Towards an Understanding of the BAME Undergraduate Degree Awarding Gap at the University of Edinburgh

Final Report

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Executive Summary

The University of Edinburgh is dedicated to ensuring the best opportunities for all its students. Through its Strategy 2030 it has developed a vision for the future that aims to, "foster a welcoming community" and to be "a place of transformation and self-improvement". However, for over 20 years undergraduate (UG) students from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background have faced a notable disparity in achieving successful degree outcomes (equivalent to a 1st or 2:1). Recent data from EDMARC continues to highlight this challenge, showing that on average, over a five-year period, a smaller percentage of BAME students achieved upper class honours degrees, (ranging from -0.9% to -18.1%) across all Schools. The persistence of the BAME awarding gap occurs, even when controlling for exam achievement prior to entry. The latest 2023 EDMARC report reveals that in the year 2021/2, 14.1% of undergraduate students and 64.5% of non-UK undergraduate entrants identified as coming from a BAME background. Hence this issue presents a significant concern for the University and indicates the need for fundamental change, within the university itself. Funded by the Principal's Teaching Award Scheme, this project aimed to understand undergraduate BAME students' perspectives on the awarding gap and belonging at the university, and to devise an action plan for improvement. This involved a literature review, followed by the development of interview questions that was reviewed by BAME students, along with ethical approval, and finally conducting and analysing one hour long semi-structured interviews with thirteen BAME UK domiciled undergraduates from CMVM, CAHSS and CSE. Through this qualitative analysis, consistent patterns emerged that informed the study's core findings. These insights provide us with a basis for formulating a targeted action plan to effectively address and ultimately eliminate the awarding gap among BAME students at the University of Edinburgh.

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The analysis of interviews with BAME students revealed several interconnected themes, that shape their university experience. Predominant amongst these is a lack of belonging and a pervasive sense of isolation. The reasons for this are varied but include a lack of representation and engagement amongst both peers and teaching staff, as well as both overt and covert racism. In addition, while some students have discovered pockets of support, the ability to engage with support services is lacking. Below, we summarise the key themes, illustrated by extracts from the interviews with students.

1) Isolation and Belonging

The BAME students reported facing challenges in feeling a clear sense of belonging, that was a significant contributing factor in understanding their experience at the university. In the academic setting, a person's sense of personal and cultural identification is strongly associated with their sense of belonging.

> *"The first years sometimes find it hard to settle in and they find it hard to feel that sense of belonging."*
> *"I've always felt like I've not exactly belonged anywhere."*
> *"It can be hard to find a sense of community until you understand your identity,"*
> *"The way that I felt lonely is on like a greater scale of just like a foreigner in a new institution."*

The absence of a sense of belonging described by the students was directly linked to the lack of representation they experience in situations with a preponderance of white people.

> *"I'm the only black girl in all of my classes."*
> *"It's just intertwined so deeply, not having people that you identify with in a way beyond words is really isolating."*
> *"Most of the students are from private school backgrounds and they're mostly white."*
> *"Sometimes I'll just be the only person who's from a BAME background and I can feel a little bit isolated."*
> *"It's the least BAME place I know."*

The students also highlighted that this lack of a sense of belonging was detrimental in maintaining motivation, engagement, and achievement in their studies.

> *"Sometimes it feels like you have to work extra hard to prove yourself."*
> *"I was feeling very motivated, but then I think it's definitely gone downhill since then."*
> *"It's difficult when you're trying to make it in a subject where a lot of the people, they don't look like you."*

2) Engagement with Staff

Related to the sense of isolation arising from a lack of representation in the student body, the students also highlighted an even more acute absence of BAME representation amongst faculty, that contributes to a lack of a supportive and relatable academic atmosphere.

> *"All of my teachers are white, all of them, none of them are ethnic minorities."*
> *"I've only ever come across a couple of teachers or lecturers who are like non-white."*

> *"The amount of people of colour has just decreased and decreased and now it's the last few I guess."*
> *"I think if you have more lecturers of colour, it creates more of that community space for students of colour to come to that university."*

3) Racial Sensitivity and Education

Students described experiences of overt and covert racism that further undermine their sense of belonging. This highlights the need for comprehensive racial sensitivity training for both students and staff.

> *"A lot of people, especially here in Edinburgh, are so racist."*
> *"I've heard so many horrific stories about racial attacks and everything."*
> *"Constantly the teachers get our names mixed up and call me her name, especially when it's just one other ethnic minority."*
> *"Sometimes you can feel overlooked in a class as well, and that you're not really being heard."*

Students whose studies meant that they were working in professional settings, for example in hospitals, expressed anxiety around how BAME students are perceived in those environments and noted the challenges in dealing with racism in such settings.

> *"When I'm in the hospital I do get a bit anxious about introducing myself and what people will think about me."*

4) Institutional Support and Responsiveness

While support services are in place, their efficacy is undermined by a lack of awareness and accessibility, coupled with a perceived indifference towards racially motivated incidents.

> *"I did consider going to university services before but obviously I wasn't really sure how to access it."*
> *"And reaching out and asking for help is just something that's just so difficult."*
> *"I don't know whether it's worth flagging or not... I wouldn't want to burden someone with more of my problems."*
> *"I don't really know what the university is doing in terms of [anti-racism], to be honest."*

Students also noted that there are inadequacies in the current system for reporting discrimination.

> *"I usually find out about [racially motivated attacks] from other people posting it on their social media and it's never an official thing."*

Current initiatives, while well-intentioned, often fail to resonate on a personal level, suggesting a need for more individualized and impactful approaches.

> *"I think when a place isn't as diverse, it is about how you welcome minorities."*
> *"Like with the renaming of 40 Joyce Square... sometimes it's just performative."*

Strategic Recommendations

The findings indicate that the experiences of BAME students at this university are shaped by a variety of factors, such as support from the institution, representation, community involvement and how instances of racism are addressed. The university should take measures to engage with these issues and create a more welcoming atmosphere in which racism and exclusion in all its forms is no longer tolerated. This will transform the university into a stronghold of inclusivity, that not only appreciates diversity but also thrives on it, thus equipping graduates for an interconnected world.

To achieve this, we recommend that the university consider the following:

1. **Enhance Transition Support**
   Ensure that BAME students' transitions into academic life are supported with resources and communities that affirm their sense of belonging.

2. **Diversify the Staff**
   Strengthen the connection between students' identity and university culture by ensuring that the staff represents the diverse student body. The low representation of BAME staff and the need for role models can be addressed by targeted recruitment of BAME staff and the establishment of mentorship schemes.

3. **Nurture Inclusivity**
   Address the connection between a sense of belonging and experiences of microaggressions by fostering an environment that is not only diverse in numbers but also in spirit. By incorporating courses on racial sensitivity and unconscious bias along with ongoing refreshers to maintain awareness and empathy, we can foster a more inclusive environment.

4. **Amplify BAME voices.**
   Address feelings of invisibility and the need for advocacy by creating platforms where BAME students' voices are heard, and their presence is acknowledged.

5. **Build Community**
   Recognize the importance of social networks in enhancing well-being and integrate community-building activities within the university's fabric to support student success. For example, regularly organizing events that celebrate cultures as well as providing strong support for societies that promote diversity, will contribute to creating a vibrant and inclusive community.

6. **Create an Inclusive Curriculum**
   To tackle feelings of alienation and ensure that every student feels valued we suggest developing a curriculum that incorporates perspectives and experiences reflecting the multicultural student population.

7. **Have Regular Support Awareness Campaigns**
   It's important to launch an awareness campaign about support services to overcome the reported under-utilisation caused by lack of awareness.

8. **Respond Proactively to Racism**
   Ensure that the university's response to racial incidents is swift, visible, and effective, fostering an environment where discrimination is actively contested. Commit to policy reviews, surveys, and transparent reporting.

Our university, via its Strategy 2030[1], recognises the value that diverse BAME student populations bring to its academic environment. The varied perspectives found within communities contribute significantly to discussions and prepare students for a globalized world. It also upholds the principles of equality and justice and desires to enhance the educational experience for all students. However, to deliver on the aim of achieving inclusivity it is crucial to carefully examine and tackle the challenges and obstacles faced by specific student demographics.

This investigation was prompted by a gap in undergraduate degree outcomes that has been observed over the last two decades at the University of Edinburgh, as highlighted in data published in the EDMARC reports[2]. The disparity between White students and Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students has emphasized the need for research to comprehend and address the root causes of this educational inequality. The 2019 Thematic Review[3] further emphasized the importance of exploring the dynamics surrounding BAME award gaps. It recognised knowledge gaps, particularly regarding BAME students' experiences at the University of Edinburgh, that highlighted the need for a focused investigation.

The study's foundation is built on a literature review conducted by Dr. Kamya Choudhary, which can be found in in Appendix 1. This review serves as a foundation to understand the dynamics surrounding the gap in educational achievements among BAME individuals in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). By examining existing research, it confirms the disparities in degree outcomes within the BAME category across various HEIs in the UK and beyond. Recognizing that the term "BAME" is subject to debate, the review acknowledges its usage as a homogenising label, that groups diverse minority communities, each struggling with their own unique experiences of discrimination. Emphasizing the importance of qualitative research, the review explores diverse aspects within HEIs, such as infrastructure, curriculum, and support systems. Additionally, it critiques the deficit model by advocating for an approach that goes beyond simply attributing the socio-cultural background of BAME students.

Drawing attention to five factors that contribute to this achievement gap the literature review highlights how "whiteness" influences curriculum content and assessment practices. It underscores the need for examination of the culture within HEIs including teacher biases, assessment methodologies employed and a pressing necessity for inclusive approaches to curriculum design.

Furthermore, the review highlights the theme of representation, revealing the impact of inadequate representation within the student body and university staff. The lack of diversity among people of colour in staff roles and professional services positions contributes to an identity crisis. This emphasizes the need for measures that counter systemic racism and decolonization efforts, that are reflected in institutional practices.

Belongingness emerges as a crucial aspect of BAME students' experiences, shaping confidence, retention rates, and academic achievement. Some key challenges identified include the absence of support networks specifically designed for BAME students and a greater recognition of issues such as unconscious bias. Importantly this literature review sets a foundation for the interview questions.

It is crucial for the university to acknowledge and address the experiences of BAME students. This responsibility goes beyond obligation; it is a priority that's essential for the success of Strategy 2030. By understanding the nature of these challenges, the university can implement measures to create an environment where every student feels valued, heard, and supported. Ultimately our goal is to contribute towards creating opportunities that empower students both academically and personally, with the aim of eliminating any disparities in awards or recognition.

The Project

Supported by funding from the Principal's Teaching Award Scheme (PTAS), we conducted a qualitative research project between 2020 and 2022.

Aims and Research Questions

The aim of this project was:

1) to develop an in-depth understanding of our undergraduate BAME students' views on the attainment gap and their sense of belonging within the University

2) to develop an action plan to address the BAME attainment gap and improve BAME students' experience of community and belonging.

Research Methods

The project was organised into two stages:

Stage 1: Preparatory work to inform the qualitative interviews

A comprehensive literature review of the factors associated with the BAME award gap was undertaken by Dr Kamya Choudhary to identify the current understanding (Appendix 1). This was used to formulate the questions for a 1 hour semi structured interview with British domiciled BAME undergraduate students (Appendix 2). A focus group comprised of BAME undergraduate students reviewed the questions, following which ethical permission was sought and granted to interview students from across the university.

Stage 2: Qualitative research with BAME students:

Sample and recruitment: BAME students were approached by email and invited to take part in an interview. Students were offered a £20 voucher for their contribution.

*Data Collection***:** 13 students were interviewed from across all three Colleges: CAHSS (7), CMVM (3), CSE (3). Interviews were conducted by Sarah Shemery, the PhD Intern**.** Each participant was assigned a unique identifier to ensure confidentiality, preserving the anonymity of their specific courses and college associations. The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

Data analysis: The literature review established a conceptual scaffold for formulating the interview questions, yet the subsequent analysis was principally an inductive process focused on elucidating the lived experiences of BAME students. This involved drawing out themes directly from the narrative data found within the interview transcripts. Each response was examined for core themes, along with key quotations that enabled a clear thematic coding process. This coding facilitated an in-depth exploration of the interconnectedness of themes within each individual interview (as detailed in Appendix 3) and allowed for a cross-interview comparison. Such a comparative analysis led to the identification of consistent patterns, which underpin the core findings of our study.

