

Sohdi, Reece (2026) "I Don’t See Myself There" - Curriculum Representation, Epistemic Exclusion and Conditional Belonging in Higher Education. The Curriculum Journal. ISSN 0958-5176

Version: VOR

Available under license: Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

Downloaded from: https://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/id/eprint/20801/

Which version am I reading (articles, book chapters and books)

Pre-print (or submitted version): the version of an article or chapter before any peer-review. Can be submitted to a publisher or added to a pre-print server.

AAM: Author Accepted Manuscript - The version of the article formally accepted for publication after the peer-review process. It includes the changes made by the author(s) in line with peer-reviewers' comments. It has not undergone the publisher's formatting, type-setting and copyediting.

VOR: Version of Record - The version published on the publisher's website which includes formatting, typesetting and copyediting.

Usage guidelines

Please refer to the usage guidelines at http://sure.sunderland.ac.uk/policies.html or alternatively contact sure@sunderland.ac.uk.

Check for updates

Received: 23 July 2026 | Accepted: 15 October 2026

DOI: 10.1002/curj.70106

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Curriculum Journal BERA

‘I don't see myself there’ – Curriculum representation, epistemic exclusion and conditional belonging in higher education

Reece Sohdi

Faculty of Education, Society and Creative Industries, University of Sunderland, Sunderland, UK

Correspondence
Reece Sohdi, Faculty of Education, Society and Creative Industries, University of Sunderland, Sunderland, UK.
Email: reece.sohdi@sunderland.ac.uk

Abstract

Curriculum representation has become a central concern within higher education, yet relatively little empirical research has examined how students interpret curriculum-making and what these interpretations reveal about disciplinary knowledge and belonging. This explanatory mixed-methods study investigates students' perceptions of curriculum representation at a post-92 university in England using survey data from 108 students across multiple faculties and levels of study. Descriptive statistical analyses identified patterns in students' perceptions of curriculum representation and belonging, while reflexive thematic analysis explored how these patterns were experienced and interpreted. The findings indicate that students understand curriculum representation not simply as the inclusion of diverse contributors but as a process through which disciplinary knowledge is legitimised and recognition is negotiated. Experiences of belonging were closely associated with these interpretations, particularly among global ethnic majority students who reported lower levels of curriculum representation. The study contributes to curriculum scholarship by conceptualising curriculum representation as a process of epistemic legitimacy, positioning students' interpretations of curriculum-making as central to understanding participation, recognition and belonging in higher education.

KEYWORDS

critical race theory, curriculum representation, epistemic legitimacy, higher education, student belonging

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
© 2026 The Author(s). *The Curriculum Journal* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of British Educational Research Association.

INTRODUCTION

Curriculum is neither a neutral collection of disciplinary knowledge nor simply a vehicle through which learning is organised. Rather, it is a process of knowledge selection, organisation and legitimation through which educational institutions determine what is considered worthwhile knowledge, whose voices become authoritative, and how disciplinary communities are imagined and sustained (Apple, 2004; Deng, 2022; Pinar, 2012; Young, 2013). Decisions concerning what enters the curriculum (and equally what remains absent) are therefore educational, political and epistemic acts. They shape not only what students learn but also how they come to understand the histories, values and identities that define their disciplines. Curriculum, in this sense, is a process of curriculum-making through which institutions continually construct and reproduce particular understandings of knowledge, legitimacy and participation (Priestley et al., 2021; Priestley et al., 2026).

Within higher education, debates surrounding curriculum have increasingly moved beyond questions of content coverage towards broader concerns regarding representation, inclusion and epistemic justice. Across many disciplines, scholars have argued that university curricula continue to privilege Eurocentric, White and Western intellectual traditions while marginalising alternative epistemologies, histories and ways of knowing (Bhambra, 2014; Bhambra et al., 2018; Connell, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2014). These critiques have fuelled growing international interest in curriculum decolonisation, not simply as an exercise in diversifying reading lists but as a reconsideration of how knowledge is selected, validated and organised within disciplinary traditions. Consequently, curriculum representation has become a significant area of curriculum inquiry because it raises fundamental questions concerning whose knowledge counts, whose experiences are recognised and whose contributions remain peripheral within formal educational structures.

Within curriculum studies, such questions are increasingly understood as questions of epistemic legitimacy. Curriculum does not merely transmit existing knowledge; it establishes which forms of knowledge are considered authoritative and which are excluded from disciplinary canons (Apple, 2004; Young, 2013). These processes are closely related to broader discussions of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), whereby individuals or groups are systematically disadvantaged in their capacity to participate as knowers. Building on this work, this study uses the concept of epistemic exclusion to describe the systematic marginalisation or absence of particular knowledges, identities and histories within curriculum. In curriculum contexts, epistemic exclusion becomes visible through decisions regarding whose scholarship is taught, whose perspectives are normalised and whose intellectual contributions remain invisible. Such decisions are rarely experienced simply as omissions in course content; rather, they communicate powerful messages concerning legitimacy, authority and participation within disciplinary communities.

These curricular processes have important implications for how students position themselves within higher education. Although a substantial body of research has demonstrated that a sense of belonging is associated with student engagement, persistence and academic success (Allen et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2019), belonging is increasingly recognised as more than an affective or interpersonal construct. Rather than emerging solely through peer relationships or institutional support, belonging is shaped by the ways in which students encounter themselves and fail to encounter themselves within the knowledge structures of their disciplines (Ashwin, 2008; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022). When curricula consistently privilege particular intellectual traditions while marginalising others, students may interpret these patterns as signals regarding whose knowledge, histories and identities are recognised as legitimate within academic communities. Belonging therefore becomes inseparable from curriculum because curriculum communicates the epistemic boundaries of disciplinary participation.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

This relationship is particularly significant for racially marginalised students. Research has consistently shown that these students report lower levels of belonging and are more likely to describe experiences of marginalisation, invisibility and misrecognition within higher education (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal, 2018; Cureton & Gravestock, 2019). However, much of this literature has examined belonging primarily through social, institutional or psychological lenses, often treating curriculum as one factor among many rather than as a central mechanism through which belonging is negotiated. Similarly, scholarship on decolonising the curriculum has largely focused on institutional initiatives, curriculum reform or theoretical critiques of Eurocentrism (Bhambra et al., 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020), with comparatively less attention given to how students themselves interpret curriculum representation and what these interpretations reveal about curriculum as an epistemic practice.

