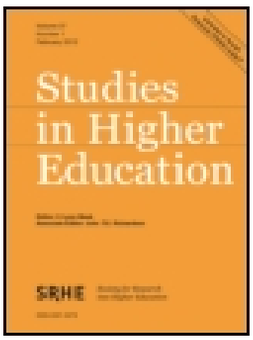

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Reimagining curricula: effects of cultural (in)sensitivity of curricula on racially minoritised students' engagement

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ABSTRACT

Imperatives to eliminate racial inequalities in higher education (HE) have led to calls for diversification of curricula. Qualitative evidence is growing about racially minoritised students' perceptions of their curricula and its impact on them. Yet there are no specific instruments to facilitate evaluation of curricular diversification and its impact on students. We examined the relationship between students' perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of their curriculum and their engagement, as measured by students' interactions with their teachers and their interest in their programme of study. To do so, we conceptualised and developed a new set of four Culturally Sensitive Curriculum Scales, making a significant, original conceptual and methodological contribution. A racially diverse sample of second through postgraduate students primarily in arts, humanities and social sciences (N = 262; 189 F) rated the cultural sensitivity of the curriculum of their programme, their interactions with teachers, and their interest. Racially minoritised students (n = 157) perceived their curriculum as less culturally sensitive on all four dimensions, reported fewer academic interactions with teachers, and had lower levels of interest than White students (n = 100). Each of the four Culturally Sensitive Curriculum Scales was significantly related to academic interactions with teachers and to interest. Regression analyses showed that all dimensions of cultural sensitivity mediated effects of ethnicity on interactions with teachers. Two dimensions of cultural sensitivity (Diversity Represented and Challenge Power) mediated effects of ethnicity on interest. Therefore, ensuring curricula are diverse and critical may support racially minoritised students' engagement, potentially contributing to reducing achievement gaps. Further implications are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Curriculum; cultural sensitivity; student engagement; subject interest; higher education

Introduction

Recent calls to diversify or decolonise higher education (HE) curricula (Douglas, Shockley, and Toldson 2020; Peters 2018; Thomas and Jivraj 2020) have gained traction given the increased global attention to racialised inequalities. Around the world, universities are responding with a variety of initiatives to create more culturally sensitive curricula. For example, in Australia, universities are developing ways to enact curricular reconciliation to redress historic injustices against indigenous people (Fildes 2021). In South Africa, although there has been grassroots activism around

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decolonisation for some time, there has been more attention to the issue in the wake of the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall protests (Meda 2020; Mheta, Nyangu Lungu, and Govender 2018). In the US, faculty responsibility for rethinking course syllabi and embedding cultural diversity in curricula has been emphasised for over a decade (Harper and Quaye 2007), but is taking on new urgency as colleges and universities adapt to incoming cohorts that are minority-majority.

In England, where this study is situated, Black and Asian students in particular are entering higher education at the highest rates of any group of students. Despite increasing access, there are disparities in outcomes between White students and their counterparts (Advance 2020). The Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) set out a number of policy recommendations to reduce racial inequality in HE (Dale-Rivas 2019), including attending to the curriculum. The Office for Students (OfS) subsequently set targets and key performance measures to eliminate all racialised inequalities in student outcomes by 2030. Mountford-Zimdars and colleagues' (2015) study exploring why different groups of students achieve different outcomes in HE has identified macro, meso and micro features of HE institutions as causes of attainment disparities. They highlighted the contribution of curriculum as a meso level contributor to attainment gaps. Their study made clear that universities need to attend to structural elements of the environment to achieve equality. The curriculum is one key aspect. Universities are now beginning to respond with a variety of initiatives, such as Diversity Mark at the University of Kent (Adewumi and Mitton, 2022) and a Decolonise the Curriculum toolkit at the University of Leicester (TASO 2021), to create more culturally responsive curricula to redress historic educational inequalities.

There is an emerging body of writing, often in specific disciplines, on how to diversify curricula (e.g. Fuentes, Zelaya, and Madsen 2021; Gabriel 2017; Raycroft and Flynn 2020). However, much work remains to create curricula in which attitudes, teaching methods and practice, teaching materials, curriculum, and theories relate to, affirms and respect students' diverse cultures, identities, and contexts – what we are calling culturally sensitive curricula. Recent studies have documented the absence of authors of colour in course reading lists in various subjects (Adewumi and Mitton 2022; Borkin 2021; Schucan Bird and and Pitman 2020; Thomas 2022). Students of colour also continue to describe ways in which their cultural experiences and perspectives are marginalised or ignored in the curriculum (Thomas and Jivraj 2020). Collective efforts by students to diversify and decolonise their curriculum continue apace through movements such as #WhyisMyCurriculumSoWhite, #RhodesMustFall, and #LiberateMyCurriculum. These 'grassroots' activists echo more than three decades of qualitative and quantitative US-based research highlighting the need for culturally engaging campus environments that enable racially diverse students to thrive (Museus 2014). Museus's model proposed culturally relevant knowledge (a curriculum in which students are enabled to see themselves) among nine indicators that are correlated with positive university experiences and achievement.

