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PALGRAVE STUDIES IN RACE, INEQUALITY AND  
SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION

# Race, Capital, and Equity in Higher Education

Challenging Differential Academic  
Attainment in UK Universities

*Edited by* Alexander Hensby · Barbara Adewumi

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# Palgrave Studies in Race, Inequality and Social Justice in Education

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Alexander Hensby · Barbara Adewumi  
Editors

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## FOREWORD

Much has been written about the findings, by now dismally familiar, that UK universities are more likely to award good degrees to white students than to Black students and students from other minoritised communities—though there remains a lot to learn. Racialised differences in the rates of good degree qualifications appear across university types, from those that serve local communities whose student populations may have had diverse pre-university learning experiences to highly selective universities whose students essentially have the same academic credentials at the point of entry. Data about this latter group of institutions make the point starkly: that, crudely speaking, many white students who leave university with better undergraduate degrees than Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (hereinafter BAME) students did not have better academic records than their BAME peers when they started higher education. Why, then, are UK universities more successful at adding value to the academic performance of white than Black students and other students of colour?

The data underlying that question are disturbing. Situated in historical context, however, the question alludes to the possibility of change even as progress may seem glacial. To illustrate consider UK Higher Education in 1978, the year I matriculated at Oxford University as a daughter of the Windrush generation, the first in my family to go to university, the first—or at least the first in living memory—from my school to attend Oxford. Higher Education opened a world of opportunity for the small minority of school leavers (less than 10 per cent) able to access it, but there

was no sense that universities were accountable to students (or anyone else) for what might today be considered among the basic ABCs of the higher educational experience—achievement, belonging, and community. Instead, it was the task of the individual student to assimilate the institution’s (typically unstated) ways and means, to locate the pathways to privilege, to figure out how to flourish. In that era and environment, the responsibility to thrive at university sat with the individual student, with the differential locations along relations of racialisation as well as class and gender that structured the student experience rendered wholly invisible.

Today, by contrast, in response to the work of scholars who have documented systemic racialised differences in degree outcomes and theorised their causes, and of students who have led campaigns for change, the focus of attention has shifted from the individual to the institution. Regulators insist on the closure of racial and other awarding gaps along the fault lines of social inequalities in the UK and Higher Education leadership across the sector has committed to reform. There is evidence of progressive change, such as a five-percentage point reduction in the gap (from 23.5 per cent to 18.4 per cent) between ‘good degree’ outcomes for Black and white students from 2017–18 to 2020–21 and the near elimination of any gap between the good degree outcomes of white students and those of Chinese or Indian ethnicities over the same period. But data from the same period make clear there is no room for complacency as unacceptable differentials coincide with these improvements; notably, studies have found an increase in the differential awarding gap of First-class degrees to white students as compared to Black students (from 16.9 per cent to 19.3 per cent) between 2017–18 and 2020–21 (UUK/NUS, 2022: 14).

Such salutary findings confirm that the changes that need to happen will entail more than aspiration, good intentions, exhortation, and tweaks to existing policies and practices. Instead, as Joel, a student quoted in a 2019 UUK/NUS report, stated: ‘It’s important that staff interrogate the data behind attainment gaps, but they also need to understand the nuances and factors that lead to those gaps’ (UUK/NUS, 2019: 11).

Early institutional and policy discussions of racialised outcome gaps tended to conceptualise them in terms of differential ‘attainment’ by white and BAME students. That work typically identified characteristics such as educational histories or family circumstances of BAME students as likely explanatory factors, attributing differential outcomes to deficits in skills, a paucity of cultural, social, and educational capitals, material inequalities in class or experiences of poverty, and the complexities of



family and kinship networks that appear ‘other’ than those expected of the normative mainstream university student. Such explanations were always suspect (and notably conflict with evidence that for most of the twenty-first-century level 3 attainment, the typical entry qualification to higher education, has been higher by age 19 for all categories of BAME students than white students). They are wholly implausible considering that repeated studies report significant racialised differences in degree outcomes between white and BAME students who enter university with the same qualifications. Better research and, perhaps more importantly, better engagement with the data has improved HE policy discussion over the past 4–5 years and has helped to transfer at least some attention away from the perceived deficits and needs of individual students. With increasing sophistication UK universities today are beginning to turn their analytic gaze on themselves, scrutinising key aspects of their practices as drivers of racialised gaps in degree award outcomes, and focusing interventions on factors that they control, including their learning environments, educational practices, and support infrastructures.

At the same time as universities have started to address the racially unequal outcomes their educational and support practices generate, powerful student movements for educational dignity and justice have campaigned for change. They have demanded the removal of memorials to imperial icons in educational settings and the return of stolen artefacts to the societies that created them. They have posed fundamental questions about who stands at the front of the lecture hall, which ideas are valorised in classrooms and on reading lists, and how historical legacies of enslavement and colonialisation have served to whiten contemporary university curricula. These movements have stimulated fresh thinking about ways to tackle institutional racialised inequities found in and produced by British universities and they challenge universities educators and researchers to be more reflective about—and to engage more critically with—the choices they make during the production, validation, and sharing of knowledge. While this challenge applies to all academic disciplines and subjects, it is particularly pertinent to a university’s engagement with and self-reflection on its own higher educational practice.

This bold collection documents some of the ways that the University of Kent has attempted to embrace that challenge through the work of its institutionally led Student Success Project, now Team. From its 2014 inception, Student Success insisted on conducting original research,

co-produced with students where possible, into their experiences of education and student life while studying courses at the University's two UK campuses.

Initially—and not unusually in this area of institutional policy—research into student experience tended to be seen as an activity that generated soft ‘anecdotes’ instead of the hard proof of problems that warranted action. And, at the beginning, there was a tendency to interpret the rich data that Student Success produced on why BAME students felt disengaged from their education or found their learning environments dispiriting as reasons to address a presumed lack of cultural or educational capital, leaving crucial institutional factors unexamined. These and other missteps occurred over the past 10 years; but mistakes are also a site of learning. As Student Success studies grew—and the discussions it engendered across the university intensified—so too did the realisation that by creating space for BAME students to speak in their words about their education at Kent; by engaging with those student experiences; and by working collaboratively with students to co-produce knowledge, the research generated unique insights into the university as a white institution. Over time the research also has given the university increasingly compelling evidence about interventions that do and do not work to counteract the inequitable effects of institutional whiteness.

These insights have enabled the Student Success Team to reconceive fundamental concepts that have shaped its work to ensure they are more likely to affirm than to demean the experiences of BAME students, concepts such as ‘belonging’ or ‘inclusiveness’, for example. At the University of Kent as in many other UK universities, these concepts have influenced thinking since the university started its work to eliminate racialised differences in degree outcomes: but what do they mean, exactly? How is belonging brought to life? On whose terms does inclusion occur?

Through its research, the Student Success Team, together with other important university initiatives and groups such as Decolonise Kent and the University's BAME staff Network, has learned to think differently about these crucial concepts. It has led to a shift in thinking away from conceptualising ‘belonging’ and ‘inclusion’ as an invitation to join the white university on its terms, an invitation that typically requires the BAME student to change, to adapt, to become aware of purported deficits they did not otherwise know existed, and to integrate by fitting themselves into the university's established ways of being and doing. Instead, ‘belonging’ and ‘inclusion’ are increasingly becoming understood and

enacted as requiring the university to change its ways—to address its own limitations and deficits, so that BAME (and all other students) are freed to learn authentically, without compromising their integrity or parking parts of their identities at the entrance to the campus.

Essays in this groundbreaking collection expose the myriad ways—some subtle, others explicit—in which unjustified privileges of whiteness may become manifest in university practice and they offer distinctive and thought-provoking examples of interventions that have sought to address them. Although the setting of their research gave it a laser-like focus on awarding gaps at the University of Kent, the reflections on their learning of researchers and Student Success staff offer generalisable lessons of immense value to the entire Higher Education sector to increase its knowledge and understanding of how to advance racial justice in UK universities.

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## REFERENCE

Universities UK and National Union of Students. (2019). ‘Black, Asian and minority ethnic student attainment at UK universities: #Closing the gap’. Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/bame-student-attainment.pdf>

**Professor Toni Williams** Born in Jamaica, raised in England, Toni has split her working life between Canada and the UK. She holds a law degree from Oxford University, a PhDs from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and an Honorary LLD from University College London. She started her academic career at University College London and then spent 20 years at Osgoode Hall Law School of York University in Toronto, Canada followed by 15 years at the University of Kent, where she served as Professor of Law, Head of Kent Law School, and Director of Division for the Study of Law, Society and Social Justice. In 2022 she moved to Girton College Cambridge. During her career, Toni has conducted research on exclusionary aspects of legal and social practice in criminal justice, consumer finance regulation, social and financial inclusion, economic development, gambling regulation, and HE and legal education.

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This book is principally a product of the University of Kent's Student Success Team which for the past decade has sought to rethink how universities can help achieve racial equity in higher education. Though it would be impossible to thank every colleague who has helped us along the way, we wish to show our gratitude to Wayne Campbell, David Nightingale, Sharon Smith, John Wightman, Toni Williams, and Jen Wyatt for establishing this project, placing original research at its heart, and encouraging us to ask difficult questions. We would also like to thank Marta Almeida, Laura Bailey, Triona Fitton, Chris Laming, Becky Lamyman, Anthony Manning, Kathleen Quinlan, Sweta Rajan-Rankin, and Miri Song for variously acting as advocates, facilitators, and confidants throughout the research process. A very special thanks go out to the 2019 Talis Aspire

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Last but not least we would like to send our love and thanks to our families who have supported and encouraged us through this epic journey. Alex would particularly like to thank Lucy, and Barbara would like to thank her three loving daughters Tele, Christiana, and Temi, and her husband Muyiwa for always believing in her. She would also like to express her love and gratitude to her immensely proud parents Carmel and dearly missed Ivan and her two supportive sisters Diann and Debbie.

We know we have more to do in the quest to eliminate systemic racism in higher education. We ask all those who read this book to dream bigger, remain optimistic, and make studying in higher education a more equitable place for future generations.

# RACE, CAPITAL, EQUITY—GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Academic Advising**—a model of personalised support provided by academic staff members for all students throughout their undergraduate study. The role is similar to that of a personal tutor through its provision of support in areas such as module choice and writing references, but differs through its obligation to signpost students to professional services for pastoral care.

**Academic Capital**—this refers to the legitimated forms of academic skills and knowledge which are profitable to students within the field of higher education. Drawing on Watson’s (2013) adaptation of Bourdieu’s (1984) original term, academic capital may include ‘styles of oral presentation and written work’ as well as ‘rules and conventions such as degree classifications and referencing system’. The accumulation and deployment of academic capital are considered valuable for enhancing student’s academic attainment.

**Access & Participation Plan (APP)**—administered by the Office for Students, this is the mechanism through which individual universities target and monitor improvement in the access, participation, and progression of underrepresented groups. Each university is required to submit a plan outlining the risks to equal access and participation, identify the intervention strategies that will address these risks, and explain how they will challenge these risks, including their monitoring and evaluation. Universities’ capacity to charge above the basic tuition fee cap is conditional on having an APP and has thus incentivised

institutions to develop EDI and WP-focused projects and initiatives, including Kent's Student Success Team.

**A-Levels**—a subject-based non-compulsory further education (FE) qualification offered in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland prior to undergraduate study at university. A-levels are currently the most common FE qualification and are provided by colleges and sixth-form centres. Courses take two years, with pupils typically taking four subjects in their first year before proceeding with three for their second year.

**Allyship**—the conscious practice of supporting an identity group to which you do not personally belong. Good allyship entails listening to, and learning from, marginalised voices while remembering that the work of self-education never ends.

**Black Cultural Capital**—a term used for the accumulation and deployment of Black knowledge and culture afforded a high status in wider society. Building on the work of Bourdieu, its purpose is to assert Black agency while challenging the notion that cultural capital should be considered synonymous with whiteness.

**Black History Month (BHM)**—a month dedicated to projects and events foregrounding Black history, usually run in schools, colleges, and universities. Originating in the US, the concept of Black history month was first developed by historian Carter G. Woodson in the 1920s, before being revived on university campuses in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. In 1976 the government officially dedicated February to the study and celebration of Black history in all public schools. The first BHM in the UK took place in 1987—occurring every October thanks to the work of Ghanaian journalist and activist Akyaba Addai-Sebo in collaboration with the Greater London Council. Today, BHM is observed on most campuses through cultural events, seminars, and film screenings arranged by university staff and the student union.

**Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC)**—one of the most common further education vocational qualifications currently available in England. BTECs are considered to be a hybrid qualification as they provide a more direct pathway to a specific career or profession than A-levels but are also accepted as a valid entry qualification for many universities.

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)**—A theoretical framework originating from US critical legal studies that offer an account of society based on systemic, deep-rooted racist oppression that saturates our judgements



to the extent that all but the most extreme racism appears normal and unexceptional—simply ‘business as usual’. CRT is one of the fastest growing and most controversial contemporary social theories, with some of its most dynamic and challenging work taking place in the field of education.

**Cultural Capital**—cultural capital refers to the possession of cultural knowledge associated with social status and power. As per Bourdieu’s (1986) definition, cultural capital can be embodied (such as taste, communication, and presentation), objectified (ownership of cultural goods), or institutionalised (receipt of qualifications and titles).

**Deficit Model**—a perspective, often implicit, which attributes the lack of an individual’s success in a particular endeavour to their personal deficiencies rather than wider systemic or structural issues. Deficiencies may refer to the lack of skills or relevant knowledges, or personal qualities and motivations, and so a deficit perspective typically proposes additional training and upskilling to ensure the individual is able to meet the required standard. Though still prevalent in policymaking, the deficit model has been widely criticised for eliding the reproductive nature of inequality and oppression, including how the construction of standards may privilege certain groups above others. Deficit thinking also thus runs the risk of placing the responsibility (and blame) on the individuals themselves should they fail to succeed in their endeavour.

**Independent Learning**—a model of learning which requires students to act and become more autonomous in the management of their studies. This is especially encouraged in higher education, where students have more private study time and are afforded greater curricular choice. Beyond this basic definition, however, there are ambiguities in how independent learning is defined and applied within higher education (see chapter 3).

**Intersectionality**—originally coined by Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is an analytical framework that captures how different hierarchies of oppression interlock and often mutually reinforce those who are most marginalised in a society. For example, discrimination against a woman with disabilities is not reducible to sexism or ableism but in fact a combination of the two. Intersectional scholarship seeks to capture the unique experiences and identities which are formed through these combinations.

**Marketisation**—the process of introducing greater competition among HEIs for student applicants in a country’s higher education system.

Underpinning this process is the belief that greater self-regulation will increase quality and standards across the sector, while reducing the economic responsibilities of the state. In the UK, marketisation has guided many of the reforms to higher education in the past three decades, exemplified by the reduction in government subsidies for undergraduate degree programmes, and increasing the maximum number of students HEIs can recruit. Marketisation has been met with longstanding criticism from within the sector, with many believing that it privileges the pursuit of profit above the provision of a public good.

**Massification**—a term to describe the process of expanding the structure and reach of higher education to achieve a mass audience. At a sector level, this entails the expansion of the number of universities and the creation of policy designed to encourage and incentivise HE participation from all populations. At an institutional level, massification entails the increase in a university's undergraduate intake, which can significantly increase its annual income. This, in turn, typically necessitates the expansion of campus facilities and the professionalisation of governance systems.

**Microaffirmations**—a term referring to small, yet regular, gestures of inclusion which create and maintain a sense of legitimacy and belonging for the recipient. As employed by McIntosh (1989) and others, this represents a counterpoint to the microaggressions often experienced by people of colour, particularly in spaces where whiteness is implicitly normalised and reproduced. Microaffirmations are thus an essential component of the 'invisible knapsack' of unconscious white privilege.

**Microaggressions**—a term, popularised through critical race theory, which captures the fleeting, yet pernicious acts of everyday racial discrimination. These often draw on forms of racial stereotyping, and though they may reveal the ignorance or bias of the perpetrator, they are largely unaware of the power structures such utterances reflect and help reproduce. Microaggressions can sometimes be difficult to 'prove', but people of colour rely on their experiential reality accrued from life experiences and situations when determining whether this has occurred.

**National Union of Students (NUS)**—the confederation of university and college student unions in the UK. The NUS represents student interests on a national level, both as a stakeholder group and as a campaign organisation.

- Office for Students (OfS)**—the Office for Students is the regulatory body for the higher education sector in England. OfS is not part of a government department, though its leadership is appointed by the Secretary of State for Education. OfS is responsible for regulating the HE sector including granting institutions the power to award degrees, promoting fair access to HE, and maintaining standards. It is responsible for the administration of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).
- Plate Glass Universities**—the name informally given to universities established in the 1960s in response to the Robbins Report and its recommendations to expand the higher education system. Referring to their steel and glass campus modernist architecture, purpose-built Plate Glass universities founded in this period include the universities of Essex, Kent, Lancaster, and York.
- Political Blackness**—Originating from the British trade union movement, political blackness refers to all people of colour who are likely to experience racial discrimination. The term was popular in the 1970s and 1980s for capturing solidarity bonds between Black and Asian workers' movements, but in recent decades has become contested for eliding the complex and global nature of racism in favour of a 'non-strategic essentialism' (Andrews, 2016).
- Post-92 Universities**—an informal term for the institutions which were granted university status through the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Most of these universities were formerly polytechnics—HE colleges funded and administered by local government—usually specialising in technical education, and with strong links to their local community.
- Race Equality Charter (REC)**—a national scheme to support and incentivise HEIs in their work to identify and address the barriers facing BAME staff and students. Administered by Advance HE, the REC provides a framework for action and improvement, with institutions applying for a bronze or silver award depending on their progress.
- Research Excellence Framework (REF)**—the periodic expert review for evaluating the research conducted by UK universities. Overseen by the UK's funding councils, universities' submissions are independently assessed and ranked for research quality and impact. The results of this evaluation are presented in public performance tables and inform how funding councils allocate their quality-research funding across HEIs.

**Russell Group**—founded in 1994, the Russell Group is a self-selected association of UK public research universities. As of 2024, its membership comprises of 24 institutions, most of which were founded prior to the Second World War. For this reason, the Russell Group has come to represent a de facto lobby group on behalf of the UK’s most ‘prestigious’ universities. It is also a term increasingly used within student recruitment and careers services.

**Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**—a psychological theory of human motivation. Originating in the 1970s, and later popularised through the work of Deci and Ryan (1985) in particular, SDT distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, arguing that the former requires the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. SDT has been widely applied to studies of education and has been employed to help explain differential patterns in student engagement, attainment, and well-being.

**Social Capital**—initially defined by Bourdieu (1986: 21) as the value of ‘networks of connections’, social capital typically denotes one’s personal contact with individuals who may broker access to, or enhanced status within, prestigious fields. Prominent applications have focused on the reproduction of elite power via ‘old school tie’ or ‘old boys’ networks, but more generally social capital may also capture the direct transmission of norms and aspirations which generate feelings of competence and legitimacy within a given field.

**STEM Subjects**—the umbrella term used in educational policy and admissions to denote the subject areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Government reforms to Higher Education funding in the early 2010s saw the withdrawal of public funding for non-STEM undergraduate degree programmes, with the shortfall replaced by increased tuition fees.

**Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF)**—the national framework for the assessment of the quality of undergraduate teaching in universities in England. Administered by the Office for Students (OfS), its stated purpose is to encourage higher education providers to improve and deliver excellence in their teaching and learning. The TEF draws its assessment on data including student satisfaction survey results, retention, and graduate employability.

**Theory of Change (TOC)**—a process evaluation mechanism widely applied in the third sector and by educational institutions. TOC

requires users to identify desired outcomes before deciding on interventions for change, and through mapping multicausal outcomes via monitoring, control groups, and feedback loops, will be able to identify an intervention’s short, medium, and long-term impact. TOC has been employed to help monitor and evaluate the Student Success Team’s intervention strategies to reduce awarding gaps, as detailed in chapter 7.

**Unbelonging**—this term captures the feelings an individual may experience in an environment where their identity and experiences are underrepresented or marginalised. In higher education, this strange and lonely feeling is evidenced by the experiences of BAME students studying and living on predominantly white campuses.

**Universities UK (UUK)**—an advocacy organisation representing universities and higher education colleges in the United Kingdom. UUK seeks to promote the interests of universities in UK governance and policymaking, as well as help develop new goals and standards within the sector. These include social mobility and widening participation, and UUK collaborated with NUS in 2019 to publish a report titled ‘Closing the Gap’ on differential attainment rates of ethnic groups in UK universities.

**Vocational Qualifications**—broadly defined as qualifications designed specifically to meet the needs of the employment sector. They are typically more skills-led and provide a direct pathway to a particular career or profession. Subject areas may include leisure and tourism, business, or health and social care. As of 2024, the BTEC represents one of the most prominent examples of a vocational qualification in England.

**White Privilege**—a term to describe the societal benefits enjoyed by white people in many societies where structural racism pervades. Developed through anti-racist scholarship including critical race theory, white privilege posits that though white people may be subjected to forms of hardship and discrimination, this will seldom, if ever, be attributable to their skin colour. White privilege is unearned and often goes unrecognised. In practical terms, this can relate both to ordinary everyday behaviour—such as the freedom to move and speak without threat of racialised prejudice or harassment—as well as instances of competition or conflict where a white person is favoured or rewarded ahead of a person of colour.