Critical race theory (CRT) provides an important analytical framework for understanding these dynamics. CRT challenges assumptions that educational institutions are neutral spaces, arguing instead that racism is embedded within the structures, practices and knowledge systems through which institutions operate (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2006). Applied to curriculum, CRT highlights how decisions concerning knowledge selection and validation reproduce particular racialised understandings of legitimacy and authority. Rather than viewing disparities in belonging as individual experiences of adjustment, CRT situates them within broader systems of epistemic power that shape whose knowledge is recognised and whose perspectives remain absent. Within this study, CRT therefore functions not as the primary object of inquiry but as the theoretical lens through which students' interpretations of curriculum representation are understood.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to curriculum representation, belonging and decolonisation, the intersection between these areas remains comparatively under-examined. Research on belonging has increasingly recognised the importance of institutional, relational and structural conditions, while curriculum scholarship has demonstrated how knowledge selection and representation are implicated in questions of authority, recognition and inequality. Less empirical attention, however, has been given specifically to how students perceive racial and cultural representation within the curricula they encounter and how these perceptions intersect with experiences of recognition and belonging within disciplinary contexts. Examining this intersection shifts attention from curriculum representation as content diversity alone towards students' interpretations of curriculum as part of their wider experience of disciplinary participation.

Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions:

> RQ1. How do students perceive racial and cultural representation within the curricula they encounter in higher education?
>
> RQ2. How do students' perceptions and accounts of curriculum representation intersect with their experiences of recognition and belonging within their academic and disciplinary contexts?

Drawing on survey responses from 108 students studying across multiple disciplines within a post-92 university in England, the study examines descriptive patterns in curriculum representation and belonging alongside students' open-ended accounts of their experiences. Particular attention is given to the experiences of racially marginalised students, while responses from across the sample provide the wider institutional context within which these experiences are interpreted.

This paper reports the first, exploratory phase of a sequential mixed-methods project examining curriculum representation and student belonging in higher education. This phase draws on a cross-sectional survey combining closed-response items with open-ended

questions to identify patterns in students' perceptions of curriculum representation and belonging and to explore how participants articulate these experiences. A subsequent qualitative phase will use in-depth methods to investigate the relationships identified through the survey in greater depth. In doing so, the paper contributes to curriculum studies by bringing students' interpretations of curriculum representation into dialogue with debates concerning knowledge selection, epistemic recognition and disciplinary participation. The concepts of epistemic exclusion and conditional belonging are used as interpretive possibilities through which these accounts can be examined, rather than as outcomes assumed or established in advance. A subsequent qualitative phase of the project will examine these relationships in greater depth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum-making, knowledge and representation

Curriculum is not simply a body of disciplinary content but a process through which knowledge is selected, organised and accorded educational value. Curriculum decisions therefore involve judgements about what knowledge matters, whose intellectual contributions are regarded as authoritative and what students are expected to encounter as constitutive of a discipline (Apple, 2004; Deng, 2022; Young, 2013). These judgements are historically and institutionally situated. Although Young's (2013) account of powerful knowledge emphasises students' entitlement to disciplinary forms of knowledge, what becomes established as disciplinary knowledge remains open to questions concerning selection, authority and access.

The concept of curriculum-making is particularly useful here because it shifts attention from curriculum as a fixed syllabus towards the processes through which curriculum is produced and enacted.

Curriculum emerges through interactions between disciplinary traditions, institutional structures, policy and educational practice (Priestley et al., 2021). Pinar's (2012) conception of curriculum as a 'complicated conversation' similarly foregrounds its relationship with identity, history and social experience. From this perspective, curriculum-making concerns not only what students learn but how disciplinary communities establish and communicate their intellectual boundaries.

Questions of representation form part of this process. Critiques of Eurocentrism have demonstrated how Western intellectual traditions can become positioned as universal or foundational while knowledge produced elsewhere is treated as supplementary, specialist or peripheral (Bhambra, 2014; Connell, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2014). Scholarship on decolonising higher education consequently distinguishes between curriculum diversification, in which a wider range of contributors is incorporated into existing structures, and more fundamental reconsideration of the epistemological assumptions through which disciplinary knowledge is organised (Bhambra et al., 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Representation, on this account, concerns not only who appears within a curriculum but the status accorded to different knowledge traditions within it.

This distinction provides a basis for considering curriculum representation in relation to epistemic legitimacy. Fricker's (2007) work on epistemic injustice draws attention to inequalities in whose knowledge and capacities as knowers are recognised, while subsequent scholarship has examined how institutional knowledge practices can produce forms of epistemic exclusion (Medina, 2013; Settles et al., 2021). Applied cautiously to curriculum, these ideas invite examination of how students interpret the visibility, absence and positioning of different contributors and knowledge traditions. They do not mean that absence necessarily produces exclusion for

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

individual students; rather, they provide a conceptual vocabulary for investigating how curriculum representation may be interpreted as communicating disciplinary authority and recognition.

Empirical research has extensively examined curriculum diversification and decolonisation initiatives, yet students' interpretations of representation within their everyday encounters with disciplinary curricula remain comparatively less developed. This study therefore approaches representation not as a numerical proxy for curriculum diversity, but as an aspect of curriculum-making whose meanings are interpreted by students.

Curriculum whiteness and epistemic exclusion

Questions of curriculum representation acquire particular significance when considered through race. Curriculum whiteness describes more than the numerical predominance of White scholars within teaching materials; it concerns the normalisation of particular intellectual histories and epistemologies as universal, objective or foundational while others are positioned as peripheral (Bhambra, 2014; Leonardo, 2009). Such patterns are historically connected to colonial relations of knowledge production through which Western institutions acquired authority to define what constituted legitimate knowledge (Connell, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2014).

