in the UK, much policy and organisational work around, for example, gender, race and disability equality, has a history of being developed and implemented relatively singularly. Intersectionality challenges equality and diversity practitioners to innovate thought and action on equality and diversity.

In 2017, ECU published its second research and data briefing, *Intersectional approaches to equality research and data*, which provided examples and guidance on intersectional approaches to research design, and quantitative and qualitative equality research and data analysis, to provide an evidence base on which to develop effective action. ECU has received requests for further examples and guidance on using intersectionality in equality and diversity work, in research and more broadly. In response to this, ECU held a call for case studies on this topic, which was open during the summer and early autumn of 2017. This briefing presents the results of this call for evidence. It covers institution-wide work to raise awareness of intersectionality; a cross strand approach to staff inclusivity networks; dedicated work targeted at professional and support staff; student led curriculum initiatives;
and intersectional research. It also highlights some common themes in the case studies, specifically cross-institutional collaboration, and addressing discipline and industry specific equality challenges.

There is some literature about intersectionality in organisations (eg Rodriguez et al. 2016), primarily in the context of human resource management and management studies, and in higher education in the US (Mitchell et al. 2014). The examples that will be shared in this briefing are unique to the UK higher education context, and include work with students as well as with staff.

It is important to note that while intersectionality is in part a framework for critical inquiry and analysis that affects how we think about equality categories, it is also a political orientation interested in transformational social change. Overall, the case studies included here can be understood as initial attempts to use intersectional ideas in equality and diversity work; small steps on a long journey to transformation.
Methodology

From June to September 2017, ECU held a call for evidence from the sector. The call requested evidence on equality and diversity work using ‘intersectionality’, relating to staff or students. Building on the recommendations in ECU’s report for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), *Sector-leading and innovative practice in advancing equality and diversity* (ECU 2017a), a call for case studies was developed, inviting submissions from across the full range of university services and functions in the UK, and in Further Education (FE) colleges in Scotland. The call was open to equality and diversity practitioners, HR staff, student services, other professional services, student unions and academics. Information was requested about a range of work, large or small, including approaches, initiatives, policies and projects, which could be older, more recent or new work, and across any of the protected characteristics as well as socioeconomic status.

This was the first call for examples from ECU on this topic.

Drawing on the methodology used in ECU’s research for HEFCE, the submissions received were assessed with regard to:

- **sustainability**: whether the work described is or could practically be ongoing
- **transferability**: whether the work described has learning that could be practically transferred to another institution
- **transformative potential**: whether the practice has or had the potential to transform existing ways of working or thinking, which intersectionality demands
- **impact**: whether the work has had a positive influence for staff and/or students

With regard to the latter criterion however, ECU appreciated that this is a relatively new area of work for some institutions, and that advancing equality is a long-term process. Therefore, while all submissions included here have reported positive results, in some cases it is too early to assess whether the projects have achieved their desired longer term outcomes.
The submissions were then coded using an inductive thematic approach, and analysis and case studies are presented below. Taken together, the six case studies included represent a small, varied selection of much work that is being undertaken at universities, research institutes and colleges, and also that could potentially be undertaken, to bring intersectional approaches to bear on equality and diversity work. One case study describes institution-wide work to raise awareness of, and build competence in, intersectionality. The second describes staff networks, and cross-strand work between them. The third is about work within, and targeted at, a professional services staff team. The fourth case study describes a student led project aimed at discipline-specific curriculum discussion and influence. While all case studies received involve research or consultation, the fifth and sixth are primarily research projects, while another has a substantial research component, and so these are described in a separate section on intersectional research. One of these projects is also linked with a student-led decolonisation initiative.

If you have further examples to share please use the contact details at the end of this briefing as ECU aims to collate more case studies in the future.
Findings: themes across case studies

Aims

The case studies are diverse, all aiming at either building an evidence base on which to design effective interventions, or to increase equality, with specific aims ranging from culture change in teaching and learning, developing action at department level, or changing institutional policy, to facilitating a more joined up approach to equality work.

Challenges

Developing practical work on intersectionality was identified as a challenge. Intersectionality was identified as a driver for equality work, ‘a call to do it carefully and thoughtfully, avoiding silo thinking and not omitting any disadvantaged groups’ (University College London).

