

From equality to equity: A case study of Creative Shift's 'the leader within Women+ of Colour Leadership Programme'

Industry and Higher Education
2024, Vol. 38(1) 87–91
© The Author(s) 2024
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/09504222231224086
journals.sagepub.com/home/ihe



Atif Mohammed Ghani

Royal College of Art, UK

Tessa Read 

University of the Arts London, UK

Abstract

In this case study, we focus on a particular University of the Arts London positive action intervention, the Women+ of Colour in Leadership Programme (W+CinL) developed by Creative Shift. The case study explores how taking a more equitable, asset-based approach supports the retention, attainment, and employability of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and self-defined female + students. The programme can be seen as an example of an asset-based model which recognises the inherent value and life wide experience that students bring to their learning. By shifting from equality towards equity, this approach recognises histories of injustice and intersectional disadvantage to disrupt and transform systems of oppression. From the case study, we acknowledge the potential Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have to reshape support for marginalised students through a broader range of initiatives that facilitate the move to a more equitable and diverse creative economy.

Keywords

widening participation, employability, asset-based, positive action, equity, creative shift

Introduction

Although there has been some progress in widening access and participation for under-represented groups of students, racial inequality in relation to success in, and progression through higher education since it was initially recognised as an issue in 1994¹ remains persistent and extensive (Stevenson et al., 2019: p6). Recent work by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG, 2023) for Creative Diversity looking at barriers in *Making the Creative Majority* highlights the struggles of diverse students accessing creative HE and entering creative occupations after their degrees.

Since its inception the Office for Students (OfS) has applied pressure on HEIs to widen their participation, access and success policies in response to research highlighting an increased level of inequality in HE participation (Stevenson et al., 2019).

There is also the acknowledgment that inequality within higher education reflects racial inequality in the labour market which continues to persist at higher levels of unemployment and over-representation in low-paid sectors and differentiating graduate outcomes for those from

'BAME'² and 'ethnic minority groups' (McGregor-Smith, 2020). According to The Race Disparity Audit (2017), despite improvements in employment outcomes over the last two decades there remains an 11.8% employment gap between people who identify as white British and other ethnic minority groups living in the UK.³

In this case study, we focus on a particular positive action intervention, the Women+ of Colour in Leadership Programme (W+CinL) developed by Creative Shift at the University of the Arts London (UAL). The case study explores how taking a more equitable, asset-based approach, supports the retention, attainment, and employability of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic and self-defined female + students. Women+ is defined as being inclusive of non-binary, agender and afab (assigned female at birth) people.

Corresponding author:

Tessa Read, Creative Shift, Academic Enhancement, University of the Arts London, 272 High Holborn, London WC1V 7EY, UK.
Email: t.read@arts.ac.uk

University of the Arts London: case study background

For the 5th consecutive year, University of the Arts London (UAL) has been ranked 2nd in the QS World University Rankings by Subject 2023 for art and design and is the top institute offering undergraduate courses. It draws together six Colleges with international reputations in art, design, fashion, communication and performing arts. The Colleges include Central Saint Martins, London College of Fashion, London College of Communication, Camberwell College of Arts, Wimbledon College of Arts and Chelsea College of Art and Design. The UAL community comprises over 5000 academic, professional, and technical staff and over 19,000 students.

UAL is aware of its impact and interdependency on the UK and global creative economy and also of the barriers that students from under-represented groups face. Duna Sabri's 2017 longitudinal study of student identity and attainment at the UAL found that Black and minority ethnic students were around 19% less likely than white students to gain first or upper second degrees, raising concern across the University about the awarding gap. That systemic patterns of inequality and exclusion from opportunity regardless of sustained efforts in widen participation for the last two decades continue to result in the exclusion of large parts of the student population forming an increasingly unsustainable or "wicked problem" (Austen et al., 2017: p1).

The programme can be seen as an example of positive action and recognises that "some groups may need more help or encouragement than others. This is because some groups are disadvantaged or under-represented, or have different needs from the population as a whole due to past or present discrimination or exclusion or particular experiences" (Government Equalities Office, 2010). The Equality Act 2010 allows for positive action measures to be taken to help overcome disadvantage and can help alleviate disadvantage experienced by people who share a protected characteristic, reduce under-representation in relation to particular activities, and meet particular needs (Section 158).

Positive action in the context of higher education "refers to steps that HEIs and colleges can take to encourage people from different groups in order to overcome historic disadvantage, or low participation education, training and welfare" (Pathak, 2021). The case study of Women+ of Colour in Leadership Programme (W+CinL) developed by Creative Shift, a project within UAL offers an example of such positive action.

What is creative shift?