CRT provides the principal analytical lens through which racialised patterns of representation are considered in this study. CRT rejects assumptions that educational institutions and their practices are racially neutral, directing attention instead towards the ways racism can become embedded within apparently ordinary institutional structures and knowledge practices (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2006). Applied to curriculum, this does not require assuming that every omission represents an intentional act of exclusion. Rather, CRT enables scrutiny of how historically established disciplinary conventions may reproduce racialised patterns of authority even where curriculum decisions are presented as neutral or meritocratic.

This distinction is important when considering epistemic exclusion. The concept is used here to describe patterns through which particular knowledge traditions, histories or contributors may be marginalised within students' encounters with the curriculum. Such exclusion may be visible through absence, but also through positioning: for example, where non-Western perspectives appear primarily as optional, supplementary or exceptional rather than as constitutive of disciplinary knowledge. Arday (2021) and Arday and Mirza (2018) similarly demonstrate how racialised institutional and knowledge hierarchies affect recognition within higher education.

The analytical purpose of CRT in this study is therefore not to predetermine students' experiences as instances of curriculum whiteness. It provides a lens through which patterns in students' accounts can be examined, particularly where participants themselves identify racialised absences, hierarchies or forms of recognition. This distinction preserves attention to structural power while allowing the empirical data to determine whether, where and how students perceive such processes within their disciplines.

Belonging as situated and structurally conditioned

Student belonging has become a significant concern within higher education because of its associations with engagement, persistence and educational success (Allen et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2019). However, belonging should not be reduced to an individual psychological state or students' capacity to integrate successfully into an existing institution. Earlier models of student persistence, particularly Tinto's (1993) work on integration, have been influential in positioning students' academic and social relationships as important to persistence. Tinto's subsequent scholarship (2025) has developed this position by placing

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

greater emphasis on students' perceptions of their experiences and on institutional conditions that support persistence, including students' sense that they belong.

Critical scholarship has further challenged accounts that locate responsibility for belonging primarily with students. Carruthers Thomas (2015, 2018) draws attention to the spatial, social and institutional production of belonging, demonstrating that students encounter universities through structures and cultures that make belonging more readily available to some than others. More recent work, including Wong (2024), similarly complicates universalised accounts of belonging by foregrounding inequalities in how students experience recognition and participation. Belonging is therefore better understood as relational and situated: produced through interactions between students and the institutional, cultural and material conditions of higher education rather than possessed as an individual attribute.

Gravett and Ajjawi's (2022) conceptualisation of belonging as situated practice is particularly valuable for the present study. Their account moves beyond treating belonging as a stable psychological condition towards understanding it as dynamic, contextual and enacted through everyday practices and relations. From this perspective, students may experience belonging differently across spaces, relationships and moments within the same institution. This helps explain why supportive interpersonal relationships need not necessarily translate into an unqualified sense of institutional or disciplinary belonging.

Racial inequalities further complicate these experiences. Racially marginalised students have reported experiences of exclusion, misrecognition and differential belonging within UK higher education (Bhopal, 2018; Cureton & Gravestock, 2019). CRT directs attention away from interpreting such differences as failures of individual integration and towards the institutional arrangements through which recognition and participation are unevenly structured. Belonging, in this study, is therefore approached as situated and structurally conditioned, rather than as either a purely psychological experience or an outcome that curriculum alone can produce.

Bringing curriculum representation and belonging into dialogue

Understanding belonging as situated and structurally conditioned creates space for considering curriculum as one of the contexts through which recognition may be experienced. This does not mean that curriculum determines whether students belong. Belonging is produced through multiple and intersecting relationships, spaces and institutional conditions. Curriculum may nevertheless matter because it constitutes a significant part of students' everyday encounter with their disciplines and with institutional decisions about what knowledge is valued.

Existing curriculum scholarship demonstrates how knowledge selection and representation are implicated in questions of authority and epistemic recognition, while critical belonging scholarship demonstrates that recognition and participation are unevenly structured. These literatures therefore share an interest in who is recognised as a legitimate participant within educational communities, but they have less frequently been brought together empirically through students' accounts of curriculum representation.

The present study examines this intersection. Rather than treating curriculum representation as a mechanism that produces belonging, it asks whether and how students connect their encounters with racial and cultural representation to wider experiences of recognition and participation within their academic contexts. Conditional belonging is consequently treated as a sensitising concept rather than a predetermined outcome: it draws attention to accounts in which belonging appears partial, contingent or uneven without assuming that curriculum representation is its cause.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

This positioning establishes the basis for the two research questions: how students perceive racial and cultural representation within their curricula, and how these perceptions and accounts intersect with experiences of recognition and belonging.

METHODOLOGY

This paper reports the first phase of a wider sequential mixed-methods project examining curriculum representation and student belonging in higher education. Phase 1 employed a cross-sectional mixed-methods survey combining closed-response items with open-ended questions. The quantitative component was designed to identify descriptive patterns in students' perceptions of curriculum representation and belonging, while the qualitative component provided contextual insight into how participants articulated these experiences. The two forms of data were therefore treated as complementary but unequal in-depth: open-ended survey responses were used to illuminate and complicate quantitative patterns rather than as equivalent to data generated through in-depth qualitative interviews.

The study was informed by an interpretivist epistemological orientation, recognising that curriculum representation cannot be understood solely through curriculum audit but also through students' interpretations of their encounters with disciplinary knowledge. CRT provided an analytical lens for examining potentially racialised patterns within these accounts. The current phase is exploratory rather than causal or statistically generalisable; its purpose is to identify patterns and questions for further investigation through the subsequent qualitative phase.

Research context

The study was conducted at a post-92 university in the north of England with a long-standing widening participation mission and a diverse student population. This context provided an appropriate setting for examining curriculum representation because debates concerning curriculum reform, knowledge diversity and belonging are particularly pertinent within contemporary higher education. Although situated within a single institution, the study contributes to broader discussions surrounding curriculum-making and epistemic inclusion.

Sampling and participant characteristics

Participants were recruited between May and July 2024 through university-wide communications, programme leaders who circulated the survey via virtual learning environments (VLEs), and student networks. Participation was voluntary, anonymous and open to all students enrolled on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. A total of 123 responses were received. Following data screening, 15 incomplete responses were excluded because substantial sections of the questionnaire had not been completed, resulting in a final analytical sample of 108 participants.

