

**Issue 10**  
**August 2018**  
**ISSN: 2051-3593**

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**Article:**

**The Challenges of a Diverse Curriculum: A Case Study from the Humanities**

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# **The Challenges of a Diverse Curriculum: A Case Study from the Humanities**

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## **Introduction**

The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity states that '[diversity is] the common heritage of humanity...[a source of] exchange, innovation and creativity' (Silverman and Ruggles, 2007, p. 36). Cultural diversity in this sense refers to the positive valuation of the interaction of differing social groups, and contemporary characteristics of diversity are based on characteristics pertaining to ability, class, ethnicity, gender, language, nationality, religion, race, and sexuality. Diversity also implies a non-hierarchical relationship of mutual inclusion between individuals with differing characteristics.<sup>1</sup> Within the context of Higher Education (HE), diversity is also a key strategic aim for the internationalization agenda of the Higher Education Academy: 'a vision to promote a high quality, equitable and global learning experience for all students studying UK HE programmes, irrespective of their geographical location or background' (HEA). A focus on diversity has come to signify a range of policies, goals, and practices in HE for example: the Race Equality Charter which aims to drive racial equality in terms of access and outcomes in HE; pedagogical research on racism in HE and inclusive practice in the classroom; promoting diversity in terms of staff employment; outreach programmes targeting students from non-traditional backgrounds; student and staff-focused welfare campaigns around discrimination; and student-led initiatives regarding the 'decolonization of the curriculum' through the introduction of texts and practices that recognize the historical and structural inequalities that underscore pedagogy in the present day.

In this article, I focus on diversity of curricula in the university, through a consideration of the challenges of working with diverse cultural texts in the Humanities.<sup>2</sup> I offer potential solutions and practices that can enrich the

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<sup>1</sup> The arguments around the potential for diversity as a policy or strategy to re-entrench notions of a normative inside and a 'diverse', non-normative outside merit consideration, but are beyond the scope of this paper. It is worth noting that Maria Scott's definition of inclusive practice as it relates to diversity in education emphasizes that a focus on diversity is not about making diverse students 'fit' a particular normative category: 'Inclusive practice does not assume that the student body is white, middle class, aged 18 or label them as "different" if they do not possess these characteristics. Nor does it make the assumption that, if they do not match this stereotype, they somehow need to "fit in" or "integrate" with the majority' (Smith, 2010, p. 215).

<sup>2</sup> We use the word 'text' to signify a cultural object of study in the classroom: films, books, music, academic articles and books, art, poetry, etc.

student experience when encountering diverse texts for the first time. In considering diverse curricula, I identify two intersecting issues: the level of the text itself, which challenges social exclusions, and the level of policy and practice, that is, how assessments and teaching styles cater to students from diverse backgrounds. I focus primarily on the first issue, in order to address current gaps in the literature, through a consideration of practice in the classroom. The methodological approach in this article departs from a thinking of intersectional diversity. Intersectional practice recognizes that ability, class, ethnicity, gender, language, nationality, religion, race, and sexuality are not isolated aspects of the individual's experience of the social environment, but instead interact and intersect in multiple ways. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, intersectionality is 'analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape [individuals'] experiences and, in turn, are shaped by [individuals]' (Hill Collins: 2000, p. 299). I will focus on a film and a television series that treat diversity with reference to race, but our conclusions are applicable to other categories of diversity and beyond Film Studies.

### **Diverse Curricula and the Humanities**

If we return to the definition of diversity as a 'heritage of humanity', and a source of 'exchange, innovation and creativity', the Humanities can be seen as a privileged site for a consideration of diverse curricula in the university. Humanities subjects involve the study of people and topics that are often distant from the student's lived experience: from different time periods, different countries, in different languages, treating topics and themes that may be entirely new to the student. Moreover, as a discipline that is largely discussion-based in the classroom, the Humanities offers particular opportunities and challenges when it comes to what is termed the hidden curriculum: the 'lessons that are learned but not openly intended' (Martin, 1983, p. 122), by transmitting values and norms through the social environment of the classroom. How the teacher manages classroom discussions, whose voices are heard, and how particular opinions are emphasized or challenged participate in the hidden curriculum, implicitly transmitting particular values. A quote from queer feminist philosopher Judith Butler (placed in the meeting area outside the School of Humanities in Keele) sums up succinctly the role that the Humanities can play in fostering diversity and inclusion in higher education environments:

'[The humanities allow us] ... to find ways of living, thinking, acting, and reflecting that belong to *times and spaces we have never known*. The humanities give us a chance to read across languages and cultural differences in order to understand the *vast range of perspectives in and on this world*. How else can we imagine living together without this ability to see *beyond where we are*, to find ourselves linked with others we have *never directly known*, and to understand that, in some abiding and urgent sense, *we share a world?*' [my italics] (Butler, 2013).

Butler highlights the elements of distance, difference, and novelty that are promoted by a study of the Humanities; we study texts that take us beyond

ourselves into different worlds, places, spaces, and time periods, encountering new lives and new people through the texts we study. Butler adds that 'we have to shake off what we think we know' (Butler, 2013) in order to relate to subjects and individuals beyond our ken. She also evokes the humanitarian and civic potential of study in this field. Indeed, the word 'Humanities' itself comes from the Latin *humanitas*, meaning 'kindness', where 'kind' evokes compassion as well as of 'one's own kind'. Thus, to echo Butler, the study of the Humanities allows us to see that others are also 'of one's own kind' (relatable, not so different after all) as well as evoking positive feelings of togetherness and kinship – what we might call kindness towards others. Kevin K. Kumashiro further argues that 'anti-oppressive', diverse curricula disrupt the 'harmful repetitions of certain privileged knowledge and practices' but he also admits that as an educator he has missed opportunities to engage in this kind of teaching because it can lead students to 'emotional crisis' (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 67). This points towards some of the challenges that delivering a curriculum based on texts by minority artists or dealing with non-normative subjects can pose. Below, Maria outlines the approach she adopts in class and some of the key challenges she has identified in delivering a diverse curriculum.

### **Diverse Curricula: Definitions and Challenges**

A diverse curriculum can broadly be defined texts by or about non-normative individuals. Within the context of Film Studies, a diverse curricula can mean: films/texts created by diverse filmmakers/authors; films/texts starring diverse actors; films/texts treating themes about minorities and social exclusion; films/texts with diverse fans/readers; films/texts with 'diverse', non-normative aesthetic practices; re-examining old classics to look for repressed and hidden elements (e.g. Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope*); inclusive practice, e.g. recognising diversity in assessment protocols. Film Studies offers great opportunity for the study of other cultures and diversity, because as a primarily visual rather than a verbal or written medium, subtitles allow audiences around the world to enjoy films from different cultural contexts. Indeed, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education guidelines for Film Studies as a discipline recognizes that 'people's lives are shaped in part by a great variety of communicative, cultural and aesthetic systems and practices' (QAA, 2016, p. 6). However, the fact remains that creating a diverse curriculum is not always easy to implement. Below I outline a series of challenges that have been identified in implementing a diverse curriculum.

### **Challenges:**

1. Relatability and relevance: Following on from the previous point, works by minority artists can seem distant from the student's personal experience. They may struggle to identify with the characters or to see the relevance of the topic to their own lives. While I in no way wish to suggest that relatability is a necessary or even desirable characteristic in an object of study, the fact remains that works that appear to be immediately relevant to the student's already constituted frameworks of knowledge can be more easily communicated. A number of theorists argue that barriers to learning around relatability and relevance are inevitable: students like texts that they understand quickly and they are