**White-BAME Awarding Gap**—this refers to the percentage difference of undergraduate degree results between home-domiciled white and

Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students at UK universities. The gap is usually, though not exclusively, measured according to whether students have achieved a 2:1 grade threshold.

**Widening Participation (WP)**—the overarching strategy underpinning policies designed to increase the participation of students from groups currently underrepresented in higher education. In the UK, widening participation policies were a key driver for fulfilling the Labour government’s pledge to increase university participation to 50 per cent, thereby contributing to the sector’s expansion in the 1990s and 2000s. WP remains a strategic priority for the Office for Students, with successive governments setting sector targets for increasing the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds entering HE, including BAME students.

**Windrush Generation**—named after the ship HMT Empire Windrush which arrived at the Port of Tilbury on 21 June 1948, carrying 492 Caribbean migrants, many of them Royal Air Force veterans returning from the Second World War. The ship and its passengers have a symbolic status as the start of the Windrush Generation who helped to rebuild and shape modern Britain.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

ACCESS	Access to Higher Education Diplomas
ACS	African Caribbean Society (University of Kent)
ANOVA	Analysis of Variances
APP	Access and Participation Plans
BAME	Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic
BERA	British Educational Research Association
BHM	Black History Month
BLM	Black Lives Matter
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council (Further Education qualification)
CPAD	Continuing Professional Academic Development
CRT	Critical Race Theory
DO	Development Officers
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit (succeeded by Advance HE)
EDI	Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion
FE	Further Education
FEC	Further Education College
GTA	Graduate Teaching Assistant
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
KCU	Kent Caribbean Union
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NUS	National Union of Students (UK)
OFFA	Office for Fair Access (succeeded by Office for Students in 2018)

OfS	Office for Students
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas (UK)
REC	Race Equality Charter (UK)
REF	Research Excellence Framework
RMF	Rhodes Must Fall
RRAA	Race Relations (Amendment) Act, 2000 (UK)
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SSL	Student Success Lecturer
SSPSSR	School of Social Policy, Sociology, and Social Research (University of Kent)
SST	Student Success Team (University of Kent)
STAND	Student Action for Diversity (University of Kent)
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (subject areas as formally grouped and recognised in education policy)
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
TESSA	Teaching Enhancement Small Support Awards
TOC	Theory of Change
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UK)
UUK	Universities UK, advocacy organisation for universities in the United Kingdom
WP	Widening Participation

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Editors' Introduction: Race and the Awarding Gap

*Alexander Hensby and Barbara Adewumi*

### INTRODUCTION: RACE AND STRUCTURAL COMPLACENCY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The persistence of an awarding gap between home-domiciled white and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students at UK universities is increasingly well recognised in higher education policy and research, yet its causes remain contested and largely misunderstood. For decades, the orthodoxy within the sector has been to frame this gap—usually, though not exclusively, measured according to whether students achieve a 2:1 grade threshold—in ‘deficit’ terms. This presupposes that BAME students

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enter university lacking the requisite level of knowledge and skills to achieve as highly as their white peers. Of course, as institutions seeking to assess students' skill, knowledge, and imagination universities are required to uphold what constitutes a 'higher education'. Yet a deficit model ultimately places the onus on students themselves to close these gaps, leaving them singularly responsible should they fail to achieve a 'good degree'. Meanwhile the values, processes, and systems of the institution are left largely undisturbed on the grounds that universities do not see themselves as part of the problem (García & Guerra, 2004).

For people of colour, deficit thinking is all too familiar in British institutions. The reluctance to fully address the root causes of racial inequities can be found in all aspects of society, from the performing arts to professional sport, from electoral politics to the police force. Earnings gaps and BAME underrepresentation in leadership roles indicate that racism is structurally embedded in society (Bhopal, 2018; Bhopal & Myers, 2023). In practice, though, such inequities are often banal and almost invisible in their execution—what Eddo-Lodge (2017: 64) calls the 'silently raised eyebrows, the implicit biases, snap judgements based on perceptions of competency'. As this suggests, structural racism does not rely on instances of outright discrimination or bigotry. Among its most pernicious drivers is *complacency*—a naïve and misplaced confidence that discrimination could not exist within a given institution on the grounds that it contradicts its projected values and self-image.

This complacency reflects how race and racism have been framed in public policy over the past two decades. Although the existence of institutional racism was brought to light through the publication of the McPherson report in 1999, it was the discourse of liberal multiculturalism that came to represent the orthodoxy for policymaking in the years since. According to Mirza (2009: 89–90), liberal multiculturalism essentially means 'respecting diversity and valuing cultural difference in the context of core shared values', and in policy terms, this has usually required institutions to affirm 'the distinctness, uniqueness and individual validity of different religions, cultures, groups, or communities' in their organisational practice. Yet this loosely celebratory language belies a fragility, as multiculturalism works 'only if the demands of visible and distinct ethnic groups are not too "different" and not too rejecting of the welcoming embrace of the "host country"' (ibid., 90). In other words, what lies behind is the implicit and habitual privileging of whiteness as the default cultural identity, with racial diversity 'accommodated' within the existing

system. For Ahmed (2012: 34), this shows diversity to be more about 'changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of the organisation'.

The moderate successes of liberal multiculturalism in public policy-making have contributed to a perception among many people in white-majority countries that we are moving towards, if not having already achieved, a post-racial society (Bhopal 2018; Goldberg, 2015). But to engage reflexively and self-critically about the causes and effects of structural racism requires us to take off these multicultural blinders. State education in Britain has so far struggled to open up this dialogue, with school and college curricula tending to privilege the civil rights movement in the United States, or South Africa's fight against Apartheid when teaching the history of race and racism. By contrast, our own racial struggles—let alone our historical culpability in other nations' struggles—have been largely elided in favour of celebrations of British virtue and tolerance (Akala, 2019).

Recent and ongoing social movements have sought to challenge this multicultural orthodoxy. The work of Rhodes Must Fall Oxford (RMFO) has demonstrated how the roots of contemporary racial inequities remain embedded in key British institutions, drawing on the endurance of settler-colonialist Cecil Rhodes's statue at the University of Oxford as an example. As Gebrial (2018: 27) notes, making these complex roots and legacies visible marked an overdue challenge to the 'ossified, rose-tinted "Great Man" theory of history' that arguably underpins Britain's national narrative. The media attention RMFO received provided a key foundation for Black Lives Matter UK's scale shift in 2020, with activists transposing the movement's critique of structural racism from a US context to the relationship between hidden histories of Empire, the Windrush deportation scandal, and continued cases of racial profiling and stereotyping in contemporary British society.

The prominence of students in many of these campaigns highlights the enormous potential for universities to lead the way in advancing racial equity in British institutions. The growing diversification of undergraduate populations at UK universities has seen BAME students become an increasingly empowered constituency on many campuses, as evidenced by recent and ongoing 'Decolonise' campaigns. Yet as a wider sector, higher education remains highly complacent on the subject of racial equity. The white-BAME awarding gap's continued framing in deficit terms arguably

reflects universities' longstanding self-perception as arbiters of progressive multicultural values. As Back (2004: 4) memorably put it, the face of racism for many academics 'is that of the moral degenerate, the hateful bigot', and so it is considered 'unthinkable that such an ugly word could be directed at a genteel, educated and liberal don as themselves'. This complacency is further exacerbated by the continued underrepresentation of BAME academic staff, particularly at senior management level (Bhopal, 2018: 109). In Back's (2004: 4) words, this leaves institutional racism 'too often unwritten, embedded and embodied within the academy's sheer institutional weight'.

So how can we challenge this institutional complacency? Bhopal and Pitkin (2020) argue that universities are typically reluctant to directly address structural inequities unless they complement existing strategic priorities. In some respects, governments have provided impetus for improving BAME access and participation in HE, but their framing reflects a broader trend towards the massification and marketisation of the sector. This can easily result in positive change being immediately compromised by the means of delivery. For example, the emphasis on market competition has encouraged universities to widen access for undergraduates from 'non-traditional' backgrounds, yet opportunities to build meaningful one-to-one support for these new students are hamstrung by rising academic precarity and the struggle to reduce staff-student ratios. Similarly, marketisation has increased the professionalisation of student services, but this is largely driven through instrumentalised targets in the form of metrics and league tables, with student voice and representation redrawn as 'consumer satisfaction' (Brooks et al., 2015).

Given these constraints, it is easy to see how efforts to achieve racial equity in universities are often met with wariness and cynicism from staff. Nevertheless, gains have, and continue, to be made. Behind what Mirza (2018: 20) calls the 'slick bureaucratic performance' of equality, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) in many universities, specialist staff teams are often seeking to achieve something more than simply institutional compliance. Successive policy agendas have enabled these teams to consolidate their knowledge and resource base, and over time they have forged links with BAME staff and student networks both internally and externally. Though frequently confronted by hurdles and barriers that stifle institutional change, their work is ultimately capable of delivering action that can make a meaningful difference.

We hope that the work of the University of Kent's Student Success Team (SST) can be considered one such example. Initially conceived as a two-year pilot project to address the factors that explained the white-BAME awarding gap, the Student Success Team now represents a permanent fixture in the University's goal of achieving racial equity for all of its students. For nearly a decade, it has learned to use the tools at its disposal to challenge the deficit orthodoxy that has long pervaded among staff and build a set of actions and practices designed to rethink how the institution engages and supports its students.

Admittedly, this work requires maintaining an often fragile and precarious balance between the target culture of HE policy and more radical critiques. It also necessitates pragmatism in dealing with certain necessary evils without succumbing to their traps and shortcomings. The term 'BAME' is a case in point. The product of HE metrics for measuring attainment and retention, BAME speaks to no social reality or common lived experience, and if taken at face value can lead to generic policy and practice that fails to resonate with students or staff. However, the term can be useful if used to aggregate trends that help draw attention to structural inequities, provided that they are then *disaggregated* when it comes to recognising the specific experiences of ethnic groups and identities that exist within. We must also be prepared to respect and interrogate intersections with class, gender, and disability, as well as the different educational experiences that may come from being born and initially raised overseas or possessing different entry qualifications to A-levels.

All of this is not to say that the SST has managed to accomplish all its goals, or that it represents a model of good practice in everything it has done. In fact, one of its key advantages has been its longevity—given that the fickle world of HE policymaking has often left EDI teams vulnerable to fluctuations in institutional prioritisation (Pilkington, 2011), Student Success at Kent is fortunate to have been generously resourced since its inception. This has enabled the team to build a knowledge base through original research to address the many intersecting factors that contribute to the gap. In more practical terms, this has enabled the team to try different things, make (many) mistakes, but ultimately consolidate their work in the areas which show the greatest impact and value. Over time, these successes have also enabled the team to pursue more 'radical' aims such as decolonising course curricula and forging close links with BAME staff and student groups.

It is also important to remain sensitive to how present challenges may echo those from the past. While the regular cycle of new HE leadership teams and policy strategies can leave the sector sometimes appearing in constant flux, there is little value to impulsively mimicking this flux at an institutional level. It is vital to build and maintain institutional memory in EDI work, so that universities do not fall into the trap of endlessly diagnosing the same issues and naively repackaging old solutions as if they were new. As the next section will show, much can be gleaned from tracing the historical relationship between race and higher education policy in Britain.

### RACE AND HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY: FROM INCLUSION TO EQUITY

University College London's 2014 student campaign asked a pertinent question: *Why isn't my Professor Black?* The answer lies not simply in the inadequacies of current recruitment practices. Academic job adverts earnestly stating that they 'particularly welcome applications from the BAME community' may have the best of intentions, but on their own such tokenistic sentiments fail to grasp how British universities have always been racialised spaces, conferring knowledge, customs, and values from generation to generation (Bhambra, 2018: 5).

For universities founded prior to the twentieth century, their histories inevitably entwine with that of Empire. Many served as the training ground for colonial administrators, and the British university model was itself a template for colonial development. Cecil Rhodes was not the only celebrated donor with links to slavery and colonialism—Cambridge and Glasgow universities recently uncovered how some of its endowment funds could be traced to investments in Caribbean slave plantations (*The Economist*, 2020). Moreover, Coleman (2014) has documented how in the early twentieth century University College London played host to a research centre for national eugenics, and until 2020 had campus buildings and spaces named after its founder Francis Galton. While explicit links to biological racism declined as the century progressed—the name of UCL's Galton-founded laboratory quietly swapped 'eugenics' for 'genetics' in the 1960s—universities' intake was largely uncontested in its upholding of white, male class privilege, with less than 2 per cent of the population having passed through them (Collini, 2012: 29).



With university funding having started to fall under the responsibility of the state in the early twentieth century, higher education was a crucial part of Britain's post-war social mobility agenda. The establishing of modern 'plate glass' universities, together with the development of polytechnics and adult access courses, resulted in the rapid expansion of student numbers in the 1960s and 1970s. This saw participatory gains in gender and class, but racial diversity remained chronically lacking (David, 2010: 8–9). For the minority of students of colour who did make it to university, they had had little option but to 'fit in' to the existing system's hierarchies and traditions as 'familiar strangers' (Hall & Schwartz, 2017).

It was not until the 1990s that higher education finally began to open access to 'non-traditional' students in large numbers. With over sixty polytechnics and HE colleges acquiring university status between 1992 and 2000, the number of students grew to more than 2 million across 130 institutions. The 1997 Dearing Report represented something of a landmark for its highlighting of race inequality in HE access, and this complemented the incoming Labour government's target of 50 per cent going into higher education in the next century. Both would set a platform for the next two decades of widening participation (WP) policy, and as the fastest growing sector of the population ethnic minority communities were well positioned to benefit from widening access initiatives such as Excellence in Cities, and AimHigher (Wilkins & Burke, 2015: 437).

Many HE scholars have interpreted Labour's 50 per cent target in 1997 as principally an economic project, albeit with accompanying social and ethical benefits (Gulam, 2004; Heath et al., 2011; Pilkington, 2011). The replacement of the grant system in favour of tuition fees saw the new generation of graduates saddled with considerable debt that contrasted sharply with the opportunities of their predecessors (see Hensby, 2017: 52–54). This new funding model carried specific commitments to widening participation and EDI in its employment policies, albeit with students putting up much of the cost of this expansion themselves. Moreover, government policy seldom identified race as warranting any specific attention, and consequently was largely absent in university WP strategies (Pilkington, 2004: 21).

The 1999 Macpherson report, and the resultant 2000 Race Relations (Amendment) Act (RRAA), began to change this. Responding to the Metropolitan Police's chronic mishandling of the case for Stephen Lawrence's murder in 1993, the Macpherson report proposed a definition of institutional racism that emphasised the 'processes, attitudes and

behaviour that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people' (Macpherson, 1999: para 6.34). The RRAA sought to address this through policy, forcing all public institutions to accept culpability where implicit forms of discrimination had pervaded unchecked, and requiring them to actively promote race equality and representation.

The charge of institutional racism was initially met with hostility and defensiveness from much of the HE sector. Staff unions voiced concerns about the consequences for 'academic freedom' while senior leaders played up their institution's race-related achievements (Gulam, 2004: 9–11). Nevertheless, the RRAA prompted the establishing of key agents and drivers for developing a race equality strategy for HEIs. Consistent with the Labour government's advocacy of Third Way managerialist public policy, this would be primarily driven by top-down performance monitoring suite of targets, indicators, and evaluations (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020: 532). This began with the founding of the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) in 2001 to preside over universities' race equality policy submissions from 2002 onwards (Hill & Kusemamuriwo, 2004: 119–123). Commitments made in this submission were expected to feature in universities' annual access agreement, which the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) had made a stipulation for HEIs wishing to charge the top rate in tuition fees. According to Pilkington (2018: 41), it was ultimately the consequences of non-compliance which eventually jolted HEIs into taking race equality seriously.

Consistent with the sector's overall WP strategy, the initiation of race equality policy reforms saw impressive gains in widening access for students of colour. In a report commissioned by the Government's Department for Education and Skills, Connor et al. (2004: 42–43) found that by 2001–2002 the participation rate for ethnic minorities at universities in England had reached 56 per cent—comfortably higher than 38 per cent for white people. This ratio has endured in the years since (see Equality Challenge Unit, 2015), even if they conceal ongoing BAME underrepresentation at Russell Group universities (Boliver, 2016). But Connor et al.'s analysis (2004) also uncovered a more concerning trend. Their analysis of 2002 graduates found that 59.6 per cent of white students had received a first or upper-second-class degree result compared with 42.2 per cent for BAME graduates, creating a gap of 17.4 per cent. Within this category, 'good degree' attainment was lowest for Black

African (30.8 per cent), Black Caribbean (34.9 per cent), and Pakistani (39.0 per cent) graduates.

It has taken time for the sector to acknowledge the awarding gap, let alone understand its complexities. Connor et al.'s report argued that the gap was not reducible to one single factor, identifying intersections between race and class, gender, and entry qualifications. Subsequent reports by Dhanda (2010) and Singh (2011) would emphasise further variables within the category of 'race' including differences in students' first language, country of birth, and family background. Despite these complexities, Broecke and Nicholls (2007) demonstrated that race remained a predictor of differential attainment in its own right. Their report prompted the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and ECU (2008) to recommend that universities implement systems to evaluate learning and teaching based on their awarding gap data. By this time, universities in England were required to submit an annual 'access agreement' to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) as a stipulation for charging the top rate of tuition fees. The new Conservative-Liberal coalition government's decision to treble the top rate to £9000 from the 2012/3 academic year saw OFFA's access agreement become the main driver of WP policy for English universities,<sup>1</sup> with HEIs required to show their commitment to 'improving access, success, and progression for people from under-represented and disadvantaged groups' ([offa.org.uk](http://offa.org.uk)).

Consequently, the 2010s saw major improvements in how universities collected and monitored their cohort data, including differential attainment rates. For many HEIs, this owed to the establishing of specialist EDI professional services teams and departmental academic leads. Yet while this helped consolidate institutional knowledge and understanding, such work tended to be kept at 'convenient margins' (Hylton, 2012). Studies by Pilkington (2011) and Ahmed (2012), for example, found that EDI roles were usually filled by junior staff (often people of colour) which restricted opportunities to consistently challenge senior management. Reluctant to adopt targeted approaches to differential attainment—and thereby invoke thorny debates over 'positive discrimination'—HEI leaders tended to favour deficit-driven interventions such as means-tested bursaries and peer-mentoring schemes. Pilkington (2011: 105, 112) further noted that efforts to engage more directly with learning and teaching practices—e.g. anonymous marking policies, or unconscious bias training for staff—were met with cries of 'academic freedom' or 'political correctness gone mad'. In most cases, however, EDI work appeared to go

unnoticed, reflecting a general staff disengagement with growing ethnic diversity among their cohorts, let alone the existence of an awarding gap (Senior, 2012: 7; Stevenson, 2012: 7–8).

While buy-in from ordinary staff remained a struggle, studies by Ahmed (2012) and Bhopal and Pitkin (2020) found that evidence collected for annual access agreements was frequently exploited by universities for marketing purposes. For Ahmed, the touting of institutional ‘excellence’ combined with the endless recycling of strategic action plans, reflected universities’ instrumentalised approach to EDI work—one of ‘doing the document’ rather than ‘doing the doing’. Despite differential attainment encapsulating the structural *and* the everyday, ‘doing the document’ can easily result in neither being appropriately addressed: the lack of granular analysis or root-and-branch engagement means that individual responsibility is easily evaded, whereas the corporate nature of such documents sees more difficult conversations about race and racism sidestepped in favour of manager-friendly ‘happy talk’ (Ahmed, 2012: 45–46; see also Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020: 536–537).

Doing the document arguably also reflects the limitations of an approach to equality, diversity, and inclusivity that is overly reliant on external targets from the government. Despite OFFA’s emphasis on BAME retention and progression, the percentage of access agreements focusing on race had barely crept above 50 per cent by 2017 (Pilkington, 2018: 36), with many universities continuing to prioritise other protected characteristics. More nefariously, Crofts (2013) found that government directives to see EDI principles ‘mainstreamed’ across all areas of institutional practice could easily be used as reason to disinvest in specialist central teams that would oversee and monitor this work in favour of ‘personal responsibility’ across existing managerial roles. The terms of these targets were also subject to regular changes in regulatory structures, with the new Office for Students replacing access agreements with ‘access and participation plans’ in 2018.

Nor do these targets provide a solid foundation from which to build a long-term EDI strategy. The past decade has seen the sector’s own standards and regulatory bodies begin to prioritise race equality, yet more recently this has been undermined by the Conservative government’s simultaneous *de*-prioritisation of race in public policy. For example, Advance HE introduced a Race Equality Charter (REC) in 2014 to help incentivise and reward good practice, but with the government unwilling to make such schemes compulsory, less than half of UK HEIs

are currently signed up as members (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Moreover, the 2021 publication of the government-commissioned Sewell report controversially and erroneously concluded that racial inequality in education (and British society more generally) had been overstated (see Bhopal, 2021).