The final sample comprised students from multiple ethnic backgrounds, levels of study and academic faculties, enabling exploration of curriculum representation across diverse disciplinary contexts. Participant characteristics are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Although students from a range of ethnic backgrounds were included, the study does not seek statistical comparison between racial groups; rather, it foregrounds the experiences of racially marginalised students while situating these within a broader institutional context.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

TABLE 1 Breakdown of participant ethnicity.

White – English, Scottish, Welsh, northern Irish or British	27
Any other White	2
Global ethnic majority (GEM)	
Asian – Indian or Indian British	16
Asian – Chinese or Chinese British	8
Asian – Bangladeshi or Bangladeshi British	6
Any other Asian background	3
Black – African or African British	20
Black – Caribbean or Caribbean British	15
Any other Black background	5
Asian – Pakistani or Pakistani British	6

TABLE 2 Breakdown of level of study.

Level of study	Total # of participants	# of White	# of GEM
IFY	4	2	2
Apprenticeship	24	11	13
UG	46	9	37
PGCE	10	3	7
PGT	16	2	14
PGR	8	2	6

Data collection instruments

The instrument combined Likert-scale and multiple choice items with open-ended questions, enabling descriptive patterns to be considered alongside participants' written elaborations within a single data collection phase. The open-ended questions were intended to contextualise and extend the closed-response data rather than generate the depth associated with standalone qualitative interviews or focus groups. Belonging items examined students' inclusion within academic studies and perceptions that their racial and ethnic identities were recognised by peers and lecturers (Allen et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2019). Curriculum representation items explored perceptions of global perspectives, visibility of non-White contributors and representation of students' own racial and cultural backgrounds. Questions relating to professional identity examined career aspirations, role models and opportunities for disciplinary participation, while open-ended responses enabled participants to elaborate on experiences of curriculum representation and suggest changes to strengthen inclusion.

Data analysis

Closed-response survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions and cross-tabulations, to identify patterns in perceptions of curriculum representation and belonging across ethnicity, faculty and level of study. Given the exploratory purpose, single-institution sample and subgroup sizes, inferential statistical testing was not undertaken. The quantitative findings are therefore interpreted descriptively and are not used to establish statistically significant group differences or causal relationships.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/cuj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Open-ended responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis. Responses were read repeatedly before initial semantic codes were generated around participants' accounts of curriculum representation, recognition and belonging. Codes were iteratively grouped and refined into broader patterns of meaning. Given the typically shorter and less dialogic character of open-text survey responses compared with interviews or focus groups, the analysis sought patterned interpretive insight rather than comprehensive accounts of participants' experiences. Coding was initially grounded in participants' responses, with CRT subsequently informing interpretation of potentially racialised patterns of representation and recognition. Furthermore, open-ended responses were considered alongside descriptive patterns to identify areas of convergence, divergence and elaboration between what participants selected in closed-response items and what they articulated in their written accounts. Integration (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) was therefore used to generate exploratory interpretations of the relationship between curriculum representation, recognition and belonging, rather than to establish explanatory or causal mechanisms.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained through institutional review procedures. Participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were assured of anonymity, confidentiality and secure data storage. Given the sensitive nature of discussions relating to race and belonging, information regarding university well-being services accompanied the survey in line with BERA (2024) ethical guidance.

Positionality and reflexivity

In line with decolonial and critical research traditions, this study recognises that the researcher is not a neutral observer but is situated within the research context (Smith, 2021). The research is informed by a commitment to equity, inclusion and decolonial praxis within higher education, which shapes both the framing of the research questions and the interpretation of findings. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, particularly in relation to the interpretation of qualitative data, the construction of analytical categories (e.g., GEM) and the potential influence of institutional positioning. Reflexive attention was also given to the possibility that the study's theoretical commitments could encourage interpretation of ambiguous responses through predetermined concepts of epistemic exclusion or curriculum whiteness; analytical claims were therefore restricted to interpretations supported by participants' responses. Engaging with student voice as data required careful consideration of how experiences of marginalisation are represented and interpreted, ensuring that participants' perspectives are not subsumed within dominant accounts.

RESULTS

The findings integrate descriptive survey data with participants' open-ended accounts to address the two research questions. First examining patterns in students' perceptions of racial and cultural representation within their curricula and subsequently considering how participants' accounts of representation intersect with experiences of recognition and belonging. Descriptive survey findings are considered alongside open-ended responses

where these elaborate, complicate or provide context for the quantitative patterns. Given the exploratory character of this first phase, the findings identify patterns and points of connection rather than explanatory or causal relationships between curriculum representation and belonging.

Curriculum representation as epistemic visibility

Across the sample, perceptions of curriculum representation revealed consistent patterns of epistemic imbalance (Figure 1). Only around one-quarter of participants indicated that their curriculum consistently reflected global perspectives, while exposure to non-White contributors remained limited, particularly among Global ethnic majority (GEM) students. More strikingly, over half of GEM students reported that the curriculum only 'never' or 'sometimes' reflected people from their own racial, ethnic or cultural background, compared with substantially higher levels of recognition reported by White students.

Participants described this absence not simply as a lack of diversity but as evidence of whose knowledge was regarded as legitimate within their disciplines. When invited to identify perspectives or contributors they considered insufficiently represented, one Community and Youth Work student identified

> Decolonising community and youth work, and more generally contributions from non-white sociologists, theorists or writers.