Across the case studies, engaging particular groups was also identified as a challenge, be this staff, students, or particular faculties or departments. Some case studies share how they worked to overcome these challenges (eg Queen Mary, University of London, below).

Cross-institutional collaboration

All of the case studies utilise cross-institutional collaboration.

Two of the case studies describe collaboration across academic and non-academic staff, and utilising academic expertise to address institutional equality and diversity challenges. The University of Edinburgh equality lecture series for IT and library staff, described below, invites academic contributors, while the staff inclusivity networks at Anglia Ruskin University similarly invite academics to talk about their research on equality and diversity issues.

Some of the case studies also evidence a high degree of collaboration between staff and students, with staff support for student initiatives to challenge gaps and prejudices in their curriculum, and participatory approaches to equality research with students.
Departments and subject areas often face equality challenges that are related to their particular discipline, and the industry or industries to which they are linked. This is one reason that ECU’s Athena SWAN charter operates at department level, as this allows the charter to engage with and address unique departmental contexts.

Two of the case studies address some of these challenges. The University of Edinburgh Playfair Steps initiative seeks to target areas of technology in which there are equality imbalances in the IT industry. At the University of East London students seek to address equality issues in subjects concerning the body and healthcare practice.
Case studies

Building awareness and competence in intersectionality

University College London (UCL)
In an effort to begin a conversation about intersectionality and its relevance at UCL, the equality, diversity and inclusion team conducted research with staff and have written a ‘think piece’ using the results.

The think piece is a short and accessible document on intersectionality, covering its history and how it is relevant at UCL. It also includes recommendations for inclusive departmental diversity initiatives attentive to differences within equality groups.

Members of UCL’s equality networks were involved as research participants and ‘critical readers’ of the think piece.

The think piece aims to open up discussion of intersectionality, demystify the term, raise awareness, and ultimately develop practical interventions at department level. The work aims to ensure that UCL supports equality areas even-handedly, and in a joined up way.

The think piece will form part of a toolkit to support meetings between the co-chairs of the Race Equality Steering Group and heads of departments, discussing race equality and intersectionality.

Impact: Staff involved in the research have reported a positive experience of participating, in terms of being asked to share their experiences and feeling that the institution is considering the issues arising from them; additional outcomes, ie practical interventions developed at departmental level, will be investigated at a later date.

Extracts from the think piece:
‘UCL considers that when staff and students are encouraged to bring the ‘whole person’ to work and study they are much more likely to have the best possible experience and, moreover, UCL can benefit from this diversity, rather than implicitly encourage social conformism and the concealing of hidden identities…

Bullying and harassment and intersectionality
Bullying and harassment exists across the UCL community and there is evidence from informal disclosures (only a tiny
minority put in a formal complaint) to the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Team and UCL’s Dignity at Work Advisors network that women and BME people are more likely to report being harassed or bullied. Thus, BME women, who are from both these groups, may be especially vulnerable. Bullying and harassment rely on the abuse of power and because women, BME people and Disabled people are underrepresented in UCL’s management and leadership grades they are statistically more at risk.

Actively preventing bullying and harassment is imperative to support equality generally, but is also of particular benefit to those who are doubly or triply (or more) minoritised. The differences in representation, coupled with the fact that minoritised people may also be keenly aware that they do not ‘fit in’ and have internalised a sense of being ‘other’, means that tackling bullying and harassment is crucial to the retention of staff with intersecting identities. Naturally, people who are the only person from their group in a departmental setting will often have a heightened awareness of any hostility in interpersonal interactions, even if it is not intentional or specific to them.

**Recommendation**

Take clear steps to prevent and tackle bullying and harassment – ensure all staff are trained in what bullying and harassment is and are aware of any specific issues in their area. A common factor is that blurred boundaries in academic culture e.g. staff socialising with PhD students, can compound difficulties that PhD students and junior staff are having as there is no clear hierarchy of support. Good training will address particular stereotypes relating to intersectional identities, such as the ‘angry black woman’ pigeonhole. Ensure all staff know what to do if they feel they are being bullied or harassed and who to speak to by means of posters, flyers as well as email and intranet information and information during important parts of the employment cycle, such as induction, appraisal and promotion. Make sure that there are clear, unequivocal messages from the leadership team that bullying and harassment is unacceptable behaviour and firm action will be taken.’