Amid all these advances, constraints, and impediments, little progress has been made across the sector to close the white-BAME awarding gap. Though the proportion of students graduating with a so-called 'good degree' has grown considerably over the course of twenty years, Advance HE (2020: 128) calculated that 68.0 per cent for BAME graduates received a first or 2:1 degree result compared with 81.4 per cent of white graduates, creating a gap of 13.3 per cent (see also Richardson, 2018). Though the drive towards data and monitoring has helped make this information more widely available across the sector, there remains a reluctance to accept race as holding explanatory significance in its own right. Of course, intersections of class, gender, and entry qualifications all help exacerbate these inequities, as indeed this book will show. But it is also easy to limit the discourse of race to generic, celebratory 'multicultural' marketing initiatives, while practical action is concentrated on technocratic strategies designed to improve existing practices and facilities for *all* students (see Richardson, 2018). What Ahmed (2012: 35) refers to as the 'habit' of institutional whiteness has proven difficult to shake.

This is also reflected in how social inequalities are commonly theorised in studies of education. It has become something of an orthodoxy in the UK to consider universities in Bourdieusian terms as a field where students accumulate academic, cultural, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Watson, 2013). This orthodoxy has arguably informed much of educational practice designed to 'upskill' students from deprived backgrounds. However, such an approach tends to overlook HE's culpability in naturalising the very factors that reproduce racial inequities in wider society. Despite the findings of Hussain and Bagguley (2007), Richardson (2018), and others, stereotypical assumptions about the motivations and expectations of BAME students—particularly Black students—have pervaded while issues relating to course curricula and belongingness remain largely unquestioned. In a word, the 'sheer weight of whiteness' in HE (Back, 2004: 1) needs challenging so that racial inequities are framed and understood institutionally. This warrants a theoretical approach that

applies Bourdieu's conceptual insights more directly to an understanding of structural racism.

### THEORISING RACE AND HIGHER EDUCATION: BRIDGING CAPITAL, RACE, AND SELF-DETERMINATION

Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1984, 1986) sociological theory has proven extremely fruitful for analysing social inequities in UK higher education, but its application to racial inequities requires careful consideration. As noted above, this reflects how his work has been (mis)interpreted as endorsing compensatory strategies designed to equip students of colour with the resources required to successfully 'play the game' while leaving the cultural whiteness of its value systems largely unchallenged. This has led some scholars to question the suitability of Bourdieusian sociology for studying race (e.g. Sian, 2019), but following Rollock et al. (2012), we have sought to develop a bridging approach that integrates the core tenets of critical race theory, as well as the social psychology of self-determination theory. Ultimately, Bourdieu remains 'good to think with' (Jenkins, 1992: 141) because he is fundamentally concerned with the manner in which the routine practices of individual actors are determined. It is through this section, therefore, that we will introduce the book's overarching theoretical framework.

Bourdieu's renown within the study of UK higher education partly reflects a congruence between the French and UK systems, but his genetic structuralism (Baert, 1998) provides us with a conceptual toolkit which can explain how educational choices, practices, and interactions help reproduce social hierarchies. This can be found in his concept of *habitus*—an individual's 'embodied history' comprising of dispositions, interests, and instincts acquired and developed from the earliest stages of socialisation. Our habitus shapes our self-identity and adaptability to the social conditions of, and requirements to succeed in, particular fields. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualises the resources sought, acquired, and deployed by individuals within these fields as capitals. Whereas economic capital represents ownership of money, property, and other holdings, *cultural capital* refers to the possession of assets associated with social status, be they embodied (such as taste, communication, and presentation), objectified (ownership of cultural goods), or institutionalised (receipt of qualifications and titles). Meanwhile, *social capital* represents the resources

accrued through interpersonal relationships which can be mobilised to facilitate particular courses of action.

Education operates as the field in which these capitals can be both acquired and deployed as a means of acquiring power and influence. Financial capital may of course facilitate access to private education at exclusive schools and colleges, but Bourdieu is keen to assert that academic success is shaped less by an individual's unique talent than their access to, and accumulation of, cultural and social capital:

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. (Bourdieu, 1986: 243)

Of course, access to the *right* educational spaces strongly reflects an individual's family background, particularly the intergenerational transmission of cultural capital from parents to offspring (Coleman, 1988). This is crucial to the reproduction of social hierarchies, as 'the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family' (Bourdieu, 1986: 246).

Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capitals has provided inspiration for the 'new paradigm' in UK class sociology (Savage, 2003) for more than a generation (Bennett et al., 2009; Bottero, 2010; Devine, 2004; Friedman, 2014; Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 1997; Thatcher et al., 2015), particularly with regard to educational inequities (Ball, 2003; Crozier, 2005; Fuller et al., 2011; Power et al., 2003; Reay, 2007; Mirza and Reay, 2000; Reay et al., 2005). Applications of Bourdieu to the study of education and *race*, however, have had to overcome the relative absence of ethno-racial distinctions in his writings (Bennett et al., 2009). This has resulted in an approach where students (and staff) of colour are typically categorised and analysed as one of a series of identities—along with class, gender, disability, age, and sexual orientation—which deviate from dominant conceptions of the 'traditional' or 'normal' student.

Such an approach at least helps us to establish some core foundations. By framing higher education and the university campus as fields that historically privilege and uphold dominant forms of knowledge and

the ‘right’ sort of student identity and behaviour, we can begin to identify the specific properties of cultural capital within the university field:

The legitimated forms of academic skills and knowledge profitable to students within the field ultimately translated into academic attainment and award, and therefore a higher cultural capital, including institutional knowledge, study skills and the legitimated style and delivery of oral presentations and written work. (Watson, 2013: 416–417)

Applications of *academic* capital (in effect, an applied subset of cultural capital) can be found in numerous studies. For example, Read et al.’s (2003) research on student integration at a post-1992 London university found that non-traditional students were acutely aware of dominant discourses of what is a ‘good’ or ‘normal’ student, yet lacked the resources to either conform to, or reshape, these norms. Similarly, studies by Reay et al. (2001) and Thomas (2002) conceptualised dominant campus culture as an ‘institutional habitus’ which impeded belongingness for non-traditional students.

Elided in this approach, however, is the specificity of race and racialised experience. In taking a more generalised approach, one risks overlooking the *colour* of university curricula and academic capital. Whether intentional or not, this elision arguably helps legitimise a deficit reading of the awarding gap. In other words, differential outcomes become synonymous with differential access to academic capital, thereby necessitating ‘compensatory experiences to bring students’ cultural capital to an equitable position’ (Leese, 2010: 248) such as extracurricular support workshops and peer-mentoring schemes. This arguably places higher education scholars in a quandary. Universities are ultimately institutions responsible for assessing and accrediting students, and possession of certain knowledge and skills might be considered essential to students’ academic achievement and graduate employability. Yet equating educational failure with low cultural capital runs the risk of upholding hierarchies of cultural wealth while ‘promoting logics of ethno-racial deficiency’ (Wallace, 2016: 5). In other words, students of colour should be better served by universities than simply receiving additional support to ‘play the game’ more effectively.

This is where critical race theory (CRT) comes in. Drawing on its roots in critical-legal studies, its founding thinkers (Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) recognise the hegemonic privileging of



whiteness in racially mixed societies, and how racism is 'deeply ingrained legally, culturally, and even psychologically' (Tate, 1997: 234). Consequently, CRT presents a far more decisive examination of the salient and nuanced experiences of racialised peoples occupying white-dominated spaces than generalised theories of inequalities can account for:

Because racism is an ingrained feature of our landscape, it looks ordinary and natural to persons in the culture. Formal equal opportunity—rules and laws that insist on treating Blacks and Whites (for example) alike—can thus remedy only the more extreme and shocking forms of injustice, the ones that do stand out. It can do little about the business-as-usual forms of racism that people of colour confront every day. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000: xvi)

CRT also urges us to think critically about whiteness. Whiteness allows white people to proceed in their everyday life without being forced to think about their racial positioning, meaning that they often 'benefit from a variety of institutional and social arrangements that appear (to them) to have nothing to do with race' (Bush, 2004: 15). McIntosh (1989) characterises these benefits and privileges as an 'invisible knapsack' that enables white people to feel comfortable in a variety of social environments and be valued and successful in their endeavours.

The application of CRT demonstrates how education operates as a field for both struggle and empowerment for BAME pupils, students, and parents. In doing so we can also explore intersections between race and class easily overlooked in Bourdieusian sociology (Adewumi, 2015). Rollock et al.'s (2015) study of Black middle-class educational strategies found that parents' desire to instil in their children the possibility of Black success is constantly undermined by the consequences of everyday racism. Adewumi's (2015) similar study described how Black middle-class parents' decision to leave urban areas to improve the life chances of their children involved navigating white spaces and combating racial stereotyping, suspicion, and being 'othered'. In both cases, these experiences were seldom experienced through outright bigotry. Rather, the nuanced yet pernicious effects were usually experienced through racialised microaggressions:

Racial micro-aggressions are articulated and performed through seemingly slight but persistent daily reoccurrences that serve to remind persons of

colour that they are judged to be different, not trustworthy, less intelligent and inferior compared to their white counterparts. (Rollok, 2012: 518)

The study of Black and BAME educational strategies also opens up the possibility of different conceptualisations of cultural capital. Taking their lead from Carter (2003) and Yosso (2005), Wallace (2016) and Meghji (2019) have both sought to develop a theory of 'Black cultural capital' in a UK context. This involves the accumulation and deployment of Black knowledge and culture afforded a high status in wider society. Wallace and Meghji take note of Black agency in asserting their status as legitimate consumers while challenging the notion that cultural capital should be considered synonymous with whiteness. Their purpose is not to segregate capitals but to emphasise that people of colour, like their white counterparts, are culturally omnivorous and dexterous depending on the context. Nor should cultural capital as a concept be geographically constrained: Ball et al. (2002), for example, sought to challenge Bourdieu's methodological nationalism through their conceptualisation of 'transnational cultural capital' which captured the valuing of cosmopolitan knowledge and dispositions in an increasingly diverse Britain. This capital was not only possessed by immigrants of colour, but actively sought out by white middle-class parents through their decision to send their children to inner-city comprehensive schools (Reay et al., 2007).

The emphasis on Black agency reflects the value of CRT as a standpoint theory, with its legitimacy 'depend[ing] on its ability to offer resistance to racism(s)' (Hylton, 2009: 86). This represents an important corrective to Bourdieu's theory, which emphasises the power of social reproduction in ways that leave actors afforded few options other than to play the game. Nevertheless, neither approach necessarily captures the motivations of individuals when navigating educational fields, and the extent to which these may be satisfied by institutional expectations of *how* one is expected to learn. For this reason, our theoretical approach also draws on self-determination theory. Ryan and Deci (2000) take the view that individuals have inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration. These draw on a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Whereas the latter speaks to the motivation to achieve a degree result that

has transferrable value in wider society—thereby complementing Bourdieu's theory of capitals—the former importantly captures a desire to explore, learn, and exercise one's capacities for personal fulfilment.

For Ryan and Deci, fostering personal growth and motivation depends on the external support of three interrelating psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Each of these can be interpreted via a Bourdieusian or CRT lens when applied to higher education. First, the need for constructive feedback and reward from key stakeholders facilitates a sense of *competence*. In addition to formalised structures of assessment, McIntosh's (1988) concept of the microaffirmation captures the subtle validations of a student's work which may encourage the adoption of behaviours and activities that stimulate feelings of efficacy. Second, *relatedness* foregrounds the need to feel valued by significant others to whom they feel (or want to feel) attached or related. This speaks to wider literatures on BAME belongingness in HE (Strayhorn, 2012) as feeling recognised for and understood by peers and teachers provides a secure relational base for students to flourish. Third, *autonomy* refers to the need to feel autonomous rather than controlled within a given field. In higher education, this may include making choices which reflect a student's own personal interests and goals, as well as feeling able to be their 'authentic self' in the classroom and among peers. This complements our aforementioned critique of deficit readings: though higher education may require students to adopt certain extrinsic values and behaviours as their own, its purpose should be to facilitate personal development rather than simply fulfil external requirements.

Combining these approaches equips us with the tools to critically evaluate student choice and action within a field governed by invisible pedagogies, and an institutional habitus which presupposes whiteness (Bernstein, 1996; Rollock et al., 2015; Thomas, 2002). On the one hand, this takes into consideration how students' motivations to study at university, shaped by knowledge and expectations accrued from prior schooling and family networks, impact on their decision-making and strategies for learning. In this regard, we are indebted to Glaesser and Cooper's (2014) emphasis on *subjective* rationality, which affords significance to the particular social context surrounding individual choice, including the information and resources students have at their disposal, and how social and cultural factors shape individual motivation. This may include the role and value of education within family narratives, as well as the wider policy framing of higher education as an advantageous choice.

On the other hand, combining these approaches enables us to interrogate the institutionalised norms and expectations of student behaviour within a contemporary university setting. At a base level, this takes into consideration the way degree-level learning is organised and assessed, as well as the resources and facilities typically made available to undergraduates. This presupposes a more individualised learning culture, with the student expected to navigate the university field more reflexively and autonomously than they have done in secondary and further education (Money et al., 2020). This produces institutional ideals and assumptions of what student competence or ‘doing university right’ may look like, yet this may implicitly privilege those already equipped with the capitals and resources to achieve academic and personal fulfilment at university (Crozier & Reay, 2011; Leathwood, 2006; Stuart et al., 2011; Yee, 2016).

In sum, our theoretical framework is intended to enhance our understanding of the complexities of the BAME student experience, one that addresses key intersecting themes and issues such as class and prior educational background while retaining race’s core explanatory significance. It is hoped that developing this framework will help higher education professionals recognise how and where universities can reflect on the efficacy of their own practices and develop strategies and activities that will ultimately enable, rather than constrain, students of colour.

## UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM, PUSHING FOR CHANGE: THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

Achieving racial equity in higher education is no easy task when we consider the many demands on universities’ time and resources each year. In a sector that increasingly encourages and rewards competition, they are under pressure to meet annual student recruitment targets, as well as fulfil their commitment to ongoing strategic priorities such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The organisational dexterity required to adjust to unforeseen government policy shifts also impedes their ability to fully deliver on long-term strategies. For EDI leaders and diversity ‘champions’, racial equity must also compete for attention with numerous other liberation struggles—gender equity, class underrepresentation, disability access, LBGTQIA+ recognition, as well as union campaigns to protect staff employment rights and fight academic precarity.

So, given these constraints what can be done? Pilkington (2011: 15) notes how good practice tends to be facilitated by a combination of factors, including 'external drivers such as legislation and internal enablers such as top-level commitment; accountability, ownership and development at all levels; and effective internal communication'. Given the often-frustrating narrative of EDI policymaking, some readers may balk at the inclusion of 'external drivers' and its associated culture of government metrics. As we have already seen, Ahmed (2012) argues that decades of government monitoring and evaluation have created an audit-aware culture in HE where 'doing the document' becomes implicitly privileged above 'doing the doing'. But for this reason we argue that 'equality competence' should not become synonymous with institutional compliance. Rather, these targets and metrics should serve as a tool for achieving liberation goals which make us better teachers and better human beings. External drivers can be pursued pragmatically and opportunistically to gain traction and leverage from senior management in particular, but they ultimately hold little moral value as ends in themselves.

The University of Kent's Student Success Team (SST) was borne out of this approach. It was founded in 2014 as the institution's principal method for meeting its access and participation targets, but it was also conceived as a more meaningful and creative form of compliance. Despite the temptation to fulfil annual monitoring criteria by adopting a 'quick fix' mentality, the SST was instigated and overseen by senior management to conduct original research that would help unpack the specific context of the awarding gap at Kent. From this evolving knowledge base, SST practitioners would design strategies and interventions—both centrally and in academic schools—to embed effective, equitable practices across all aspects of the university. This work was generously funded across a number of targeted academic schools and overseen and evaluated by a central team of researchers and project development staff.

Admittedly, naivety played its part in its design and organisation. The SST was initially conceived as a two-year 'developmental project' but was soon extended and expanded once the scale of the issue became increasingly apparent to senior leaders. A decade on, the project has become a team and we have seen a sustained reduction in the white-BAME awarding gap (though still not by enough!) as well as a shift in how this work is perceived and understood by staff and students across the institution. Fundamental to these conditional successes is a recognition of the gap's complexities and intersections, but without losing sight of the

bigger picture. Findings and approaches are chronicled in this book, and we hope that they will be useful for practitioners and researchers seeking to advance racial equity in other HEIs as well as other fields.

With this in mind, it is useful to introduce the University of Kent as an institution. The University was founded in 1965, and like its ‘plate glass’ contemporaries such as Essex, Lancaster, Warwick, and York, Kent was conceived as a purpose-built modern campus and designed to serve its wider county. Its principal site is located on the outskirts of Canterbury, and in 2001 it was joined by a new UK campus at Medway. Formed as part of an initiative to increase HE access in the North Kent region, the Medway campus consists of a space located at Chatham’s historic dockyard, and a purpose-built site in Gillingham which is shared with Greenwich and Canterbury Christ Church universities. As of 2022–2023, the University of Kent has around 19,000 students enrolled across its campuses. Its undergraduates make up approximately two-thirds of this total population, and as one of only two HEIs in the county a large proportion of these hail from London and the wider South-East region.

The ethnicity of Kent’s undergraduate population has shifted significantly in the past decade, as evidenced in the data presented in Table 1.1. Breaking down the distribution of white and BAME undergraduate entrants at Canterbury and Medway, the differences between the two campuses become clear. First, the Medway campus has a considerably smaller cohort than the Canterbury campus—the former ranging between 400 and 500 new entrants each year compared with more than 3000 at the latter. Second, BAME undergraduates have represented the majority at the Medway campus for the last five entry years. BAME undergraduates remain in the minority at Canterbury, but their share has been growing at a much faster rate than the overall sector (HESA, 2021), exceeding 40 per cent of all UK entrants for the first time in 2020–2021. Both campuses present contrasting issues and challenges for notions of ‘belongingness’, which will be a recurrent theme throughout this book.

Intersections with class are more difficult to gauge. Traditional measures of class based on employment schema have struggled to adapt to fundamental changes in the labour market and family structure, while more recent models have sought to incorporate social and cultural indicators (e.g. Savage et al., 2013). In any case, HE data is scarce due to the fact that class is not a protected characteristic and so university dashboards tend to use neighbourhood classification indexes—such as POLAR, IDACI, and Acorn—as a proxy. These, however, were not

**Table 1.1** White-BAME percentages of undergraduate entrants by campus since 2013–2014 (UK domiciles only)

<i>Entry year</i>	<i>Undergraduate entrants at Canterbury</i>		<i>Undergraduate entrants at Medway</i>	
	<i>White (%)</i>	<i>BAME (%)</i>	<i>White (%)</i>	<i>BAME (%)</i>
2013–4	73.5	26.5	55.3	44.7
2014–5	70.4	29.6	51.2	48.8
2015–6	69.3	30.7	51.1	48.9
2016–7	66.7	33.3	47.7	52.3
2017–8	65.8	34.2	45.8	54.2
2018–9	63.2	36.8	42.6	57.4
2019–20	61.9	38.1	44.2	55.8
2020–21	58.1	41.9	45.4	54.6
2021–22	55.2	44.8	36.7	63.3
2022–23	57.6	42.4	36.8	63.2

*Source* University of Kent Qlikview

necessarily designed to capture class and are notoriously unreliable for identifying economic disadvantage in mixed urban neighbourhoods.<sup>2</sup> Though universities hold data on students' household income, this is only recorded on a voluntary basis. Resultant datasets risk overestimating the proportion of lower-income students and therefore must be used with caution.<sup>3</sup>

Given this profile, it was important that the Student Success research team accounted for these ambiguities in their research design and methodology. As is common with EDI departments and associated projects, the SST has maintained a close relationship with the University's planning and business information offices to develop an understanding of student data and attainment trends. Building on this, the research team received ethical approval to conduct a large-scale survey of home-domiciled undergraduates in the 2014–2015 ( $N = 4504$ ) academic year. Individual participation was incentivised and achieved a response rate of 33 per cent. Respondents from the first survey were invited to participate in follow-up in-depth interviews, of which 62 were conducted in Spring 2015.

These represented the core data of Student Success research, establishing from an early stage key themes such as student decision-making,

expectations of success, extracurricular belonging, and intersections between race, class, and vocational qualifications. Findings also highlighted areas where the University's support provision was lacking, prompting strategies and interventions from Student Success staff, as well as follow-up research studies. In 2015–2016, the team conducted in-depth interviews with academic and professional services staff ( $N = 24$ ), as well as provide funds and guidance for Kent Union to conduct its own study of participation and inclusivity in sports clubs and societies, including the union itself. The following academic year, Student Success conducted further survey research ( $N = 647$ ) to analyse patterns in students' basic psychological need satisfaction.