Creative Shift is a programme in UAL that takes a targeted positive action approach, supporting students from

underrepresented backgrounds to access and progress within the creative industries through either employment or self-employment. This commitment is written in UAL's Access and Participation Plan which sets out how institutions will widen access to higher education for students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups and support students to succeed and progress into successful graduate outcomes. It also forms part of UAL's Anti-Racism Action Plan – which states the need to increase the visibility of BAME student communities and people.

Creative Shift builds links between industry and education to provide students from under-represented groups with opportunities to develop their networks, working relationships and future careers in the creative industry. This is achieved through working collaboratively with industry partners to support emerging creatives develop their professional practice and build their network. It encourages students to inform the shaping of their educational experience by offering an alternative model of enterprise learning and employability education. This focuses on learning by doing approach, centering the student's voice, and harnessing the power of community. Since 2019, Creative Shift has worked with an average of 400 students per academic year from an average of 8000 home undergraduate students.

The programme

Now running in its fifth year, the W+CinL programme has worked with 64 students and collaborated with industry partners on co-created live briefs, where cohorts of selected UAL students work in small groups with industry and a mentor to respond to selected industry briefs. During the 10-week programme, the students are supported by a leadership coach who works with the students to identify and develop their leadership strengths and address the barriers that women of colour face accessing leadership positions in the creative and cultural sector. The idea of self-discovery is a unique and ongoing journey for each individual:

"There are many indexes of marginalisation and intersection in the world due to many structural inequalities - but Women + of Colour in Leadership is particularly important because of the intersectional nature of marginalisation, when it comes to women of colour, specifically Black women who face unique and specific forms of marginalisation based on their intersectional barriers which come up in what they want to achieve" (EDI Representative, at The Leader Within Event, August 2023).

An emphasis is placed on centering the voices of marginalised students by creating a network of like-minded female + individuals who can support each other. Not only did the students gain insights, but mentors noted learning

from new and different perspectives as they were asked to reflect on their own leadership qualities. The programme is designed to create a space where students can explore their values, experiences, strengths and abilities.

Each session has a unique approach that supports the students to discover the leader within through a range of discussions, activities, reflection, and peer, staff and industry support. Through the weekly meetups, students are given the opportunity to leverage these assets and explore their innate leadership skills. The programme offers opportunities for learners to access formal and informal mentoring thereby building a network of advisors and personal support. The March 2023 cohort of the W+CinL worked with the PR Agency Hope&Glory and their client Depop. Working on a real life co-created brief with industry resulted in better engagement and investment in the programme for the learners.

The leader within and feedforward

The programme offers an alternative paradigm of leadership that moves beyond more traditional business approaches and disrupts conventional views of leadership. Leaning on Ubuntu Philosophy, which “envelops the key values of group solidarity, compassion, respect, human dignity, conformity to basic norms and collective unity” (Himonga et al., 2013), the sessions build trust and strong bonds between participants. The Leader Within sessions emphasises that all the participants come with strong assets, which means they already have entrepreneurial skills, life experience and communication and teamwork skills, as the leadership coach highlights: “Let’s tap into the core of you, the juice of you and let’s build on that. There will absolutely be things you will need to learn, and you will keep learning, but see yourself as a leader from day one.” (Leadership coach JM)

Throughout the programme, dominant narratives of leadership are examined, and stereotypes are challenged. Students are given the opportunity to bring to the fore their existing leadership qualities and potential in an authentic way. This includes building relational resilience through peer support, which moves beyond the notion of the leader as the individual and creates a mutual system of support. The participants were inspiring and motivated each other in their respective teams to achieve a positive outcome. A participant from the 2022 W+CinL cohort noted: “The entire process was great and took you on a journey where you were meeting people for the first time, and then you became friends and created that bond”. She also added she was able to learn so much about herself: “I was able to see myself in a leadership position than in the background. I am more confident about my ideas. I can balance things. And met deadlines. Overall, it was such a confidence booster.” (Participant JJ)

The programme supported students to be able to effect positive change in their respective communities and become change agents for their own futures. One clear example of this is the notion of feedforward – a concept developed by Goldsmith and Katzenbach (1993) that is essentially the reverse of feedback. Feedforward replaces positive or negative feedback with future-oriented solutions. Instead of focusing on things that could have been taken personally, or perceived as negative, during the feedback process, feedforward is more proactive, more objective and positive approach, which affirms the learning experiences. It is very clear that even semantically in using feedforward (rather than feedback) – there is a conscious effort to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions on reflection and improvement.

Relational resilience (community and belonging)

A common feature and comment from participants was the lack of people of colour in their day-to-day UAL learning and teaching environments. As participant JJ further explained, “it was a nice chance to collaborate with everyone who looks like you, and you can be more open about what types of conversations you can have”. For a student to see themselves represented within the creative industries allows them to feel like they belong there and that their voice, skills and creativity matter.