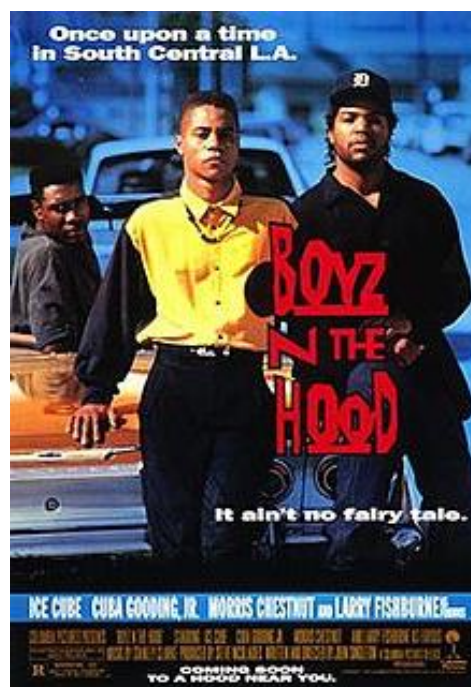
invested in their thoughts and beliefs about the world, and it is easier when these values are repeated in the texts that they study (Britzman, 1998; Felman, 1995; Luhmann, 1998).

2. Cultural and historical context: Works that examine non-normative topics and individuals can require greater historical, social or political contextualization and knowledge in order for the student to fully engage with work. For example, teaching Stephen Daldy's film *Billy Elliot* to a group of students in Keele requires very little cultural explanation: the film is about a young boy who grows up to be a ballet dancer, and it is set against the backdrop of the miner's strike of 1984-85. Most, if not all, British students have studied the strike in secondary school, and many have personal anecdotes to tell and can comment on the class structures in the past and the present in the UK. By contrast, a film like Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, a film about the bloody decolonization of Algeria from the French in the 1950s and 1960s, necessitates a historical overview of colonialism (in general and in Algeria), the war, and the terrorist tactics of the Algerians in order for the film to be fully understood.
3. Emotional challenges: Teaching diverse curricula can pose emotional challenges to both students and teachers. Feelings of discomfort and vulnerability may arise: minority students may feel they are put in the position of spokesperson or 'expert' because of their identity, and that they are pressured to speak, or indeed, not to speak. Non-minority students may feel that these topics are 'not for them', and may feel unwilling to voice opinions on issues that do not touch them directly. In contrast to students in Cornell, who felt comfortable drawing attention to their racial and ethnic background in their interpretation of texts, students in Keele are less inclined to bring their own identities to bear on the topic in a group discussion. Disgust and anger may be expressed at the material presented in the films, which may examine social injustice and inequality and can be a difficult and sometimes eye-opening experience for students, leading to the kinds of 'emotional crisis' Kumashiro references. They may also feel hostility towards these texts, because of the negative or uncomfortable feelings that arise. They may also have to challenge their own prejudices or discover that they have prejudices in the first place, 'influencing not only how they think and feel and relate to others, but also how they think and feel about themselves' (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 70).
4. Accessibility: Some films made in non-Western cultural contexts can be expensive and tricky to source or find in libraries. They can also be troublesome to watch online, and nowadays, students often expect material to be easily accessible for purchase or streaming on the internet.
5. Desire to study the canon: Many students, irrespective of their own race or gender, are used to studying canonical works, the majority of which are created by Euro-American men. This is because these works are more easily legible, because they are part of a dominant cultural language, and they often confirm ideas students already have about the world they live in and the identities they encounter. Texts by minority artists or authors can be perceived as 'minor', and not 'worthy'

of study. Moreover, there is a risk that particular diverse texts in a core or general curriculum can be perceived as distractions from the more 'culturally significant', i.e. normative, works of the 'canon'. However, increasing diversity in HE and a number of student groups such as the 'decolonizing the curriculum' movement actively call for a re-thinking of the canon. Moreover, depending on the institution, the canon as a concept may not exist for certain students. Keele, as a university with a 94.5% intake from comprehensive schools, has a high number of students who have not been formed with a clear idea of 'normative' curricula. What constitutes the 'canon' in this case may simply be what they are taught. For example, I was surprised when only two out of forty in a second year group of film students has seen an Alfred Hitchcock film. My reaction betrayed my own repetition of what I assumed a canon was, and what I assumed students 'should' have seen before coming to university. Indeed, with the increasing relevance of Netflix and the Internet to students viewing habits, the very notion of a pre-formed canon is rapidly deteriorating. Students may have seen and been influenced by an obscure independent film from a non-Western country that they have happened upon on Netflix, while older, 'canonical' works may be eschewed because of their lack of availability on online platforms.