All of these different sources of data form the research foundation of this book. The first part (Chapters 2–6) uses survey and interview data to map out BAME student patterns and narratives at the University, whereas the second part (Chapters 7–10) addresses institutional responses to the awarding gap. Chapter 2 (Hensby and Adewumi) focuses on BAME student choice, identifying the intersecting rationalities of marketisation and parental expectations. The chapter highlights the importance of 'ethnic mix' as a prerequisite for institutional belonging, even though this may come into conflict with market pressures to prioritise 'elite' HEIs. Parental expectations also feature in Chapter 3 (Hensby and Adewumi), which considers BAME students' adaptation to university learning and teaching. The pressure to maximise academic attainment is compounded by struggles to adapt as independent learners in an environment which implicitly privileges whiteness. While for some students this transition is eased by prior capital possession (including Black cultural capital), the combination of high expectations and a lack of belongingness leaves many reluctant to seek support from academic staff, interpreting independent learning as more akin to 'self-reliance'.

Despite these constraints and struggles, the book seeks to foreground BAME student agency. Most will develop a sense of relatedness through building peer networks on campus, and this is especially evident in findings from Chapter 4 (Hensby et al.), which explores BAME students' extracurricular activity. Many felt implicitly excluded from clubs and societies, leading to the formation of ethnicity-based groups such as the African Caribbean Society (ACS). Moreover, at a time when Black-led movements such as BLM and Decolonise were developing global prominence, ACS's rapid growth saw it become a de facto Black union on campus. The authors conclude that HEIs should better support these



groups to ensure that EDI principles of BAME voice and representation are realised in practice, thereby informing meaningful institutional change.

Chapters 5 and 6 return to patterns of student performance and attainment. Chapter 5 (Mitton and Hensby) draws attention to the under-studied intersection between BAME access to higher education and vocational qualifications, emphasising the disconnect between the skills and learning environment offered by BTEC courses, and those expected by universities. This creates an awarding gap between BTEC and A-level entrants, which can further exacerbate the white-BAME awarding gap. The intersection between race and entry qualifications is explored further in Chapter 6 (Earl). Drawing on self-determination theory, Earl uses survey data to compare students' motivations for university and the extent to which the institution is able to satisfy their psychological needs. He concludes that HEIs should prioritise deeper interventions that foster students' autonomy, including curriculum reform and improving teacher support. Echoing the findings of Chapter 3, this is driven towards actively facilitating independent learning in ways that counter tendencies for self-reliance.

The role and responsibility of HEIs is the core focus of Chapter 7 (De La Torre et al.), which introduces the book's more practice-oriented second part. The authors trace the development of Student Success work at Kent, from a two-year pilot project to a permanent, mainstreamed fixture in the University's EDI provision. Enhanced by sustained financial outlay and leadership from senior management, the story of Student Success is nevertheless one of gradual and painstaking structural change. De La Torre et al. write candidly about the challenges faced in ensuring Student Success did not fall into the trap of reproducing deficit approaches. While negotiating challenges relating to academic staff buy-in, resourcing, and institutional upheaval, the chapter identifies key areas for where Student Success was able to gain traction as a vehicle for sustainable change.

Given Chapter 7's emphasis on institutional as well as student-focused change, the final three chapters focus on enhancing BAME student engagement through staff-directed interventions. Returning to themes of massification and professionalisation, Chapter 8 (Hensby and Naylor) considers the role of academic advisers. Drawing on interviews with staff as well as students, the authors argue that advisers have lost a clarity of purpose and the capacity to generate much-needed personalised and

meaningful interactions. The chapter details how these research findings have stimulated action to address these issues, including the use of resource technologies for meetings, the introduction of staff training, and the sharing of school survey data to better educate staff on contemporary student needs and expectations. Chapter 9 (Adewumi and Ng'andu) foregrounds the voice of BAME academic staff through the authors' personal reflections as Black women in higher education. Reflections address their own 'double consciousness' within the academy, and their pedagogical approaches to facilitating meaningful discussions about race for students in the social sciences. The chapter offers insights and applicable knowledge for white as well as BAME staff when it comes to 'creating comfortable spaces to discuss difficult issues'.

The book's final substantive chapter (Adewumi) contends with the colour of our curriculum through an account of the award-winning Diversity Mark (DM) initiative. Adewumi highlights the value of DM for including students as co-producers of knowledge through the process of reviewing module reading lists. Significantly also, it engages academic staff through interviews with conveners, encouraging self-scrutiny on their module's epistemological foundations. In doing, DM becomes a reflective exercise for staff and students alike, thereby pursuing the often-tricky task of curricula reform in ways that are not reducible to a 'tick box' exercise. Chapter 11 (Hensby and Adewumi) brings this book to a conclusion, summarising its core themes and identifying some of its shortfalls, as well as identifying key priorities for future work geared towards eliminating awarding gaps across the HE sector.

## NOTES

1. The role of OFFA and OfS as drivers of WP policy applies to universities in England only as HEIs in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland operate under devolved or partially devolved systems of governance. Universities in Northern Ireland operate under a similar model to England, with all fee-charging HEIs required to submit a Widening Access and Participation Plan (WAPP), administered by the Department for the Economy. In Scotland, widening access and participation falls under the responsibility of the Scottish Funding Council's Commission on Widening Access (CoWA), which sets

sector targets and provides funding streams. In Wales, the equivalent role is performed by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

2. <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Measuring-Disadvantage.pdf>.
3. With this in mind, the book's survey dataset links respondents to their stated household income but this is used only for the purposes of comparing between ethnicity categories. This is because the reduced availability of data (extending to 58 per cent of all respondents) compromises its claim to representativeness of the student body as a whole.

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# Race, Class, and Student Choice: Negotiating Competing Rationalities

*Alexander Hensby and Barbara Adewumi*

## INTRODUCTION

The discourse of ‘student choice’ has become increasingly ubiquitous in higher education, reflecting its significance within HE policy where it is positioned as an engine of progress in standards and outcomes. This began with the sector’s expansion and introduction of tuition fees in the 1990s and accelerated more recently through marketisation reforms in the 2010s. Both phases arguably helped reposition higher education as primarily an economic, rather than social, good (Brooks, 2018; see also

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Shelton, 2023). In ‘putting students at the heart of the system’ (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2015: 15), the relationship between students and HEI has arguably been reconceptualised as akin to a service provider and customer (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). According to Brooks (2018), the value of higher education is thereby framed as an investment, with students required to make decisions that will give them the best chance of maximising their return—usually measured in terms of a student’s graduate employability and future income.<sup>1</sup>

With widening participation initiatives driving the expansion of student numbers, higher education scholars have sought to interrogate how equitable and empowering student choice might be in practice. Initial research focused predominantly on social class, necessitating the construction of a ‘new class paradigm’ (Savage, 2003) as the broader societal impact of individualisation, post-Fordism, and globalisation had begun to dismantle traditional class identities and solidarities (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Studies by Ball (2003), Power et al. (2003), and Reay et al. (2005) were instrumental in advancing this paradigm, with the authors broadly concluding that the marketisation of education rewarded middle-class families as they were able to furnish their children with the social, cultural, and economic resources that would maximise educational returns. Moreover, these middle-class privileges were obfuscated through this new market logic, as they were assumed to reflect the rational actions of ‘reflexive strategic actors’ (Savage, 2003: 538). Meanwhile, the pernicious endurance of class stigma would leave poorer students reluctant to apply to elite universities or take up higher education altogether (Reay et al., 2009).

As noted in the previous chapter, this new class paradigm draws heavily on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986). Bourdieu advanced a model of class that was not reliant on collective identity or durable employment schemas, instead foregrounding the significance of cultural and social capital for maintaining the reproduction of structural inequalities. While this has usefully reconceptualised class around life chances and resources, its application to *racial* inequalities in higher education required further work. Though Bourdieu (1986) himself claimed that cultural and social capital were concepts partly inspired by the need to explain differential educational outcomes, his overarching rationale prioritised explaining how the dominant class reproduces its own structural privilege. As Modood (2004) points out, this leaves little room for explaining the educational success of disadvantaged groups. Given that

BAME students across *all* minority classifications have long been overrepresented in higher education (Modood, 2004), one can infer that young people of colour do not necessarily lack the capital resources that facilitate entry into higher education.

However, this book is not about BAME access to higher education. As noted in the previous chapter, growing awareness of the attainment gap from the 2000s onwards necessitated more attention to studying BAME access and choice *within* higher education. Resultant research has focused on two broad patterns. First, Connor et al. (2004) found that students of colour tended to favour degree courses that were perceived as providing a direct and specified career pathway (e.g. medicine, computer science, law). Second, Shiner and Noden's (2014) study indicated that BAME students were less likely to target 'elite' universities (defined as Oxbridge and the ancient/redbrick institutions which mostly comprise the Russell Group) even when the grade variable was removed.

Such patterns remind us that for all the university guides, league tables, and graduate outcome metrics students have at their disposal, student decision-making remains *subjectively* rational (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014). Significance should therefore be afforded to the context of an individual's choice, including the availability, range, and weighting of different informational sources, as well as the social and cultural factors which shape individual motivation. Modood (2004) argued that BAME overrepresentation in HE was broadly attributable to social and cultural consolidated in strong familial ties which enabled the transmission of certain norms and aspirations—notably the valuing of education as a path to social mobility—from parents to children. However, these capitals did not necessarily extend to brokering access to the most prestigious universities, as this may draw on specific forms of knowledge, networks, and embodiment that remain the preserve of socioeconomic elites.

Emphasis on resource access has led some authors to effectively position race as a cultural subset of class, but this overlooks how choice may reflect racial differences and cultural needs. While these may not be as easily measurable as socioeconomic factors, they reflect the very real yet often invisibilised experiences of racism within the context of institutionalised whiteness (Rollock, 2012; Sue et al., 2008). Employing qualitative methods, Ball et al. (2002), for example, argued that BAME students' desire to not 'stick out' in predominantly white spaces saw them favour institutions that offered a greater 'ethnic mix' of students (see

also Rollock et al., 2015). Yet such choices—whether favoured implicitly or reasoned explicitly—are arguably incompatible with a consumerist discourse which presupposes a model of rationality that does not account for racial belonging. According to this logic, any BAME student opting to study at ‘non-elite’ institutions (or read ‘vocational’ degree subjects) risks being perceived as lacking the sufficient ambition to maximise their educational returns.

These factors necessitate a theoretical framework which ensures racial experience does not get subsumed into the logic of class while allowing for student agency amid these structural constraints. Picking up from the previous chapter, we propose a framework bridging Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of capitals with critical race theory (CRT) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While Bourdieu’s work has long been heralded for examining the ways in which class and racial hierarchies are structurally reproduced, there is a need to centre racial experience and shift our conception of student choice away from simply ‘playing the game’. This also entails avoiding presupposing a common ‘BAME’ experience of higher education. As already noted, intersections of race and class may help explain differential resource access when it comes to student decision-making, but we should also be careful to recognise differences between ethnic origin categories and identities. Moreover, as this chapter will show, students’ migration status and generational identity are also significant for understanding their motivations within higher education.

This chapter admittedly makes only a partial intervention into the existing literature on race and student choice, drawing as it does on original data from a single institution. In other words, all of our research subjects—incorporating a survey of home-domiciled undergraduates<sup>2</sup> ( $N = 4504$ ) and 62 follow-up interviews from the 2014–2015 academic year<sup>3</sup>—ultimately opted to study at the University of Kent. However, this limitation ultimately does not contradict our principal focus on student decision-making within higher education. Neither a Russell Group nor ‘post-1992’ institution, Kent ranked in the top 30 of most university league tables during the data collection period.<sup>4</sup> As a post-war ‘plate-glass’ institution with its main campus located on the outskirts of Canterbury (with a smaller campus located in the Medway region), Kent’s reputational proximity to the ‘elite’ universities, combined with its physical proximity to London, served as key factors in BAME students’ decision-making.

The chapter itself contains two substantive sections. The first unpacks ‘home’ BAME students as a category, drawing out, in particular, the significance of differing family migration narratives and how this affects choice and perceived belongingness within higher education. From this base, the second section examines student reasonings for their choice of institution and degree subject. This traces the influence and impact of two competing rationalities: one, the marketisation discourse of contemporary HE which positions choice as an economic investment and two, the expectations from family to invest in education as a means of social mobility.

### ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE UK EDUCATION SYSTEM: UNPACKING ‘HOME’ BAME STUDENTS

It is important to begin by considering the diversity and composition of home BAME students that typically study in UK universities. Table 2.1 breaks down ethnic categories for all UK-domiciled students studying in the UK during the 2013–2014 academic year. Results show that Black African students comprise the biggest BAME subcategory, representing 4.6 per cent of students overall, followed by Indian (3.4 per cent) and mixed (3.2 per cent). Excluding ‘other’, Bangladeshi (0.9 per cent), Chinese (0.9 per cent), and Caribbean (1.5 per cent) are among the most underrepresented categories. The data makes clear that BAME students are largely concentrated in London, comprising 46.2 per cent of all students studying in the city. London represents the region with the largest share for each individual BAME category, though the proportion of Black African students is highest by some distance at 11.7 per cent. Pakistani and Bangladeshi students are the least concentrated in London but overall BAME categories are significantly underrepresented at universities located in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

The concentration of BAME students in London is broadly commensurate with the UK population as a whole—data from the 2021 census (excluding Scotland and Northern Ireland) indicates that 46.2 per cent of the capital’s residents identified as belonging to a BAME ethnic group.<sup>5</sup> In other words, ethnic minority undergraduates are generally more likely to study close to where they live, or where they will encounter ethnic diversity. Defying this trend somewhat, Table 2.2 and Fig. 2.1 suggest

**Table 2.1** UK-domiciled students by country of institution and ethnic group

	<i>White (%)</i>		<i>BAME total (%)</i>		<i>Black (%)</i>		<i>African (%)</i>	<i>Caribbean (%)</i>	<i>Other (%)</i>
	<i>All (%)</i>		<i>All (%)</i>		<i>All (%)</i>				
England	76.8		23.2		7.5	1.8	5.3		0.4
London	53.8		46.2		16.7	4.1	11.7		0.9
Eng. exc. London	81.6		18.4		5.5	1.3	4.0		0.3
Northern Ireland	97.5		2.5		0.4	0.0	0.4		0.0
Scotland	92.6		7.4		1.5	0.1	1.3		0.1
Wales	91.7		8.3		2.0	0.3	1.6		0.1
Total	79.8		20.2		6.4	1.5	4.6		0.3

	<i>Asian (%)</i>				<i>Chinese (%)</i>		<i>Mixed (%)</i>
	<i>All (%)</i>	<i>Indian (%)</i>	<i>Pakistani (%)</i>	<i>Bangladeshi (%)</i>	<i>Other (%)</i>		
England	9.8	3.9	2.9	1.1	0.9		3.6
London	18.5	6.5	3.9	3.0	1.6		5.7
Eng. exc. London	8.0	3.4	2.6	0.7	0.8		3.1
Northern Ireland	0.9	0.4	0.2	0.0	0.4		0.7
Scotland	3.0	0.8	1.4	0.1	0.7		1.5
Wales	3.2	1.3	0.7	0.5	0.8		2.0
Total	8.5	3.4	2.5	0.9	0.9		3.2

Source: ECU (2015: 114-115)

that Kent's student demographic more closely resembles that of London universities than the rest of England. In the 2016–2017 academic year, BAME home undergraduates hit 40 per cent and have continued to grow in the years since. Further in line with wider trends, Black African students represent the most populous BAME subcategory, having exceeded 10 per cent in 2015–2016. Unlike London universities, however, Kent features a higher representation of Black students than it does Asian students.

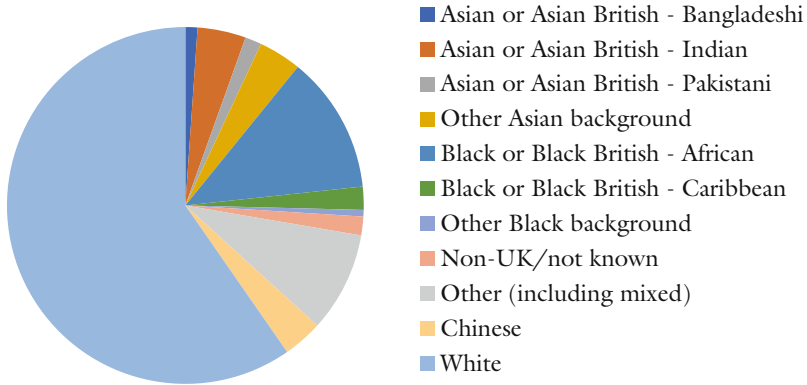
Of course, these data do not fully capture the ethnic diversity on Kent's UK campuses—or indeed universities more generally—as they

**Table 2.2** Ethnic breakdown of entrants at the University of Kent 2013–2018

<i>Ethnic group</i>		<i>Entry year</i>				
		<i>2013–4</i> (%)	<i>2014–5</i> (%)	<i>2015–6</i> (%)	<i>2016–7</i> (%)	<i>2017–8</i> (%)
Asian	Asian or Asian British–Bangladeshi	0.8	0.7	0.9	1.0	1.1
	Asian or Asian British–Indian	4.2	4.2	4.9	3.9	4.4
	Asian or Asian British–Pakistani	1.5	1.4	1.2	1.1	1.5
	Other Asian background	3.5	3.9	4.4	4.7	3.9
	Total	10.0	10.2	11.1	11.0	10.8
Black	Black or Black British–African	9.7	9.9	10.2	10.5	12.5
	Black or Black British–Caribbean	2.3	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.1
	Other Black background	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.8	0.6
	Total	12.8	13.0	13.3	13.9	15.3
Other BAME	Non-UK/not known	1.4	1.5	1.9	2.1	1.7
	Other (including mixed)	6.7	7.8	7.8	8.2	9.1
	Chinese	3.9	4.6	4.7	4.8	3.6
	Total	12.0	13.8	14.4	15.1	14.4

*Source* Qlikview, University of Kent

*Note* Percentages by column



**Fig. 2.1** Ethnic breakdown of entrants at the University of Kent in 2017/8 academic year

feature home undergraduate populations only. This excludes how international students and postgraduates may impact the overall representation of ethnic minorities. Though these groups sit outside the white-BAME attainment gap as defined by the Office for Students, the experience of being a home-domiciled and international BAME undergraduate may not differ as much as one might expect. Interviews revealed that many students categorised as ‘Black African’ were not born in the UK, with their formative years characterised by chain migration, sometimes via another European country. This speaks to broader migration trends: in 2001, the population of Nigerian-born UK residents was 87,000; by 2011, it had grown to 191,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2013). In contrast, all of our Black Caribbean interviewees were born and raised in the UK.