The key findings were that BAME students face unique challenges related to isolation, lack of support, racial insensitivity, and a desire for greater representation and inclusivity. The thematic analysis provided below supports the recommendations outlined in the summary.

Isolation and Belonging

Isolation and Belonging Among BAME Students: The data presents a clear picture of the isolation and challenges to experiencing belonging felt by our BAME students. The profound sense of being othered or excluded due to a lack of cultural representation and understanding underscores the need for the university to embrace inclusive practices and policies that cater to the diverse needs of their student body.

Isolation in Predominantly White Spaces: The study findings reveal that BAME students frequently encounter a sense of isolation within the university setting. This isolation stems from the lack of representation and the cultural disconnect in predominantly white spaces. Many students initially enter university with high levels of motivation and the expectation for inclusion and academic success. However, this initial enthusiasm tends to decline as they confront the reality of their environment.

One student articulated a decline in their sense of belonging over time:

> *"I was feeling very motivated, but then I think it's definitely gone downhill since then."*

This sentiment is echoed by first-year students who struggle to settle in, feeling that their sense of belonging is not just unfulfilled but is actively challenged:

> *"The first years sometimes find it hard to settle in and they find it hard to feel that sense of belonging."*

A recurring theme among the students' experiences is the feeling of being a solitary representative of their background, contributing to a sense of exclusion:

> *"Sometimes I'll just be the only person who's from a BAME background and I can feel a little bit isolated."*

The enduring sense of not fully belonging was a common thread:

> *"I've always felt like I've not exactly belonged anywhere."*

The Link Between Identity and Belonging: BAME students describe a complex relationship with their identity as it intersects with their experiences at university. The challenge of finding a community is often a journey of self-discovery and acceptance:

> *"It can be hard to find a sense of community until you understand your identity."*

The feeling of loneliness described by students is not merely about being alone but rather about feeling foreign or othered in an environment that should be familiar:

> *"The way that I felt lonely is on like a greater scale of just like a foreigner in a new institution."*

The effort required to fit in and feel accepted was not only a matter of hard work but also an emotional toll, where students felt they had to prove their worth more than their peers:

"Sometimes it feels like you have to work extra hard to prove yourself."

The depth of this sentiment was captured by one student who noted the deep-rooted nature of this disconnect:

"It's just intertwined so deeply, not having people that you identify with in a way beyond words is really isolating."

Lack of Representation Among Peers and Staff: The lack of representation among peers and staff was highlighted as a significant factor contributing to feelings of isolation for BAME students. The homogeneity of the student body was noticeable, with one student saying,

"Most of the students are from private school backgrounds and they're mostly white."

This disparity extends to the academic staff, with calls for more lecturers of colour to reflect the diversity of the student body:

"I think if you have more lecturers of colour, it creates more of that community space for students of colour to come to that university."

Indeed, data from UK universities suggests that 1 in 5 academic staff with a known ethnicity are BAME, whilst just 2.5% of staff are Black[4].

The isolation felt by BAME students is exacerbated by their nominal presence in academic and social settings, often being the sole person of colour:

"It's the least BAME place I know."

Challenges are particularly marked in academic disciplines where students encounter few, if any, non-white lecturers, or peers:

"I've only ever come across a couple of teachers or lecturers who are like non-white."

This lack of representation is further highlighted in learning environments, as underscored by one student:

"All of my tutorials, for some reason, last semester and this semester too, are just entirely white women."

The rarity of having a fellow person of colour in the classroom was plainly evident, with one student expressing:

"I'm the only black girl in all of my classes."

This not only illuminates the issue of representation but also the impact it has on the inclusivity of the educational environment.

The essence of university life for many BAME students is overshadowed by a general sense of isolation. The motivation that marks the beginning of their educational journey gradually erodes as they confront the stark lack of representation and cultural disconnect. First-year students, in particular,

grapple with a challenging transition, where the excitement of new beginnings is dampened by the difficulty in finding common ground with peers who do not share their cultural narrative. Quotes such as the one below poignantly reflect the inner conflict between personal identity and the desire for belonging.

"Sometimes I'll just be the only person who's from a BAME background and I can feel a little bit isolated"

This struggle extends beyond mere physical presence to a deeper yearning for recognition and understanding of one's cultural identity within the academic fabric. The data indicate that not only is there a stark absence of BAME staff and students, but there is also a significant impact on BAME students' experiences, with many feeling they must overcompensate for their presence, as captured in the sentiment:

"Sometimes it feels like you have to work extra hard to prove yourself."

Several publications confirm the link between isolation, reduced self-confidence and low self-esteem, that impedes performance and may affect the awarding gap[5-6].

Institutional Support and Responsiveness

Accessibility and Awareness of Support Services: The findings from the study highlight significant gaps in the accessibility and awareness of university support services. BAME students frequently reported uncertainties regarding how to engage with support mechanisms provided by the institution. A student's account illustrates a common barrier that impedes the utilization of available resources.

"I did consider going to university services before but obviously I wasn't really sure how to access it,"

This lack of clarity about access points to a broader issue of communication and outreach efficacy within the university's support framework.

Moreover, students expressed a lack of knowledge about the university's anti-racism efforts, which correlates with their experiences of institutional indifference. Statements such as the example below reveal a disconnect between the university's stated commitments to diversity and the lived experiences of its BAME students:

"I don't really know what the university is doing in terms of [anti-racism], to be honest."

Perceived Indifference and the Difficulty in Seeking Help: The study also surfaces a perception of indifference from the university, particularly towards racially motivated incidents. This perceived indifference contributes to the reluctance of BAME students to seek help. Students expressed concerns about the logistical challenges of seeking support:

"And reaching out and asking for help is just something that's just so difficult,"

In addition, there was an emotional hesitance rooted in a fear of being a burden. Students navigate the additional weight of not wanting to impose their struggles on others, as encapsulated by the concern:

> *"I don't know whether it's worth flagging or not... I wouldn't want to burden someone with more of my problems."*

This hesitation indicates a profound sense of resignation and isolation among BAME students, feeling that their concerns may be trivialized or dismissed.

Inadequacies in the Current Reporting System for Discrimination: The reporting system for discrimination was another area where BAME students felt unsupported. The informality with which students learn of racially motivated attacks, often through social media rather than official university channels, undermines their confidence in the university's commitment to addressing such issues. The lack of a formal, transparent, and accessible reporting system leaves students questioning the efficacy and seriousness of the institution's approach to combating racism.

The data paints a concerning picture of the institutional support available to BAME students. While support services exist in theory, in practice, their effectiveness is considerably diminished by a lack of awareness, accessibility, and perceived indifference, especially regarding incidents of racism. The psychological weight of feeling like a burden exacerbates the isolation that BAME students feel, which eventually has a detrimental impact on their academic studies and general well-being. The university must recognise these differences and work to close them in order to foster an atmosphere where all students feel appreciated, supported, and confident in the institution's commitment to their success.

Engagement with Staff: The Need for Increased Diversity
Understanding the Need for Staff Diversity: The significance of positive staff engagement in fostering a supportive and relatable academic environment is clear. BAME students have identified a stark need for increased diversity among university staff, which is seen as a crucial step toward creating a more inclusive atmosphere. A student's aspiration, as seen here, underscores the importance of representation in fostering a sense of belonging and mentorship.

> *"I would love to see more professors of colour, on campus in general."*

The Decline in Diversity Among Staff: BAME students have observed and reported a disheartening trend regarding the diversity of academic staff. Students articulated a growing concern over the dwindling numbers of BAME teachers and professional services staff, particularly at more senior levels.

> *"The amount of people of colour has just decreased and decreased and now it's the last few I guess."*

This decline is felt acutely by students who seldom see their racial and cultural identities reflected in their academic leaders and mentors.

Consequences of Limited Staff Representation: The limited representation of BAME staff has tangible effects on the student experience. Encounters with diverse staff members are rare, with some students noting

> *"I've only ever come across a couple of teachers or lecturers who are like non-white."*

Such infrequent interactions impede the development of a fully supportive academic network that resonates with the experiences of BAME students.

The Importance of Relatable Role Models: Staff diversity is more than a numbers game; it is about the quality of engagement and the ability of students to find role models to whom they can relate. The presence of BAME teachers and professional services staff can inspire students, enhance the learning experience, and provide a sense of what is achievable. It also plays a vital role in validating the students' presence in academic spaces traditionally not represented by diversity.

BAME students seek a reflective representation within the academic staff that goes beyond tokenism to a more substantive inclusion that supports their educational journey. The university's commitment to diversity must be evident not only in student admissions but also in the recruitment and retention of a diverse staff body. This change is imperative for nurturing an academic environment where all students can find mentors who understand their unique perspectives and challenges. These findings echo those of other reports into the BAME award gap and indicate the general applicability of these findings [4-7].

Racial Sensitivity and Education

The Prevalence of Microaggressions and Overt Racism: The experiences of BAME students within the university context have underscored a persistent issue of racial insensitivity, manifesting through recurrent microaggressions (also known as covert racism) and instances of overt racism. Students report that while overt racism may not be a daily occurrence, the subtlety and frequency of microaggressions contribute to a climate of discomfort and marginalization:

"I think direct racism isn't as common for me, but I experience a lot of microaggressions."

The impact of such experiences is profound, with students recounting "horrific stories about racial attacks and everything," which points to a severe issue that extends beyond the campus boundaries. Within the classroom setting, there is a feeling of invisibility and a sense that their contributions are undervalued, as one student reflects,

"Sometimes you can feel overlooked in a class as well, and that you're not really being heard."

Issues with Name Recognition and Respect: A particularly poignant example of microaggressions is the misidentification by teachers, as a student reported,

"Constantly the teachers get our names mixed up and call me her name, especially when it's just one other ethnic minority."

This not only undermines the individual's identity but also signals a broader issue of racial competence among staff members.

Inadequate Reporting Systems: Furthermore, the study reveals significant inadequacies in the current system for reporting discrimination. BAME students often learn about racially motivated incidents informally, through social media, rather than through official university channels:

"I usually find out about [racially motivated attacks] from other people posting it on their social media and it's never an official thing."

This lack of formal reporting mechanisms leaves students feeling unsupported and questions the university's commitment to tackling racism.

Challenges in Professional Settings: BAME students also face considerable anxiety in professional environments, such as hospitals, where they must contend with perceptions and biases from both NHS staff and patients, that impact their ability to perform and learn effectively. This anxiety can hinder their professional development and sense of security in their chosen fields.

> *"When I'm in the hospital I do get a bit anxious about introducing myself and what people will think about me."*

The data clearly indicate that comprehensive racial sensitivity training for both students and staff is necessary to address the subtle and overt forms of racism that BAME students encounter. There is an urgent need for the university to revise their reporting systems to ensure that incidents of racism are acknowledged and addressed formally. Additionally, preparing BAME students to cope with potential racism in professional settings is crucial for their overall well-being and career progression. Our university bears the responsibility to cultivate an environment where every student is acknowledged and supported, ensuring that their academic progression is not impeded by racial insensitivity. Moreover, Green and Ernsting link the degree awarding gap to systemic racism. They reference the work of Banaji et al. (2021), who define systemic racism as the embedded and persistent racial inequalities and injustices that are entrenched within the societal structures, influencing both opportunities and outcomes. In essence, systemic racism encompasses both the processes that lead to racial disparities and the resulting inequities in life chances and treatment [8-9].

Inclusivity Initiatives: Beyond Performative Actions
Assessing the Depth of Inclusivity Efforts: The study highlights how students regarded the current inclusivity initiatives within the university. Despite well-meaning efforts to promote diversity, BAME students may perceive these initiatives as lacking in personal resonance. The sentiment expressed by this student underscores the necessity for a welcoming environment that is consistent throughout the course and that permeates every aspect of university life.