In the following four examples, I consider factors 1 to 3 cited above, as I consider them to be most relevant to the Keele and wider HE context.

**Example 1: *Boyz N the Hood*, dir. John Singleton, 1991**



John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* was the first American and Hollywood film to feature not only a full black cast, but also a black director and majority black production crew. The film examines the lives of a group of African American male teenagers as they navigate the challenges of growing up in South

Central Los Angeles (the 'hood' of the title) in the 1980s and early 1990s. The film is the first film taught on the third-year course 'Race and Sexuality on Screen' and as such, the students were 'self-selecting'. Students thus chose to do a module that explicitly deals with issues of diversity, rather than a course where diversity issues are part of the 'hidden curriculum', or one strand of a broader theme. As self-selecting in this sense, most of the students (unless they chose the module for lack of other options) had some interest in the topic.

The film proved to be an extremely popular choice, with all students writing one of their assignments on it. I will assess the factors that contributed to the film's popularity, with reference to factors 1-3 cited above.

### 1. Relatability and relevance

The film adopts a conventional Hollywood narrative of order, disorder, and order restored. The story is told in a linear and chronological fashion, and the principal protagonists are likeable. The director also adopts a didactic point of view, in that he assumes little knowledge on the part of the spectator and aims to inform. There is also a clear and unambiguous moral message at the end of the film. It is a *Bildungsroman*, a coming of age story, which is a familiar narrative structure that appeals to young people because of its relevance to their own stage in life. These formal techniques and story-telling choices make the film relatively easy to understand and interpret.

### 2. Cultural and Historical Context

Some contextualization of the film was required: the LA riots of the 1990s, following the shooting of Rodney King by a police officer, form an important piece of cultural and social context. However, the political backdrop of the film, including racial tensions, poverty, police brutality and gang conflict in the 'hood', are social issues that are familiar to students. All students will have familiarity with African American culture, through popular music principally, and many will be aware of the prominent social justice movement 'Black Lives Matter' through social media. Therefore, the cultural and historical context required to understand the film was limited: we were building on previous knowledge.

### 3. Emotional Challenges

The film presented a number of emotional challenges. One of the central characters, a young football player who dreams of a scholarship that will enable him to leave the neighbourhood, is caught in the crossfire of gang conflict and dies at the end of the film. Students were saddened by this scene, and by the cycle of violence in which the characters are trapped. They were also angered by the injustices experienced by African Americans, including racism, ghettoization, government drug policy, and economic inequality. However, as mentioned above, it is worth noting that these issues were not new to the students, and in many ways, the film confirmed their preconceived ideas about the situation of African Americans in terms of inequality, police injustice, and urban segregation. Therefore, the emotional challenges the film presented were not insignificant, but tempered by the fact that the film confirmed, rather than challenged, previously held assumptions about the

social and economic conditions of African Americans. This confirms Britzman's suggestion that 'students, at least subconsciously, want learning that affirms their identities, experiences, perspectives and values' (1998, p. 12).

**Example 2: *Dear White People*, Season 1, creator Justin Simeon, 2017**



*Dear White People* is a recent Netflix series based on the film of the same title by African American director and screenwriter Justin Simeon. The series examines the lives of a group of African American students at a fictional Ivy League college in the North East of the United States in the present day. The series deals with contemporary racism on American campuses, looking at issues around blackface, cultural appropriation, histories of slavery, divergent responses to injustice within the African American community, light-skinned privilege, mixed-race individuals, stereotyping, and social class in the African American community. The series was generally well received in the liberal press in the United States, but it launched the alt-right hash tag #BoycottNetflix on Twitter. Before the series was even released, this hash tag called for the boycotting of the streaming service based on the title of the



show and two minute trailer. The film is taught on the third-year course 'Race and Sexuality on Screen' and as such, the students were 'self-selecting'.

The series was not a particularly popular choice in class, but many students wrote essays about it, suggesting that some did not perhaps feel comfortable expressing opinions about the show in a public context. I will assess the factors that contributed to the student's differing engagements with the series, with reference to factors 1-3 cited above.