The response identifies a perceived gap in the racial diversity of contributors encountered within the discipline. On its own, it does not explain how the participant experienced that absence;

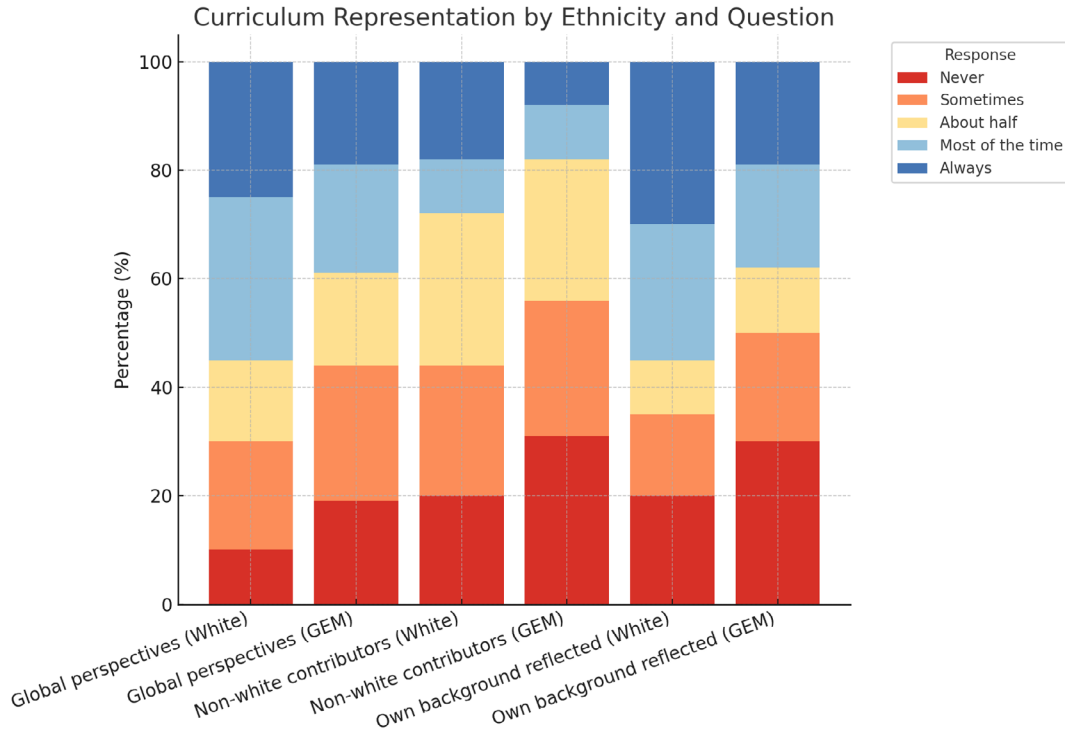


FIGURE 1 Stacked bar chart: Exposure to non-White contributors in field (White vs GEM).

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/tcuj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

rather, it provides an example of the forms of representation students considered missing from their curricula.

> Medical research in general should [be] targeted on minorities since some conditions depend on genetics. For example, skin assessment in Black and Brown people were not properly explored and taught to healthcare students.

Here, the participant frames representation not only as an issue of visibility but as a question of what professional knowledge healthcare students encounter, connecting racial representation directly with perceived preparedness for practice.

Perceptions of imbalance were not confined to GEM participants. One White respondent similarly observed,

> I feel like white men get a lot of representation, but women and POC get left behind.

This provides further evidence that some students perceived representation within their curricula as uneven, although the survey cannot establish the composition of the curriculum independently of participants' perceptions.

Another participant identified what they perceived as an imbalance within particular areas of disciplinary content:

> Not enough stress is placed on Asia or non-western perspectives when talking about post-colonialism, nationalism and globalisation.

The response indicates dissatisfaction with the relative emphasis accorded to Western and non-Western perspectives rather than the complete absence of global content. Collectively, these accounts indicate that students interpret curriculum representation as signalling whose knowledge, histories and experiences are considered central to their disciplines.

For one participant, perceived absence was expressed more personally:

> I don't see myself there.

The brevity of the response limits what can be inferred about the particular curricular experiences to which the participant was referring. Nevertheless, read alongside the more specific accounts above, it illustrates how questions of representation could also be articulated by participants in terms of self-recognition.

Experiences of belonging and recognition

Patterns of belonging mirrored disparities in curriculum representation (Figure 2). Although almost half of respondents reported feeling a strong sense of belonging overall, substantial differences emerged between White and GEM students across measures of belonging, perceived respect and programme inclusion. White students were consistently more likely to report feeling that their racial or ethnic identity was respected by both peers and lecturers and to indicate that they ‘always’ felt included within their academic programme.

However, the qualitative data demonstrate that belonging was rarely experienced as fixed. Instead, participants frequently described it as conditional, varying across programmes, modules and institutional encounters.

Some open-ended responses also complicated any straightforward relationship between curriculum and belonging by locating recognition within other aspects of institutional