> *"I think when a place isn't as diverse, it is about how you welcome minorities."*

The Perception of Performative Inclusivity: In addition, some students expressed scepticism about the authenticity of some inclusivity measures, citing instances such as

> *"Like with the renaming of 40 Joyce Square... sometimes it's just performative."*

This points to a broader issue where symbolic gestures are not supported by substantive changes in practice throughout the university, leading to a sentiment among students that the institution's commitment to diversity is not as robust as it appears.

The Need for Individualized and Impactful Approaches: The information shows that there is an urgent need for programmes that are both truly impactful and individualized. BAME students want an environment where their unique perspectives are recognised and acknowledged, not just token adjustments. All aspects of the university, including the curriculum, staff training, and student support

services, need to be integrated with inclusivity to make sure that every student is personally impacted by the university's diversity initiatives.

It is imperative that the university conduct a critical assessment of its present inclusion programmes, shifting from performative measures to genuinely accepting all students. This entails paying attention to the unique requirements of BAME students and responding to those needs in a meaningful and tailored way. By doing this, the institution can support the development of a community and a sense of belonging where diversity is valued, and every student is empowered to thrive.

Conclusion

It's important to remember that supporting students from a BAME background requires a long-term commitment. The interviews provided insights into the challenges that currently exist and proposed potential solutions. By putting these recommendations into practice, the institution can establish an environment that not only meets students' needs but also improves their university experience. Through these initiatives the university can cultivate a lasting reputation for excellence, diversity and inclusivity ultimately preparing graduates to make contributions to a diverse global society.

Recommendations

The findings indicate that the experiences of BAME students at this university are shaped by a variety of factors, such as support from the institution, representation, community involvement and how instances of racism are addressed. The University is at a point where it can drive the necessary changes to ensure the success of Strategy 2030, that will play a key role in improving the university experience and success of BAME students. To fully realise the ambitions of the Strategy 2030 the university should take measures to engage with these issues and create a more welcoming atmosphere in which racism and exclusion in all its forms is no longer tolerated. By making these efforts we can transform the university into a stronghold of inclusivity that not only appreciates diversity but also thrives on it, thus equipping graduates for an interconnected world. To achieve this, we recommend that the university consider the following:

Enhance Transition Support

Ensure that BAME students' transitions into academic life are supported with resources and communities that affirm their sense of belonging.

Diversify the Staff

Strengthen the connection between students' identity and university culture by ensuring that the ethnicity of the staff represents the diverse student body. The low representation of BAME staff and the need for role models can be addressed by targeted recruitment of BAME staff and the establishment of mentorship schemes.

Nurture Inclusivity

Address the connection between a sense of belonging and experiences of microaggressions by fostering an environment that is not only diverse in numbers but also in spirit. By incorporating courses on racial sensitivity and unconscious bias along with ongoing refreshers to maintain awareness and empathy, we can foster a more inclusive environment.

Amplify BAME voices

Address feelings of invisibility and the need for advocacy by creating platforms where BAME students' voices are heard, and their presence is acknowledged.

Build Community

Recognize the importance of social networks in enhancing well-being and integrate community-building activities within the university's fabric to support student success. For example, regularly organizing events that celebrate cultures as well as providing strong support for societies that promote diversity, will contribute to creating a vibrant and inclusive community.

Create an Inclusive Curriculum

To tackle feelings of alienation and ensure that every student feels valued we suggest developing a curriculum that incorporates perspectives and experiences reflecting the multicultural student population.

Have Regular Support Awareness Campaigns

It's important to launch an awareness campaign about support services to overcome the reported under-utilisation caused by lack of awareness.

Respond Proactively to Racism

Ensure that the university's response to racial incidents is swift, visible, and effective, fostering an environment where discrimination is actively contested. Commit to policy reviews, surveys, and transparent reporting.

Limitations of the study

1) BAME is an umbrella term and does not consider the disparities between different ethnicities. In the 2023 EDMARC report[2] only 70.3% of black UK domiciled UG students achieved a 1st or 2:1 compared to 84.4% of white and 79.7% of Asians. Whilst the general findings may be applicable to all students, there are clear differences to which students experience them. The study did not ask for the specific ethnic background of the students, which could be an important factor in understanding the nuances of the awarding gap. A more detailed follow-up study could prove beneficial in addressing this issue.

2) When studying the BAME awarding gap in universities, it's not enough to only consider racial or ethnic identity. It's essential to understand how a student's experience might be further influenced by their gender, whether they come from a low-income household, or if they have a disability. These factors can compound the challenges that BAME students face, leading to a more complex and nuanced understanding of their university experience. Such an intersectional framework can provide a more comprehensive approach to addressing disparities in higher education, that could be a focus for a future study.

3) Furthermore the 2023 EDMARC[2] data highlights an important issue at the University of Edinburgh: the underrepresentation of Black students. Despite Black individuals making up 4% of the population in England and Wales[10] and 0.7% in Scotland[11], their representation among UK domiciled undergraduate (UG) entrants at Edinburgh University is disproportionately low at 1.5%. This discrepancy raises questions about the barriers that may deter Black students from applying to or accepting offers from Edinburgh University. These barriers could range from perceived cultural inclusivity, the visibility of Black role models within the university staff, to the university's

outreach and engagement efforts with Black school children. A thorough examination of these factors is essential for understanding and addressing the underrepresentation but was not part of this study.

4) The concern raised by the student that, "they never really teach us how to write essays and all they're assessed by is writing essays", points to a potential gap in educational support which could be affecting the performance of students, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds. If assessment methods disproportionately favour one form of evaluation, like essay writing, without providing adequate preparation, it may contribute to the awarding gap. The study by a UCL researcher, published in eLife[12], highlights that the difference in marks awarded to white and minority ethnic students may be more related to exams than coursework. This finding opens up a new area for investigation regarding the types of assessment and their potential biases. It suggests that minority ethnic students might be at a disadvantage if they are not given the necessary tools and support to excel in the primary mode of assessment. In light of this, future research could focus on the relationship between teaching methods, assessment types, and student performance across different ethnic groups. This research could explore whether minority ethnic students receive equal opportunities to develop the skills required for success in their assessments and whether alternative forms of assessment might lead to a more equitable educational environment.

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Contributions

Dr Jeni Harden: PTAS grant application, research Design, Ethics design and interview design. Read final repport.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: A Literature Review on the BAME award gap (By Kamya Choudhary)

There has been a significant concern over the attainment disparity of BAME students in higher education since the 1990s (Owen et al., 2000; Connor et al., 2004; Leslie, 2005; Elias, Jones, and McWhinnie, 2006; Broecke and Nicholls, 2006; Senior, 2012). BAME (or BME) is a broad term referring to Black, Asian, and Mixed/Multiple/Minority Ethnic categorisation of people of colour (Richardson, 2008a; 2015). The BAME attainment gap generally pertains to the underachievement with regard to student retention, qualifying for a 'good degree' and progression to further education or employment (BIS, 2014; Richardson, 2015; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). For the purpose of this study, it begins at the threshold of the entrance of undergraduates into HEIs (see Culliname and Kirby, 2016 for a discussion on grades and black pupils) and their lived experiences of accessing spaces and cultivating strong engagement with their classes and the wider student body.

The research will draw from linkages to studies around belonging (Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011; Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born, 2010; Singh, 2011; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Loke and Berry, 2011; Stevenson, 2012; Tate, 2020), social justice and mobility agenda (Bok, 2010; Donohue and Erling, 2012; Senior, 2012; Owen et al., 2000), intersectionality[1] (Advance HE, 2018a; Cotton, Georger and Joyner, 2013; Cotton et al., 2016; Field and Morgan-Klein, 2013; Connor et al., 2004; ECU and HEA, 2008; Broecke and Hamed, 2008) and anti-racism (SOAS SU, 2016; Singh, 2011; Rollock, 2012; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; NUS, 2017; Tate, 2020).

A grounded theory lens would be particularly useful methodological approach in data collection for interviews and post-interview data analysis (see Heath and Cowley, 2004). Smith (2017) adds that it is important for researchers during the analytical process to consider "their own power positions and perspectives particularly" (p. 50) as they are themselves embedded within the *social field* of the study that is not 'neutral' but a racialised space (Doharty, 2018; Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020; Tate, 2020).

Understanding Key Terms

In UK, a 'bachelors' is considered as the first degree which is awarded as honours, finally classified[2] into first, second (divided into upper and lower division) and third-class degrees upon completion. A

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[1] Further reading includes López et al. (2018) on critical race studies approach for Black students in HEIs, Bhopal (2020) using a sociological approach.

[2] National statistics collected by Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) on the classes of degrees awarded by UK HEIs does not classify practice degrees for students in Medicine, Dentistry and Veterinary Sciences.

'good degree' is described as one that is awarded with first class or upper-second class honours (Richardson, 2008a; 2008b), often a prerequisite for job offers and further university admissions (Jones et al., 2020; Coughlan, 2018; Miller, 2016). According to the 11th national student equality data report drafted by Advance HE (2018a) for higher education institutions (HEIs), 22.7% of students in HEIs identified themselves as BME from the 98.4% of all UK domiciled students who disclosed their ethnicity information. From this cohort, 79.6% of white students received a first/2:1 honours degree in comparison with 66% of BME students, representing a BAME degree award gap of 13.6%. Richardson (2015) points out that classification of degrees is a complex "social process" and not an absolute legitimate measurement index. Thus, any data picked from such statistics even at the university-level must be leveraged with caution.

It is essential that the merits of HE should be shared equally between individuals, society and the economy. The equality of opportunity and diversity representation in the student body generates public welfare by reducing socio-economic inequalities at the societal level and boosting economy by having larger access of draw the potential of the demography (BIS, 2014). The BAME award gap has impact on employment/career progression as well as in degree completion rates, where Black students are 1.5 times more likely to drop out from HEIs compared to Asian or White peers (National Union of Students (NUS) and Universities UK, 2019).

The 2014 National strategy for access and student success in HE set forth by Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and Office for Fair Access stresses that the whole process from student enrolment to the creation of a holistic and inclusive learning environment at university is important for the academic success of its students as well as the development of their employability attributes (BIS, 2014). ECU/HEA report (2008) recommends that more qualitative research needs to be done around BME student experiences to strategically identify and address the infrastructural, curricular and pastoral needs at HE institutions. This study holds great potential to be the first to fill in the gaps for this research in Scotland.

Several studies done by HEFCE (2010/13; 2014/03; 2017/27) and Office for Students (OfS) (2019) have found differences in degree award outcomes among varied group of students. Generally, women were more likely to attain a 'good degree' than men. However, the starkest gaps were noticed between students of minority groups, i.e., BAME and their white counterparts (OfS, 2019; Richardson, 2015; Loke and Berry, 2011; Broecke and Nicholls, 2006). "For example, while 82.2 percent of young white students were awarded a 1st or 2:1 in 2017, only 60.4 percent of their black and 71.7 per cent of their Asian counterparts were" (OfS, 2019, p. 55-56).

Leslie (2005) in his study to identify reasons for under-performance of ethnic minority UK domiciled students within HEIs between 1998 and 2000 noted that ethnic minority students are more likely to choose subjects such as business studies and computer sciences where chances of being awarded 'good degrees' are less. Nonetheless, they are less likely to obtain a 'good degree' in comparison to

White students even after taking their entry qualification and course choice. The above data points to another important facet of nuance that is essential to this study moving forward that there are variations within attainment amongst BAME students as well[3].

The term BAME is contested as it subsumes a diverse range of minority communities living in the UK within a single label that they may or may not identify with, assimilating disparate degrees of and internal discriminatory and racist experiences; and hence, needed to be treated with caution and sensitivity (Tate, 2020; Smith, 2017; Richardson 2015; Singh, 2011; SOAS SU, 2016). While some discriminatory behaviour such as 'othering' and 'isolation' were commonly faced by all members of the minority groups, there are evidences of more pronounced and targeted racism towards certain groups within the BAME category, such as Islamophobia and anti-Black attitudes within HEIs (SOAS SU, 2016).