In practical terms, this can create anxieties for prospective students who emigrated in their mid-teens. For non-British citizens to qualify as a home student for Student Finance England, applicants need to either have a long residence (either seven years or half your life) or have proof of settled/pre-settled status (Department of Education, 2022: 6–7). This involves regularly renewing visas, or applying for indefinite leave to remain. For some students, this meant that their status as home or international students would not be confirmed until a few weeks before their arrival at university:



I was born in Ghana and then I came to the UK in 2006, so in 2012 I was meant to start uni, but I got my indefinite [*leave to remain*] very late, around August. I applied to the University of Kent around July and then they send me messages that they need a copy of my citizenship. And during that time, it was at the Home Office. So, I was so scared that they were going to reject me because I'm not able to send them my citizenship. (Rebecca,<sup>6</sup> BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

I was born here but I went back to Nigeria when I was three years old, and I came back as an adult. So, they asked for a copy of my British passport and there were lots of delays. They were asking for an English result to show my English proficiency. (Andi, LLB Law – Black African)

Given these fine margins, it is perhaps unsurprising that many first generation/recently naturalised students frame their identities more strongly according to their country of origin (Jessop & Williams, 2009). Moreover, receiving 'home' status shortly before arrival at university likely reflects a schooling that has spanned more than one country. Rebecca experienced a sense of cultural dislocation from entering school in the UK in her mid-teens:

It was difficult because in Ghana, the way you have to behave is really different from here. In Ghana if a teacher comes to the class everyone has to stand up and greet her. And then if the teacher asks you a question you have to stand up and answer. So, of course, I had the same mentality when I came here, and when the teacher asked my name I stood up and everyone was laughing at me. So it was really difficult to adjust because back home if the teacher talks you can't really be rude. But here it's different. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

This indicates that for first-generation BAME students may feel 'othered' not only in racial terms but also with regard to the British educational system and its 'invisible pedagogies' (Bernstein, 1996). Puwar (2004) draws on the work of Bourdieu and Michel Foucault to explain how cultures of exclusion operate within such institutional spaces:

Social spaces are not blank and open for anybody to occupy. Over time, through processes of historical sedimentation, certain types of bodies are designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific spaces... some bodies have the right to belong in certain locations, while others are marked out

as trespassers, who are in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined, politically, historically and conceptually circumscribed as being 'out of place'. (Puar, 2004: 51)

For students born and schooled in the UK, few spoke of comparable disorientation in their formative years, mostly on account of having grown up in cosmopolitan areas of London. This generated a different set of social and cultural capital resources. Though many spoke with pride of the experiences and sacrifices of their parents, students ultimately were more likely to describe their home culture in equivocal terms—identifying with multi-ethnic, diasporic communities in London:

I have been raised in multicultural groups from when I was really, really young. My groups of friends, my mum's group of friends, have always been a mixed group – Portuguese, Italian, this and that. I can't comprehend somebody who is like, "I have never met a person like that" or "I have never had this food." I am like, "My friend's mum – that is all she cooks!" (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

Of course, we should be mindful of presupposing hard boundaries on the grounds of country of birth. Frances's experience, for example, sits somewhere between those of Rebecca and James. Having been born in Germany to Nigerian parents, she felt more personally detached from her family's migration narrative but retained an acute awareness of the decisions and actions of their parents. This highlights the existence of different cultural identities within a family unit:

My parents were both from working-class to middle-class families, so it wasn't the typical, you know, Water Aid advert with the starving kids. But it still came from a struggle. [...] I appreciate my parents so much for coming from Nigeria and moving to Germany and then here. There weren't many opportunities in Nigeria. They moved here because there's an element of racism in Germany, especially in the selection for students for uni. [...] They say to me all the time, like, "You're a European baby because you're just so acclimated to this environment". My mum would always be like, "You're so lazy. When I was ten, I had to carry water on my head". It's just like, "Okay Mum, you're dramatising." [*laughs*] (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

Frances's casual reference to 'Water Aid adverts with the starving kids' shows a reflexiveness about how migrant families can be stereotyped in British society. But such stereotypes do not capture the complex transference of middle-class values and capitals involved in Frances's family's migration narrative. It has long been established that though most migrants come to the UK in search of upward social mobility, many experience downward social mobility upon arrival as the jobs available to them are often below their qualification levels (Basit, 2012; Modood et al., 1997; Reay, 2017). This might be attributable to discrimination in the labour market, as well as language and financial problems caused by living in dislocated, transnational families. Consequently, migrant families often put great emphasis on education—particularly higher education—as an accessible means of converting familial social and cultural capital into a UK context. This is particularly evident in the educational choices of children of Black African migrant parents (Mitton & Aspinall, 2010), as illustrated in the interview accounts of Ava, Frances, and Rebecca:

A lot of Nigerian families or African families, there's a lot of pressure. It's academically driven. Academics is key to getting out of poverty and making a living when you're older. (Ava, BSc Wildlife Conservation – Mixed Race)

My parents felt that coming to England, not only would I learn English – which is more translatable in terms of where I can go – but also [it] gave me a chance to succeed, you know, being Black. So that's the main motivation behind being here. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

Obviously not everyone wants to come to uni but African parents do push you to go. It was my choice, but I don't know what my dad would have done if I said I wouldn't come. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

In many cases, improving educational opportunities for their children was identified as a key factor for their parents' decision to migrate to the UK. For students such as Meera, whose parents emigrated from Kenya, and Yeni, whose father had previously studied in Egypt, this involved following in their families' footsteps. Like Frances, the incentive of an inclusive university education system was coveted both as a means of capital conversion and as a continuation of their family identity:

It's been like the main thing since I can remember. After we moved here, we were doing our GCSEs and A-Levels and [my parents] were doing their university degrees. (Meera, BA Comparative Literature – Other Asian Background)

They've always wanted me to go to uni 'cause we're quite an academic family, although I am the first in our family to go to university in England. (Yeni, BA Politics & International Relations – Other Mixed Background)

The conveyancing of these 'durable ambitions', consolidated within family networks, to BAME students represents a form of social capital that Modood (2004: 95) identifies as significant for explaining ethnic minority overrepresentation within British universities. However, for migrant families this transference of capital can incur emotional costs. Remi's parents left Rwanda during the Civil War in the 1990s and spent time in Tanzania before the family moved to the UK. However, their first town of settlement was coloured by experiences of racism:

When we first came to this country it wasn't too welcoming to ethnic minorities – one time someone spray-painted a Nazi sign on our door. Eventually we moved and my parents just had to really build their lives from scratch. A couple of years later, both my parents got their PhDs. So they're very pro-education. (Remi, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black African)

For BAME students born and raised in the UK, migration narratives take on a more symbolic quality, drawing on the secondary accounts of parents and grandparents. This reflects their families' settled status often within multi-ethnic and diasporic communities (Vertovec, 2009). This was true for James, whose family is of Caribbean heritage and has lived for many decades in London. In his case, education is valued less as an identity and more in recognition of transformations in the UK labour market, with university degrees increasingly a precondition of entry into professional careers:

My parents have never been to university. But obviously when they were my age there was no need to. This was the 1980s, so it was like you could get into a job and go up. Because both my parents they worked in telecommunications, by the time they met they were both at management level. They hammered that into us, like, "You have to go to university.

It is just something that you have to do." (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

Yet within the advice James received from his parents was a recognition that staying competitive would not necessarily override racial discrimination when it came to professional recruitment,<sup>7</sup> recalling the well-known aphorism that people of colour ‘must work twice as hard to get half as far’:

It is harder for a minority to get a job. You have seen studies where if a person has got an ethnic minority name, they are more likely to hire the person with a white name even though they have the same degree. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

In sum, the student narratives underline the particular significance often afforded to studying at university in BAME students’ upbringing. For students not born in the UK, these are often tightly bound up in family migration narratives, sometimes reflecting parents’ motivations for their own higher education as well as their children’s. Higher education may also represent an accessible means of restoring the family’s professional status following their migration to the UK. The transference of these familial norms and values serves as a form of social capital in that it sets clear expectations of participation in higher education—education in this respect may give students a sense of *who they are* (Modood, 2004). Higher education is also venerated for UK-born BAME students, though this may reflect awareness of the increased importance of HE qualifications in a changing job market, albeit one that still discriminates against people of colour. Though different in their motivations, these narratives ultimately reach the same conclusion. Data presented in Table 2.3 indicates that family encouragement plays a more significant role for BAME students than it does for white students.

### METRICS, EMPLOYABILITY, AND ‘ETHNIC MIX’: CHOOSING A UNIVERSITY AND DEGREE SUBJECT

With university representing an increasingly common path for UK school leavers, marketisation policy and rhetoric has put greater emphasis on selecting the ‘right’ university and degree subject (Macfarlane, 2020). Reforms in the past decade have sought to provide prospective students

**Table 2.3** Importance of family encouragement as a factor in choosing to study at university level

		<i>In general, how important were the following factors in your decision to study at the university level?</i>		
		<i>Important (%)</i>	<i>Not important (%)</i>	<i>Not applicable (%)</i>
The encouragement of my family	White ( <i>N</i> = 2935)	63.1*	33.4*	3.5*
	BAME ( <i>N</i> = 994)	77.3*	16.3*	3.5*
	Black ( <i>N</i> = 460)	81.5	15.2	3.3
	Asian ( <i>N</i> = 263)	75.3	20.9	3.8

*N* = 4504. \**P* = 0.00

with the informational tools to enable them to make an informed choice. Although students do not necessarily see themselves as consumers (Tomlinson, 2017), they are increasingly aware of the risks and consequences of their decision-making which can cause feelings of anxiety and uncertainty (D’Silva & Pugh, 2021). Despite this, studies by Ball (2003), Power et al. (2003), and Reay et al. (2005) have all addressed how differential access to cultural and social capital equips middle-class students with greater knowledge and self-confidence to make the sorts of decisions that will help them maximise their returns. Conversely, the relative lack of such capitals may lead working-class students to self-exclude from opportunities available to them (Bourdieu, 1977; Watson, 2013; Bathmaker et al., 2016).

Race also plays a part in enabling and constraining student choice, though its significance as an independent variable can be harder to ascertain, at least quantitatively. This is evidenced in Shiner and Noden’s (2014) multivariate analysis of 50,000 HE applicants, which identifies class (measured according to parents’ occupation) as the principal underlying factor in explaining why BAME students are less likely to apply to ‘prestigious’ universities. The authors conclude that converting class privilege into selective schooling is the most crucial factor as it raises students’ expectations of their academic potential and furnishes them with the confidence to ‘play the educational system’ to their advantage.

Shiner and Noden's work helps establish clear behavioural trends, but there is a need to unpack categories of 'class' and 'race' sociologically. Drawing on their analysis of 120 interviews, Ball et al. (2002) construct contrasting ideal types of prospective students: the 'contingent' and 'embedded' chooser. Embedded choosers capture the privileges and freedoms typically enjoyed by white, middle-class students as their decision-making draws on a range of knowledge sources and social capital networks to select the right institution from a broad range of options. For contingent choosers, HE decision-making is as much characterised by constraint as possibility. Reflecting the narratives of ethnic minority and working-class interviewees, choice is comparatively distant and 'unreal', drawing little on social capital or parental engagement, and shaped by what is feasible financially. Contingent choosers also draw less on the 'hot knowledges' valued in marketisation discourses, instead favouring trust, familiarity, and local proximity.

Race is only explicitly highlighted in Ball et al.'s (2002) ideal types with regard to contingent choosers' preference for universities offering an 'ethnic mix' of students. Ball helps develop this further as a contributor to Rollock et al.'s (2015) study of the educational strategies of the Black middle-class parents, finding that parents favour schools for their children that combine ethnic mix with the right educational credentials. In practice, however, pursuing the latter may come at the expense of the former, necessitating leaving their community to access more high-performing schools (see also Adewumi, 2015).

Of course, students themselves have greater agency when it comes to higher education decision-making, but according to Shiner and Noden's analysis a preference for ethnic mix is likely to be one of the factors that will likely lead BAME students to apply to 'less prestigious' universities.<sup>8</sup> As a top 30 institution but outside of the Russell Group, the University of Kent is perhaps one such destination, albeit not located in a region known for high ethnic diversity. However, it would be a gross oversimplification to assume that a BAME student's choice of Kent reflects a lack of knowledge or resource access. This is evident in the accounts of Eric and Shappi. Though both were from lower-income households,<sup>9</sup> echoing Rollock et al.'s (2015) study their relatively privileged state schooling furnished them with the resources and encouragement to apply to Oxford and Cambridge universities. Nevertheless, this experience generated further pressures that conflicted with a preference for universities offering a greater ethnic mix:

I went to a comprehensive, but it was basically posing as a private school. We had obligatory UCAS sessions once a week, talks on student finance, graduate careers, on how your life will be infinitely better if you go to university. We all went on an Oxford and Cambridge trip, and it was just like, this is your future, basically, this is your goal. And I just thought, maybe not [*laughs*]. I remember having an argument with my head of sixth form because he was upset that I didn't apply to Oxford for English literature. (Eric, BA Comparative Literature – Mixed Race)

It was a grammar school, one of the best in the area. Very sort of like “if you don't go to Oxford...” They had things like, “if you're thinking of going to Oxford / university / work...”. They didn't even identify the two [Oxford and other universities] as being the same thing [*laughs*]. (Shappi, BA Classical & Archaeological Studies – BAME Arab)

The resultant decision to apply to Kent arguably positions Eric and Shappi somewhere between embedded and contingent choosers as per Ball et al.'s (2002) conceptualisation. Though one can argue that freedom of choice was constrained by their valuing of ethnic mix, this was not attributable to ‘narrowly defined socioscapes and spatial horizons’. With more than half of its BAME students hailing from Greater London (see Table 2.4), Canterbury promised opportunities for personal growth and independence away from home:

Choosing university in London will enable me to stay at home, so I'd save more money instead of paying for bills. But then again somehow I wanted to go outside, like outside London. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

My dad didn't want me to stay at home here. He was like “Live life, don't stay here for uni”. So I was like yeah, definitely I don't want to be at home. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies – Black African)

My friend went to Queen Mary and he never had Fresher's because you have to go home. He never really got to enjoy the nightlife of uni and I didn't want that. You always hear how going to uni, having that lifestyle is one of the best times of your life. I wanted to at least give myself a chance to experience all of that, so I wanted to go far enough where it would be reasonable to stay on campus. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)



**Table 2.4** White and BAME students' home postcode region by campus

		<i>Students' home postcode region</i>		
		<i>Kent (%)</i>	<i>Greater London (%)</i>	<i>Rest of UK (%)</i>
Canterbury	White ( <i>N</i> = 2944)	21.1	15.5	63.5
	BAME ( <i>N</i> = 945)	9.3	56.3	34.4
Medway	White ( <i>N</i> = 340)	51.2	14.7	34.1
	BAME ( <i>N</i> = 220)	11.8	62.3	25.9

*N* = 4449. *P* = 0.00

For Rebecca, Jocelyn, and James, the decision to study in Canterbury rather than commute to a London university reflected a deployment of social capital insofar as university learning privileges independence (a point we will discuss more in chapter 3). James's comment, in particular, also highlights that for many students the appeal of 'independence' is inseparable from the desire for personal growth that comes from experiencing the 'student lifestyle'. However, this does not mean distance from home is not an issue. As a city 60 miles from London connected by Britain's only high-speed rail service, Canterbury promised freedom with a safety net. With family providing an important source of bonding capital (Modood, 2004), our interviewees were reluctant to overly weaken their close ties to home:

I didn't want to go to the University of London because I wanted to move out of home, but I don't want to move *that* far out, otherwise my parents will just be, "Oh, you're going so far away." And Kent's a good commutable distance for them and it's far enough for me to be more independent. (Eric, BA Comparative Literature – Mixed Race)

I didn't want to be at home, I didn't want to be in London, I wanted to be somewhere else but I wanted to be far enough, so I think Kent was the best option. London's only two hours away. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology – Black Caribbean)

The main reason was really distance. I'm very close to my family so I couldn't see myself going very far. Kent is a very good university as well,

particularly for law. It just all seemed right. It was really between Kent and Surrey. (Remi, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black African)

Of course, facilitating the decision to study at Kent was a degree of economic wealth since the location of the Canterbury campus (which itself is approximately two miles from the city centre) is arguably too far from London to be considered commutable. With white people representing 93.7 per cent residents in the county,<sup>10</sup> it is perhaps unsurprising that only 11.7 per cent of BAME students commute to the Canterbury campus (see Table 2.5). At Medway, however, the campus's 30-mile distance from London makes commuting both viable and cost-effective. Financial constraint is certainly evident in the accounts of Emily and Hannah, both students from lower-income households. For Emily, her decision-making reflected a desire to minimise future debt repayment, whereas for Hannah commuting allowed her to continue making a financial contribution to her single-parent household:

Finances became a factor for living at home because I felt like if I lived away I would have more debt in terms of paying back. I didn't want to have an extra loan on top to pay back with already what's been provided for me. (Emily, BSc Business Studies – Black African)

I would have liked to go to Coventry, but I thought it was quite far so I picked Kent. [...] I live with my mum. She wanted me to stay closer to home rather than go far away, but I don't regret it to be honest. She needs me moneywise. I work at KFC down the road from where I live, so I commute to uni, come back, and go straight to work. I can get enough money to go to uni, pay for uni things, as well as pay for things at home. (Hannah, BSc Business Information – Black African)

Despite their differences, the accounts of commuters and residential students highlight the importance of ethnic relatedness in university choosing. This incorporates both the maintenance of strong ties to home and the desire for ethnic mix on campus. When arriving at university, BAME students would have to contend with dominant cultures which implicitly privileged aspects of whiteness (see chapter 4), but at the point of choosing it was notable how the basic *visibility* of diversity across the student cohort was considered foundational for developing belongingness at university:

**Table 2.5** Undergraduate commuters<sup>11</sup> by ethnicity

<i>All students</i>		<i>Commuter (%)</i>	<i>Resident (%)</i>
Canterbury	White ( <i>N</i> = 1982)	16.3	83.7
	BAME ( <i>N</i> = 486)	11.7	88.3
	All students ( <i>N</i> = 2468)	15.4	84.6
Medway	White ( <i>N</i> = 246)	53.3	46.7
	BAME ( <i>N</i> = 131)	26.0	74.0
	All students ( <i>N</i> = 377)	43.8	56.2

*N* = 2845. *P* = 0.00

I'm actually satisfied with the diversity here because the other universities I applied for weren't diverse at all. It's nice to see, it makes you feel a bit more, I don't know, at home. Not at home, but a bit more comfortable when you do see diversity. (Ava, Wildlife conservation – Mixed Race)

When I was applying for university, I wanted it to be multicultural. I didn't want to apply to a university that had a very high percentage of just one ethnicity. I am not comfortable in that sort of environment. I want to be in an environment where there are people of multiple ethnicities. [...] When I came here, I thought that it was going to be a majority of white people. I was very surprised and my parents were surprised. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

Of course, ethnic mix is not necessarily replicable across all departments and programme cohorts. Table 2.6 indicates that Connor et al.'s (2004) aforementioned analysis of BAME course representation is broadly reproduced at the University of Kent, with arts and humanities courses under-subscribed compared with courses in the sciences and social sciences. Interview accounts also broadly support Connor et al.'s analyses, namely that ethnic minority students favour degree courses that are perceived to lead more directly to professional occupations. However, decisions over degree subjects reflect a more complex negotiation of rationalities, one which affords greater significance to parental encouragement and expectation. For Gina, Rebecca, and James, this involved choosing degree

subjects that their parents recognised as providing a more direct pathway to a respectable professional career:

I really like to dance, I went to Brit School but it got too expensive. I just wanted to have a degree, like an actual degree. I could still do dance on the side rather than just pursue it and not have a degree to fall back on. I don't even do dance now, but I decided to get an academic degree so that if anything happens, I've still got that. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology – Black Caribbean)

Before GCSE I really liked art, I was really into art. But with Africans our parents have this influence on what we do, so my dad was like, "Art is not really good, you wouldn't really get a good job out of there." They kind of see it as being a doctor, being a lawyer, you know, them high positions. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

I love acting, I love drama because it really boosted my confidence, especially [after] bullying and stuff [but] I don't necessarily need a degree to be an actor, that is something my parents always told me. It was like, *love drama, do sciences*. I would still like to do acting, whether I am good enough is a completely different thing. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

For all three students, the selection of psychology, health and social care, and law as degree subjects incurred the rejection of a prior passion for arts subjects. This was the outcome of two mutually reinforcing rationalities. On the one hand, the perceived value of arts and humanities subjects has suffered from the repositioning of students as consumers of

**Table 2.6** Distribution of home-domiciled white and BAME students by subject area, 2014–2015 entry year

		<i>Entry year 2014–5 (%)</i>
Humanities	White	80.7
	BAME	19.3
Sciences	White	60.9
	BAME	39.1
Social sciences	White	62.0
	BAME	38.0

*N* = 3849

higher education, evidenced most clearly in the UK Government's divestment in non-STEM subjects since 2012 (McGettigan, 2013). This has compounded the pressure to choose degrees which will maximise career returns. On the other hand, for Gina, Rebecca, and James, advice on degree subject choice came principally from their parents. Again, one can locate important racial nuance between Ball et al.'s (2002) 'contingent' and 'embedded' chooser types, with parents representing 'strong framers' albeit in ways that can sometimes constrain decision-making. For James, his expectations of the university were strongly shaped by his parents' emphasis on staying competitive within an often-discriminatory labour market, whereas for Rebecca her educational aspirations reflect her parents' migrant narrative. In each case, a passion for the arts was relegated to 'hobby' status with relatively little complaint.

Of course, parental pressures to pursue high-status careers as doctors and lawyers are well-worn cultural stereotypes within BAME and especially Asian communities and precede recent marketisation reforms (e.g. Basit, 1996; Mirza, 1992). Though this may strengthen the likelihood of ethnic mix at subject level, students who opted to study arts and humanities degrees were often acutely aware of how their choices confounded such stereotypes. Meera, for example, chose to read comparative literature and found herself to be one of a minority of students of colour in her course:

A handful in my degree [are ethnic minorities], there are not a lot of males doing it either. [...] A lot of people assume that Asian parents are very strict in terms of careers and education because of that stereotype of Asians go onto be lawyers or doctors. I'm not a part of either of those stereotypes. (Meera, BA Comparative Literature – Other Asian Background)

While Meera did not encounter any pushback from her choice of degree, Jocelyn's desire to study film required a more careful negotiation process to ensure it would satisfy her parents' hopes for a sustainable career:

My parents are Nigerian. African parents are all the same, the idea of their children going into the arts is unheard of. And because it's unheard of they don't really know what it's about. So, if they're not seeing other people like in the arts they're like, "okay, so where are they?" Like, you don't even really have someone to look up to. So, when I was at secondary school if I try to talk about the arts, it's like, "Well, you know that's not really safe is it?" But they saw that I was not going to be happy doing anything else. I

really loved English, they've always known that I love reading and writing. I wanted to be an actress when I was younger, that was like really scary for them. Child stars like Lindsey Lohan and all of that – that's all they saw. So that was a bit nerve wracking. So, when I started screenwriting, they were like, "Yeah that's good, there's money in screenwriting, we'll support you". (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies – Black African)

Jocelyn was conscious of the broader structural factors that explained the underrepresentation of people of colour in the performing arts but still recognised the importance of gaining her parents' understanding and approval. Despite their initial scepticism, Jocelyn's pursuit of a degree in film studies was aided by a background of relative economic privilege, coming as she did from a higher-income household. This arguably helped soften familial pressure on immediate career returns, as did the fact that her elder sister had recently graduated from a UK university. The combination of her parents' economic capital and greater knowledge of UK higher education also laid the platform for a more nuanced conversation about Jocelyn's decision whether to study at university:

I made up my mind in college that I didn't want to go to uni. In an African household that is unheard of. I told my sister, and she was like, "Good luck telling mum and dad that". I sat them down, and I was like, "Parents I don't want to go to university." And they were like, "Okay." And I was like, "What do you mean okay?" Literally they were the calmest they've ever been. I came with my arguments for it, and they were like, "That's good, you've thought about it. But what are you going to do with yourself because you're not going to chill at home for three years whilst your sister's going to uni, your brother's in school. You have to be doing something." And I was like, "That's so true, I don't have anything to do right now." And my mum was like, "Well you'd better find something to do." So I said, "Okay, yeah I didn't find anything to do so I guess I'm at uni now." But when I read about the course and I actually got on the course I was like, okay I'm coming to uni for a reason, I actually enjoy what I'm doing ... I'm just thinking now about this whole reverse-psychology thing, I didn't realise it [*laughs*]. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies – Black African)

This points to the importance of understanding the subtle intersections of race and class when studying undergraduate choice. For higher-income BAME students, decision-making is more likely to draw from a wider range of variables which are not governed by economic needs or constraints. For lower-income students, their selection of degree

programme or the decision to commute may reflect a narrower scope of choice. However, race cuts across class when we consider BAME students' desire to study at universities where they are less likely to be made to feel like 'space invaders' while retaining close ties with family. The latter, too, reflects the considerable influence of BAME students' parents when it comes to the value placed on education as a means of social mobility as an ethnic minority in the UK.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear from the interview and survey data presented in this chapter that BAME students typically do not lack the motivation to succeed in higher education. Achieving a university degree represents a key resource for social mobility, be it for converting family capital to a new national context or maintaining a competitive advantage in the labour market. This highlights the complex interplay between race and class when it comes to BAME student decision-making. While there are overlaps between the two, the added pressures to combat racism and discrimination makes it clear that one should avoid assuming that the former is ultimately reducible to the latter. This underlines the value of analysing choice from a student's perspective.