1 [www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/michelle-obama-angry-black-woman-label_us_5852cea0e4b0c05ff31ff57d](www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/michelle-obama-angry-black-woman-label_us_5852cea0e4b0c05ff31ff57d)
Staff inclusivity networks: a cross-strand approach

Staff networks can be a powerful tool for empowering equality groups, supporting staff to progress and providing an avenue for consultation.

Guidance on staff networks is available on ECU’s website.

Anglia Ruskin University (ARU)

ARU previously had a women’s network established in the 1990s, but this network had lost momentum. In 2014, a steering group comprising academic and professional and support staff led on the redevelopment of the network. This involved consultation during a university wide event attended by over 1000 staff, and also led to the creation of four new networks, in addition to the women’s network:

- part-time and flexible workers forum
- BME staff
- LGBT staff
- disabled staff

The networks include members from both professional and support and academic staff. These networks are staff-led (rather than led by senior management or human resources), and this is felt to have contributed to their success. Senior managers are however involved out of personal interest, and high level support is also felt to have contributed to strong engagement in the networks.

A ‘cross-strand’ (ie working across more than one equality strand) approach to the networks is in place. The leads of each network meet regularly, and memberships of the networks are overlapping, including in their co-leads (eg a women’s network co-lead also co-leads the BME network). Events of each network are also attended by members of other networks: ‘the cross-membership of staff is bringing together common interests and personal identifications which are knitting the networks together’. There are also joint network events.

Across all of the networks, a mentoring scheme has been established, involving partnerships across the university. This is a promising way of applying ideas of intersectionality in practice, since many network members will share more than one protected
characteristic and cross-network pairings allow flexibility to meet individual needs.

The networks also held a cross-network ‘Human Books’ project, where sharing of personal experiences highlighted intersectional themes. Participants have reported that network activities have challenged their own biases, and supported culture change wherein exclusionary language is not tolerated.

One objective of the networks is to provide a forum to influence equality policy and practices. Links between the staff networks and other local and regional networks are being established. Staff are given time and flexibility by managers to run the networks, at the request of senior management.

Impact: High levels of staff satisfaction and engagement, with improvements demonstrated in relation to work life balance and communications; commended changes to flexible working policy.

Dedicated equality activities for professional and support staff

From the post May 2015 application process, professional and support staff are included for consideration in the Athena SWAN Charter, and they are also included in the Race Equality Charter. There are particular equality issues among this group of staff, as highlighted in ECU’s Equality in higher education: staff statistical report 2017. Moreover, equality and diversity work in some institutions may have been primarily aimed at equality challenges experienced by academic staff, thereby inadvertently neglecting professional and support staff.

Many of the lowest paid and most precarious roles at universities are among professional and support staff, as highlighted by recent intersectional campaigns for improved working conditions for cleaning staff at some institutions (eg LSE blog, 2016), roles disproportionately filled by the overlapping groups of women, BME people and migrants (LSE blog, 2016). The 2017 ECU statistical report found that across occupational groups, the largest proportion of non-UK BME professional and support staff in an occupational group (28.5%) was in the standard occupational classification (SOC) group 9, comprised of cleaners and other elementary occupations (table 3.11a, ECU 2017b).
One case study that was submitted covers work aimed to benefit professional and support staff, specifically IT and library staff.

**University of Edinburgh (UoE)**

An initiative called the Playfair Steps is targeted at professional services staff, specifically the Information Services Group (ISG), including library and IT staff. Building on a staff survey concerning gender equality, Playfair Steps is a programme of staff development and diversity initiatives which is designed to explore and celebrate intersectionality in the workplace, and activities specifically include a lecture series and an Equality Working Group. These explore how gender intersects with other characteristics.

The lecture series takes advantage of the university’s range of academics across disciplines specialising in inequalities, who are invited to present their research to IT and library staff. Examples of topics covered include ageism, intersectionality across gender, disability and class, and race relations in Scotland. After each lecture, staff are asked how this knowledge can be applied in the ISG, and recommendations are made and promoted within ISG.