This is supported by Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2015) study which shows that Black students are on the lowest ranks with regard to degree outcomes, while 'other Asian' or other ethnic groups within BAME also perform relatively worse off than their Chinese, Indian and White student counterparts; from all of these, White students consistently perform the best in high level degree attainment. In another study conducted by Tolley and Rundle (2006), students of Indian and Chinese descent performed better than Black British-Caribbean, Black British-African or other Black background students, and some White group students. The 'Asian' category itself is flawed as sub-grouping negates further nuance, such as data reflecting that Indians are much better in performance than their Pakistanis and Bangladeshis counterparts (Broecke and Nicholls, 2006) and more likely to go to university in the first place (Crawford and Greaves, 2015), with Black and Pakistani students showing lower enrolment rates (Montacute and Culliname, 2018).

Researching Lived Experiences: Exploring the BAME Award Gap

BAME award gap is caused due to complex and multiple interacting factors. These causal determinants for differential outcomes for different categories of students are influenced at three levels: student-staff (micro), institutional (meso) and societal (macro) (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Stuart, Lido and Morgan (2011) in their study based on life history approach using grounded theory found that though intersectionality of socio-economic variables shapes the engagement of students in HE institutions, in some cases, ethnicity surpasses these other factors in affecting overall involvement levels. It has been noted that irrespective of the causes of the BAME award gap, both historically and contemporarily, the foremost measures in HEIs assumes that the deficit within the BME students is

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[3] Connor et al. (2004) pointes out the lack of uniformity within the sub-groups reflected in the wide-ranging contrarieties based on social class, cultural environment, faith and advocates specific ethnic group study to grasp the issue better.

associated with their socio-cultural background (Tate, 2020; Smith, 2017; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Loke and Berry, 2011).

Tate (2020) and Smith (2017) highlights the lack of appreciation for 'cultural learning styles' of BAME student body that led to persistent emphasis on 'fixing' BME students, resulting in meagre positive outcomes. Similarly, the SOAS SU (2016) research on ethnicity award gaps at SOAS, and Smith (2017) study the ongoing project working on BME degree attainment at Leeds Beckett University demonstrates that the BAME award gap is not attributable to deficit in the minority ethnic group of students, instead also pointing at the need for specific interventions to target institutional factors rather than BME students themselves. Tate (2020) points out that there is always a tendency to move the problematic onus from the institution to the BAME student group as if is the problem of 'their' culture. There is a need to move away from a deficit model as it assumes that BME students are lacking in capabilities and aspirations that are required to successfully perform within HEIs, misguidedly attributing them to be 'unbiased' spaces (Loke and Berry, 2011).

Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph (2017) in their study at University of Bristol argue that though the causal factors behind awarding gaps are indeed multiple (e.g., structural, financial, attitudinal, and organisational), these cannot be elucidated upon without careful subjective study of experiences of BME students. Similarly, Loke and Berry (2011) advocate for a similar study of student experiences along with quantitative data to reveal new and complex dimensions of differences in the awarding gap, especially given that BME students do not constitute as a homogenous group.

In another study of 523 first year students (145 ethnic minority students and 378 majority students) from 4 universities in Netherlands, it was found that an activated learning environment aided in promoting a qualitative interaction between students and staff and among students (which led to development of a sense of belonging), but most positively impacting the progress among the majority student group. This suggests that there is need to look more extensively at student life histories to understand how ethnic majority and minority domains interrelate to accurately study its impacts on student successes (Meeuwisse, Severiens and Born, 2010).

Investigating Causes and Further Avenues to Explore

A review of studies on the BAME award gap discerns five types of explanatory parameters: curriculum and assessment; pedagogy and learning environment; interrelationships between students and HE staff; socio-cultural-economic capital; psychosocial and identity factors HEIs (Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph, 2017; Smith, 2017; SOAS SU, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Cotton, George and Joyner, 2013; Singh, 2011; Broecke and Hamed, 2008). All these factors play a role in shaping the belonging of BAME students, whose engagement levels and degree outcomes are additionally predicated on their positive self-perception, racial identity and social capital, and positive images of self (Collins, 2020; Harper and Quaye, 2008). Student identities within engagement and entitlement

to spaces that they feel are the constant determining aspects in this discourse. The 'sense of belonging' is identified as a key determinant of student degree outcome, making up the 'common core' of successful students (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

Cultures of 'Whiteness4' Surrounding Entry, Curriculum and Assessment

Although qualification prior to the entry at HEIs is also a key factor in student degree outcomes, it does not explain all the differences between results of ethnic groups during university time. Even after taking preliminary qualification into consideration, BME students are still less likely to attain a 'good degree'. For example, according to HEFCE (2014/03) statistics, 72 percent of white students while 56 percent of Asian students, and 53 percent of black students attained a first or 2:1 degree while entering with the exact same A-level grades.

Majority of the BAME students in different research studies highlight the influence of 'whiteness' in the curriculum more than any other aspect of learning and teaching within the HEIs, consequently impacting their performance (Tate, 2020; Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph, 2017; Smith, 2017; SOAS SU, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Singh, 2011). Such curriculum is seen to serve white students better than other ethnic groups, legitimising the 'white man's perspective'. It has been noted that including works of people of colour occurs in segregated or separate units rather than assimilated into the curriculum as a whole (Tate, 2020). Euro/White-centric curriculum leads to systematic erasure of work and knowledge systems of people of colour. It leads to feelings of 'othering', 'alienation', and 'erasure', making it difficult to engage with the course and lack of motivation for HE (Phillips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph, 2017; SOAS SU, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Singh, 2011).

A disjuncture has been identified between pedagogic intentions of the staff and the way it is experienced by BAME students, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation (Mountford-Zimadars, 2015). It is noted that staff are less likely to take socio-cultural and historical variables into account when forming the curricula and pedagogy (Mountford-Zimadars, 2015). Smith (2017) in a course documentation analysis found that there is little detail/guidance from universities to staff with regard to approaches for inclusive curriculum, induction, placement, learning and assessment and "lack of explicitness about how integration, group work and multicultural issues are addressed explicitly within the course delivery" (p. 51). In addition, teacher biases themselves remain poorly investigated in HEIs (Dhanda, 2020).

Cotton, George and Joyner (2013) in their research point out that white interest-concentrated syllabi do not allow students to connect their learning with relevant current social issues around the students (like the Black Lives Matter Movement) and leads to depleting levels of motivation and an absence of

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[4] Joseph-Salisbury (2018) and Yancy (2012)

the development of skills needed to 'change' the world (Cotton, George and Joyner, 2013). This is important because in contrast to 48% white students, 57% of BME student enter HEIs with the intent to build such skills that change the 'world' they experience inside/outside universities (Cotton, George and Joyner, 2013). This leads to potential disconnection and is likely to be one of the reasons for the BAME award gap.

Similarly, with regard to assessment, the acknowledgment of ability plays a significant role in the confidence levels of students, which in turn impacts the performance outcomes Burke et al., 2013; Mountford-Zimdars, 2015; Bok, 2010). This recognition of potential that boxes BAME students at lower expectations is closely linked to those with higher authority (like teaching staff) in HEIs to name, classify and assess incorrectly (Burke et al., 2013). Smith (2017) focuses on the faculty's ability/inability to identify 'unconscious' bias or racist attitudes in an institution and its culture for students. It is often a challenge to acknowledge the need to change pedagogy by the academics.

Since BME students often live at home (or self-segregate), it influences faculty perceptions, making racialized differences problematic and impacts student ability to progress (Smith, 2017) and miss out on opportunities to network at university (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Mountford-Zimdars (2015) identifies the prevalence of this as 'unconscious bias' - "people 'selecting people like themselves' or 'rewarding in assessment people like themselves'" (p.35) on part of the people in the positions of power, thereby impacts differentials in students' outcomes. Lower levels of engagement in this learning process are associated with underperformance of BAME students (Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph, 2017; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Burke et al., 2013; Loke and Berry, 2011; Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011; Singh, 2011).

Moutford-Zimdars et al. (2015, p. 33) remark that,

> "In addition to the conceptual spaces of the curriculum, the physical spaces for teaching and learning were cited as another possible cause for differential progression and attainment. For example, some Asian students might state that they 'learn by discussing with each other' rather than using a library book for quiet reading at a desk thus highlighting the need to 'restructure space so that different groups can learn in their preferred style'".

BAME students are more likely to encounter discriminatory teaching and assessment practices at university (Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020; Osler, 2019). Examples of such assessment practices include criticisms about linguistic ability (despite guidelines to not assess on the basis of grammar) as well as in-seminar/tutorial on contributions assessments. Specifically, the latter appears fair but actually disadvantages certain ethnic groups that are culturally not socialised to put forward their ideas or and discounts the varied levels of 'confidence' exercised by social class locations of students completely (Mountford-Zimdars, 2015, p. 31). This brings attention to the learning environment - both virtual and physical, as crucial with regard to attainment outcomes.

The pervasiveness of 'whiteness' within HE- curriculum, pedagogy and demography of HEIs explicates "whose perspective mattered, and whom the course was for" (SOAS SU, 2016, p.7). It manifests in how the relations of power in the HE institutional environment are constructed as well (e.g., Who commissions research? Who goes on to implement changes? etc.). 'Whiteness' is represented as multifaceted power, domination and privilege that is invisible and often goes unaccounted while continuing to maintain its supremacy (Rollock, 2012).

It allows white students and staff to benefit from the varied historical social and institutional structures and processes that seem 'neutral' and innocuous (Rollock, 2012) ignoring the racialised nature of the space (Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020). Borrowing Bourdieu's (1990) description of misrecognition in his conceptualisation of *social fields*, whiteness can be disguised and glossed through the influence of social class, religion, ethnicity, gender and social processes to deliberately contribute to and/or maintain social differentiation and inequalities. These begin to be viewed as "morally acceptable"/ "normal"/"natural" (Rollock, 2012, p. 518).

Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2015) findings show the negative experiences of engagement in HEI environments with direct racism and racist micro-aggression found prevalent there (see also NUS Black Attainment Gap, 2017), affects students experiences and performances negatively, including of BME students' mental health and degree outcomes (Tate, 2020). Rollock (2012) defines racial micro-aggressions as description of students' everyday episodes of degenerating messages received as people of colour or for belonging to minority ethnic groups (see also Gillborn, 2008). They "sap" feelings of belonging and confidence (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2019). These are "subtle and insidious, often leaving the victim confused, distressed and frustrated and the perpetrator oblivious of the offence they have caused" (Rollock, 2012, p.517).

Rollock further argues that while more overt forms of racism are given due consideration, these latent and nuanced forms of racial prejudices and discrimination are ignored within the education sector (and the larger British society), forcing minority ethnic student groups to contend with these on an everyday basis creating negative ramifications on their motivations and performance in HE. It tries to *socialise* minority ethnic groups to *internalise* their underperformance, thereby maintaining social inequalities (Cotton, George and Joyner, 2013; Rollock, 2012; Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011). For example, in the study, one BME student pursuing medicine had to prove his identity at the hospital everyday as staff did not believe he was capable of practising medicine.

Although, these issues often have been spoken about, they have not been systematically researched substantially (Philips, Rana-Deshmukh, Joseph, 2017). Harvard University's Voices of Diversity (2014) project research findings show that micro-aggressions have a detrimental impact on graduation rates (sample researched in 4 American universities). In SOAS SU (2016), it was found that BAME students felt that a certain level of disparaging of their perspective within classroom discussions was passively

enabled by tutors, as their perspectives were either dismissed or challenged on the basis of "racist tropes of white people as rational and Black people as hyper-emotional" (p. 14).