The interviews show that BAME student decision-making entails a complex negotiation of two competing yet often-overlapping rationalities: on the one hand, a higher education system which increasingly positions a degree principally as an economic investment, and the influence of family which places high expectations on students to make good on parental sacrifices. For many interviewees, choosing to study at Kent was the outcome of a careful negotiation of these rationalities, while also seeking to carve out a degree of personal autonomy at a key life stage. Significantly, Kent's relative diversity and proximity to London enabled students to retain ethnic relatedness on campus and at home. While this may represent a constraint on BAME student choice as per Shiner and Noden's (2014) assessment, the basic desire for ethnic mix is rooted in students' lives and family histories which have been coloured by racism. Not all students of colour may feel able or willing to act as trailblazers in applying to a predominantly white university, and for this reason the pursuit of 'ethnic mix' should be recognised as valid in its own right, with the onus on HEIs, rather than students, to address institutional diversity shortfalls.

Choosing a degree subject was found to be a more constrained process, as HE and family rationalities were often mutually reinforcing. This drove the majority of BAME students towards programmes which were perceived as providing the fast-track to a respectable career, sometimes at the expense of subject areas students had found more personally rewarding. Jocelyn's story indicates that class—both in terms of economic and cultural capital—can help counter these rationalities, but what remains clear is that parents play a significant role—either directly or symbolically—in shaping BAME students' understanding of higher education and motivations for attainment. Once at university, however, parental influence is diluted as students are expected to meet institutional expectations of acting as 'independent learners'. This is the focus of the next chapter.

## NOTES

1. For example, graduate employment progression is a key 'numerical indicator' for the awarding panel of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Progression is defined as 'the proportion of qualifiers who identify managerial or professional employment, further study or other positive outcomes among the activities that they were undertaking when responding to the Graduate Outcomes survey 15 months after they left higher education' (<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/tef-data-dashboard/about-the-data-dashboard/>).
2. Individual survey respondent data was linked with the University's student records to match responses with data relating to students' ethnicity, postcode region, degree programme, campus, and household income. The combining of these sources of data was subject to the University's data compliance procedure, with consent taken from all survey participants. The survey dataset was anonymised, and strictly limited for the purposes of Student Success research only.
3. In the interests of consistency, we have chosen to situate these findings within the broad context of the HE statistics and student demographics from the 2014–2015 academic year.
4. Complete University Guide 2014: <https://www.educationindex.co.uk/articles/university-rankings/obschie-reytingi-vuzov-veliko-britanii/ranking-uk-2014-cug/>.



- Guardian University Guide 2014: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/table/2013/jun/03/university-league-table-2014>.
5. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest>.
  6. All student names in this chapter have been anonymised, with pseudonyms applied consistently across all chapters in this book.
  7. To illustrate, recent data indicates that Black male graduates are over three times more likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts. See <https://www.voice-online.co.uk/news/uk-news/2022/07/20/Black-male-graduates-twice-as-likely-to-be-unemployed/>.
  8. While BAME access to Oxford and Cambridge universities has increased over the past decade, evidence points to a continued lag compared to the rest of the sector <https://blog.thepienews.com/2019/07/universities-like-oxbridge-fail-to-represent-britains-ethnic-diversity/>.
  9. Data in this chapter draws on students' household income as originally reported to Student Finance England. The categories of 'high', 'medium', and 'low' income mirror those employed by Student Finance England to determine whether students should receive no grant, a partial grant, or a full grant. <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/35366065/a-guide-to-financial-support-for-higher-education-students-2013-14>.
  10. [https://www.kent.gov.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/8559/Cultural-diversity-in-Kent.pdf](https://www.kent.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/8559/Cultural-diversity-in-Kent.pdf).
  11. 'Commuter' is self-defined commuters, excluding the self-defined who are resident on campus. 'Resident' is defined as living in student accommodation (on/off campus) or shared house with other students and does not self-define as a commuter.

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# Becoming a Higher Education Student: Managing Expectations and Adapting to Independent Learning

*Alexander Hensby and Barbara Adewumi*

## INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter indicated that students of colour do not typically lack capital resources that facilitate entry into higher education, as the combination of parental support and widening participation drives has seen consistently high BAME representation at university (Modood, 2004). However, representation is no guarantee of academic success, and while many students favour studying at HEIs which provide ethnic mix,

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it is worth highlighting that the white-BAME attainment gap has been reproduced across 92 per cent of UK universities (UUK/NUS, 2019: 13). In other words, the gap is not reducible to individual choice or the composition of a university's student demographic—it is at least partly shaped by institutional factors (Singh & Cowden, 2016; Richardson, 2015). This, of course, incorporates a myriad of factors which will be explored across the chapters of this book, including extracurricular campus culture (Chapter 4), staff–student interactions (Chapter 8), and curriculum inclusivity (Chapter 10). Having established their motivations for higher education, this chapter will look at how BAME students encounter the institutional and learning culture of HE. This involves assessing not only students' preparedness for university, but also the university's preparedness to support and accommodate the needs and expectations of BAME students.

Literature responses to this question have drawn extensively on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986), but there is a need to adapt his toolkit of habitus, capital, and field to take account of transformations in the university system over the past three decades. Recent and ongoing processes of massification and professionalisation have helped standardise many aspects of the university experience. With the exception of Oxbridge and some smaller, specialised HEIs, these processes have arguably diluted the significance of cultural traditions and expectations of student conformity. This does not mean that modern 'professionalised' universities have forgone their institutional habitus, however. Thomas (2002: 431) defines this as 'relational issues and priorities which are deeply embedded, and subconsciously informing practice', and drawing on Bernstein's (1996) theory of 'invisible pedagogies', Crozier and Reay (2011) argue that student adaptation still entails the absorption of recognition and realisation rules. The former relates to the purpose and function of legitimate activities (e.g. a lecture), whereas the latter pertains to their public performance (i.e. knowing how to perform effectively during a lecture). It is important to foreground race within the concept of institutional habitus. Studies by Read et al. (2003) and Jessop and Williams (2009), for example, find that even universities with an ethnically diverse undergraduate cohort uphold a habitus that privileges whiteness. This involved the minimisation of race in favour of a 'colourblind' approach to learning, leaving BAME students feeling 'othered'.

Definitions of institutional habitus must also incorporate the idealised learning styles and strategies that universities promote—either explicitly or implicitly—to their students. This is arguably best captured by the concept of the ‘independent learner’, which has become increasingly ubiquitous within UK higher education. With universities typically operating under a modular system, often catering for large undergraduate cohorts, it is likely that no student’s timetable will look the same. This creates greater curricular choice than in school or college, with students required to select optional, specialist modules in addition to their core programme. Moreover, timetabled teaching usually comprises 20–40 per cent of a programme’s expected study time, necessitating that students organise their own independent study around these events (Green, 2014). Consequently, universities promote ‘independent learning’ to emphasise students’ requirement to be more intrinsically motivated and critically reflexive in how they develop their study routines.

One can argue that the need for students to develop as independent learners within such a system is unavoidable. Independent learning may help promote and develop valuable and transferrable skills—such as time management and organisation—but its practical definition and application at university are arguably more ambiguous. Students are also expected to identify and proactively seek out available support services where necessary, albeit without recourse to staff setting the terms of their study for them. For this reason, the independent learner discourse has been criticised by Leathwood (2006) for not only shifting the pedagogical consequences of massification onto the students themselves, but also upholding an ethnocentric masculinist ideal of a student ‘unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty, or self-doubt’ (Leathwood, 2006: 615; see also Read et al., 2003).

This necessitates a closer investigation of the capital that students possess and deploy to succeed academically at university. Previous studies have placed great emphasis on Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of embodied cultural capital as it encompasses the knowledges and styles of behaviour that are rewarded within a given field. Applied to university, deployment can demonstrate confidence and belonging on campus, combining ‘the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 245). There is also value in following Watson’s (2013: 416–417) lead by adapting Bourdieu’s term *academic* capital to capture the ‘legitimated forms of academic skills and knowledge profitable to students within the field which ultimately [translate] into academic attainment’.

Recalling the aforementioned ‘invisible pedagogies’ of higher education, academic capital incorporates an aptitude for styles of oral presentation and written work, as well as rules and conventions such as degree classifications and referencing systems.

As noted in the previous chapter, it is important to avoid presupposing a deficit model of capital accumulation when applying Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. Choosing to ‘play the game’ is not necessarily a viable or efficacious option for students of colour, nor does it afford them agency within a system where the ‘legitimated forms of academic knowledge’ have historically presupposed whiteness. To counter this, authors advocating a critical race perspective such as Carter (2003), Rollock et al. (2015), Wallace (2017), and Meghji (2019) have proposed the term *Black* cultural capital as a means of identifying the knowledge, taste, and styles which assert the legitimacy of people of colour within historically white fields. Though recent drives to ‘decolonise’ university curricula indicate that Black cultural capital should be welcomed by teaching staff (at least in theory), its deployment also has the potential to cut through the institutional ‘performance’ of equality and diversity (Mirza, 2018) by asserting the power of Black knowledge and experience from below.

Nevertheless, possession of any form of capital represents a position of relative class privilege, and so it is important to consider the source of transmission. As noted in Chapter 2, studies of social capital as a resource for UK higher education have tended to focus on how family networks may help broker access for the middle classes to the most prestigious universities (e.g. Ball, 2003; Devine, 2004; Reay et al., 2005). Authors such as Modood (2004), however, preferred to emphasise the bonding capital that helps instil high expectations of and levels of commitment to university participation. Fuller (2011: 82) further claims that this sort of social capital can ‘flow down the generations’, to the extent that educational achievement becomes an essential part of a family’s shared identity. This was found to be true for our BAME interviewees from the previous chapter, with higher education viewed as a vehicle for social mobility. For first-generation migrants, this tended to be articulated in terms of converting existing educational capital from overseas into a new country, whereas for UK-born and raised students university represented a means of staying competitive in an often-discriminatory labour market (see Chapter 2).

Of course, the persistence of the white-BAME attainment gap indicates either a relative lack of, or misalignment between, capitals the majority of



students of colour are able to deploy, and the expectations and assumptions embedded within a university's institutional habitus. This is the core focus of this chapter. Research data is again drawn from our study of University of Kent students studying in the 2014–2015 academic year—specifically, a survey of home-domiciled undergraduates<sup>1</sup> ( $N = 4504$ ) and 62 follow-up interviews—with student narratives picking up where the previous chapter left off. It comprises of two substantive sections. The first captures students' adaptation to learning in higher education. This focuses initially on their own expectations of their academic attainment, before moving onto their development as independent learners. In both discussions significance is afforded to the role of parental expectations, as well as the struggles experienced in encountering a more impersonal academic environment. The second section explores BAME students' strategies for accruing and deploying capital on campus, be it through asserting their ethnic identity within the curriculum, or by developing peer networks that help foster a sense of relatedness on campus.

### ADAPTING TO HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING: EXPECTATIONS OF SUCCESS, SCALE-SHIFT, AND BECOMING INDEPENDENT LEARNERS

The previous chapter identified recurrent themes within BAME student decision-making, notably the high value placed on attending university from parents, experiences of racial unbelonging in prior schooling, and how intersections with class that may facilitate or further constrain the options available. While it is certainly clear that BAME students typically do not lack motivation to achieve at university, we may question how these factors impact on their learning strategies and practices. Survey data presented in Table 3.1 shows that a higher proportion of Black and Asian students state that they are aiming for a first-class degree result, and are confident of achieving this grade, than their white counterparts.

These expectations clearly run counter to the white-BAME attainment gap, though we should be careful when interpreting student confidence within this context. Table 3.2 considers the role of family expectations among white and BAME students who claimed to be aiming for a First and were confident of achieving it. The data indicates that more than half of BAME students are also concerned about their academic achievement not meeting the expectations of their family, compared with 38.8

**Table 3.1** Student expectations of gaining a first-class degree result by race

	<i>Aiming for a 1st class degree (%)</i>	<i>% confident they will achieve it</i>	<i>% of ethnic group is aiming for a 1st and confident of achieving it</i>
White ( <i>N</i> = 2836)	51.9 <sup>a</sup>	70.6 <sup>a</sup>	38.3 <sup>a</sup>
BAME ( <i>N</i> = 932)	58.3 <sup>a</sup>	74.5 <sup>a</sup>	45.1 <sup>a</sup>
Black students ( <i>N</i> = 424)	60.4	76.9	46.9
Asian students ( <i>N</i> = 295)	58.2	75.2	43.1

*N* = 4504. <sup>a</sup>*P* = 0.00

per cent of white students. This suggests that ‘confidence’ betrays an underlying pressure to make good on their parents’ sacrifices through high academic achievement. The underlying assumption is that you are in a privileged position and cannot waste this opportunity: there is no room for failure. Recalling family narratives discussed in the previous chapter, as well as Stuart et al. and’s (2011) study, this can be bound up in family migrant narratives where students’ attainment is one such measure of capital conversion from one country to another. For Frances, who was born in Germany to Nigerian parents, this association was made explicit in a recent conversation with her father:

My dad sat me down and was like, “Even if you fail this degree, I know you’ve gotten further than I’ve gotten ever and I’m so proud of you for that. But that doesn’t mean you can fail this degree” [*laughs*]. [...] My parents have been through a lot and worked very hard, so I want to make them proud and I know the only way to make them proud is to go further than they did and be a professional. My mum was always like, “I could have been a doctor. I could have been a nurse. I didn’t have the opportunity to go to uni and just study.” So I always say I want to take it further than she did, and I want my kids to go further than I could. (Frances,<sup>2</sup> BSc Biomedical Science—Black African)

For Gina, who was born and schooled in the UK, her goal of achieving a First-class degree was not directly shaped by a family migration narrative, reflecting instead the internalisation of her parents’ emphasis on upward

**Table 3.2** Comparing concerns about family expectations with aiming for a 1st class degree result

		<i>Had concerns about academic achievement not meeting family expectations</i>		
		<i>Agree%</i>	<i>Disagree%</i>	<i>Not applicable%</i>
Aiming for a 1st and confident of achieving it	White ( <i>N</i> = 1033)	38.8	55.6	5.6
	BAME ( <i>N</i> = 393)	51.3	45.2	3.5

social mobility. Nevertheless, as the first in her family to attend university she contrasted her background unfavourably to those of her white peers. Again, the intersection of race and class plays a part, as she believed middle-class white students are less likely to feel the same pressures to outperform their parents academically:

I do want to get a First, I have very high expectations of myself. My parents would never put any pressure on me – ‘do as best as you can’, type of thing – but I want to get a First. I think I might put too much pressure on myself, I’m not very good under pressure. [...] When you’re a minority, I think all my friends are the first people to go to uni, so it’s just like you want more from life. I’m not saying all white people’s parents have gone to uni but it’s more so, like, Black people’s parents *haven’t* gone to uni. It’s just you can see when you’re from something lower and you see something higher, that’s what you aim for. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology—Black Caribbean)

Of course, not all BAME students lack relevant social capital,<sup>3</sup> and for students like Darren whose parents have already been to university, the expectation is one of *maintaining* high educational standards within the family:

My mum went to university. She’s even made a space on the wall for the [graduation] picture, next to hers. Pressure, yes, but it’s what I wanted to do, so... (Darren, BA Business Studies—Black Caribbean)

As a Black Caribbean student born in the UK, Darren’s familial pressure is reminiscent of James’s from the previous chapter. Since the sector’s

expansion and introduction of widening participation policies in the 1990s, higher education has become one of the most widely accessible (albeit expensive) means of converting employability potential into transferrable currency. This enables people of colour to feel more competitive in what is potentially a racially discriminatory labour market. Nevertheless, the increased supply of university graduates has intensified pressures to achieve a ‘good’ degree. Charlotte (who was the first in her family to attend university) and Chloe (whose parents went to university overseas) both spoke of the pressure to achieve a First or 2:1, considering any lower grade to be a marker of failure:

Realistically I’m aiming for a First, I’m not going to lie. I’m working hard for a First, I really want a First, it would be great to get a First, but nothing lower than a 2:1. I will cry if I get a 2:2. (Chloe, LLB Law & Business Studies—Black African)

I definitely want to get a First, or at least a 2:1 because in order for me to progress to the Master’s [degree] I can’t have a 2:2. A First will enable you to think “okay definitely I can handle this”. But if you got like a 2:2, or just a pass, then it’s just like, maybe education’s not for me. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology—Black African)

Such pressures can at least help engender a clear sense of purpose at university, with familial expectations and employment ambitions providing extrinsic motivation to achieve students’ stated goals. However, these pressures may not necessarily complement the development of academic strategies and behaviours that are most likely to be rewarded at university. Table 3.3 cross-tabulates students’ worries and concerns when first starting at university with race and household income. Low-income BAME students are the group with the highest percentage of agreement for each question apart from ‘academic preparedness’ which is a concern felt consistently across all groups (albeit slightly less for high-income white students). Intersections between race and household income are also evident in students’ concerns over meeting family expectations, though percentages are consistently higher for each BAME income group compared with white students. Concerns about ‘feeling different to other students’ are more evenly distributed across all groups, indicating that ‘unbelonging’ can be prompted by factors other than class and race.

Again, however, these are most keenly felt by low-income BAME at 67.1 per cent of all students in this category.