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

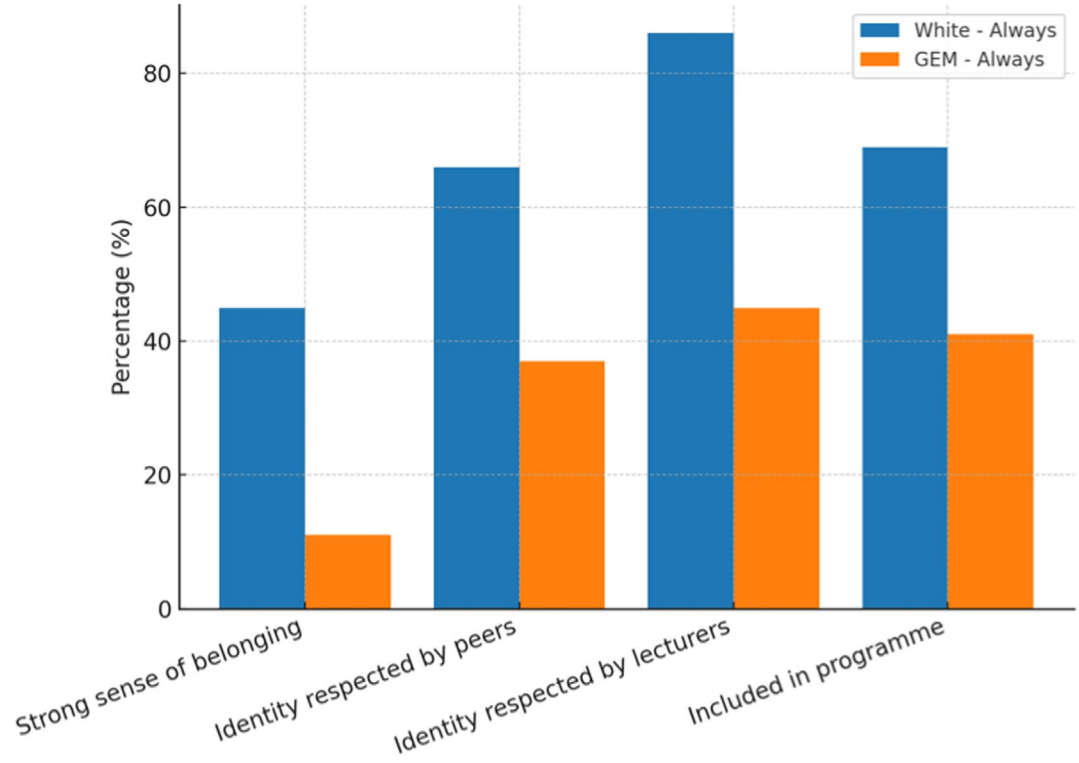


FIGURE 2 Bar chart: Sense of belonging disaggregated by ethnicity.

experience. One participant distinguished explicitly between interpersonal and institutional support:

> The university as a whole doesn't do much to support me in achieving my academic goals in a way that addresses intersectional oppressions which I face. My lecturers are always incredibly supportive and seek to understand me and my experiences, but the institution has a long way to go.

This account does not identify curriculum as the source of exclusion; instead, it illustrates the wider institutional conditions within which experiences of belonging were situated'.

This distinction recurred throughout the data. Participants consistently praised individual lecturers while simultaneously questioning whether institutional systems themselves fostered inclusion. A second participant similarly emphasised lecturer support while identifying language and educational experience as relevant to their participation:

> I have support from all my lecturers. Being a Black African learner makes it harder as English is not my first language. But all the lecturers in my Programme team are always helpful.

Together, these responses indicate that students located belonging within multiple and intersecting conditions, cautioning against attributing differences in belonging to curriculum representation alone. Experiences of belonging cannot be attributed to curriculum representation in isolation. Participants referred to lecturers, language, institutional support and intersectional experiences alongside the curriculum, reinforcing the need to interpret the descriptive association between representation and belonging cautiously.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Curriculum representation and imagining future disciplinary identities

Participants also connected curriculum representation to their developing professional identities and future aspirations. Rather than viewing representation solely as an issue of fairness, students described it as shaping whether they could imagine themselves within their chosen professions. The clearest explicit connection between representation and belonging appeared in accounts of professional visibility. A Community and Youth Work participant reflected:

> It's hard because the regional community and youth work sector is extremely white British, but having more opportunities to meet or interact with sector professionals who are of colour would probably have done loads to help my sense of belonging at university, within the sector, and in the North East.

Unlike more ambiguous responses, this participant directly connects greater racial representation within the professional community with their anticipated sense of belonging. The account also extends representation beyond taught content, suggesting that students may encounter disciplinary representation through the professionals and communities made visible around a programme.

Students reporting lower levels of curriculum representation were also more likely to describe belonging as uncertain, negotiated and dependent upon particular institutional encounters. Conversely, participants who described positive experiences of belonging frequently attributed these to individual lecturers rather than curriculum structures or institutional systems.

Taken together, the findings identify two related but analytically distinct patterns. First, GEM respondents reported lower levels of curriculum representation across several survey items, and open-ended responses identified perceived omissions in contributors, perspectives and professional representation. Second, experiences of belonging were uneven, with participants locating inclusion and recognition across multiple dimensions of university life, including relationships with lecturers and wider institutional support.

Some participants explicitly connected representation with recognition or belonging, most clearly where they discussed seeing themselves within the curriculum or encountering professionals with whom they identified. Other responses, however, located belonging in circumstances that could not be attributed to curriculum. The findings therefore provide exploratory evidence of points of intersection between curriculum representation and belonging, while also demonstrating that the relationship is neither singular nor established as causal within this phase of the study.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how students perceive racial and cultural representation within their curricula and how these perceptions intersect with experiences of recognition and belonging. The findings identify a consistent descriptive pattern in which GEM respondents reported lower levels of curriculum representation than White respondents across several survey items. Open-ended responses also identified perceived omissions in contributors, perspectives and professional representation. These findings provide support for treating curriculum representation as an important aspect of students' encounters with disciplinary knowledge, while the variation within participants' accounts cautions against interpreting curriculum as a singular or causal determinant of belonging.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Curriculum representation, knowledge and recognition

The findings reinforce curriculum scholarship that positions curriculum as a selective process rather than a neutral body of disciplinary content (Apple, 2004; Deng, 2022; Young, 2013). Participants did not encounter representation simply in terms of whether particular authors appeared within teaching materials. Some identified the relative absence of non-White theorists, limited attention to Asian and non-Western perspectives, or gaps in professional knowledge relating to racially diverse populations. These accounts suggest that students notice not only who or what is present within curriculum, but also the relative emphasis accorded to different knowledge and perspectives.

Such perceptions can be considered alongside scholarship on epistemic legitimacy and exclusion. Fricker (2007) and Medina (2013) draw attention to inequalities within knowledge systems, while decolonial scholarship has questioned the historical positioning of Western knowledge traditions as universal or foundational (Bhambra, 2014; de Sousa Santos, 2014). The present study cannot establish independently whether the curricula encountered by participants were epistemically exclusionary because no curriculum audit was undertaken. What it does show is that some students perceived racial and cultural absences and imbalances within their disciplinary learning. The distinction is important as the findings concern students' interpretations of curriculum rather than an objective assessment of curriculum composition.

CRT offers one lens through which these patterns may be interpreted. The lower levels of perceived representation reported by GEM respondents, alongside accounts identifying absent non-White contributors and perspectives, are consistent with CRT's concern with how apparently ordinary institutional practices can reproduce racialised patterns of recognition (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2006). However, CRT should not be used to predetermine the meaning of every curricular absence. Some responses identified specific racialised omissions, while others described broader concerns about international perspectives, disciplinary knowledge or professional preparation. The value of CRT here lies in sensitising analysis to possible racialised patterns while retaining attention to the particular meanings expressed by participants.