BAME students can perceive differences in treatment in comparison with white students, including lecturers preferring the latter or feeling more confident based on their authority in the class to deploy racist behaviour or comments (SOAS SU, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Singh, 2011). These demonstrate that academia is not prone to the racism of earlier/contemporary British years that shapes a lot of the views (and their own university experiences as students once) of staff employed at universities today (Dhanda, 2020; Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020). HEIs structures and processes of functioning today is influenced by strong histories of racism that does not allow a different way of being, forming major structural and institutional barriers and disadvantages for African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean background (NUS, 2017; Tate, 2020).

Representation as the Window/ Mirror to 'See More'

Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph (2017) in their study at University of Bristol found that lack of representation and diversity both within the student body and HEIs workforce leads to feelings of isolation, reduced engagement and otherness as well as unable to be 'completely themselves'[5] (Smith, 2017). By otherness, it is implied that students experience constraints to fully expressing themselves (Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph, 2017; Stevenson, 2012). It was seen that often a single BME student in class would be asked to express opinion on race/victimhood - becoming the uncomfortable and the sole representative of BME people (SOAS SU, 2016) or make up for the lack of diversity in the euro-centric course of study (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020; SOAS SU, 2016).

BME students perceived that white students did not seem to be aware of their privileges and often showcased micro-aggressions such as an 'eye roll' or expressed a sense of 'here we go again' if discussing BME perspectives/racism (Tate, 2020; Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph, 2017; SOAS SU, 2016; Rollock, 2012; see more on cultures of bullying and harassment, Connor et al., 2004; Farwell, 2008). Further, it was noted that white teachers and classroom students did not recognise the emotional labour and impact of this work when performed by Black students, often "discussing racist and colonial violence in an abstract way, without also sufficiently emphasising its material reality" (SOAS SU, 2016, p.15; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020).

Further, underrepresentation of people of colour within the faculty and managerial personnel often leads to identity crisis among BME students during their years at university (SOAS SU, 2016; Singh, 2011). Calls for anti-racism and decolonisation of curriculum or institutional spaces need to have those

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[5] See Choudhary (2020) for higher education experience of BAME students at the postgraduate level specifically in Scotland.

mirrored in practice (Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020; Tolulope, 2019). This is supported by Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2015, p.iv) who find that the lack of BAME role models to identify with led to students questioning their self-motivation or pursue studying, "Academics are perceived by students as role models and are key to delivering the implicit messages of success that underpin attainment and progression" (Smith, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2019).

Advance HE (2018b) reports that the number of BME individuals with relevant qualification employed in HEI is lower than their white counterparts. 9.4% of UK staff identified themselves as BME. Only 0.6% of UK professors are black. It is worthwhile to note that though there has been an increase in representation of BME staff between 2003/04 and 2016/17, BME representation is mostly in the lowest levels and are underrepresented at the highest contract levels (Advance HE, 2018b).

Navigating Belongingness

Belongingness forms an important aspect of BAME students experiencing HEIs in relatedness and connectedness terms (Jones et al., 2020), as integration (Severiens & Wolff, 2008; Tate, 2020), or acceptance (Thomas, 2012) rather than alienation/isolation. It positively impacts student's confidence levels as well as improves student retention rates (Singh, 2011) as well as boosts academic achievement levels and personal spirations (Gemmell and Harrison, 2020; Stayorn, 2018).

In Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph (2017) study, students revealed that they successfully navigated university life in *social fields*, albeit as a *chore* by 'performing whiteness' and 'playing the game'. By imitating and performing, they referred to taking on the tastes (e.g., changing to a more English sounding name), etiquettes and choice of words of White peers that could make their perspective feel valued. By pretending to play the game, they described exercising patience that one day they can reach where they want and finally be more like themselves there. Such cultures of 'fitting in' impose exclusionary environments on BAME students, specifically those from lower socio-economic backgrounds as they enter more elite institutions (Shiner and Noden, 2014).

The 2017 study recommended that "university could do more to be accommodating of different cultures - for example by being careful not to timetable exams around non-Christian religious events" (p.16). Alongside this, students require more pastoral care and support in their first year at university to combat feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome/ not feeling "academic enough" (Smith, 2017).

Additionally, the lack of cohesive and BME-specific support networks adds to the lack of belonging and disengagement within HEIs (NUS, 2011; Wilcox et al., 2005). Mountford-Zimdars et al. (2015) note the importance of friendship and peer support in relation to developing persistence and supporting decisions to complete HE. These networks act as critical 'coping mechanisms' and support structures that build their sense of belonging at the university. Field and Morgan-Klein's study (2013) highlights

that these networks are still relatively under-developed and there is little research in terms of how they interact with and impact HE to develop student agency and leading to a dearth of examples of university attempts at restructuring/creating such support bases.

Stevenson (2012) studies the scope of influence that students view on what 'they believe or expect they can become' i.e. their 'possible selves' has on their actions to seek academic support and ensuing degree outcome. Inferring from qualitative data-group interviews of 70 full-time undergraduate White and minority ethnic students studying at two UK 'Russell group' universities - it found that white students are more likely to seek all sorts of support available at the HEI unlike BME students who expressed exhaustion of 'getting by' leaving a minimal need to connect with their lecturers. BME students instead in the study tried to manage on their own or through their peers. This research highlights the lack of consistency between BME student aspirations and their reality guided by their 'ought to' selves that demarcates academic help-seeking strategies.

Smith (2017) findings from focus groups discussions show that minimal presence of BME student course representatives and the reluctance on the part of BME students to seek assistance led to the submission of substandard work. However, there are no questions raised as to why there is reluctance and simply attributed to their ethnicity. Singh (2011) argued that reluctance to ask questions on the part of BAME students should not be attributed to personal and psychological factors but instead focus on investigating why students feel alienated, what makes them hesitate to ask, due to what experiences at the university (Tate, 2020)? The monocultural curriculum taught through white lens, lack of BAME people representation in student unions, faculty and staff feeds into bias of white man superiority and racist micro-aggressions in institutional culture, structure, processes and environment (Tate, 2020; Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020; Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph, 2017; Smith, 2017). It impacts feelings of belonging negatively as BAME students are more likely to report receiving less favourable treatments than their White ethnic peers (Alexander and Arday, 2015; NUS, 2011; Peterson and Ramsay, 2020).

Tate (2020) analyses the BAME award gap from the vantage of an equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) failure to bring about anti-racist change at HEIs (see also Collins, 2020; Currants, 2015) that continue to "envision themselves as white, then they are zones of un-belonging for students of colour" (p.1156). She argues that institutions use 'unconscious bias' to negate institutional racism present and prove 'white innocence' and avoid redressing systemic and structural forms of racism (Tate and Page 2018, pp. 143).

HEI environment is a replication of the broader inequalities and processes present in the society leading to "taken-for-granted practices" that students interact with "differently depending on their own backgrounds" (Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011, p. 493). Consequently, this changes how impact and outcome levels are shaped for different BAME students and also hold HEIs hold up white privilege into place (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020).

Tate (2020) advocates for a shift away from BAME students/their 'different' learning styles to the euro-centric curriculum, lack of support and unfavourable pedagogy adopted by the faculty; predominance of white bureaucracy and faculty; student of colour delegitimization by fellow peers; expectation to underachieve leads to an environment of indirect exclusion, fear, isolation and segregation. These keep the 'libidinal economy' of racism intact feeding into white supremacy where "nonwhite bodies, psyches, knowledges continue to be of little concern, or, to be only of concern if they begin to be troubling to white privilege and must be contained" (Tate, 2012 cited in Tate, 2020, p. 1158).

EDI training needs to reword 'unconscious bias' as '(un)conscious bias' to recognise the racist influences in HEIs (Tate, 2020). This call is supported by Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph inference that there is "low awareness of equality and diversity policies and the complaints procedure amongst the BME student" (2017, p.4) and found students feared complaining would be seen as 'pulling the race card'. It indicates that university are still ill-equipped to deal with issues faced by BME students (Gillies and Robinson, 2012) and may struggle to acknowledge institutional racism within its policies/staff/teaching styles through an "operation of the coloniality", power" and "knowledge" of power, being, knowledge, and affect within EDI influenced environments" (Tate, 2020, p.1153).

How Intersectionality Adds to the Research

With escalating intermingling and mobility of different communities, an increasing number of students also have multiple identities which need to be carefully noted. In such a scenario, the progress of any one ethnic group may be equally connected to their socio-economic context such as their class position in society *as well as* their ethnicity (Singh, 2011). Intersectionality has become important topic for consideration within BAME award gap research (Eden, 2019).

The discourse of equality and diversity in HEIs is driven alongside the rising centrality of "institutional and procedural requirements" like Athena SWAN charter principle on intersectionality or its inclusion in the Race Equality Charter principles alongside other outcome-oriented guidance in Scotland (Advance HE, 2018a, p. 242). Though these inclusions have been described as performative and superficial (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020).

Intersectionality refers to acknowledging that an individual's identity and position in the society is shaped by multiple social, economic, cultural factors, thereby creating a matrix of distinctive circumstances and perspectives. Students with similar racial backgrounds may not necessarily share similar deprivileges/privileges, principles and stances towards education due to their distinctive experiences (Eden, 2019). Intersection of faith, religion, culture, class, gender, ethnicity, able-

bodiedness and socio-historic conjunctions have a critical relationship to educational attainments in HEIs (Broecke and Hamed, 2008).

Singh (2011) recognises several parameters that contributes to differential attainments of BAME vis-a-vis their white counterparts at the institutional level. It is associated with range of personal, institutional, structural and cultural factors already studied extensively, but superimposed with occurrences of direct and indirect forms of racism. Smith (2017) notes that a significant proportion of BME students predominantly come from poorly performing schools and lower socio-economic backgrounds, who face racist, classist stereotypes from peers leading to feelings of alienation (Connor et al., 2004; Farwell, 2008).

Burke et al. (2013) highlight the complex relationship between gender, class and race and pedagogy by studying relationships, experiences and practices that demonstrate the anxieties associated, the fears of being shamed and overall uncertainties among students. SOAS SU (2016) noted that a role model is also viewed in a further intersectional way - "if women are disadvantaged, black women are 'twice disadvantaged'" making the lack of women who identify as black and lower/working class as equally important considerations for 'role model' seeking in HEIs by students (p. 34). There is a call for more Black-inclusion efforts within BAME initiatives at university (Hamilton, 2020) but also recognising that they face a unique and layered form of isolation/alienation that is left out from discussion around inclusion and awarding gaps (Collins, 2020; Currants, 2015; Tate, 2020) as well as reflected in black students disproportionately dropping out from universities even within the BAME category (National Union of Students (NUS) and Universities UK, 2019).

The lack of representation of diversity in the student body and faculty discussed above gets compounded with intersectionality of ethnicity with gender and/or class, impacting the power dynamics in the institutional environment. Cotton, George and Joyner (2013) found that female BME are less likely to over-estimate their potential degree outcome than their male counterparts as well as having the lowest levels of expectation of accomplishing a good degree. This demonstrates the intersection of gender and ethnicity/race power dynamics in society and how that impacts their aspirations and expectation towards HE which play important role in shaping degree outcomes.

Further, socio-cultural background plays an important role in determining the BAME student's engagement with HEIs and their degree outcomes (Smith, 2017; Cotton, George and Joyner, 2013; Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011; Singh, 2011; Richardson, 2008b; Owen et al., 2000) as well as the achievement gap between black students and their peers (Gillborn, 2008; Strand, 2012). BAME students' educational and career objectives are strongly influenced by experience and objectives of their parents and communities in which they reside. BME students expressed that coming as the first generation to attend a HE institution in their families, they did not have necessary know-how and support to navigate university life and lower linguistic competency (Cotton, George and Joyner, 2013; Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011).

Advancing Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) concept of cultural capital and habitus (resource of knowledge), socio-cultural context (habitus) determines the availability of capital available to them determining the chances of successful education and career. Cultural capital refers to the value associated with culturally validated forms of symbolic elements such as values, tastes, preferences, skills, attitudes that can be strategically deployed as resources in social action, based on one's position in social order and is the foundation of social life. It is transferable to economic capital and contributes to inter and intragenerational reproduction of class differences. This education is not necessarily same as formal education, but it can provide or fail to provide the necessary skills and outlook to successfully engage with the HE institutions.