There is also an urgent need to ensure research and evaluation inform changes in practice. Other studies have qualitatively documented students' experiences of the curriculum (Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas 2020; Harper 2013; Harper, Smit, and Davis 2018; Meda 2020; Museus 2014; Museus and Quaye 2009; Thomas and Jivraj 2020; UUK 2019). Existing surveys of students in higher education such as the UK Engagement Survey (an offspring of the US National Survey of Student Engagement) have shown differences in racially minoritized students' experiences versus majority students (Higher Education Academy 2105). However, these existing survey instruments are not race-focused (DeCuir-Gunby and Schutz 2014) and do not query the cultural sensitivity of the curriculum. There are also surveys assessing broader aspects of campus racial climate (National Institute for Transformation and Equity n.d; USC Race Equity Centre n.d.), but they do not focus on curricula. New tools for researching students' experience of their curricula are needed to facilitate research on the relationship between culturally sensitive curricula and key educational outcomes.

To address these gaps, this study explored: (1) the extent to which students, particularly Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)[1] students, perceive their curriculum as culturally sensitive; and (2) the relationship between cultural sensitivity in curricula and students' engagement, defined as

their academic interactions with teachers and their individual interest in the subject. To do so, a new set of Culturally Sensitive Curricula Scales (CSCS) was developed, drawing on Critical Race Theory. The scales make an important conceptual and methodological contribution to the literature about racially minoritised students' experiences and the nature of HE curricula. The substantive results offer a significant and original contribution to understanding the impact of culturally sensitive curricula on students.

Critical race theory as a guiding framework

Critical race theory (CRT) is a cross-disciplinary social and intellectual movement that shifts attention away from racism as an individual act to the ways structural racism is enmeshed in the fabric of society and enacted in policies, practices, and processes (Harper 2012; Ladson-Billings 1998). In educational contexts, Ladson-Billings (1998) (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) used key tenets of CRT to contend that racism is structurally ingrained in the curriculum, with assumptions of Whiteness as the norm. Consequently, the experiences of those who are racially minoritised are 'muted and erased', leading to 'distortions, omissions, and stereotypes' that are often invisible to many White people (Ladson-Billings 1998, 8). Ladson-Billings (1995) also used CRT as a conceptual framework to argue for a culturally relevant curriculum that facilitates learners' socio-political awareness, enabling them to challenge hegemonic, taken-for-granted power structures.

Harper (2012) found few HE researchers had taken a CRT approach to understanding students' (or academics') experiences (Harper 2012). Yet, 'ongoing attempts to study race without racism are unlikely to lead to racial equity and more complete understandings of minoritized populations in postsecondary contexts.' (Harper 2012, 15). Instead, to illuminate and accurately reflect the educational experiences of racially diverse students, the field needs racially and culturally responsive theoretical models, constructs and tools (DeCuir-Gunby and Schutz 2014).

Museus's (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model is one example of a race-focused, culturally responsive theoretical model. Synthesising research on racially diverse students in the US, he proposed nine indicators of culturally engaging campus environments that influence student outcomes. This model foregrounds the role of institutional cultures and climates as drivers of students' academic dispositions and performance. Thus, consistent with CRT, it shifts the emphasis from supporting students in *adapting* to traditional campus cultures to *creating campus cultures* in which racially diverse students can thrive.

We use CRT in an integrated manner like other exponents of CRT, but specifically to illuminate the extent to which students perceive and experience inequality (based on ethnicity or race) as being enmeshed in the curriculum as a normal feature. Revising the curricula requires a substantial re-imagining of the content, as well as reconsideration of the context, processes of knowledge production, and who are considered authorities.

Conceptualising culturally sensitive curricula within a CRT frame

In this study, we focus specifically on what it means to make curricula culturally engaging, attending to two of Museus' (2014) most applicable indicators of culturally engaging campuses more generally: culturally relevant knowledge and culturally validating environments. We focus on curriculum because it is the centrepiece of university education; all students in all contexts experience curriculum. For many students, including commuting and part-time students, their primary or possibly sole engagement with HE is through their formal curricula, not other aspects of campus life (Hope and Quinlan 2020). The curriculum also has been identified as a key site of educational inequalities (UUK 2019). Through the curriculum, students earn the marks that influence future study and career options. As we explain later, we assume that curricula have a significant effect on students' engagement, which in turn, affects their continuation, achievement and future life chances.

Finally, as noted above, there are no instruments yet available for specifically assessing HE students' perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of their curricula. Thus, conceptualising and developing a set of scales that enables HE students to rate the culturally sensitivity of their curricula is a significant and original contribution. This instrument will equip educators and the sector as a whole to reflect on, evaluate and enhance the racial inclusivity of their curriculum from students' perspective. It also can enable students to have a collective voice on this important aspect of their HE experiences on a larger scale. Student voice is a particularly important element of the HE policy landscape in the UK.