The findings also complicate a simple distinction between inclusion and exclusion. Participants did not describe uniformly absent representation. The quantitative responses were distributed across the response categories, while qualitative comments indicated that some global or culturally diverse material was present but perceived as uneven or insufficiently emphasised. Curriculum representation may therefore be better understood, within this dataset, as variable and uneven rather than simply present or absent. This distinction has implications for curriculum-making: additive inclusion of individual authors or examples may not necessarily alter how students perceive the relative authority accorded to different knowledge traditions across a programme (Bhambra et al., 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020).

Belonging as situated rather than curriculum-determined

The relationship between these perceptions and belonging is less straightforward. The descriptive data show differences between White and GEM respondents across several belonging measures, but the study does not establish that differences in curriculum representation caused those differences. This distinction is especially important given critical scholarship that conceptualises belonging as relational, situated and produced across multiple dimensions of university experience rather than as a stable individual characteristic (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022).

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Participants' written accounts illustrate this complexity. Some made direct connections between representation and belonging, particularly where they discussed seeing themselves within disciplinary knowledge or encountering professionals from racially diverse backgrounds. The statement '*I don't see myself there*', while too brief to establish why the participant experienced this absence, illustrates how representation could be articulated through the language of self-recognition. More explicit was the account of a Community and Youth Work student who connected opportunities to interact with professionals of colour with their anticipated sense of belonging at university, within the profession and within the region. In these instances, participants themselves connected visibility and representation with their position within disciplinary or professional communities.

Other accounts, however, located belonging elsewhere. Participants referred to supportive relationships with lecturers, institutional support, language, transition and intersectional experiences. These responses are significant because they prevent curriculum representation from becoming an all-purpose explanation for differences in belonging. They support instead a situated account in which curriculum is one of several contexts through which recognition and participation may be negotiated. This is consistent with Gravett and Ajjawi's (2022) account of belonging as situated practice and with critical approaches that locate belonging within institutional and social conditions rather than solely within individual students.

Within this framing, conditional belonging remains potentially useful, but more modestly than originally proposed. The present data do not establish conditional belonging as a distinct curricular phenomenon. Rather, the concept can sensitise attention to accounts in which inclusion appears partial, contextual or dependent upon particular relationships and environments. Curriculum representation may contribute to such conditions for some students, but the survey data cannot determine its relative importance alongside other institutional, interpersonal and biographical factors. Further qualitative inquiry is required to understand when students connect curriculum representation with belonging, how those connections are made, and when other conditions become more salient.

Implications for curriculum-making

Despite these limitations, the findings have implications for curriculum studies and curriculum-making. Students' accounts suggest that representation is noticed at several levels: through the contributors encountered within disciplinary knowledge, the geographical and cultural perspectives emphasised within teaching, the applicability of professional knowledge to diverse populations, and the professionals made visible around programmes. Curriculum representation therefore extends beyond reading-list composition and may involve how programmes construct the intellectual and professional communities into which students are being introduced.

This supports caution regarding additive approaches to curriculum diversification. Including individual non-Western authors or isolated examples may increase visibility without necessarily changing the relative positioning of knowledge across a programme. Curriculum review might therefore ask not only whether diverse contributors are present, but how knowledge traditions are positioned, connected and accorded authority across modules and levels of study. Such questions remain consistent with curriculum-making scholarship that emphasises the ongoing selection, organisation and enactment of knowledge rather than treating curriculum as a fixed product (Priestley et al., 2021).

The findings do not justify universal prescriptions for curriculum reform from a single institutional case. They do, however, suggest the value of incorporating students' interpretations into curriculum review alongside other forms of evidence. Student perceptions cannot

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

establish the epistemological character of a curriculum on their own, but they can reveal how curriculum is encountered and understood by those participating in it. Bringing such accounts into dialogue with curriculum mapping, disciplinary expertise and programme-level review may provide a fuller picture of how representation is enacted and experienced.

Contribution, limitations and further inquiry

The study makes a focused contribution by bringing students' perceptions of curriculum representation into conversation with critically situated understandings of belonging. Rather than demonstrating that curriculum representation produces belonging or exclusion, the findings identify an under-examined intersection: some students explicitly connect curricular and professional representation with recognition and belonging, while others locate belonging within different interpersonal and institutional conditions. This complexity is itself important because it suggests that the relationship between curriculum and belonging should be investigated rather than assumed.

The findings must also be interpreted within the limits of this first exploratory phase. The study is based on a single institutional sample and uses descriptive rather than inferential quantitative analysis; consequently, differences between groups should be understood as patterns within this dataset rather than statistically generalisable effects. Similarly, open-ended survey responses provide useful elaboration but do not offer the depth or opportunity for probing available through interviews or focus groups. No direct curriculum audit was undertaken, meaning that claims concern perceived representation rather than independently verified curriculum content.

These limitations provide the rationale for the subsequent qualitative phase of the wider project. In-depth inquiry can examine how students define representation, what particular curricular encounters become significant, how these experiences relate to other dimensions of belonging, and whether concepts such as epistemic exclusion or conditional belonging adequately capture participants' own understandings. The present study therefore serves less as a demonstration of a fixed relationship between curriculum representation and belonging than as empirical groundwork for investigating how curriculum may participate in the wider institutional conditions through which recognition and belonging are experienced.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how students perceive racial and cultural representation within their curricula and how these perceptions intersect with experiences of recognition and belonging in higher education. Across the survey, GEM students reported lower levels of curriculum representation than White students on several measures, while open-ended responses identified perceived gaps in contributors, perspectives and professional representation. Some participants explicitly connected these experiences with questions of self-recognition and belonging, while others located belonging within different interpersonal and institutional conditions, including lecturer support, language and wider experiences of inclusion.

These findings suggest that curriculum representation is one potentially important dimension of students' encounters with disciplinary knowledge, but they do not establish that curriculum representation determines or causes belonging. Instead, the study highlights an under-examined intersection between what students encounter within curricula, how they interpret recognition within disciplinary communities, and how they describe their wider experiences of participation. In this sense, the contribution of the study lies less in proposing a new causal model of belonging than in bringing curriculum representation into dialogue with

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

structurally situated understandings of belonging and showing why this relationship warrants closer empirical attention.