Of course, unbelonging is not limited to the classroom, and this theme will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4. With regard to students' learning strategies, Table 3.3 indicates that BAME students are more concerned about 'getting organised to attend lectures' than white students. Again, this is highest for low-income BAME students with 64.8 per cent agreeing with this statement. This speaks to fundamental differences in the learning culture of higher education compared to further education, with the former placing greater emphasis on self-responsibility within a more individualised learning environment. For Eric, Frances, and Dawn, the loss of supervised, collective learning routines that characterised their experiences of school and college was highlighted as a key challenge upon entering university:

University is a lot more free, there's a lot more room to do whatever you want to do. And without that academic rigorous structure enforced by parents, you're leaving an environment you've known and going into a completely different one. (Eric, BA Comparative Literature—Mixed Race)

It's like going from really personal to very impersonal. One of my A-Level teachers was like, "The first thing that shocked me at uni is that no one knows where I am right now". That's how I feel. It's a really, really individual experience. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science—Black African)

I think the difference is the culture. We don't have parents here. Parents at home would be, "Do your work, do your work, come home early, go to bed early," while here we are in a playground, we do whatever we want to do. If we don't want to go to our seminar we won't go to our seminar. (Dawn, LLB Law, Black African)

It is interesting that Eric and Dawn's comments emphasise the loss of parental influence within this context. This arguably underlines parents' longstanding role as extrinsic motivators. Once removed from the family home, however, students are conscious of the need to establish themselves as self-directed independent learners. The growing ubiquity of this concept dates back to the expansion of HE in the 1990s, with numerous studies finding that WP students especially struggled to adapt to university learning models (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Lowe et al., 2003). Over time schools and colleges began to address this directly via preparatory events

**Table 3.3** Student worries and concerns by race and household income

*It is common that students have worries and concerns when first starting at university. How much do the following statements capture some of your concerns when you first came to the University of Kent?*

	% agree 'I had concerns about not being prepared enough academically'	% agree 'I had concerns about getting myself organised to attend lectures and relevant events'	% agree 'I had concerns about coming to a new city'	% agree 'I had concerns about feeling different to the other students'	% agree 'I had concerns about my academic achievement not meeting my family's expectations'
White					
High income (n = 402)	65.7 <sup>a</sup>	51.5	47.4	51.0 <sup>b</sup>	41.8
Middle income (n = 420)	70.7 <sup>a</sup>	49.6	43.7	57.5 <sup>b</sup>	43.0
Low income (n = 787)	75.9 <sup>a</sup>	54.0	46.6	59.0 <sup>b</sup>	43.0
BAME					
High income (n = 96)	72.6	58.3	50.0	52.1	52.2
Middle income (n = 124)	67.7	57.0	50.4	49.2	57.6
Low income (n = 383)	74.7	64.8	57.8	67.1	58.8

N = 4504. <sup>a</sup>p = 0.00; <sup>b</sup>p = 0.03

and programmes (Money et al., 2020), with many universities providing guides and resources on their websites.<sup>4</sup> However, student awareness of basic independent learner principles such as time management is not the same as being able to perform effectively as an independent learner. This points to ambiguities between how independent learning is defined explicitly by HEIs and how it is constructed implicitly through an institution's learning culture. For students such as Gina, independent learning is positioned as the binary opposite of any support service that may constitute 'spoon-feeding'. This is informed by her experience of schooling, which she invokes as explaining her initial struggles to adapt to higher education:

Independent learning's the main thing for uni. In secondary school we had booster sessions and extra classes afterwards. A lot of teachers in my school would spoon-feed: do this, do that. It's all about the grades, it's not really about the students. Maybe spoon-feeding too much at school kind of backfired when you get to uni. Unless you've got really hard parents that push you, you're not going to push yourself if you don't know how. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology—Black Caribbean)

It is again telling that Gina refers to the role of parents within this context: although a core tenet of university practice is the minimisation of institutional dialogue with parents or guardians, they remain influential in students' study lives. While some might offer specific capital resources (see next section), they also represent a source of pressure to succeed academically. This presents particular difficulties for students who are the first in their family to study in higher education: for Charlotte, her struggles to adapt as an independent learner were compounded by her family's relative lack of knowledge or understanding of university study life:

My parents are there to ensure that I'm doing it 'cause if they get a bad report they will be the first one to come down and [say] "Why are you getting a bad report?" [...] Like I'm stressing about my essay and [my mum] wants me to do something at that moment I'm busy. She's like, "Why are you complaining? You just have to go to lectures!" And I'm like, "No it's not, you don't understand how stressful it is, reading and trying to do an essay, and trying to like live on your own. She thinks it's a walk in the park. I can't even be on my phone without her going, "Why are you on your phone? Shouldn't you be reading?" (Charlotte, BSc Psychology—Black African)

Negotiating family pressures may also skew students' perception of how they must adapt as independent learners. Yee's (2016) study finds that for students without a family history of university attendance, 'independent learning' was interpreted as more akin to self-reliance. This reflected students' pride in their abilities and achievements in spite of their relative lack of privilege, but it also betrayed a desire for self-protection within an environment in which they lacked belongingness. This is arguably evident in how Gina and Charlotte characterise independent learning:

Independent learning, it's a difficult thing to grasp in itself. I mean, there's people you can ask to help but we don't, and they won't give us the answers. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology—Black Caribbean)

I feel like because of the independence we have it's not necessary [to seek help or advice]. Even when I get my essay feedback, and sometimes it's like, okay let me speak to someone about it, but then I'm just like, nah I'm not bothered [*laughs*], the paper says it all. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology—Black African)

In both cases, it is significant that independent learning entailed the avoidance of personalised interactions with academic teaching staff. As per Yee's (2016) analysis, this could reflect students' perceived lack of entitlement to teacher support, a fear of rejection, or a compulsion to prove they were capable of working things out without the need for assistance (see also Stuart et al., 2011). For Frances, Chloe, and Eric, asking for help ran the risk of looking 'dumb' in front of teachers, undermining their need to feel competent as a student:

Sometimes you just feel dumb. Like, I should really know this and if I ask the question they're just going to be like, 'why does she not know this?' [*laughs*] That holds me back from asking all the questions. [...] Putting your hand up in front of 220 people and then risking sounding like a dummy isn't necessarily something that I want. I find it's easier to just message my friends than email a lecturer. Some lecturers don't reply, others are like, "This is stuff that you really need to be able to do by yourself." (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science—Black African)



As a student you get this feeling that, oh gosh, you don't want to go and see your teacher, you don't want to seem like you don't know anything. (Chloe, LLB Law & Business Studies—Black African)

What if someone finds out that I'm not doing very well? I just think it's really hard once you've been told before you go to university, "Oh, this is the start of the rest of your life. This is your chance to prove yourself." If you're not having that best time for multiple reasons, it can be really difficult to actually admit to struggling academically. (Eric, BA Comparative Literature—Mixed Race)

Self-reliance might be considered an asset in certain learning contexts, but at university it can be labour-intensive and emotionally draining if always favoured above dedicated contact hours and support services. This, of course, likely contradicts how most learning and teaching specialists present independent learning to students, but it is important to interrogate how this misconception has become so commonplace. First, we can point to the relative lack of preparation students receive for university learning and teaching at further education. Money et al.'s (2020) study indicates that while sixth-form colleges attempt to lay the foundations for developing university-ready independent learners, this is compromised by institutional pressures to prioritise activities that will maximise immediate outcomes—activities, of course, which are largely teacher-directed. This may leave students with misunderstandings about what independent learning means.

Second, recalling Leathwood's (2006) critique, the independent learner discourse arguably presupposes students' prior capital resourcing, as well as relatedness on campus that facilitates proactive behaviour. As we have seen throughout this chapter, many BAME students feel pressure to convert their parents' sacrifices and expectations into high grades, and this pressure is exacerbated by encountering a new field that is largely governed by invisible pedagogies and implicitly upholds a white institutional habitus. The resultant instinct to avoid 'sticking out'—which for some students may echo prior experiences of schooling in the UK—comes into conflict with an expected mode of learning that emphasises student autonomy and proactiveness, especially with academic staff. Within this context, it is hardly surprising that students of colour may venerate self-reliance.

Addressing this tendency arguably places greater responsibility on academic and support staff to be proactive in their support for BAME students. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 8, there are structural constraints which inhibit the development of meaningful teacher–student relationships in most universities, yet as Leathwood points out independent learning can easily function as a discourse for justifying the minimisation of such interactions. Of course, large cohort sizes divided across a modular system typically afford fewer opportunities to develop more personalised and enduring relationships at university compared with college. Nevertheless, these constraints risk reinforcing the perception—implicitly or explicitly reproduced by staff—that the most competent students will always work out the answers themselves. Consequently, it can take time for students to become sufficiently confident within the university field to overcome this perception and make use of the support systems available to them:

I just thought uni is where you go to learn, and if you're struggling then you're probably not meant for uni. I only found out [otherwise] by talking to my academic adviser when I was struggling, and he pointed me in the right direction. When you're not looking for something, you don't really see it. (Joseph, BEng Computer Systems Engineering—Black African)

One should not underestimate the continued underrepresentation of staff of colour—particularly in certain subject areas—at UK universities as a contributing factor in BAME students' willingness to seek out academic support. Drives towards cultural sensitivity and implicit bias training may help reduce—if not exactly eradicate—racialised microaggressions delivered by academic staff, but it is important to note that the attainment gap is a product of white advantage as well as BAME disadvantage. This brings us to microaffirmations. McIntosh (1989) notes that white advantage is derived from spending most of the time in the company of white people and seeing white representation in all aspects of organisation. Consequently, they are never being asked to speak on behalf of their own race or be judged or defined by it. McIntosh characterises these benefits and privileges as an 'invisible knapsack', which equips white people to feel comfortable and competent in a variety of social environments. Microaffirmations are thus a fundamental mechanism for producing unconscious white privilege. These are manifested through

small, yet regular gestures of inclusion, which create and maintain a sense of legitimacy and belonging for the recipient.

As a concept, the invisible knapsack is analogous to Bourdieu's habitus, yet one that foregrounds racial experience. In higher education, these interactions may involve recognising and validating a student's background, academic interests, expectations of success, and personal motivations and ambitions. This can instil a sense of belonging which negates initial feelings of anxiety or 'imposter syndrome' that incoming students may often feel. Though the transference of microaffirmations is difficult to pinpoint, they are arguably evident in certain white students' personal narratives of adapting to university:

My seminar leader, he'd take you through the essay personally to give you things to work on. Every time I had one of those sessions I did better in the next essay. He offers it with everyone, hardly anyone takes it, which is a bit stupid. You could chat to him like you could chat to any bloke in the pub. You've got to take these sorts of opportunities. (Frankie, English Language & Literature—White)

Though a first-year undergraduate, Frankie's comment arguably reflects a basic, yet meaningful, cultural commonality and recognition with his tutor. Consequently, one-to-one feedback sessions were an available resource he felt entitled to quickly use to his advantage. We can contrast this with the experiences of Frances. As a student studying in a department with an especially low representation of BAME staff, her interactions (or lack of) are characterised by the comparative *absence* of microaffirmations. Consequently, Frances found it more difficult to build a meaningful rapport with lecturers, an issue that she felt marked her out as different to her white peers:

It's more easy for white people to approach lecturers, because they can relate to them more. I don't feel like I *can't* approach the lecturers because I don't relate to them, it's more for me of a... there's no personal connection. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science—Black African)

To sum up, it is important to situate the significance of microaffirmations and microaggressions within the context of students' expectations of university achievement, and the learning culture of higher education. Interactions with staff—be it through spontaneous conversations following a lecture, or an arranged meeting with a tutor—are indicators of

belonging within a field that unwittingly reproduces white privilege not only through BAME staff underrepresentation, but via the promotion of a learning strategy that rewards individual confidence and proactivity. This can further compound the pressures students already feel to convert their efforts into career-enhancing outcomes. That the resultant fear of failure stimulates a need for self-protection within this environment should therefore come as little surprise. Though HEI practitioners may reasonably view independent learning as an essential component of the broader value of a university degree, results in this section nevertheless indicate HEIs need to do more to understand students' backgrounds and learning needs and reconsider how inclusivity should be practised.

### BUILDING SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC CAPITAL ON CAMPUS: FAMILY, NETWORKS, AND RACE

Despite the pressures of adapting to higher education learning, it is important not to deny BAME students' agency within this field. Race may be a significant barrier to belonging in any white-dominated space, but interview accounts show that students of colour typically seek to accrue and deploy their own capital within the university. Nor is their deployment simply a matter of learning to play the game: Black cultural capital, for example, can help challenge implicit whiteness within course curricula as well as foster personal attainment. This final section will discuss three forms of capital used by BAME students at university: first, social capital as inherited from family; second, the deployment of Black knowledge and experience in course curricula; and third, students' investment in bonding social capital through the development of friendship networks on campus.

Bourdieu's (1986: 21) emphasis on the value of 'network(s) of connections' leaves plenty of room to interpret how social capital might be converted into success in higher education. Arguably the most manifest expression is found in studies of 'old boys' or 'old school tie' networks where access to exclusive fields and positions is brokered through prior association with well-connected individuals. The professionalisation and massification of higher education has arguably made this sort of social capital more subtle in its power and significance, exemplified in Reay et al.'s (2005: 72–73) account of how middle-class parents used their network connections to help select the 'best fit' Oxbridge college for their children. For most ordinary students, however, social capital inherited from parents involves the transmission of familial norms and aspirations

which are valued not only for their conversion into the habits and practices that produce academic attainment but also for instilling a sense of family membership and identity (Adewumi, 2015; Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Coleman, 1990; Modood, 2004). In Chloe's case, for example, family social capital allows her to be *understood*, which is a recognition and validation of her legitimacy as a student. This serves as a counterweight to the pressure she feels to achieve academically:

My mum, she's kind of getting the hang of me telling her, "I have so much work to do, I can't really talk now," sort of thing. But my dad is a barrister, so he's already prepared his mind: she's going to be doing a lot of work. (Chloe, LLB Law—Black African)

The previous chapter highlighted that many BAME students born outside the UK possessed this sort of social capital, but that it often drew from a wider overseas family network. Bourdieu was keen to debunk any inference that the value of social capital was reducible to physical proximity of network connections, and this is evident in how Joseph and Meera both sought advice remotely from family members and connections when preparing for university:

My uncle went to boarding school as well as university [in Nigeria]. So I can ask him for information and all that when it comes to education-wise. (Joseph, BEng Computer Systems Engineering – Black African)

I have a close family friend was at the university [in Kenya], so I called her and asked her questions about uni. (Meera, BA Comparative Literature—Other Asian Background)

In terms of the content of these interactions, students spoke of the value of these conversations in fairly generic terms with conversations covering themes of time management and making friends. Though undoubtedly valuable both for helping students prepare as independent learners and strengthen their sense of entitlement within higher education, not all advice was necessarily well-received. A longstanding critique of Bourdieu's theory is that it presupposes a common national context (Ball, 2003), and combined with transformations in the structure of higher education over the past three decades, this can create a disconnect between presumed social capital relations:

My dad went to university when he was in Egypt [...] He was like, “You only have eight contact hours a week or something. We studied from like 7am until we finished, there was no specific time to go home,” so he thinks we have it really easy. (Yeni, BA Politics & International Relations—Other Mixed Background)

As noted in the previous chapter, Yeni’s academic family background has created ‘durable ambitions’—she also recalls her father telling her throughout childhood that she should become a doctor—but as the first in her family to study in the UK this social capital is only partially transferrable in practice. This highlights some of the opacities in capturing the power and influence of social capital, for as Nast and Blokland (2014) argue, networks may exist in measurable form but do not necessarily produce valuable communication flows.

Of course, the capital students inherit and accrue prior to university may be directly relevant to the content of their degree programme. This was true for Chloe, who as a law student, could seek subject-specific advice from her barrister father. Jocelyn, however, was able to deploy cultural capital that was specific to her ethnic background and identity. As a film studies student, her presentation on racist stereotyping and colonial representation in Global North cinema history enabled her to demonstrate embodied Black cultural capital through the subject’s inclusion in her film theory module. Preparation initially drew on conversations with her father on how to position her narration as a Black woman in a majority white degree programme:

Our topic was postcolonialism. I’m Black, so that’s a topic I’m going to excel in [*laughs*]. We knew what topics we were going to be doing, so when I went home I was talking to my dad about it. And he was like, “Oh that’s good, but don’t make it seem like you’re shouting at them” [*laughs*]. So when I gave my presentation I didn’t want to seem that I was being like ‘oh, this is your fault’ kind of thing. Do you get what I mean? So, when we had the lecture on it, you can see a shift because we’ve been talking about just normal stuff and now we’re talking about race, and a lot of people are uneasy about that. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies—Black African)

Jocelyn’s juxtaposition between ‘normal stuff’ and race, together with white students’ unease when studying the latter, highlights how a white disposition is silently centred within many course curricula. This gives the introduction of race—albeit limited to a single topic in the module

programme—a ruptural power, and Jocelyn’s feedback both from her lecturers and her peers generated multiple affirmations. This was also an endorsement of a conscious strategy to use her racial identity to her advantage academically:

There’s only like five Black people on our course. But I just try to use it to my advantage. You could see when you first walk in because we’re like different specs of colour in a sea of whiteness [*laughs*]. [...] When I finished [the presentation] other students came up to me and said, “I never really knew just how it was.” And that stuff like that just warms my heart ’cause like, yeah, I’m cool with that you do now. Especially because I wasn’t uncomfortable about it, I was just saying facts, and asking them questions like, “What are your favourite films that have recently come out?” And they told me. And it’s like, “Well do you notice that none of those films are led by a person of colour?” And they were all like, “Oh.” And I was like, “Yeah well, you don’t notice because it doesn’t bother you, and that’s okay. But I’m here to tell you that it does bother some people.” So, I think it was informative. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies—Black African)

Definitions of Black cultural capital vary across the literature. For Rollock et al. (2015), it represents a set of performative strategies for navigating white institutions, whereas for Carter (2003) it is a non-dominant form of cultural capital that only acquires value within specific locales and peer groups to draw boundaries against other racialised groups. Jocelyn’s case is perhaps closer to models advanced by Wallace (2017) and Meghji (2019) in that she demonstrated not only the transferrable power of Black knowledge within the higher education field, but also through her embodiment. This allowed Jocelyn to assert her legitimacy as a student of film while drawing attention to her peers’ implicit centring of whiteness.

In truth, though, there were few instances where students of colour recounted deploying forms of Black cultural capital within their degree programme. This may partly reflect the relative lack of decolonised or inclusive curricula at the time interviews were conducted—a deficit which contributors to this volume have since sought to address directly (see Chapters 9 and 10). It should also be noted, as Wallace (2019) does, that Black cultural capital remains a resource primarily deployed by the Black middle classes, thereby representing a privilege not necessarily available to all students of colour. For most of our BAME interviewees, the accrual and conversion of capital primarily focused on the development of peer networks on campus. Recalling Putnam’s (2000) distinction, this

can provide a form of bonding social capital which helps students mutually overcome the challenges they face in adjusting to a new field. For residential students, this draws especially on the ‘instant social network’ provided by halls of residence (Sims, 2007: 7) which for Charlotte can also compensate for the loss of immediate access to family:

I’m not really a shy person. When I get into the room I’m just like, “Hi guys” [*laughs*]. At first [my housemates] thought I was a bit crazy because as soon as I got in I was like, “Okay we’re a family now, we’re going to have family dinner”. It was a bit full on, but they got used to it, and it became like a tradition for us. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology—Black African)

Charlotte’s recreation of family rituals helped instil a sense of relatedness at university, which in turn helped develop her feel competent as a student. Recalling her earlier comments from this chapter, these network ties served as an important support network for managing and alleviating pressures she faced in negotiating parental expectations (and misunderstandings). Indeed, for similar reasons other sought to establish bonding networks which were more culturally specific. Both Megan and Susan are from East Asian backgrounds, and much like the students from Bhopal’s (2011) study of British Indian women, highlighted the benefit of friendships where common experiences as a specific minority group on campus could be shared:

There are two girls in my lecture from Hong Kong, and I don’t think we’d be friends if I wasn’t from Hong Kong because people in Hong Kong kind of stick together. The mindset and the culture’s so different. (Megan, BA Psychology—Asian Mixed)

If they have a similar background there’s more to talk about, so there’s more engagement, compared to someone who I don’t know at all or have nothing in common with. (Susan, BSc Mathematics—Asian Chinese)

Bonding capital is not restricted to the provision of emotional support. The value of making friends from one’s own degree programme can be particularly valuable for collectively accumulating subject and course-specific knowledge (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). In the case of Charlotte, this helped her organise her learning and stay on top of deadlines:



One of my housemates did the same course as me, which is really fun because a lot of the times you just forget about things. He was my alarm clock to get me out of bed in the morning [and] get my essay done on time. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology—Black African)

Building more strategic networks within degree programmes arguably necessitates a more proactive approach. This is evident in how Jocelyn sought to accrue social capital within her film studies programme:

I had to put myself out there. If I sat next to someone I'd make it a point, I'd go, "Oh hi I'm Jocelyn, how are you liking the course? Have you watched this film that we're about to watch?" Just stuff like that, just little conversations. I think it's easier in your seminars because there was sometimes pair work or group work. So it's a lot easier to make friends like that... not that you have to be friends, but you have to communicate. So yeah, I just decided even if they don't like it, I'm going to talk to everyone that's around me. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies—Black African)

Of course, Jocelyn's proactive strategy in making friends on her degree programme falls within the scope of independent learning. But as has been evidenced throughout this chapter, peer friendships typically lack the perceived risks associated with contacting academic staff as they rest on a common status and purpose. For Frances, the 'expectation to impress' whenever communicating with academic staff limits the scope for such interactions, leaving peer networks as the principal resource of interpersonal support:

I feel like people are more likely to talk to someone that they could share experiences with. And although [*gestures at interviewer*] you were a student at one point, you're a person of authority, and for me it's just easier to go to my friend, like, "Can you help me with this?" than go to a lecturer, because I've already got the personal connection with my friend. With a lecturer, you know, there's an expectation to impress. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science—Black African)

## CONCLUSION

The persistence of a large white-BAME attainment gap across the vast majority of HEIs in the UK necessitates a more focused investigation of how BAME expectations of learning and teaching interact

with universities' expectations of students' adaptability for learning and teaching. Evidence presented in this chapter has foregrounded 'independent learning' as the commonly recognised ideal learner strategy in higher education. Implicit within this term is the need to transition to a more individualised programme timetable, and while this involves adjusting to a comparatively distanced relationship with academic staff it nevertheless presupposes student reflexivity and proactivity when it comes to identifying and seeking out support.

As this suggests, there are ambiguities within this model, particularly regarding the nature of staff–student dynamics. Though students have access to a wide range of staff contacts—including personal tutors as well as seminar leaders and module conveners—the discourse of independent learning espoused by many student interviewees in this chapter promoted self-reliance and the minimisation of staff interactions. This interpretation is at least partly attributable to the massification and expansion of HEIs, which has necessitated the creation of more voluntaristic models of student support, themes which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8. For BAME students, especially those from low-income backgrounds and who studied BTEC in further education (see Chapter 5), this also complemented a desire to avoid 'sticking out' for fear of exposing a sense of unbelonging within a field governed by largely invisible pedagogies.