In developing our novel Culturally Sensitive Curricula Scales (CSCS), we built on three main CRT-consistent studies to help us conceptualise the constructs (Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples 2019; Holgate 2016; Ladson-Billings 1995). First, Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples (2019) developed an instrument to be used by experts in evaluating the cultural sensitivity of primary and secondary school curricula in New York City. Their Culturally Responsive Curricula Scorecard asks reviewers to determine the cultural responsiveness of language arts curricula in two sections: representation and social justice. Regarding representation, they assessed character and author tally, diversity of characters, and accurate portrayals. Under social justice, their three categories were: decolonisation, power and privilege; centering multiple perspectives; and connecting learning to action. Their tool was particularly influential in the development of our items.

Second, to ensure our instrument addressed the critical thinking expected in HE curricula, we relied upon Ladson-Billings' (1995) conception of culturally relevant education. She emphasised that culturally relevant teaching has three essential criteria: (1) an ability to develop students academically through high expectations of all students; (2) a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and; (3) the development of socio-political or critical consciousness. Critical consciousness means enabling students to recognise and address power imbalances and social justice issues in society.

Holgate's (2016) instrument was particularly helpful in describing interpersonal interactions, although it did not address the cultural relevance of knowledge and skills being taught. Holgate's scale focused on four factors that contribute to the development of a culturally responsive classroom climate in HE: (1) inclusiveness, (2) cultural inclusion, (3) diverse language, and (4) diverse pedagogy.

In the CSCS, whose development we will describe further under 'measures' in the methods section, the items we developed were grouped into four factors: (1) diversity represented, (2) positive portrayals, (3) challenge power, and (4) inclusive classroom interactions. *Diversity Represented* refers to whether ethnically diverse peoples' experiences and perspectives are represented (Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples 2019). *Positive Portrayals* captures *how* ethnic minorities are represented, seeking to overcome stereotypes (Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples 2019). *Challenge Power* refers to encouraging students to develop critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). *Inclusive Classroom Interactions* focuses on classroom interactions between teachers and students and among peers (Holgate 2016). These dimensions are consistent with qualitative evidence that the absence of these curricular dimensions contribute to racially minoritised students' feelings of being stereotyped, being 'othered', disempowerment, alienation, marginalisation, and micro-invalidation (Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas 2020; Harper 2013; Harper, Smit, and Davis 2018; Meda 2020; Museus 2014; UUK 2019). Thus, we propose that these dimensions are likely to affect BAME students' engagement in HE.

Interactions with teachers and interest as outcome variables

While engagement is variously defined in HE, we focus on two key variables. First, interactions with teachers, as used here, refers to interaction between students and teachers on academic matters relating to their programme of study. Positive interactions with teachers have been shown in other studies to be associated with attainment (Frings, Gleibs, and Ridley 2020; Hu, Kuh, and Li 2008). High quality interactions are of particular importance in predicting BAME students' learning

(Lundberg and Schreiner 2004). Yet, in predominantly White institutions where teachers are disproportionately White, BAME students may face barriers in forming positive relationships with their teachers (Woolf 2008; Back 2004).

We expected that when any student perceives the curriculum as more culturally sensitive, they will be more likely to interact with their teachers. Those interactions may happen because teachers who are more culturally sensitive will be less biased, being open to initiating interactions with a diverse range of students and providing more positive and reinforcing experiences in those encounters. Alternatively, students may feel greater trust toward teachers who demonstrate cultural sensitivity in the design and teaching of their courses, thus they may initiate and sustain conversations with those teachers. In either case, culturally sensitive curricula should be associated with more out of class interactions between students and teachers.

Second, we investigated students' interest in their subject. Interest is defined as affective and cognitive engagement with a specific object (Renninger and Hidi 2011, 2016). It is inherently rewarding and, as a key motivational variable, affects many other aspects of students learning and performance (Ainley, Hidi, and Berndorff 2002; Quinlan and Renninger, 2022; Renninger and Hidi 2016; Schiefele, Krapp, and Winteler 1992; Jansen, Lüdtke, and Schroeders 2016). Interest defined in this way (Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000; Renninger and Hidi 2016) fits within our broader theoretical framework (Ladson-Billings 1995; Museus 2014) insofar as this theory also emphasises ways in which the environment supports interest. Interest can grow or wane depending upon whether the curriculum, teachers, significant others, and instructional resources support it (Renninger and Hidi 2016).

A recent study in England found that BAME students have lower interest in their programme of study than White students (Quinlan 2019). Utility value interventions, short activities in which students write about how HE content is relevant, have been shown to increase students' interest and help to close racial achievement gaps (Harackiewicz and Priniski 2018; Harackiewicz 2016). However, these short interventions leave the rest of the curriculum unaltered. Relevance of HE curricular material itself, and the way it is taught, are also associated with higher interest (Crouch 2013; Dohn, Madsen, and Malte 2009; Quinlan 2019; Rotgans and Schmidt 2011). Thus, we inquire into the cultural relevance of the curriculum overall and its relationship with student interest. We expected that when the curriculum as a whole is perceived as relevant (culturally sensitive) it will also have a positive impact on students' interest, particularly BAME students.