The working group provides a forum for department staff to engage with the equality and diversity team, including developing recommendations for senior managers, and participating in training sessions from external equality specialists.

The initiative is felt to be transferable to other university IT departments.

**Impact:** Increase in staff awareness; changes in recruitment materials based on gender sensitive recruitment training delivered to the Equality Working Group, with increased representation of women in certain roles attributed to this.
The last few years have seen a number of student campaigns and initiatives to challenge bias in the curriculum. The principles of ECU’s Race Equality Charter address teaching and learning particularly as they relate to the BME attainment gap, covering course content; teaching and assessment methods; and academic confidence.

One case study that was submitted is about a student-led initiative to influence curriculum.

**University of East London (UEL)**

Students studying Sports Therapy started a group called B.E.A.T. (Body Equality in Athletic Therapies) in 2017. Students and staff wanted to address equality issues that emerged in their course, in terms of practices in healthcare studies and subjects concerning the body. The group provides an opportunity to develop the student ‘voice’ to enhance teaching and learning culture, including co-creation of resources, delivery, assessment and feedback.

The group discusses issues including gender representation in health, sport, culture and media, with a focus on the intersections of sexuality, race, and other identities, as informed by social constructivism. Issues that are emerging organically given the vocational context include body confidence; body dysmorphia; and inequalities specific to sports, healthcare and fitness industries.

The format of the group was decided through collaborative meetings between students and lecturers, and gathering input through questionnaires. At the end of the academic year 2016/17, the B.E.A.T. group presented its programmes and findings to lecturers. Consequently, the first sessions have been embedded in the curriculum and continue to be offered as additional enrichment sessions for both students and staff, with feedback contributing to critical reflection on the curriculum and its delivery.

**Impact:** Planned student code of conduct pilot incorporating guidance on body equality.
Three case studies have a substantial research component (one is included above, UCL). The research projects aim to develop an evidence base on which to develop effective interventions.

Challenges related specifically to intersectional research that were identified include engaging academic schools and recruiting research participants. Two case studies mentioned problems of recruiting ‘the usual suspects’ (i.e., staff and students already highly engaged in university life). To overcome recruitment challenges, one project (QMUL, below) used both formal methods (e.g., mailing lists), as well as more active and less formal methods, such as speaking with and developing relationships with students face to face, ‘within the everyday spaces of student life’, and utilising student ‘co-researchers’ to recruit other students. This was felt to be successful in recruiting a diverse group of BME students across a variety of characteristics, including individuals who are less engaged and therefore would not usually volunteer to participate in such a project. In contrast, ‘more formal approaches have been found to recruit only the most engaged students or rely too much upon the intrinsic motivation of a few staff to share information’ (QMUL).

Another identified challenge was institutional questioning of the validity of results obtained using qualitative methods, which are not able to be statistically generalised to the whole relevant university population. However, qualitative data is invaluable for equality and diversity work, because it provides rich information which aids in understanding differences in the lived experiences of people as they work or study in higher education institutions. It is particularly insightful when exploring the experiences of groups comprising small numbers or who are severely underrepresented within the institutional context. Moreover, qualitative methods can engender positive outcomes for individual research participants and the university more generally.

An identified learning point in one case study was ensuring that consent to use contributions is received at the point of data collection. More on this, including example consent statements, can be found in ECU’s briefing on ethics in primary research.

Case studies reported the positive impacts on research participants, in terms of having the opportunity to voice their experiences.
One case study describes a focus group and interviews exploring ‘intersectionality’ (UCL, above) as a topic, while two concern ‘single strand’ research conducted ‘intersectionally’ (Newcastle University and Queen Mary University of London, below).

More on using intersectional perspectives in equality and diversity research can be found in ECU’s briefing.

Newcastle University
Newcastle University is currently undertaking a three-year programme of qualitative research on equality and diversity issues among academic, research and professional and support staff, and students. The overall project employs an intersectional approach. This includes exploring the ways in which specific inequalities may be more durable and resistant to change compared to others and how specific markers of identity have more or less influence in different spaces of the university campus – such as the lecture theatre, students’ union or the staffroom – and at different times.