### 1. Relatability and relevance

The question of intersectionality may help explain why some students found the series difficult to engage with. Many of the students in the class were from working class backgrounds, and some found the elite university context alienating and pretentious. Many of the characters express themselves in extremely sophisticated prose, while also employing a lot of terminology that is specific to the context of an elite American college. The series is also a satire, a form which is often not very familiar to students and which relies on a certain amount of knowledge of the social context that is being lampooned, a context that as shown below, was not always clear to students.

### 2. Cultural and Historical Context

Although the show is titled *Dear White People*, the creator has stated that this is misleading: he wants the series to speak principally to a black community. As such, many of the references in the series speak to African American cultural contexts, both pop culture as well as intellectual histories of Blackness and histories of Black resistance. As such, white British students did not understand some of the jokes and cultural references that the series employs, and a full exploration of the numerous and nuanced cultural expressions that the series evokes would certainly be beyond the scope of one class. Moreover, the student's lacked familiarity not only with the context of elite American educational institutions, but also with the African American upper class.

### 3. Emotional challenges

The series addresses not only 'visible' racism among far right groups but also white liberal racism, which can be an uncomfortable topic for white audiences. Issues around identity politics, reverse racism, white or black 'only' spaces, cultural appropriation and institutional racism are highly contemporary debates that are evolving rapidly.

The discomfort generated by these topics may have been increased by the fact that the show does not attempt to 'translate' black culture for a white audience, leading to the kinds of confusion and lack of context for jokes and references discussed above. In class, the students noted that they were not accustomed to watching an obviously popular show on Netflix where so many of the jokes passed them by. We discussed the fact that many cultural products, even those made by non-white artists, are modified to make their language and imagery legible to white audiences.

While the social context of *Boyz N the Hood* was largely familiar, middle and upper class African Americans are much less visible in the kind of popular culture products available to British students. There is also the possibility that 'unconscious bias' or latent prejudice played a role. Considering racism in relation to wealthy and socially privileged African Americans poses greater emotional challenges than the condemnation of the self-evidently morally unambiguous discrimination that is depicted in *Boyz N the Hood* (a film which appealed to audiences across racial and liberal/conservative boundaries). Many students unconsciously assume that racism particularly affects lower class African Americans, and these assumptions are disturbed when they confront the idea that racism (while experienced and expressed in different ways by different social groups) exists separately from class. Kumashiro notes, many students think that 'society is meritocratic but learn that it is racist' and this uncoupling of race and class can be 'emotionally upsetting' (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 72).

### **Suggested Approaches**

I would like to offer two distinct but interconnecting approaches to creating diverse curricula in the Humanities. In the opening sessions of a course that adopts a diverse curriculum, I suggest that teachers adopt a 'make it relatable' model. Students often cite the factor of 'relatability' in class and in evaluations when encountering new objects of study. Texts like *Boyz N the Hood* offer some level of familiarity, in terms of the age and life stage of the characters, and the cultural and historical context (African American popular culture). With sufficient preparation, including hand-outs, lectures, readings, and internet resources (such as YouTube videos or blogs), students can draw and expand on previously held knowledge. The lecturer can also invite the students to encounter the texts on an *emotional* level, asking 'how might this character *feel?*', rather than 'what do you *think* of the film?'. By engaging feeling, the element of 'right or wrong' is removed from student response. Some films will lend themselves more easily or obviously to a feeling-centred approach than others; *Boyz N the Hood*, for example, has an extremely emotive ending. This feeling-centred approach serves to invite student identification with the characters on screen, where identification is defined as 'the becoming or making oneself one with another in feeling, interest or action' (OED 2003: 89). By aligning their feelings and experience with those of the characters on screen, the lecturer invites all students to encounter the topic on an emotional common ground.