Research questions and hypotheses

First, we hypothesised that BAME students will experience their curricula as less culturally sensitive than White students. Second, we hypothesised that BAME students will report fewer interactions with their teachers. We asked whether and which aspects of cultural sensitivity of the curricula explain differences between BAME and White students' interactions with their teachers. Third, we hypothesised that BAME students will have lower interest in their programme than White students. Finally, we asked whether and which aspects of cultural sensitivity of the curricula explain differences between BAME and White students' interest in the subject.

Methods

Following ethical approval, participants completed a single survey (i.e. a cross-sectional design) assessing their perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of the curriculum in their programme of study (all the curricular subjects within their degree course), their interactions with teachers, their interest in their programme, and answering demographic questions. In a process of multi-stage, convenience sampling (Babbie, 2015), the first author approached students in person individually and in groups and invited them to participate in the study. Students took part in various campus venues (e.g. libraries, cafés, student common rooms and dining halls), in 11 classes (e.g. in the fields of Law, Social Work, English, History and Psychology) and at student society events (e.g. hosted by

the Afro-Caribbean Student Society and Islamic Student Society to centre BAME students' experiences). First, we describe the sample and the study context, then we present each of our measures. We provide a longer discussion of how the new CSCS were developed.

Sample and research context

Participating students ($N = 262$; 189 Female; 73 Male; 157 BAME; 100 White) were enrolled in a diverse institution (37% BAME undergraduates) in England that is ranked in the middle of most UK league tables. The majority were of African heritage ($n = 99$; 84 Black African; 15 Black Caribbean), though the sample also included smaller numbers ($n = 58$ total) of other minority ethnic groups. We report the breakdown of BAME and White students by gender in Table 1. Ninety two percent ($n = 242$) were undergraduates, with the majority in social sciences (63%) or humanities (23%). Participants were second year through postgraduate students to ensure they had sufficient experience of the HE curriculum. The teaching staff at this university are predominantly White, and the institution served a primarily White middle-class student body until recently.

Culturally sensitive curricula scales (CSCS)

This measure of students' perceptions of their curricula was newly developed for this study. Participants rated 24 items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*) in relation to their perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of their curriculum (Table 2). As described above, items were developed based initially on Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples (2019) tool for analysing primary and secondary curricula and Holgate's (2016) inclusive classroom scales, within a broader CRT orientation (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings 1998). Items were piloted qualitatively with 40 students and 10 academics before survey administration. The original survey included 10 questions that were ambiguous and were removed prior to the exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

After ensuring appropriate assumptions were met (See details in Supplementary Materials (SM)), the remaining 24 items were subject to an exploratory factor analysis in SPSS version 25 using principal axis factoring with oblique rotation (direct oblimin) to assist in interpreting the factors. The results showed four components with eigenvalues greater than one, suggesting a four-factor solution. The results of the initial EFA also revealed five items that did not fit the emergent four factor solution. Closer scrutiny suggested they were ambiguous, double-barrelled, or otherwise difficult for respondents to interpret, so they were removed. The final 19 items are provided in Table 2. A further EFA (Table 3) supported the use of the remaining 19 items to measure four separate factors: *Diversity Represented* (8 items; $\alpha = .87$); *Positive Portrayals* (3 items; $\alpha = .81$); *Challenging Power* (5 items; $\alpha = .88$); and *Inclusive Classroom Interactions* (3 items; $\alpha = .83$). All items had large pattern coefficients (over .30) and loaded on only one factor. We opted to include Item 18 with *Diversity Represented* given our underlying conceptualisation and its correlation with other items in that scale. The overall percentage of variance extracted (66%) was high, suggesting four factors are sufficient.

Table 1. Description of study participants.

Ethnicity	Gender	
BAME	Female	109
	Male	48
White	Female	76
	Male	24
	Not known	1
Unknown	Female	4
	Male	1

Table 2. Culturally Sensitive Curricula Scales (CSCS): constructs and items.