The project is composed of several specific research projects:
- experiences of transgender staff and students
- BME student and staff experiences
- everyday sexism on campus
- Muslim students and the university campus
- disability issues at university.

The projects employ interviews and focus groups. To date interviews have been conducted with undergraduate and postgraduate students, and academic and professional services staff at all levels. These specific projects have been chosen as they have been identified as areas where further research is needed on which to provide recommendations for actions moving forward. Project findings for each are shared regularly with the Dean of diversity and diversity leads in all of the three university faculties.
Each project, though focusing on one equality area, is being conducted intersectionally, paying particular attention to how specific inequalities shape one another. For example, research on the experiences of BME staff and students explores how gender, class, age, sexuality and disability shape lived experiences. When the projects are complete, an intersectional approach will be employed to consider connections and differences between each of the projects.

This project involved engagement with academic literature on intersectionality at the outset of the project as a key component, and the development of a paper on intersectionality and its critiques.

The project is resourced through employment of a full-time three year postdoctoral researcher funded by Newcastle University’s Research Excellence Academy.

**Impact:** Demonstrated leadership commitment to furthering equality and diversity; positive experience for research participants, in terms of opportunities to have their voices heard.

**Queen Mary University of London (QMUL)**
QMUL is currently undertaking a research project on BME student experiences and attainment.

The project aims to understand differences in BME learning experiences, the intersections which shape BME experience and success (eg age, gender, socioeconomic background, and previous education), and how institutional practices at the university may be linked to differences in success for BME students. The research project uses a mixed methods approach, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. The project is delivered by staff in Engagement, Retention and Success, a team within Academic Development at QMUL.

Quantitative analysis has been undertaken, and 40 interviews around student experience and belonging have been conducted with BME students.
The quantitative component found that notwithstanding income, entry qualifications, and gender, BME identity has a significant impact on attainment. Further intersectional analysis is planned.

The qualitative component has found that among BME students, sense of belonging at the university is influenced by the intersection of ethnicity with the religion/belief of students, as well as with gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

The project has taken a participatory approach. This has involved, for example, ‘long table’ events with student co-researchers, open forums wherein diverse participants, including staff and students, engage in face-to-face discussion. Several long table events were held, one specifically on ‘diversities’.

The intended outcome of the research is an evidence-based, collaborative design of new approaches and activities to increase the success of diverse BME students. Further data collection will be undertaken to monitor these interventions.

**Impact:** Changes to make Welcome Week activities more inclusive, e.g. a ‘Try this’ suite of events/activities; a new student transition into higher education module in the works; contribution to wider cultural change in the university, including a new student society, ‘Decolonizing QMUL’; development of principles of inclusive module design; planned student-led curriculum consultation in some schools; encouraging the institution to pursue ECU’s Race Equality Charter; and changes to teaching training for new staff.
Conclusion

The case studies included here are a small selection showing how intersectional perspectives can be used in equality and diversity work in UK higher education institutions. For further information on any of the case studies in this briefing, or to be put in touch with the institution who submitted the case study, please contact ECU at the details below.

Intersectionality is a growing area of work. If you would like to submit a case study for a future resource please contact Ashlee Christoffersen info@ecu.ac.uk.
Useful resources


Equality Challenge Unit (2017a) *Findings: Sector-leading and innovative practice in advancing equality and diversity.* Report to HEFCE by the Equality Challenge Unit www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2017/Sector-leading,and,innovative,practice,in,advancing,equality,and,diversity/2017_edpractice.PDF


LSE blog ‘Justice for the LSE Cleaners!’ (2016, 14 November). blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2016/11/14/justice-for-the-lse-cleaners

ECU provides research, information and guidance, training, events and Equality Charters that drive forward change and transform organisational culture in teaching, learning, research and knowledge exchange. We have over ten years’ experience of supporting institutions to remove barriers to progression and success for all staff and students.

ECU believes that the benefits of equality and diversity and inclusive practice are key to the wellbeing and success of individuals, the institution’s community, the efficiency and excellence of institutions, and the growth of further and higher education in a global environment.

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