For other participants, the programme gave them a wider idea of how working in the creative industries would feel like, and the experience of working with other students from different UAL colleges made them feel a greater sense of belonging. They added, “This is because even though others study different courses, I still felt as if I was part of the same community which we all settled into through ideas and different perspectives” (Participant APP). The programme builds on the concept of relational resilience, a sense of being encouraged and inspired by others to persevere and equally coming to a deeper sense of understanding about the self through our relationships with others; it’s not about what we do necessarily, but who we are together amid adversity (Barton and Kahn, 2019).

Industry partnerships

Through working closely with industry partners, the project also intends to support ethical changes in the industry, which brings benefits to the wider creative economy. The programme works closely with industry partners who feed into the project brief, but there is also a wider benefit to their involvement as it provides a reflective space to consider their own recruitment, retention and EDI practices. Companies such as LinkedIn, Depop, The Elephant Room, Treasure Tress, SheSays, and Major Players engage with

W+CinL to empower, teach and make a change to the industry. Industry Leader AT notes:

“We have seen time and time again a glass ceiling for women, we have seen discrimination within business, and the PR industry is not immune to some of these issues. The only way we are going to change that is to inspire the next generation of women who will take leadership positions”. (Industry Leader AT)

The programme offers opportunities for learners to access formal and informal mentoring thereby building a network of advisors and personal support. Not only do the mentees gain insights, but mentors also noted learning from new and different perspectives, as they were asked to reflect on their own leadership qualities. As another participant highlighted “talking to other minorities about their experiences not only in the creative field but in life, it made me feel seen”. In a context where women of colour are often marginalised or treated unfairly, she added, “talking about these issues with other strong women I have felt more empowered and confident in knowing how to approach these situations in the future.” (Participant APP)

The programme rethinks cultural capital and explores the idea of “Community Cultural Wealth” (Yosso, 2005). Yosso’s model was initially designed to “capture the talents, strengths and experiences that students of colour bring with them to their college environment” but works well in a professional context. Yosso’s Cultural Wealth Model⁴ explores the talents, strengths, and experiences that students of colour bring with them to their learning environment. (Da Graca and Dougherty, 2015).

Analysis: shift from a deficit to asset-based mindset

This was further discussed by a representative at The Leader Within Event who reiterated when doing EDI work or social justice work that we use asset models rather than deficit models where instead of focusing on the lack of certain skills:

“We need to say students and staff, actually the world as it is doesn’t recognise the skills you are bringing to the table. As a result we are going to run an enriching programme that brings everything that you are already to the fore and you can learn how to use it most effectively.” (EDI Representative)

Structural inequality creates access issues which are overlooked by a deficit approach which ultimately places the responsibility for aspiration with parents and students (Scandone, 2018: p539) or with institutions initiating student support work packages such as basic IT skills, language support skills programs that do not pay attention to barriers imposed by institutions that exclude the lived experience of students (Seuwou et al., 2023: p10). Educators seek to transmit

the values and expertise of the dominant class to those that are seen to be in need of improvement, rather than recognising the varied cultural capital that students possess (Yosso, 2005).

The programme can be seen as an example of an asset-based model which recognises the inherent value and life wide experience that students bring to their learning. Unlike the deficit approach, an asset-based model focuses on valuing and recognising the strengths of individuals and communities rather than emphasising challenges and disadvantages (Ladson-Billings, 2007 in Ramos Montanez, 2023: p 3). The problem lies in the fact that “universities tend not to recognise and even de value the provenances, styles, expressions and substance of Black ‘cultural capital’”. The acknowledgment of what is present is necessary to shift mindsets (Shilliam, 2015).

W+CinL is an example where explicitly the objective has been to nurture existing strengths and experience in building new notions of leadership, affirm a more collective approach to decision-making and build collective confidence and personal affirmation through group work. The reality is that some people need different or greater resources and treatment more broadly than others and equal opportunities policies do little to disrupt the prevailing status quo.

Conclusions

Taking a positive action approach recognises the need to move from a position of sameness and *equality* to one of fairness and *equity* to affect sector change. Public policy, HE institutions and creative industries must work together to envision what a more ethical and inclusive creative pipeline might look like. To change the future of leadership within the creative industries we must embrace new approaches which disrupt the current paradigm which reinforces barriers to career progression for marginalised groups.

As a creative University with a commitment to social purpose, UAL is dedicated to breaking down barriers into the creative industries through supporting students and graduates into paid work, partnering with industry and championing the importance of creativity beyond the university.