Scale	Original item	Constructs	Description
Diversity Represented	1	**DR1** The curriculum features people from diverse backgrounds.	focuses on how people from diverse backgrounds are referenced within the curriculum.
	2	**DR2** The curriculum references different ethnic and cultural traditions, languages, religions and/or clothing.	
	3	**DR3** Diverse ethnicities and nationalities are portrayed	
	4	**DR4** Diverse family structures (i.e. single parents, adopted or fostered children, same-sex parents, other relatives living with family, etc.) are portrayed.	
	5	**DR5** Differently-abled people are represented.	
	6	**DR6** People of diverse ethnicities are represented as researchers or professionals, not just as participants in research, clients, consumers, customers, etc.	
	16	**DR7** The curriculum respects that different cultures may have different understandings, skills and/or philosophies.	
	18	**DR8** The curriculum addresses problems that are of concern to marginalized people/ communities.	
Positive Portrayals	7	**PP1** When social problems (e.g. crime, violence) are presented, people of colour are usually considered the problem. (R)	focuses on redressing the assumptions, perceptions and considerations of people from diverse backgrounds that may distort how they are considered by society
	8	**PP2** When interpersonal conflicts are presented, people of colour are usually considered the problem. (R)	
	10	**PP3** When people of colour have problems, white people are usually presented as being able to solve those problems. (R)	
Challenge Power	22	**CP1** The curriculum raises critical questions about power and/or privilege that are usually taken for granted.	focus on the curriculum's ability to provoke critical thought and challenge dominant ideologies
	23	**CP2** The curriculum encourages students to challenge existing power structures in society.	
	24	**CP3** The curriculum encourages students to critique unearned privilege.	
	25	**CP4** The curriculum encourages students to connect learning to social, political or environmental concerns.	
	26	**CP5** The curriculum encourages students to take actions that fight inequity or promote equity.	
Inclusive Classroom Interactions	28	**ICI1** My instructors make an effort to pronounce everyone's name correctly.	focuses on the development of a learning environment accepting of cultural differences and respectful of different perspectives
	29	**ICI2** My instructors encourage students to be mindful of other students' perspectives.	
	30	**ICI3** My instructors encourage students to respect other students' perspectives.	

Academic interactions with teachers scale

Participants rated 6 newly developed items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 4 = *very often*) about their academic interactions with teachers outside of taught classes related to various aspects of the curriculum such as ideas, assignments, content, academic interests, feedback, and academic performance(e.g. 'Communicated with teaching staff about assignments outside of taught sessions'). The reliability of the scales was good (6 items: $\alpha = .86$).

Table 3. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with principal axis factoring on selected 19 items.

	Pattern coefficients			
Original item	1	2	3	4
3	**.752**	.027	.001	-.071
6	**.657**	.139	-.039	.059
5	**.651**	-.010	.043	.018
2	**.642**	-.032	-.123	-.132
1	**.636**	.043	-.262	.065
4	**.550**	-.036	.006	-.139
16	**.357**	.066	-.009	-.324
29	-.053	**.903**	.055	-.023
30	-.029	**.805**	-.004	-.125
28	.067	**.640**	-.092	.072
8*	-.010	-.076	**.826**	.040
7*	.063	.001	**.743**	.123
10*	-.235	-.028	**.474**	-.043
24	.010	-.022	.000	**-.816**
25	.004	-.036	-.076	**-.774**
23	.029	.135	-.041	**-.719**
22	-.045	.102	-.112	**-.703**
18	**.312**	.038	-.043	**-.489**
26	.314	.165	.152	**-.450**

*Item reversed.

Individual interest scale

Quinlan's (2019) 11-item Individual Interest Scale was used to assess interest. Students responded to the items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*) in relation to their programme. Reliability was very good (α = .88). Items were consistent with Renninger and Hidi's (2016) definition of individual interest by capturing emotional interest in the field (e.g. 'I am curious about this field in general'), knowledge (e.g. 'I am quite good in this field'), and frequent, independent and voluntary engagement (e.g. 'Regularly I find myself thinking about ideas from lectures in this field when I'm doing other things').

Demographics

Participants also reported demographic information about programme and stage of study, gender, ethnicity, sex, age and country of domicile.

Results

First, we present students' overall perception of the cultural sensitivity of the curriculum. Then we analyse data related to interactions with teachers, particularly exploring the link between ethnicity, cultural sensitivity of the curricula and interactions with teachers, using mediation analysis. Then we repeat this type of mediation analysis for interest, our second outcome variable.

BAME students perceived the curriculum as less culturally sensitive than White students. CSCS mean scores were significantly lower for BAME students than White students on all four subscales (Table 4), with medium to large effect sizes, supporting Hypothesis 1.

Academic interactions with teachers

Confirming Hypothesis 2, the BAME students reported significantly fewer academic interactions with their teachers than White students. The difference was moderate (Table 4).

To investigate whether and which aspects of cultural sensitivity of the curricula explained BAME students' lower academic interactions with teachers, we conducted mediation analyses on each of

Table 4. Independent samples T-test for CSCS – ethnicity (BAME vs White Students).

Sub scale	BAME Mean	White Mean	BAME SD	White SD	MD	t	Cohen's d
Diversity Represented (DR)	2.661	3.106	.745	.530	-.445	−5.580***	.664
Positive Portrayals (PP)	2.200	2.964	.735	.662	-.764	−8.293***	1.080
Challenge Power (CP)	2.740	3.278	.878	.638	-.538	−5.294***	.678
Inclusive Classroom Interactions (ICI)	3.018	3.683	.786	.486	-.665	−8.380***	.970
Academic Interaction with Teachers (AIT)	2.957	3.250	.638	.652	-.293	−3.559***	.455
Interest	3.592	3.935	.599	.500	-.343	−4.766***	.610

***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$ (2-tailed); *$p < .05$.
MD = differences in means between BAME and White students.

the CSCS scales, reported in separate subsections here. Data met assumptions of normality (Table 1 SM). Given the correlations between the CSCS scales (Table 5), we conducted separate analyses (Table 6) to avoid problems of multicollinearity. In each analysis, ethnicity significantly predicted interactions with teachers.