Ladson-Billings (2006) in his study of achievement gap between Black, Latino and immigrants and White in US universities, advances award gap as an 'education debt' that has accumulated overtime. This debt comprises of a legacy of BME disadvantage resulting from decades of inequality and lack of opportunity. Further, the study by Field and Morgan-Klein (2013) observes that there is close relationship between language and social class in Britain. Use of language, literacy levels and academic writing directly shapes students experience and identities in HE (Donohue and Erling, 2012). This indicates how cultural and social capital such as linguistic capacities cause student differential outcomes (Collins, 2020; Harper and Quaye, 2008).

Philips, Rana-Deshmukh and Joseph (2017) highlighted that in Bristol, more BME students come from state school backgrounds in comparison to their white counterparts who were predominantly from private schooling and considered 'rich'. These differences can create feelings of isolation for stets attempting to assimilate in institutional spaces constructed to favour the training 'rich' students receive at private schools (Burke et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2020; Philips, Rana-Deshmuk and Joseph, 2017; Smith, 2017; Field and Morgan-Klein, 2013; Shiner and Noden, 2014). Also, important for BAME students is accounting of any 'hidden curriculum' i.e., the informal demands and often unspoken assumptions within the HEI that assumes certain information to be known by all students, ignoring the challenges faced by first generation students (Mountford-Zimdars, 2015).

What Do Inclusive Futures Look Like?

The research so far (SOAS SU, 2016; Smith, 2017; Tate, 2020) necessitates the creation of more inclusive environment at HEIs, where the structure and processes do not view BME students as subjects of the 'fix' but instead create them as targeted beneficiaries of improved structures around them. It would be important to veer away from the one-size-fits-all approach in the interview questions as well as the eventual recommendations arising from the research. It requires a longitudinal consideration and comprehensive perception of impact on the attitudes surrounding students and staff, as well as the overall culture of the university. HEA (2015) delineates a holistic

approach for implementation of action plans that especially promote embedded inclusion, equality and diversity both within the HE institutional structure, curricula, staff and learning technologies.

Aspiration is an important aspect in the discourse of BAME award gap, marking a complex relationship between socio-cultural contexts of BAME students. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2004) in his essay 'Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition' argues that culture is not simply habits, custom, heritage, tradition- i.e., ideas of the past but also ideas of the future which are embedded and nurtured. Studies and research important but putting into place strict interventions are essential to move past performativity of universities hopping on to the 'decolonial bandwagon' (Bhopal and Henderson 2019; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020; Moosavi, 2020).

Strengthening this capacity to aspire (see Bhopal and Leadership Foundation for Higher Education 2014) by conscious interventions in the form of education, voice and exposure to a BAME-inclusive and future-oriented logic of development can modify the aspirations. Bok (2010) in his paper reframes 'capacity to aspire' as aspiration that is a cultural category rather than motivational trait, one where BAME students from low socio-economic status background in society have but face difficulties realising them.

The key to reducing the award gap lies in changing the institutional cultures which requires the HE institutions' willingness and commitment as well as actual operation to be more inclusive. Therefore, there is need for decolonisation of the university structure, processes, culture and environment. Conceiving an all-embracing supportive culture at an HE institution brings forth a cohesive environment and strong sense of belongingness among BAME students. The study, drawing from Tate (2020, p.1165), would be essential in breaking the "myth that universities are "post-race" institutions" where anyone can succeed irrespective of 'race' to ensure the existence of racism and BAME student experiences are not erased from research findings on the subject of the awarding gap.

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Section 1: The University and Belonging

1. What does a 'sense of belonging' mean to you?

    a. What groups do you feel you belong to at the moment?

    b. Could you describe who's in it, and what its core features are? Where do you fit in personally?

2. Do you find the University of Edinburgh to be a welcoming and friendly place?

    a. Are there particular areas of the University where you feel most welcome, and why?

    b. Are there any areas you find it harder to feel welcome and connected in? Why do you think that is?

    c. How do you feel about the induction into University (or for returning students the 're-induction' back into second/third/fourth year)?

    d. Have you ever helped newer students get to know the University?

3. How would you describe the University of Edinburgh community?

    a. Do you feel part of a community within your school? How would you describe it? How does it make you feel?

    b. What suggestions would you have to improve the community within your school?

    c. How could being part of this community benefit them?

4. How important is physical space to fostering a sense of community?

    a. Are there spaces in the University that work well for fostering community?

    b. What places would you like there to be, or to be more of, to help foster a sense of community at the University?

5. Do you think it's important for your school to help bridge the academic-social divide?

    a. Does this make you feel more engaged in the course?

    b. How would being part of the community be able to benefit engagement with a course do you think?

Section 2: The Course & School

6. When you first started at the University do you think it would have been beneficial to be part of an academic family or to have access to a peer mentor?

    a. What are your thoughts on peer networks and study groups?

7. Is there a school society or family system which helps you get to know your fellow classmates?

    a. If yes, how beneficial is it? Could you tell me about the value you think it brings?

    b. If no, do you think activities like this would work in your school?

    c. Should there be more student led initiative to help build communities? Would these work?

8. Do you think there are people at the University who care about your success?

    a. If yes, what type of roles are these people in? How do they make you feel this?

    b. If no, why?

    c. Do you think good relationships with University staff within your school is key to a good community?

9. What is the makeup of your class/cohort, in terms of race, ethnicity, class and gender? Do you think being from a minority ethnic group shapes your experience at university?

    a. Are there times when you have to work in groups with other students –formal group work or informal study groups? Does ethnicity influence how the groups are formed and interact?

10. Do you feel you have access to enough networks of support at university (other students, societies, teachers/lecturers, mentors etc.)? Have you ever reached out to lecturers/anyone for help? What was that like? How frequently? If not, what feels lacking that prevented you from doing so?

Section 2: Personal factors that shape university experience

11. Where do you feel most at home at the University and why?

12. What other aspects of your identity impact your university experience so far, for example class, gender, religion, sexuality, disability, where you are from?

    i. Probes around these including assessing impact of – positive/ disruptive experiences with teachers, classmates (discrimination, loneliness)

    ii. Ability to avail opportunities at university consider aspects of finances, race/ethnicity

13. Have you had periods of feeling lonely whilst at the University?

    a. Do you think the University should take a more active role in preventing students from feeling isolated?

    b. How could they do this?

14. Some students will say things like 'this isn't the place for me' or 'I don't belong at Edinburgh University'. Why do you think some students, or maybe even yourself feel like this?

    a. How important are friends and flatmates in this sense of belonging?

    b. What aspects of 'not belonging' do you recognise?

    c. How could this be changed?

15. How important is it to you to feel valued by the University?

    a. How important is it to you to feel valued by your school?

    b. How important is it to you to feel valued by your fellow students?

    c. Is there anybody else at the University who has been important to you, and made you feel valued whilst here?

16. Have you heard about any great initiatives or events within the University, schools, societies, sports clubs which you think foster a sense of belonging and community?

    a. What ideas do you have, that could help foster a sense of community?

Section 3: Assessment and Grades

17. How do you feel in terms of your academic attainment? Do you feel you are reaching your full potential?

18. Have you noticed a change in the levels of your motivation to 'achieve' between when you started university and now? What factors or experiences do you think affected these motivation levels?

19. Have you ever thought of changing your course or dropping out of your degree program?

20. Do you think the assessment system is a fair one for all students?

21. Do you think your previous schooling prepared you well for university assessments? Can you give examples in what ways it did/didn't prepare you?

22. Do you think the university prepared you to undertake assessments? If yes – in what way? If not, what makes you say that; what else could have been done?

Section 4: Racism at University

23. Do your teachers and professors maintain an environment that makes you feel comfortable talking about race?

    a. Have there been such discussions in your classes?

Can you give examples of how teachers have facilitated/handled those discussions positively or negatively? Did the race/ethnicity of your teacher in class make a difference in how this interaction took place?

24. Have you ever felt stereotyped in any way based on your race/ethnicity by students, tutors or teachers or experienced racism/xenophobia/micro-aggression at university?
    i. What did you feel at the time?
    ii. Have you been supported by a bystander during such an incident?
    iii. Has your mental health ever been impacted by such experiences or events? And your energy to pursue your academic goals?
    iv. Have you ever made an official complaint or supported someone making one? What was your/their experience like?
25. Do you think the university needs to better support students who have faced racism on and off-campus? If so, how?
26. Do you feel the university is taking sufficient steps to make its students, teachers and professional staff anti-racist/race-sensitive? What more would you like to see?

Section 5: Within the curriculum,

27. Do you feel 'seen' in the curriculum in terms of representativeness and diversity? Does it feel relevant to contemporary events/politics happening around you?
28. Do you feel university provides you the space to develop ideas and skills to build an anti-racist society?
29. How has the university supported you specifically based on race/ethnicity/gender for life at and after university in relation to that? Career development?

Section 6: Wrap-up

1. Is there anything else related to the BAME attainment gap that we have not covered here?
2. What do you think the university should do to reduce the gap?

It's now the end of the formal interview and I'll be turning the recorder off. How are you feeling?

We can discuss how the data will be used; did you know you can request to receive a summary of the results when they are ready. In case you're interested, here are some important contacts…

72088

<u>Core Themes</u>

Feeling of Isolation: The student reports feeling more isolated since the onset of COVID-19, which has been exacerbated by a predominantly white middle-class cohort and a lack of BAME representation among tutors and classmates.

Sense of Belonging: The student highlights the importance of feeling comfortable and welcome without the need to alter one's behaviour or identity to fit in. This is contrasted with their experience of often feeling out of place or singled out due to their ethnicity.

Racial Sensitivity and Microaggressions: There is a recurring mention of microaggressions and occasional direct racism. Questions about the student's ethnic origin, name, or background contribute to a sense of being targeted or othered.

Support Systems and Community Groups: The formation of groups like BAME Medics and WellMed indicates attempts to create support networks. However, there is a sentiment that the university's and the Student Association's efforts to foster inclusivity don't always resonate personally with the student.

Academic Support and Mentorship: The student experiences challenges in accessing support services and mentorship, feeling that their concerns are not adequately addressed by course organisers or personal mentors.

Representation and Visibility: Positive steps like the inclusion of diverse medical conditions in teaching materials are noted, suggesting an appreciation for representation that reflects the student's own background.

Online Learning Challenges: Online learning has amplified feelings of isolation and disconnection from the university community, making it harder to stay motivated and engaged.

Coping with Racism in Professional Settings: The student discusses the anxiety associated with being misidentified or having to explain their identity in clinical settings, which affects their comfort level.

Observation of Others: The respondent notices that loneliness and isolation seem more pronounced among BAME students, indicating a broader issue of inclusion within the university.

Long-term Impact of Microaggressions: While immediate effects may not seem significant, there is an acknowledgment that the cumulative impact of microaggressions can lead to a noticeable toll over time.

Coding Framework

Isolation (IS): References to feeling alone or segregated.

Belonging (BL): Expressions of wanting to feel welcome without changing oneself.

Racial Sensitivity (RS): Discussions about the university's stance on anti-racism.

Microaggressions (MA): Instances of being made to feel othered through small, often indirect, comments or actions.

Inclusivity Initiatives (II): Mentions of groups or actions taken to increase inclusivity.

Support Services (SS): Availability and effectiveness of university support structures.

Academic Support (AS): The role of academic parents and study techniques.

Professional Racism (PR): Racism experienced during clinical placements or in the hospital.

Online Learning (OL): The impact of remote learning on motivation and connection.

Impact of Microaggressions (IM): The cumulative effect of repeated microaggressions

Key quotes

"I was feeling very motivated, but then I think it's definitely gone downhill since then."

"Sometimes I'll just be the only person who's from a BAME background and I can feel a little bit isolated."

"I don't really know what the university is doing in terms of [anti-racism], to be honest."

"Most of the students are from private school backgrounds and they're mostly white."