The second model of teaching a diverse curriculum is ultimately more ethically engaged and productive of societal change in the long-term. This approach asks student to disrupt the desire for relatability, and invites them to explore what it feels like to *not* fully understand a cultural context. I would argue that this approach is best adopted *after* the students have encountered some more familiar, relatable texts. The teacher has therefore laid the emotional groundwork for a pedagogical encounter that is not based on identification, but rather on a potentially radical non-identification: what does it mean, particularly for a white/non-diverse student, to not see themselves reflected in a text, and to not understand the cultural contexts portrayed? As Kumashiro notes, 'students need to disrupt their desire to see their identifications,

perspectives, and values repeated' (Kumashiro, 2002: 70). If we only show students lives, experiences, and cultural and social contexts that are familiar to them, they are deprived of learning opportunities provided by having to question and challenge their own previously held assumptions. Blackburn and Buckley argue that this process is nothing less than the origin of wisdom: 'wisdom, after all, is the accumulation and application of knowledge(s) or differing cultural "truths;" that is, the ability to learn and grow' (2005: 204). Texts like *Dear White People* can generate fear, discomfort, and even anger. Yet these 'unpleasant' reactions and emotions can lead to conversations that work against the reiteration of damaging stereotypes, if we consider 'oppression in society as being characterized by harmful repetitions of certain privileged knowledge and practices' (Kumashiro 2002: 67).

Thus, we can read the desire for relatability and identification, and the disruption of relatability, as part of a spectrum. When teaching diverse curricula, it is useful to ground the ideas presented in the opening sections of the course in emotionally accessible texts. The students can then be lead to encounter more challenging works that disrupt deeply held assumptions, and may also invite re-readings of earlier texts. For example, in 'Race and Sexuality on Screen', we return to *Boyz N the Hood* at the end of the course to think about the potentially problematic ways that the film isolates its characters in the ghetto, and that suggests that the only way to reform the ghetto is to escape it; no internal change is possible. Indeed, considering relatability/identification and disruption/non-identification as part of a spectrum is a fundamental principle of practice in interpreting cultural texts in the Humanities. As Nicholas Harrison points out, 'the pleasure we gain from reading, even where it may appear to hinge on our being "involved" through a process we might call "identification", clearly depends on a fundamental separateness and distinctness of perspective – a prior, radical "non-identification", as it were' (Harrison 2003: 89). Our ability to perceive ourselves as separate from the text allows us to engage more fully – if we are too close, intellectual or emotional engagement can be difficult or overwhelming. To be able to sympathise or understand a character or their actions we must feel ourselves in some way to be distanced from their situation; it is not our condition, but one we can understand.

## **Conclusions**

In this article, I have focused primarily on the challenges for students when introducing them to diverse curricula. I have also chiefly presented students as largely undifferentiated, but of course, an individual's identity and profile will alter their encounter with a text. Moreover, the challenges for teachers are also highly significant, particularly given that the majority of staff working in HE in the UK are from racially and ethnically non-diverse backgrounds. Some teaching staff may not feel comfortable teaching works that do not speak to their own identities, knowledge, or experience. These absences thus point to very fruitful avenues for further study.

Ultimately, teaching is not a rational, predictable or easily controlled process. There remains what Ellsworth calls a 'space between': between the teacher teaching and the learner learning, as well as between what the teachers

thinks the text is saying, and how the student brings their own intellectual insights and lived experience to bear on their interpretations (Ellsworth 1997: 32). Perhaps one of the most rewarding aspects of teaching and learning through diverse, non-canonical curricula is that this 'space between' is consistently foregrounded. Rather than 'repeating the status quo or utopian visions' (Kumashiro 2002: 79), diverse curricula open a shifting and fluid space between students and teachers, between the canon and its outside, between relatability/identification and disruption/non-identification, and between harmful societal stereotypes and challenging new ways of understanding social and cultural difference.

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QAA: The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, Subject Benchmark Statement: Communication, Media, Film and Cultural Studies: Draft for consultation (April 2016)  
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/SBS-Communication-Media-Film-and-Cultural-Studies-consultation-16.pdf>

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**Dr. Maria Flood** joined Keele in 2016 as Lecturer in Film Studies in the School of Humanities. At Keele, she delivers the following modules: Race and Sexuality on Screen (Level 6), World Cinemas in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Level 6), Gender and the Cinematic Gaze (Level 5), and Introduction to European Cinema (Level 4).

Before Keele, she was a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at Cornell University in the School of Romance Studies, delivering modules on North African and Francophone cinema at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.