Diversity represented

Ethnicity significantly predicted perceptions of *Diversity Represented*. *Diversity Represented* also significantly predicted academic interaction with teachers. In Model 3, the effect of ethnicity on academic interaction with teachers was reduced after including *Diversity Represented* in the model. The indirect effect was significant ($z = .05$, $p = <.05$).

Positive portrayals

Ethnicity also significantly predicted *Positive Portrayals*. *Positive Portrayals* also significantly predicted academic interaction with teachers. In Model 3, the effect of ethnicity on academic interaction with teachers was reduced after including *Positive Portrayals* in the model. Again, the indirect effect was significant ($z = .06$, $p = <.01$).

Challenge power

Ethnicity significantly predicted *Challenge Power*. *Challenging Power* also made a statistically significant contribution in predicting interaction with teachers. In Model 3, the effect of ethnicity on academic interaction with teachers was reduced after including *Challenge Power* in the model and it had a significant indirect effect mediating ethnicity and interest ($z = .05$, $p = <.01$).

Inclusive classroom interactions

Ethnicity was also shown to significantly predict *Inclusive Classroom Interaction*. *Inclusive Classroom Interactions* made a statistically significant contribution to predicting academic interaction with teachers. In Model 3, the effect of ethnicity on academic interaction with teachers was reduced after adding *Inclusive Classroom Interactions* in the model. The indirect effect was significant ($z = .07$, $p = <.01$).

Table 5. Pearson product-moment correlations for the study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Ethnicity	1							
2. Gender	-.075	1						
3. DR	.306*	.175	1					
4. Positive Portrayals	.446**	-.044	.459**	1				
5. Challenging Power	.306**	-.050	.574**	.417**	1			
6. Inclusive Classroom Interaction	.381**	-.065	.372**	.332**	.450**	1		
7. Academic Interaction with Teachers	.217**	.133*	.187**	.217**	.228**	.248**	1	
8. Interest	.305**	-.079	.214**	.223**	.226**	.207**	.330**	1

** $p < .01$ (2-tailed) Female = 1, Male = 2; BAME = 1; White = 2.

Table 6. Effects of ethnicity on academic interaction with teachers (AIT): mediation by cultural sensitivity of curriculum.

	Model 1 (dv: AIT)				Model 2 (dv: CSCS Mediator)				Model 3 (dv: AIT)			
	B (SE)	β	t	95% CI for b	*B* (SE)	β	t	95% CI for b	*B* (SE)	β	t	95% CI for b
Diversity Represented as a Mediator												
Constant	2.691 (.115)		23.472 ***	[2.446;2.917]	2.267 (.118)		19.161***	[2.034;2.500]	2.406 (.177)		13.602***	[2.058;2.755]
Ethnicity	.271 (.076)	.217	3.581 ***	[.122;.420]	.404 (.078)	.306	5.180***	[.251;.558]	.220 (.079)	.176	2.788***	[.065;.376]
Diversity Represented									.126 (.060)	.133	2.105*	[.008;.243]
R^2	.047				.094				.063			
Positive Portrayals as a Mediator												
Constant	2.691 (.115)		23.472 ***	[2.446;2.917]	1.564 (.129)		12.150***	[1.311;1.818]	2.496 (.147)		16.956***	[2.206;2.785]
Ethnicity	.271 (.076)	.217	3.581 ***	[.122;.420]	.667 (.085)	.446	7.852***	[.500;.834]	.187 (.086)	.150	2.181**	[.018;.357]
Positive Portrayals									.125 (.057)	.150	2.179**	[.012;.238]
R^2	.047				.199				.062			
Challenge Power as a Mediator												
Constant	2.691 (.115)		23.472 ***	[2.406;2.917]	2.275 (.140)		16.207***	[1.998;2.551]	2.368 (.160)		14.763***	[2.052;2.684]
Ethnicity	.271 (.076)	.217	3.581 ***	[.122;.420]	.479 (.093)	.306	5.177***	[.297;.662]	.203 (.078)	.162	2.587**	[.048;.357]
Challenge Power									.142 (.050)	.178	2.844**	[.044;.241]
R^2	.047				.093				.076			
Inclusive Classroom Interactions as a Mediator												
Constant	2.691 (.115)		23.472 ***	[3.059;3.450]	2.505 (.124)		20.240***	[2.262;2.749]	2.265 (.181)		12.498***	[1.908;2.622]
Ethnicity	.271 (.076)	.217	3.581 ***	[.210;.468]	.542 (.082)	.381	6.641***	[.382;.703]	.179 (.081)	.143	2.217**	[.020;.337]
Inclusive Classroom Interactions									.170 (.057)	.194	3.008**	[.059;.282]
R^2	.047				.145				.079			

Taken together, these results demonstrate that each component of the CSCS mediated the relationship between ethnicity and interaction with teachers (Figure S1, SM).