"I did consider going to university services before but obviously I wasn't really sure how to access it."

"When I'm in the hospital I do get a bit anxious about introducing myself and what people will think about me."

"I think direct racism isn't as common for me but I experience a lot of microaggressions."

71907

<u>Core Themes</u>

Academic Expectations and Preparedness: The interviewee mentions the lack of instruction on essay writing, despite it being a key component of assessment, indicating a gap in academic preparedness.

Transition and Belonging: There's an acknowledgment of the challenges that first-year students face in settling into university life and finding a sense of belonging, which is attributed to the transition from high school to university.

Identity and Community Integration: The importance of understanding one's identity and how it fits into the university environment is highlighted as a key factor in finding a sense of community.

Merit and Self-Affirmation: The respondent expresses a strong sense of deserving their place at the university, having met, and exceeded the requirements.

Involvement in University Societies: Active participation in societies is seen as a way to be part of smaller communities within the university, enhancing the feeling of inclusion.

Supportive Academic Relationships: The personal tutor system is praised for its effectiveness, and the respondent feels comfortable contacting lecturers, which contributes to a sense of support and belonging.

Discussion of Race: The respondent does not frequently discuss race in their academic setting but acknowledges that diversity may reduce discrimination. They also appreciate the presence of other people of colour in their living arrangements.

Complex Identities: There is a recognition that students arrive with complex identities that may not fit into pre-existing university social structures.

Staff-Student Relationships: Good relationships with university staff are perceived as crucial for fostering a positive community atmosphere, as staff have significant influence on students' initial university experience.

Motivation and Belonging: Feeling that one belongs is tied to motivation; there's an implication that the desire to belong and the feeling of belonging can drive students to engage more fully with their university experience.

Coding Framework

Academic Adjustment (AA): Challenges in transitioning to university academic standards. : "never really teach us how to write essays"

Sense of Belonging (SB): The emotional and psychological process of feeling part of the university community. "first years sometimes find it hard to settle in"

Identity and Integration (II): The personal journey of fitting into university life while maintaining individual identity. "understand your identity and how that fits in"

University Support Networks (USN): The role of university structures and individuals in providing support."personal tutor system is amazing"

Diversity and Inclusivity (DI): The impact of diversity on the student experience and discrimination. "there's less discrimination if there's more diversity"

Academic Engagement (AE): Interactions with staff and participation in academic discourse. "I contact my lecturers all the time"

Community Participation (CP): Involvement in societies and groups within the university. "I'm part of community is when I'm in societies"

Staff Influence on Community (SIC): The effect of staff-student relationships on the sense of community. "good relationships with university staff are key to a good community"

Key quotes

"never really teach us how to write essays and all they're assessed by is writing essays"

"the first years sometimes find it hard to settle in and they find it hard to feel that sense of belonging"

"it can be hard to find a sense of community until you understand your identity"

"I deserve to be here because I've done everything that was asked of me and more"

"I feel like I'm part of community is when I'm in societies"

"the personal tutor system is amazing"

"They've never made me feel uncomfortable. I study a science subject. Race doesn't come up."

"good relationships with university staff are key to a good community"

Core Themes

Racial Visibility in Academic Spaces: The interviewee's experience of standing out due to their race in predominantly white spaces, starting from private school and continuing into university.

City University Dynamics: The benefits that a city-based university offers in terms of joining various organisations and the feeling of inclusion it can bring.

Questioning Institutional Commitment: A critical view of the university's efforts in renaming buildings as potentially performative, questioning the depth of institutional changes.

Mixed Views on University Spaces: Appreciation for diverse study environments like the library, yet a critical understanding of how university spaces can still be improved for inclusivity.

Understanding of University Support: The student expresses a lack of clarity regarding how to navigate and utilize university support systems effectively.

Representation and Advocacy: A strong desire to see more professors of colour and recognition of movements that aim to inspire and include black students.

Classroom Participation: The student's experience with not being heard in class discussions, feeling overlooked, and the consequent impact on participation and grades.

Personal Impact of Tutor Interaction: The significance of personal interaction with tutors, particularly the issue with being confused with the only other black student, leading to feelings of invisibility and reluctance to participate.

Faculty Engagement and Responsiveness: Concerns about the lack of faculty responsiveness to student communications, particularly regarding sensitive issues of inclusion and participation.

Policy and Support Seeking: The student's uncertainty about policies regarding raising issues, and a reluctance to "burden" staff with problems or overstep perceived boundaries.

Thematic coding

Visibility (VIS): The sense of being conspicuous or invisible in educational spaces due to one's race. "the only black person in my year" and "you stand out in white spaces"

Urban Experience (UE): How city life and non-campus setting contribute to feelings of inclusion. "being in a city makes a difference"

Performativity (PERF): The gap between symbolic gestures and meaningful institutional change. "renaming of 40 Joyce Square" and "it's just performative"

Diverse Environments (DE): The importance of inclusive spaces like libraries and resource centres. "library's intense" and "see people of all different backgrounds"

Support Systems (SS): The need for clearer understanding and access to university support. "I don't feel like I have a great understanding of how the uni support systems work"

Academic Representation (AR): The desire for more faculty of colour and its impact on student experiences. "I would love to see more professors of colour"

Classroom Dynamics (CD): How racial dynamics affect participation and engagement in class. "I don't always speak out as much" and "you're not really being heard"

Student Advocacy (SA): Efforts to make minority students feel more included. "there's Race [Ed and Black Ed]" and "make us feel like we're more part of the community"

Tutor Recognition (TR): The significance of tutors recognizing and differentiating between students. "I did have one last year, that kept mixing me up with someone else"

Staff Communication (SC): The importance of staff responsiveness and validation of student concerns. "she didn't reply to my email"

Key quotes

"I went to a private school and I was probably the only black person in my year."

"Being in a city makes a difference, so the fact that we're not on a campus, and I can join different organisations and stuff and live in a big city is great."

"Like with the renaming of 40 Joyce Square... sometimes it's just performative."

"The library's intense, but it is a nice place where you see people of all different backgrounds studying together."

"I would love to see more professors of colour, on campus in general."

"Sometimes you can feel overlooked in a class as well, and that you're not really being heard."

"There's been a lot of movements to inspire black students."

I did have one (class teacher) last year, that kept mixing me up with someone else (the only other black student in the class).

"She didn't reply to my email... which isn't great for the whole sense of community in that class."

"I don't know whether it's worth flagging or not... I wouldn't want to burden someone with more of my problems."

71861

Core Themes

Institutional Response to Racism: The student perceives a lack of official communication and response from the university regarding racially motivated incidents.

Barriers to Seeking Support: There is a noted difficulty in asking for help from university staff, which may be influenced by self-reliance expectations or cultural norms.

Navigating a Predominantly White Cohort: While the student feels generally welcome, they also acknowledge the need to prove themselves more due to their racial identity.

Group Work as Inclusion Practice: Small group projects are highlighted as valuable experiences for creating connections and feeling included.

Lack of Awareness of Support Structures: The student is not fully aware of the support networks available at the university, suggesting a gap in communication or accessibility.

Thematic coding

Response to Racial Incidents: The interviewee feels that the university does not officially acknowledge or respond to racially motivated incidents, which are often only discussed informally among students.

Reluctance to Seek Help: There is a perceived cultural or personal barrier to asking for help from teachers and lecturers, which may be exacerbated by a sense of needing to be self-reliant.

Feeling of Inclusivity Amidst Diversity Challenges: Despite recognizing an overwhelmingly white cohort, the student generally feels welcome but also feels a pressure to work harder to prove themselves.

Group Projects as Spaces of Connection: Small group projects are mentioned as opportunities for bonding and meeting others, suggesting these as valuable for creating a sense of community.

Awareness of Support Networks: There is uncertainty about the existence and extent of support networks within the university, indicating a potential lack of communication or promotion of these services.

Experiences of Discrimination Among Peers: The student is aware of discrimination and racial attacks experienced by others, highlighting a concern for the campus racial climate.

Belonging in Academic Fields: The challenge of feeling like one belongs in a field where there is little racial representation among peers is noted.

Diverse Friendships as a Counter-Narrative: Friendships with well-travelled and diverse individuals provide a contrast to the predominantly white environment.

Lack of Racial Diversity Among staff: Encounters with non-white teachers or lecturers are rare, and there is a desire for more racial diversity among the academic staff.

Identity and Cultural Belonging: A struggle with belonging is expressed, not feeling fully integrated into any particular cultural group.

Key Quotes

"I usually find out about [racially motivated attacks] from other people posting it on their social media and it's never an official thing."

"And reaching out and asking for help is just something that's just so difficult."

"Sometimes it feels like you have to work extra hard to prove yourself."

"I've never really explored in depth to see if there are many [support networks]."

"I've heard so many horrific stories about racial attacks and everything."

"It's difficult when you're trying to make it in a subject where a lot of the people, they don't look like you."

"I've only ever come across a couple of teachers or lecturers who are like non-white."

"I've always felt like I've not exactly belonged anywhere."

71860

<u>Core Themes</u>

Inclusivity in Diverse Environments: The importance of not just the presence of diversity but the active and welcoming inclusion of minorities within academic spaces.

Personal Experience of Diversity: The individual's feelings of isolation and the struggle to adjust to environments where they don't see people who look like them, particularly after transferring from a more diverse setting.

Diminishing Representation: The noticeable decline in the number of people of colour encountered throughout the student's educational progression.

Need for Community in New Settings: The critical role of community in fostering belonging, especially when moving to a new city or institution.

Isolation and Foreignness: The experience of feeling like an outsider or foreigner within the university, which can lead to a cynical outlook when personal input is not reciprocated.

Challenges in Seeking Academic Help: The difficulty in asking for help within the university, compounded by a sense of isolation and the perceived requirement to be independent.

Absence of Specific Ethnic Groups: The explicit recognition of the lack of black individuals within the university, pointing to gaps in representation.

Impact of Homogenous Teaching Staff: The influence of an all-white teaching faculty on the educational experience, particularly when teaching subjects that would benefit from diverse perspectives.

Support for Students Facing Racism: The need for improved university policies and practices to actively support students who have encountered racism, both on and off-campus.

The Emotional Toll of Stereotyping: The personal and emotional impact of racial stereotyping and the frustration of being confused with others due to one's race.

Inclusive Practices (IP)

Emotional Impact (EI)

Trend in Diversity (TD)

Sense of Community (SC)

Foreignness Experience (FE)

Seeking Help (SH)

Representation Absence (RA)

Teaching Diversity (TD)

Support for Racism Victims (SRV)

Stereotyping Frustration (SF)

Key Quotes

"I think when a place isn't as diverse, it is about how you welcome minorities."

"The amount of people of colour has just decreased and decreased and now it's the last few I guess."

"When you've come to a new city, it's just such a big thing that you want to have a community."

"The way that I felt lonely is on like a greater scale of just like a foreigner in a new institution."

"All of my teachers are white, all of them, none of them are ethnic minorities."

"It's not even spoken about, that shows…the fact that it's not spoken about shows the lack of diversity in the institution."

"It's just intertwined so deeply, not having people that you identify with in a way beyond words is really isolating."

"Constantly the teachers get our names mixed up and call me her name, especially when it's just one other ethnic minority."

71858

Core Themes

Perceived Lack of Welcoming and Support: The university is perceived as not being welcoming to minorities, particularly those of black, British, or South Asian descent.

The Need for Representation in Academia: There is a call for more BAME lecturers and more comprehensive coverage of topics such as black feminism within the curriculum.

Isolation and Difficulty Relating: The student feels there is a risk of subtle exclusion when BAME individuals are in a predominantly white group, affecting their engagement and mental wellbeing.

Stereotypes and Assumptions: The student discusses the importance of not making assumptions about someone's diversity based on their skin colour and the need for individual consideration.

Importance of Relationships with Staff: Positive relationships with university staff are seen as crucial for fostering a sense of community and inclusion.