The Women+ of Colour in Leadership programme recognises that the creative industries are marred by inequity especially around ethnicity and that intersectional discrimination, has meant that women of colour have not necessarily been given the same opportunities or visibility in leadership positions.

In response, the programme takes a positive action approach to empower UAL students who are least represented in the creative sector. By actively disrupting dominant narratives and by reframing leadership, students are given the opportunity to bring to the fore their existing leadership qualities and potential, in an authentic way. W+CinL is an example where the objective has been to nurture existing strengths and experience in building new notions of leadership.

By deploying an asset-based model, the uniqueness of student's cultural capital is emphasised and placed at the centre of interactions. This allows students to develop strong career narratives that integrate their own lived experiences, values and interests. Moreover, the focus on building community enables students to develop relational confidence and collective resilience which informs their own leadership journey.

Acknowledgments

Charline Springer, Satvinder Sehmbey, Jannett Morgan, Anna Terrell, Jo Carr, Danielle Tran, Mia Liyanage and all the student participants from the Women + of Colour in Leadership programme.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Tessa Read  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6433-9010>

Notes

1. Medical schools were the first to identify the attainment gap between students of different cultural backgrounds in 1994. This early study of the Widening Participation debate uncovered that 10 out of 230 students at the University of Manchester's Medical School failed their clinical examinations see Seuwou, 2023: 3.
2. It is recognised that terminology used, such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), is contested and reductive and may be offensive to some people. Yet these terms are unfortunately still currently widely used in the Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) world and across sectors for benchmarking, with no consensus view on alternative terminology.
3. Cabinet Office (2017: 26) indicates that 41% of Black African graduates, 39% of Bangladeshi graduates and 36% of Pakistani graduates are more likely to be overqualified for their roles, compared with 25% of white graduates.
4. This model examines six forms of cultural capital that help students of colour experience learning from an appreciative standpoint: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance (Yosso, 2005).

References

- APPG (2023) *Making the Creative Majority: A Report for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Creative Diversity on 'What Works' to Support Diversity and Inclusion in Creative Education and the Talent Pipeline with A Focus on the 16+ Age Category*. London, UK: King's College London.
- Austen L, Heaton C, Jones-Devitt S, et al. (2017) Why is the BME attainment gap such a wicked problem? *Journal of Educational Innovation, Partnership and Change* 3(1): 147.
- Barton MA and Kahn WA (2019) Group resilience: the place and meaning of relational pauses. *Organization Studies* 40(9): 1409–1429.
- Cabinet Office (2017) *The Race Disparity Audit: Summary Findings From the Ethnicity Facts and Figures*. London: Cabinet Office.
- Da Graca M and Dougherty L (2015) First Generation College Students: Navigating Higher Education. *Community Cultural Wealth*. Workbook. Available at: <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/first-generation-college-student-/index>.
- Goldsmith M and Katzenbach J (1993) *The Wisdom of Teams*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Government Equalities Office (2010) *Equality Act 2010: A Quick Start Guide to Positive Action, Action in Service Provision for Voluntary and Community Organisations*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing.
- Himonga C, Taylor M and Pope A (2013) "Reflections on judicial views of Ubuntu" in PER. *Potchefstroom Electronic Law Journal* 16(5): 369.
- McGregor-Smith R (2020) *Race in the Workplace*. The McGregor-Smith Review. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/race-in-the-workplace-the-mcgregor-smith-review.
- Pathak P (2021) *Why It's Time to Retire Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion*. London: WONKHE Online.
- Ramos Montanez S (2023) Advancing equity through research: the importance of asset-based approaches and methods. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 86: 101540.
- Sabri D (2017) *UAL Students' Engagement with Industry and Communities of Practice: Year 3 Report of a 4-Year Longitudinal Study for University of the Arts London*. Project Report. London: University of the Arts London.
- Scandone B (2018) Re-thinking aspirations through habitus and capital: the experiences of British-born Bangladeshi women in higher education. *Ethnicities: Special Issue: Educational Inequality, Overcoming Disadvantage* 18: 146879681877754.
- Seuwou P, Nathan D, Osho Y, et al. (2023) Exploring the factors that impact ethnic minority students' attainment at a British university. *Journal of Educational Research and Review* 6(1): 10.
- Shilliam R (2015) Black academia: the doors have been opened by the architecture remains the same. In: Alexander C and Arday J (eds) *Aiming Higher Race, Inequality and Diversity in the Academy*. Surrey: Runnymede Press.
- Stevenson J, O'Mahony J, Khan O, et al. (2019) *Understanding and Overcoming the Challenges of Targeting Students From Under-Represented and Disadvantaged Ethnic Backgrounds*. Bristol: Report to the Office for Students.
- Yosso TJ (2005) Whose culture has capital? *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 8(1): 69–91.