Interest

Confirming Hypothesis 3, the BAME students reported significantly lower interest in their programme than White students (Table 4). The difference in means was moderate. Furthermore, each of the four dimensions of the CSCS was positively correlated with students' interest (Table 5).

Relations between ethnicity, cultural sensitivity of curricula, and interest

To investigate whether and which aspects of curricular cultural sensitivity explained BAME students' lower interest, we conducted mediation analyses on each of the CSCS scales (Table 7). We conducted separate analyses to avoid problems of multicollinearity. In each analysis, ethnicity significantly predicted interest.

Diversity represented

Ethnicity significantly predicted perceptions of *Diversity Represented*. Diversity Represented also significantly predicted interest. In Model 3, the effect of ethnicity on interest was reduced after including *Diversity Represented* in the model. The indirect effect was significant ($z = .04$, $p = <.001$).

Positive portrayals

Ethnicity also significantly predicted *Positive Portrayals*. However, *Positive Portrayals* did not make a statistically significant contribution to predicting interest.

Challenge power

Ethnicity significantly predicted *Challenge Power*. Challenge Power also made a statistically significant contribution in predicting Interest. The relationship between Ethnicity and Interest is stronger in model 1 than in model 3. *Challenge Power* had a significant indirect effect mediating ethnicity and interest ($z = .04$, $p = <.01$).

Inclusive classroom interactions

Ethnicity was also shown to significantly predict *Inclusive Classroom Interaction*. However, *Inclusive Classroom Interactions* did not make a statistically significant contribution to predicting Interest.

Taken together, these results show that the *Diversity Represented* and *Challenging Power* components of the CSCS each mediated the relationship between ethnicity and interest (Figure S2, SM).

Discussion

We constructed and validated a set of culturally sensitive curricula scales (CSCS) that can be used to assess, reflect on, and improve the cultural sensitivity of HE curricula (Harper and Quaye 2007). While other scales assess the overall racial climate on campuses (e.g. National Institute for Transformation and Equity, n.d.; USC Race Equity Centre, n.d.), there were no instruments available that assess the cultural sensitivity of what is taught and how it is taught.

As expected, BAME students perceived their curricula as less culturally sensitive than White students on all four dimensions: whether racial and cultural diversity was represented in the curriculum, how positive the portrayals of people of colour were, whether the curriculum encouraged students to challenge power, and the inclusivity of classroom interactions. This finding is consistent with a central Critical Race Theory claim that the curriculum is normatively White (Ladson-Billings 1998). Using quantitative methods, this study provides further empirical support for BAME students'

Table 7. Effects of ethnicity on interest: mediation by cultural sensitivity of curriculum.

	Model 1 (dv: Interest)				Model 2 (dv: CSCS Mediator)				Model 3 (dv: Interest)			
	B (SE)	B	t	95% CI for b	*B* (SE)	β	t	95% CI for b	*B* (SE)	β	t	95% CI for b
Diversity Represented as a Mediator												
Constant	3.254 (.099)		32.777 ***	[3.059;3.450]	2.267 (.118)		19.161***	[2.034;2.500]	1.753 (.266)		6.585***	[1.229;2.227]
Ethnicity	.339 (.065)	.305	5.173 ***	[.210;.468]	.404 (.078)	.306	5.180***	[.251;.558]	.351 (.081)	.265	4.309***	[.190;.511]
Diversity Represented									.158 (.073)	.133	2.153*	[.013;.303]
R^2	.093				.094				.109			
Positive Portrayals as a Mediator												
Constant	3.254 (.099)		32.777 ***	[3.059;3.450]	1.564 (.129)		12.150***	[1.311;1.818]	3.129 (.128)		25.342***	[2.928;3.421]
Ethnicity	.339 (.065)	.305	5.173 ***	[.210;.468]	.667 (.085)	.446	7.852***	[.500;.834]	.285 (.075)	.257	3.618***	[.120;.406]
Positive Portrayals									.080 (.050)	.108	1.685	[-.014;.179]
R^2	.093				.199				.097			
Challenge Power as a Mediator												
Constant	3.254 (.099)		32.777 ***	[3.059;3.450]	2.275 (.140)		16.207***	[1.998;2.551]	3.019 (.140)		21.637***	[2.744;3.293]
Ethnicity	.339 (.065)	.305	5.173 ***	[.210;.468]	.479 (.093)	.306	5.177***	[.297;.662]	.289 (.068)	.261	4.242***	[.155;.423]
Challenge Power									.103 (.043)	.146	2.379**	[.018;.189]
R^2	.093				.093				.113			
Inclusive Classroom Interactions as a Mediator												
Constant	3.254 (.099)		32.777 ***	[3.059;3.450]	2.505 (.124)		20.240***	[2.262;2.749]	3.047 (.159)		19.188***	[2.734;3.359]
Ethnicity	.339 (.065)	.305	5.173 ***	[.210;.468]	.542 (.082)	.381	6.641***	[.382;.703]	.294 (.071)	.265	4.164***	[.155;.433]
Inclusive Classroom Interactions									.083 (.050)	.106	1.669	[-.015;.180]
R^2	.093				.145					.103		

qualitative reports of the Whiteness of the curriculum and its effects (Arday, Belluigi, and Thomas 2020; Harper 2013; Harper, Smit, and Davis 2018; Meda 2020; UUK 2019; Thomas and Jivraj 2020).