The Impact of Belonging on Mental Health: If a student doesn't feel they belong or can't socially integrate like other students, it significantly affects their mental state and feelings of loneliness.

Thematic coding

Welcoming Environment (WE)

Academic Representation (AR)

Social Exclusion (SE)

Stereotype Avoidance (SA)

Staff Relationships (SR)

Mental State and Loneliness (MSL)

Key Quotes

"I don't think the University of Edinburgh is, well, at least from my experience coming as a fourth year, I don't think it was welcoming at all."

"I think there needs to be more lecturers of colour, like BAME lecturers."

"I think one of the things could be a potential exclusion from the rest of their peers."

"And to stereotype onto them that, oh you've come from an ethnic minority therefore you must be disadvantaged."

"But yes, definitely having a good relationship with university staff is definitely…has a positive effect on the community."

"I'd say if the student doesn't feel like they belong and they're not able to socially mix in the same way as other students, then that's going to affect their mental state and how lonely they feel."

71859

Core themes

Inclusivity and Welcoming Environment: The student feels that the university environment is not welcoming towards individuals with certain racial and ethnic identities.

Representation in Academia: There is a clear call for an increase in BAME lecturers and for a more extensive curriculum that includes subjects like black feminism, suggesting that one-off lectures are insufficient.

Cultural Insensitivity Among Peers: The student recounts an experience with a flatmate that reflects a lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity.

Support for Marginalised Identities: While some support is received from specific departments, there is a perceived lack of care from personal tutors, especially when dealing with personal struggles.

Struggle to Find Community: A student from the same background is struggling to find friends and support networks, which echoes the interviewee's sentiments about the challenges faced by minority students in finding a sense of belonging.

Relatability to staff of Colour: Having a professor of colour is seen as significantly beneficial for the student's ability to relate and feel understood.

Thematic coding

Welcoming Environment (WE)

Representation in Curriculum (RC)

Cultural Insensitivity (CI)

Support for Marginalised Identities (SMI)

Community and Support Networks (CSN)

Relatability to staff (RS)

Key quotes

"I don't think it was welcoming at all."

"I think there needs to be more lecturers of colour, like BAME lecturers."

"It's the least BAME place I know."

"My PT was basically non-existent for three years."

"They're genuinely really struggling to find friends and all that support networks."

"One of my professors is a person of colour and it's just being a blessing, an absolute blessing to just relate."

72091

<u>Core themes</u>

Community and Identity Formation: The significance of building a community within the university for minority students to foster identity.

Isolation in University Experience: A pervasive feeling of isolation among minority students within the university.

Representation in staff: The call for more lecturers of colour to create a community space and enhance the academic experience for students of colour.

Reporting and Handling Racism: The lack of clear systems or support for reporting racism and the perceived insensitivity in handling such reports.

Social Criticism and Academic Response: The challenging environment for social criticism within certain academic disciplines, like social anthropology.

Support Networks: Reliance on social groups and societies for support, particularly the African Caribbean society.

Support from Academic Staff: The difficulty in receiving adequate support and communication from academic staff, such as personal tutors.

Active Engagement and Support: The need for more proactive engagement with students on racial issues and the support of BAME initiatives.

<u>Thematic coding</u>

Community and Identity (CI)

University Isolation (UI)

Staff Representation (SR)

Racism Reporting Systems (RRS)

Academic Environment Response (AER)

Support Networks (SN)

Tutor Support (TS)

Active Engagement (AE)

<u>Key Quotes</u>

"I think if you have more lecturers of colour, it creates more of that community space for students of colour to come to that university."

"Do you know how to report racism if you experience it at the university? No...and honestly, even if I did, I probably wouldn't."

"All of my tutorials, for some reason, last semester and this semester too, are just entirely white women."

"The people from those few groups are my main networks of support."

"I reached out to my tutor for politics, for help, and that was pretty unsuccessful."

"Definitely more active engagement with students about what the difference between being anti-racist and being pro, like supporting BAME people is."

"I'm the only black girl in all of my classes, in fact, I'm the only black person in all my classes."

75162

<u>Core Themes</u>

Socioeconomic Diversity and Challenges: Recognition of the diverse socioeconomic backgrounds of BAME students and the challenges they face.

Isolation within the University Environment: The experience of feeling isolated within the university and difficulties in finding one's place and community.

Access to Support Networks: The importance of, and at times the lack of, support networks, mentoring, and 'academic family' structures.

Cultural Shock and Diversity: Experiencing cultural shock due to the lack of diversity, particularly the underrepresentation of black students.

Financial Struggles and Support: The financial burdens faced by students, especially those from low-income backgrounds or those who are self-funding.

Interaction with staff: The nuanced interactions with staff and perceived changes in behaviour based on race.

Reporting Racism and Institutional Response: Uncertainty about how to report racism and a desire for more university support in these matters.

Sense of Belonging: The feeling of being an outsider and longing for a community where one can feel included and supported.

<u>Thematic Coding</u>

Socioeconomic Diversity (SED)

University Isolation (UI)

Support Network Access (SNA)

Cultural Diversity (CD)

Financial Struggle (FS)

staff Interaction (SI)

Racism Reporting (RR)

Belonging and Community (BC)

Key Quotes

"I mean, it's quite difficult to tell, I guess, with COVID, because obviously, we're doing quite a lot of social distancing learning."

"I don't know if my background... I grew up in a council estate, I grew up with... I didn't have, I don't know, a lot of white friends."

"It's not a place I feel like the people I vibe with, the people that I make friends with, the people that I feel I can talk to."

"I had to work illegal hours in two jobs, literally from September last... no, July last year, fulltime."

"I wouldn't say racism, but I'd say... I feel like people sometimes... the best way I can explain it is that you know if you're, I don't know, if you've got a group of 100 people, and let's say 75 per cent is white, 20 per cent is... and then 25 per cent is going to be... is BAME, then naturally, we split into our group."

"Do you feel like you're reaching your full potential academically here? R: NO."

72092

Core themes

Inclusivity and Engagement: The interviewee perceives the university as an inclusive environment, where efforts are made to engage students and create a sense of belonging.

Demographic Dominance: Acknowledgement of the predominant demographic at the university and a personal lack of struggle with this due to a privileged upbringing.

Comfort in Discussing Race: The interviewee feels comfortable discussing race in the university setting and has noted productive discussions in class.

Support and Accessibility: There is a perception of available support networks and accessible professors who are willing to assist students.

Thematic coding

Welcoming and Inclusivity (WI)

Demographic Awareness (DA)

Racial Discussion Comfort (RDC)

Support and Accessibility (SA)

Student Engagement (SE)

Belonging and Identity (BI)

Academic and Social Integration (ASI)

Microaggressions and Stereotypes (MS)

Key quotes

"It's a very welcoming place in that maybe while I grew up in Scotland anyway, I knew Edinburgh before coming to study here."

"It seems to be dominated by a particular demographic of person and maybe I've had, I guess you could say, quite a white upbringing."

"Imposter syndrome is real... it's not been so bad for me."

"I don't really feel unwelcome anywhere. And I realise that might come from a position of privilege."

"Do your teachers and professors maintain an environment that makes you feel comfortable talking about race? Yes, I think so, yeah."

"A lot of my tutors have made efforts to get us engaged and get everybody working together."

"Do professors feel accessible, do you feel like there is a line of communication where you can reach out if you need help? Yeah, I think there is a line of communication, definitely."

"Have you ever felt stereotyped in any way based on your race or ethnicity by students, tutors, teachers or experienced any micro-aggressions? No, not really."

76651

Core themes

University Experience: The respondent perceives the university environment as generally okay, not extremely welcoming but with good efforts to try and integrate students.

Demographics and Belonging: A recognition of the diversity in student demographics and how this might influence feelings of belonging or exclusion.

Community and Support: The importance of having a community and support networks, whether formal or through friendships and societies.

Thematic coding

Welcoming Environment: Noted as okay but not overly personalised.

Societal Engagement: Societies are available, but there's an onus on the individual to engage.

Demographic Influence: Noted posh demographic and potential influence on student belonging.

Inclusive Teaching: Generally good experiences with no discomfort in discussing sensitive topics.

Minority Experience: No perceived negative impact on the university experience due to being from a minority ethnic group.

Friendship Networks: A critical factor in feeling of belonging and academic success.

Key quotes

"I wouldn't say there's anything amazing but they did try, so yeah."

"It might be the demographic of students that come to Edinburgh Uni."

"I think that probably could have helped... I think like a mentor from older year, yeah, I think that would be good."

"I don't think they do anything that makes me uncomfortable and I think they're inclusive enough."

"Oh, 100 per cent, I think it's very important, like, for mental health to be able to, you know, have a group of friends that you can speak to or go out with."

76648

Core themes

Racism and Discrimination: The interviewee expresses that racism is prevalent, particularly in Edinburgh, and has influenced their experience, causing them to feel unwelcome at the university.

Institutional Support and Community: There's a focus on the importance of active student support and the need for the institution to foster a sense of community, particularly through student-led initiatives and proper guidance for making complaints.

Belonging and Isolation: The individual describes feelings of detachment from the university community and discusses the need for spaces that promote inclusivity and belonging.

Engagement with University Staff: A significant relationship between students and university staff is highlighted as essential for creating a supportive community.

Educational Experience and Representation: Concerns are raised about the curriculum reflecting diversity and whether the university environment allows for discussions on race and representation.

Feeling of Invisibility and Stereotyping: The interviewee feels stereotyped due to their race and discusses the exhaustion of working against black stereotypes.

<u>Thematic coding</u>

Racism: Instances and the impact of racism are coded throughout, with the respondent emphasizing the pervasiveness of subtle and overt racism.

Support Networks (SNV) : Mentions of the importance of student support services and their visibility.

Engagement and Inclusion (EI): Discussions on how engagement within the university should look, including student-instructor relationships and representation in the curriculum.

Community Building: The role of the university in fostering a sense of community, especially for minority students.

Assessment and Academic Potential: Reflections on the assessment system, its fairness, and its impact on students' academic potential.

<u>Key quotes</u>

"A lot of people, especially here in Edinburgh, are so racist."

"I don't feel like I feel welcome in all these points of the uni."

"I think student support are really good and they seem to be very active."

"Have you ever felt stereotyped: Yeah, for sure. It's tiring."

"Is the university taking enough steps to make staff and students more race sensitive? No, absolutely not."

 "I think again the concept of an academic family is really helpful, so maybe having something like that but at a more emotional level. "

76646

<u>Core themes</u>

Cultural Representation and Diversity (CRD): The interviewee's perception of the level of cultural diversity and representation within the university setting, particularly among South Asian Bengali students.

Belonging and Identity (BI): The interviewee's feelings of belonging within the medical school and university community, and the impact of their personal and cultural identity.

Community and Support Networks (CSN): The importance of community, including familial connections and societies, for creating a sense of belonging and providing support.

<u>Thematic coding</u>

CRD1: The proportion of South Asian Bengali students and the comparison to other universities with higher diversity.

BI1: The interviewee's personal narrative of belonging and the significance of their Bangladeshi background while being born in Scotland.

CSN1: Mention of small Bengali community in Edinburgh and its interconnectedness.

IWI1: Discussion on the ethnic make-up of the medical school year and the surprise at the low number of black students.

ISE1: Expressions of imposter syndrome among medical students from certain backgrounds and the interviewee's personal rebuttal of not belonging.

SAS1: The utility of student societies in fostering a sense of belonging and the mentorship programs for students from working-class backgrounds.

<u>Key quotes</u>

"In terms of the university itself, there's not a huge number of Bengali students." (CRD1)

"I think probably I…because my identity meant more to me is probably the way I was raised, maybe class wise, in a sense that came from a relatively deprived background." (BI1)

"The community in Edinburgh [for Bengali people] probably was very, very small, so they all know each other." (CSN1)

"Edinburgh is very white, so the majority of medical students are white." (IWI1)

"I earned my place here, no-one's taking it away from me." (ISE1)

"One thing I'd say again is a lot of societies, especially for example [inaudible] international students has things like ISOC." (SAS1)