For curriculum studies, the findings reinforce the importance of examining representation as more than a matter of numerical diversity within reading lists or teaching materials. Students' accounts indicate that representation may be experienced through the relative visibility of contributors, the emphasis accorded to different geographical and cultural perspectives, the applicability of professional knowledge to diverse populations and the professionals made visible around programmes. Curriculum-making therefore provides a useful context for considering how students encounter questions of recognition and disciplinary participation, while caution is needed against assuming that all perceived absences have the same meaning or effect.

The study also has important limitations. It was conducted within a single institutional context, the quantitative analysis was descriptive rather than inferential, and the open-ended survey responses provided less opportunity for probing participants' meanings than interviews or focus groups. In addition, the study examined students' perceptions of curriculum representation rather than independently auditing curriculum content. The findings should therefore be understood as exploratory patterns and interpretive connections rather than statistically generalisable or causal conclusions. These limitations shape the next phase of the wider project. The planned qualitative study will investigate in greater depth how students define representation, which curricular encounters become significant, how these experiences interact with other dimensions of belonging, and whether concepts such as epistemic exclusion and conditional belonging reflect participants' own interpretations. This next phase is particularly important for understanding when curriculum representation becomes salient to belonging and when other institutional, relational or biographical factors are more influential.

Ultimately, this study suggests that curriculum representation deserves greater attention within research on belonging, not because curriculum can be isolated as its cause, but because it forms part of the wider set of institutional and disciplinary conditions through which students encounter recognition, participation and knowledge. By foregrounding students' perceptions while maintaining caution about what this first phase can establish, the study provides a basis for further inquiry into how curriculum-making may intersect with the experience of belonging in higher education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the students who participated in this study for sharing their experiences and colleagues who supported the dissemination of the survey.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest in relation to this study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and confidentiality considerations.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval for this study was obtained through institutional review procedures at the University of Sunderland. All research was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for educational research.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

PARTICIPANT CONSENT STATEMENT

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE MATERIAL

No third-party materials requiring permission were reproduced in this study. All figures and tables are original to the author.

ORCID

Reece Sohdi https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6574-0506

REFERENCES

Allen, K. A., Kern, M. L., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2018). What schools need to know about fostering school belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, *33*(2), 397–431. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-016-9389-8

Allen, K. A., Slaten, C., Hong, S., Lan, M., Craig, H., May, F., & Counted, V. (2024). Belonging in higher education: A twenty-year systematic review. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, *21*(5), 1–55. https://doi.org/10.53761/s2he6n66

Apple, M. W. (2004). *Ideology and curriculum* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Arday, J. (2021). Fighting the tide: Understanding the difficulties facing black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) doctoral students' pursuing a career in academia. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *53*(10), 972–979. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1777640

Arday, J., & Mirza, H. S. (2018). *Dismantling race in higher education: Racism, whiteness and Decolonising the academy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Ashwin, P. (2008). Accounting for structure and agency in 'close-up' research on teaching, learning and assessment in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Research*, *47*(3), 151–158. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2008.01.002

BERA. (2024). *Ethical guidelines for educational research* (5th ed.). British Educational Research Association.

Bhambra, G. K. (2014). *Connected sociologies*. Bloomsbury.

Bhambra, G. K., Gebrial, D., & Nişancıoğlu, K. (2018). *Decolonising the university*. Pluto Press.

Bhopal, K. (2018). *White privilege: The myth of a post-racial society*. Policy Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. Sage.

Carruthers Thomas, K. (2015). Rethinking belonging through Bourdieu, diaspora and the spatial. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, *17*(1), 37–49. https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.17.1.37

Carruthers Thomas, K. (2018). *Rethinking student belonging in higher education: From Bourdieu to borderlands*. Routledge.

Connell, R. (2007). *Southern theory: The global dynamics of knowledge in social science*. Routledge.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Cureton, D., & Gravestock, P. (2019). We belong': Differential sense of belonging and its meaning for different ethnicity groups in higher education. *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, *12*(1). https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v12i1.942

de Sousa Santos, B. (2014). *Epistemologies of the south: Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (3rd ed.). NYU Press.

Deng, Z. (2022). Powerful knowledge, educational potential and knowledge-rich curriculum: Pushing the boundaries. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *54*(5), 599–617. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2022.2089538

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.

Gillborn, D. (2006). Critical race theory and education: Racism and anti-racism in educational theory and praxis. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *27*(1), 11–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300500510229

Gravett, K., & Ajjawi, R. (2022). Belonging as situated practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, *47*(7), 1386–1396. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.1894118

Leonardo, Z. (2009). *Race, whiteness, and education*. Routledge.

Medina, J. (2013). *The epistemology of resistance: Gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations*. Oxford University Press.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2020). *Decolonization, development and knowledge in Africa: Turning over a new leaf*. Routledge.

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Pinar, W. F. (2012). *What is curriculum theory?* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
Priestley, M., Biesta, G., & Robinson, S. (2026). *Teacher agency: An ecological approach* (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury Academic.
Priestley, M., Philippou, S., Alvunger, D., & Soini, T. (Eds.). (2021). *Curriculum making in Europe: Policy and practice within and across diverse contexts*. Emerald Publishing.
Settles, I. H., Buchanan, N. T., & Dotson, K. (2021). Scrutinized but not recognized: (in)visibility and hypervisibility experiences of faculty of color. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *113*, 62–74. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.06.003
Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (3rd ed.). Zed Books.
Strayhorn, T. L. (2019). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
Wong, B. (2024). Exploring the spatial belonging of students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *49*(3), 546–558. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2243285
Young, M. (2013). Overcoming the crisis in curriculum theory: A knowledge-based approach. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *45*(2), 101–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.764505

How to cite this article: Sohdi, R. (2026). 'I don't see myself there' – Curriculum representation, epistemic exclusion and conditional belonging in higher education. *The Curriculum Journal*, *00*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.70106

14693704, 0, Downloaded from https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/curj.70106 by Delphine Doucet - University of Sunderland , Wiley Online Library on [02/11/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License