All dimensions of the CSCS were associated with students reporting more frequent academic interactions with their teachers. That is, when students experienced the curriculum as culturally sensitive, they were also more likely to report interacting with their teachers. BAME students reported less frequent academic interactions with their teachers. This finding is consistent with extant literature (Lundberg and Schreiner 2004). We found that these differences were partially explained by perceptions of the cultural (in)sensitivity of the curriculum. All four dimensions of the culturally sensitive curricula scales contributed to explaining BAME students' less frequent academic interactions with teachers. This finding is sensible because cultures and practices that validate and affirm cultural backgrounds, identities, and knowledge foster interactions and greater engagement (National Institute for Transformation and Equity, n.d.).

All dimensions of the CSCS also were associated with higher interest. Consistent with previous findings (Quinlan 2019), BAME students had lower interest in their programme than White students. This finding was partially explained by perceptions of the cultural (in)sensitivity of the curriculum, particularly lack of representations of diversity and failures to challenge power structures and inequities. Thus, these two dimensions may be particularly important for academics to attend to in course design. Making the curriculum itself more culturally relevant would extend existing utility value interventions, which have also been shown to improve minoritised students' interest and achievement (Harackiewicz and Priniski 2018; Harackiewicz 2016) and offer another example of how curricula can be modified to engage diverse students' interest (Crouch 2013).

Implications for practice

Given increased attention to racialised inequalities in higher education, academics and administrators need resources to facilitate the reimagining of HE curricula. The CSCS are intended to promote action by helping teachers and administrators better understand what culturally sensitive curricula are and their importance to students. The CSCS can facilitate an assessment of what is taught and how it is taught through attention to four dimensions of cultural sensitivity.

We encourage teachers to reflect on the survey items (Table 1) in relation to their own curricula and to use the survey with their own students – particularly BAME students – in the process of revising their curricula. Existing reflective processes have focused on reading list or syllabus reviews (Adewumi and Mitton 2022; Borkin 2021; Schucan Bird and and Pitman 2020; Thomas 2022). While such reviews prompt conversations about the scarcity of BAME authors in the curriculum, and suggest actions for reform, our conceptualisation of culturally sensitive education suggests that attention also needs to be paid to the other three areas of culturally sensitive curricula (e.g. Positive Portrayals, Challenge Power and Inclusive Classroom Interactions). While the presence of diversity in the curriculum is important, the extent to which diversity is positively portrayed also matters insofar as it may affirm racially minoritised students (Harper, Smit, and Davis 2018). Helping students to develop critical consciousness by challenging power structures and social injustices was also particularly important to promoting students' interest.

There are many ways to make curricula culturally sensitive. These may include attending to the case examples used in class discussions, diversifying images used in lectures, flexibility around assessments to enable students to connect to their own cultures, and encouraging students to interact with diverse peers respectfully (Gabriel 2017; Fuentes, Zelaya, and Madsen 2021; Raycroft and Flynn 2020). The CSCS items also suggest a variety of issues to attend to.

Directions for future research

The development and validation of new measurement scales for cultural sensitivity of HE curricula (CSCS) is a significant contribution, enabling further research on curricula as part of culturally

engaging campus environments (Museus 2014). The findings support calls for academics to improve their cultural competence (Gabriel 2017; Purnell 2000) and diversify their curricula (Douglas, Shockley, and Toldson 2020; Peters 2018), suggesting that a culturally sensitive curriculum may enhance BAME students' interactions with teachers and interest.

This study focused on advanced humanities and social science students, thus first year students and science students have not been systematically tested. Further research with the CSCS in other institutional contexts, in a wider range of subjects, and systematically across different programmes in the same discipline would be useful next steps.

Future research should investigate the relationship between culturally sensitive curricula with other key student outcomes, including achievement. The use of larger samples in a variety of contexts may enable a more granular analysis and desegregation of more diverse subgroups of students. Ultimately, the CSCS should be used in intervention studies in which course contents and teaching approaches are made more culturally sensitive and tested for their impact on students' perceptions, engagement, and achievement.

Note

1. BAME is a collective term used by the British government to describe a range of people of colour in the UK including those of Black, Asian or minority ethnic heritage. Following Omi and Winant (1994), we use the word ethnicity to represent the result of group formation process based on culture and descent.

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