This points again to the complex interplay of race and class. The desire to avoid 'sticking out' not only reflected perceived racial and cultural differences with academic staff, but also the considerable burden students felt to live up to their own expectations of success. As we saw in the previous chapter, these expectations are partly the outcome of broader marketisation trends which have intensified the pressure to make the 'right choices' that will maximise (largely economic) returns. Moreover, as students of colour they often reflect the high value attached to university education by their family as a vehicle for social mobility and employability within an often-discriminatory labour market. For some students, these expectations were communicated directly by their parents, and while such extrinsic motivations may represent a form of social capital (Modood, 2004) it is not necessarily accompanied with relevant communicative support that students need the most.

This brings us to the forms of capital students of colour are able to deploy and accrue while at university. Possession of Black cultural capital can help students gain a sense of autonomy and competence within course

curricula and assessment, but it represents a resource principally in the possession of the middle classes (Wallace, 2017). For students born overseas, academic capital accrued from family may be transnational in form and therefore not necessarily translatable to a UK university setting.

According to our findings at least, the most prevalent form of capital available to students is the social capital they accrue themselves while at university. Of course, this extends beyond the classroom to include residential halls, sports clubs, societies, and social spaces on campus. Though not directly related to students' attainment, this is a crucial aspect of students' desire for belongingness and the ability to feel competent as a student and will be explored in chapter 4.

## NOTES

1. Individual survey respondent data was linked with the University's student records to match responses with data relating to students' ethnicity, postcode region, degree programme, campus, and household income. The combining of these sources of data was subject to the University's data compliance procedure, with consent taken from all survey participants. The survey dataset was anonymised, and strictly limited for the purposes of Student Success research only.
2. All student names in this chapter have been anonymised, with pseudonyms applied consistently across all chapters in this book.
3. The survey did not return statistically significant results when attempting to capture whether students were first in their family to attend university. This led the research team to question some of the presuppositions of the question. Not only is the 'first in family' discourse generally weaker than it is in the United States, definitions of family may also vary to include siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles, some of whom may have studied overseas. This opens up ambiguities as to what 'social capital' really means in a context of massified higher education system, and one where BAME students' families have been educated to degree level elsewhere across the world.

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# BAME Students' Extracurricular Belonging at University: Building Networks, Representation, and Capital

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## INTRODUCTION

According to Thomas (2012: 1), belongingness is ‘critical to both retention and success’ and should this need to belong go unfulfilled, Strayhorn (2012: 64) warns students may experience ‘diminished motivation’, ‘alienation’, and ‘poor academic achievement’. Definitions of belongingness vary across education literatures, but applications typically seek to

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describe ‘the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment’ (Goodenow & Grady, 1993: 60). There is much to unpack here. On the one hand, belongingness incorporates aspects of a student’s psychological need for relatedness through the establishing and strengthening of meaningful peer networks (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These networks can be utilised to mutually develop social and academic capital that may enhance one’s academic attainment. On the other hand, these networks may facilitate the need for a sense of ontological competence within the university field—the idea that they are *doing university right*. This reflects student expectations of what university should feel like, and the hope for a basic compatibility between the university field and their own personal habitus (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Thomas, 2012).

On UK campuses, extracurricular belongingness is facilitated through positioning oneself in a range of subnetworks. These may include degree cohorts, colleges, and halls of residence, as well as specific groups, societies, clubs, and teams that students choose to join. These networks are shaped by power relations embedded within the campus field, which reflect and privilege dominant discourses of the ‘normal’ or ‘ideal’ student. The literature on UK universities still characterises this student as ‘white, middle-class and male’ (Read et al., 2003: 261; see also Leathwood, 2006), as well as full-time and residential (Ozga & Sukhmandan, 1998). As we saw in the previous chapter, this impacts on BAME and low-income students’ preparedness for university study as the expectation to develop into independent learners rests on prior capital resourcing and resistance to feelings of institutional unbelonging. The same is true for students’ social and extracurricular adaptation, as decades of social reproduction supported through key campus foci such as sports clubs, societies, and the student union, create a dominant campus culture which

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is complicit in upholding what is considered 'normal' student behaviour (Jessop & Williams, 2009). Those whose habitus closely conforms to this culture are most likely to feel akin to a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 127) and thereby take best advantage of the range of extracurricular opportunities available to them. For those who sense a mismatch between habitus and field, (Bourdieu, 1977) however, the water will feel heavier and the codes and modes of behaviour unfamiliar, with consequent feelings of uncertainty and anxiety harder to counter (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Reay et al., 2010).

Of course, widening participation programmes have sought to challenge such notions of the 'typical' student, yet greater BAME representation on campus does not necessarily ensure equity and inclusion across all of its subfields. Indeed, students of colour entering majority-white sports clubs, societies, or the student union, are required to accept two simultaneous yet contradictory processes: the invisibilisation of whiteness and their own racialisation (hooks, 1992; Puwar, 2004). The former reflects the embeddedness of norms, practices, and expectations that continue to reproduce the privileging of white students as the natural inheritors of the campus environment. The latter entails the responsibility of embodying the university's commitment to diversity in its recruitment. This process, which Bourdieu (1990) terms 'ontological complicity', is increasingly written into university policy as belongingness becomes an increased area of focus for HEIs seeking to eradicate awarding gaps. Studies by Yorke (2016) and Sims (2007) indicate that white students are more likely to have a stronger sense of belonging than ethnic minority students, though when translated into HE policy this amorphous concept risks becoming reduced to a range of non-academic student satisfaction metrics. Moreover, these characterisations offer little scope for how students of colour are developing alternative spaces of belonging, instead favouring deficit-oriented narratives of 'persistence' and 'resilience' (Thomas, 2015, 38–39).

In this chapter, we address and analyse the range of experiences that may enable or restrict belongingness for students of colour. It draws on three sources of data spanning an 18-month period: as with previous chapters, these include the survey of home domiciled undergraduates<sup>1</sup> ( $N = 4504$ ) and follow-up interviews with students both conducted in the 2014-15 academic year ( $N = 62$ ). Additionally, the chapter integrates interview data from BAME clubs and society members as part of Kent

Union's 'Student Voices' Report, conducted the following academic year (Twumasi, 2016).<sup>2</sup> Funded by the University's Student Success Team and prompted in part by survey findings presented in this chapter, research for the report sought to identify and analyse social and institutional factors which discouraged BAME students from engaging in sports clubs, societies, and the student union.

The narrative of this chapter captures a period of upheaval in BAME student representation and community-building at the University of Kent. First, we use survey and interview data to consider students' social adaptation to campus life, and the extent to which multicultural representation translated into inclusive cultures and behaviours. Second, we explore BAME students' experiences of extracurricular campus culture, including student societies, sports teams, and the student union. Here, we address the invisible barriers to belonging produced through the pervasive effects of dominant culture, and everyday racialised microaggressions. Third, we study the growing influence of cultural and ethnicity-based societies and networks on campus. This discussion draws on the case study of Kent's African Caribbean Society (ACS) and its relationship to the student union.

### SOCIAL ADAPTATION, INCLUSIVITY, AND DISCRIMINATION ON CAMPUS

Regardless of background, new students will feel some degree of pressure to 'fit in and get on' when first arriving at university (Bathmaker et al., 2016). Interviewees spoke of anxieties related to constantly making themselves available socially in order to quickly make friends from their course and residential halls. The latter was further exacerbated by the urgency of finding a social group with whom they could seek off-campus accommodation in their second year. Given these pressures, it is unsurprising that students tended to prioritise social above educational adaptation in their first term. Moreover, many arrived on campus with strong expectations of what university social life should be like, both in terms of establishing meaningful networks and having fun:

Fresher's week is supposed to be like the greatest week, and you're supposed to meet loads of people. I did, but I think everyone was pretending to have a lot more fun than they actually were. (Meera,<sup>3</sup> BA Comparative Literature—Other Asian Background)

If you're coming to university thinking, this is going to be it, it's going to be amazing, and then you get here and you're not making that many friends on your course, and you're already finding you're slipping academically, you think why am I not having a good time? It's clear that I'm not doing well. (Eric, BA Comparative Literature—Mixed Race)

Eric's quote in particular demonstrates how feelings of social and educational competence are often intertwined. This recalls the previous chapter's emphasis on building peer networks on campus as a means of accruing academic capital and gaining a sense of competence and relatedness as a student. However, networking requires proactivity and confidence within a field that privileges certain student behaviours above others. Oluchi, Gina, and Yeni further highlight the pressure to appear outgoing and confident when meeting new people within a context where the 'student experience' implicitly or explicitly promotes alcohol consumption:

I don't want to change who I am just to fit in, so first year was awful for me as I felt I had to drink and go out a lot and do all these things that are not my character in order to fit in some sort of circle. I don't want to change who I am. (Oluchi, former student society participant—Black African)<sup>4</sup>

In Black culture it's not really the thing to sort of go out and drink and stuff, that's not really an experience for us. I mean, we might do it once a month but it's not as normal as the student experience would be. So, I think it's probably a difference in culture, like, I don't know what uni would be for me. And I shouldn't really expect it, going out and drinking is not my sort of thing so why should I feel kind of good to do it 'cause everyone else is doing it? (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology—Black Caribbean)

I'm not a massive drinker and it was sort of like you either drink or you don't drink at all. I'm somewhere in the middle, I'm a moderate drinker, I don't necessarily go out with intentions to get smashed. [...] it's hard to find your place, you know. 'Cause a lot of the time it's like, "So who did you get with last night?" All this kind of thing, and I'm like, "No one." And I don't really fancy going to clubs. (Yeni, BA Politics & International Relations—Other Mixed Background)

Gina's separation of 'Black culture' and high alcohol consumption implies that the latter is part of a white dominant culture on campus, even if Yeni's status as a 'moderate drinker' should remind us not to arbitrarily polarise such distinctions. Nevertheless, despite BAME undergraduates representing a significant minority on the Canterbury campus, we may question the extent to which dominant cultures continue to implicitly privilege whiteness. As noted in the previous chapter, representation is not necessarily evenly distributed across all communities and subject areas. Kent's Business and Law schools have a roughly equitable proportion of white and BAME students, but students of colour taking arts and natural science subjects in particular found their university experience to be more strongly shaped by their minority status:

On my course there's basically just me and this other girl, and she's mixed race too, so there's like no Black people. (Ava, Wildlife conservation—Mixed Race)

I was heading to a lecture in Keynes [college] and I didn't know where Keynes was, and there was a... she's like one of my closest friends now. Out of all the people that were looking for it, she just approached me, because she was also Black and female, and she was just like, okay, let me ask her because, you know, she won't look at me like I'm crazy [*laughs*]. I mean, it's the same reason why white kids tend to stick together. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science—Black African)

These accounts paint a mixed picture of being an ethnic minority in lecture and seminar environments. Both interviewees are conscious of their hypervisibility as a person of colour on nearly all-white degree programmes. Jocelyn, who in chapter 3 recalled having to counter parental expectations in order to study a BA in Film, used her minority status as an academic advantage, even if this was restricted to instances where her degree programme embraced a more inclusive curriculum. On the other hand, Frances's above quotation demonstrates how monocultures can easily form where students of colour (and women) find themselves outnumbered on degree programmes. This chimes in particular with Bhopal's (2011) study of the social networks formed by British Indian female students, as shared cultural backgrounds and social alienation on campus were able to be managed collectively.

Nevertheless, survey data presented in Table 4.1 indicates BAME students reported very few instances of discrimination during their time

at Kent. There is very little to separate the two campuses, and at 6.2 per cent, BAME females represent the group with the highest proportion of discriminatory experiences. Despite these low percentages, however, some notes of caution should be observed. First, as part of an 'official' Kent survey, it might be the case that some BAME students chose not to answer this question truthfully on the misapprehension that this would be logged or subject to follow-up action by the University. This, in turn, may reflect students' scepticism over the veracity of institutional reporting systems for harassment and discrimination in general (EHRC, 2019), a theme that we will return to later in this chapter. Moreover, as a non-compulsory question, it might be significant that 24.5 per cent of BAME students opted not to answer at all, compared with only 15.6 per cent of white students. A similar reticence might also be observed in the fact that a higher proportion of BAME respondents answered the question with 'unsure' than white respondents. Though this may reflect students' own desire to 'play down' episodes and avoid confrontation (Wong et al., 2021), by incorporating this into our analysis we can therefore observe that 16.9 per cent of BAME females across both campuses were unable to confirm that they had *not* experienced discrimination at Kent (see also Khambhaita and Bhopal, 2015).

BAME interviewees were sometimes reluctant to identify acts of racism unless they were expressed explicitly, yet most recalled being made to feel uneasy by casual comments from fellow students. This recalls the distinction made by critical race theorists between overt, deliberate acts of discrimination and more subtle racialised microaggressions. In highlighting the prevalence of the latter, CRT theorists seek to reframe how racism and racial bias are measured—and thereby reproduced—in wider society. These are more fleeting, yet pernicious acts of everyday discrimination, and therefore may account for the high proportion of BAME students who answered 'unsure'. These vagaries were captured in our interview with Tasmin:

Some people, maybe when I'm talking to them they say, "Oh maybe that was a little bit racist," but I don't notice it. (Tasmin, BSc Biomedical Science—Black African)

Other students were more conscious of being subjected to microaggressions. According to Sue et al., (2007: 279), people of colour rely on their 'experiential reality' accrued from life experiences and situations to

**Table 4.1** White and BAME students' experiences of discrimination at University of Kent

		<i>In your opinion, have you personally experienced instances of discrimination at the University of Kent?</i>		
		<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Unsure</i>
All students	White ( <i>N</i> = 2789)	4.1	89.9	6.1
	BAME ( <i>N</i> = 905)	4.5	84.4	11.0
Sex	White male ( <i>N</i> = 1266)	3.5	90.9	5.6
	White female ( <i>N</i> = 1523)	4.5	89.0	6.5
	BAME male ( <i>N</i> = 419)	2.6*	85.9*	11.5*
	BAME female ( <i>N</i> = 486)	6.2*	83.1*	10.7*
Canterbury	White ( <i>N</i> = 2501)	4.3	89.3	6.4
	BAME ( <i>N</i> = 741)	4.6	84.2	11.2
Medway	White ( <i>N</i> = 288)	2.1	94.8	3.1
	BAME ( <i>N</i> = 164)	4.3	85.4	10.4

*N* = 3694. *P* = 0.00 except \**P* = 0.01

determine whether a microaggression has occurred. For students such as Frances, this can lead to an awareness that their racialisation may invoke specific racial stereotypes that override their own identity or behaviours in the minds of the perpetrator:

I'm coming here with the objective to succeed and to learn my subject and to be good at it, but also to prove that I'm serious about it and that I'm not just, you know, a loud Black woman [*laughs*]. That is often how we're perceived: angry or intimidating. So, you feel sometimes people don't expect me to be introverted or quiet. I mean, I've felt the effect of someone being intimidated by me purely for being Black, and it's not a very nice feeling. I'm not any more scary than your average person [*laughs*] (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science—Black African)

Frances refutes the image of the 'loud Black woman' as pertaining to her own personality but being routinely subjected to this commonly

recognised racist trope (Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Kent, 2021) arguably undermined her claim to a sense of competence as a student. Though the campus itself may be racially diverse, BAME students' desire to feel like a 'fish in water' is nevertheless compromised by their racialisation in an environment where whiteness is invisibilised.<sup>5</sup> A key factor here is that incoming white undergraduates may have had little prior experience of racial diversity in their school or community. Consequently, the white-centring dispositions they bring with them may serve to racialise students of colour as soon as they arrive on campus:

When I first came here, I met students and some people who I am friends with now, who are from Northampton, and it is like, there are literally no Black people there. They don't know what is right to say, so that sometimes makes me think about my ethnicity. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration—Black Caribbean)

One of the most damaging aspects of racial microaggressions is that they are believed by the perpetrator to have minimal negative impact on the victim (Sue et al., 2007: 278). Microaggressions place added pressure on the victim to negotiate the fallout themselves, be it through engaging in self-denial or even protecting the perpetrators' own feelings. Such struggles were common among our interviewees, most of whom preferring to either 'brush off' the incident or address it in such a way that the perpetrator could understand the significance of their actions without being made to feel overly uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the often-fleeting nature of microaggressions belie greater burdens, with the lingering memory of such experiences chipping away at students' sense of belongingness on campus:

If you speak to people on my course, I think you will find those typical ignorant people. [...] There's also people that sometimes make comments and you think, that's actually really offensive, you can't say that. (Shivani, student society committee member—Asian Indian)

Perhaps inevitably, students were reluctant to report microaggressions to university staff for fear that it would prompt further interrogation or even academic sanction. This revealed a fundamental lack of trust in how university authorities or student representatives would handle such

an incident, with the perceived requirement to explain and justify their complaint only exacerbating its psychological toll:

I feel like they'd know it was an issue which needs to be addressed, but say someone did something to me because of my ethnicity, I might tell [the student union] and they might understand it's bad, but I don't know if they'd understand how it's actually affected me deep down. (Hannah, student society member—Black Caribbean)

Such attitudes were not necessarily a response to specific university policies or procedures at Kent. Rather, they were a reflection of UK institutional culture more generally, with universities serving as one such example. A number of interviewees cited a contemporaneous incident at the University of Warwick that had received national media coverage, where a Black student found a bunch of bananas with racist abuse written on them in her shared kitchen. Students saw Warwick's poor handling of the incident as evidence of the need for universities to adopt a complaints procedure that did more than blandly promote the principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion. For Grace, this was felt to require greater involvement of people of colour in EDI leadership positions:

Kent needs to have a strategy in place in case something happens. It's key. If something flags up tomorrow, are you guys ready to deal with it? Who's the person appointed to addressing this? Who's the person that's going to liaise with those involved? How is it going to be handled? (Grace, sports club member—Mixed White and Black Caribbean)

## SOCIETIES, MEMBERSHIPS, AND NETWORK BUILDING

New students need not be wholly reliant on their halls of residence or degree cohorts for building meaningful social relationships on campus. Contemporary universities typically offer a range of student-led societies, sports teams, and clubs, as well as the opportunity to seek election to college and student unions and pathways to apply for internships and voluntary programmes. In general terms, extracurricular activities are recognised by students for enhancing their overall health and wellbeing, as well as helping instil greater organisational discipline when suddenly faced with more free time than in further education (Gorard, 2007: 88–89). Extracurricular activity can also enable students to accrue forms of capital.



With approximately 800,000 graduates entering the labour market each year (UUK, 2019), extracurricular activities offer additional opportunities for demonstrating leadership, organisational, or entrepreneurial skills to future employers (Bathmaker, 2016; Nwosu et al., 2021; Purcell et al., 2013).

Extracurricular activity can also help establish peer networks which strengthen belongingness at university, thereby enhancing their academic attainment. Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) characterise clubs and societies as network 'foci' which through meetings, events, and online forums draw like-minded individuals to the same locations and build meaningful social ties. The establishing of these ties can help collectively manage the emotional labour associated with transitioning to higher education, the stresses of study and assessment, and the need to become more autonomous and self-organised (Baumeister & Levy, 1995; Strayhorn, 2012).

As we saw in the last chapter, networks and foci based around culture and ethnicity can be especially valuable for BAME students transitioning to higher education, particularly when facilitating certain culturally specific activities and services (such as providing religious observance or recommending local Afro hair salons). According to Strayhorn (2012: 80–86) connecting with peers from similar backgrounds can be especially valuable for negotiating minority status in certain subfields while developing forms of capital to manage and counter instances of discrimination or marginalisation. However, numerous studies indicate that extracurricular activity requires a greater engagement with campus culture than some BAME students are able to commit. As we saw in the previous chapter, the pressure students feel to succeed academically and 'make good' on the sacrifices and hardships of their parents can lead to a narrower engagement with university life.

Table 4.2 brings together three survey indicators of extracurricular availability and engagement: joining student societies, voting in union elections, and working a part-time job. The table finds that a slightly smaller percentage of BAME students at Canterbury have joined societies (55.6 per cent) compared with white students (61.1 per cent). At Medway, however, the reverse is true with a higher proportion of BAME students having joined societies (41.8 per cent compared with 31.9 per cent for white students). While this suggests a stronger BAME campus culture at the latter, it should be pointed out that the percentages are considerably lower for white and BAME students compared

with Canterbury—reflecting Medway’s greater proportion of mature and commuter students. The high proportion of white society members at Canterbury—almost two thirds of all students—suggests that joining societies is perceived as a common aspect of the student experience, albeit one that BAME students are marginally less active in.

Table 4.2 also addresses voting in student union elections as a potential measure of student engagement in campus life. Excluding first year students (who had yet to be given an opportunity to vote when data was collected), results show that 32.6 per cent of second and third year BAME students have voted in elections, compared with 43.1 per cent of white students. Although a comparable ratio is found at Canterbury and Medway, fundamental differences in their respective campus cultures are again illustrated, with only 20.9 per cent of white and 11.7 per cent of BAME students having voted. Again, results may consequently be of greater relevance at Canterbury, and therefore suggestive that BAME students generally feel less represented by the union and in student politics more generally.

Finally, Table 4.2 details the percentage of students who have worked in a part-time job while studying at Kent. According to Yorke (2016) part-time work can be seen as a potential ‘barrier to belonging’ for BAME students as it detracts from the free time they might otherwise have to engage in social activities on campus. Surprisingly, however, Table 4.2

**Table 4.2** White and BAME student engagement in extracurricular activities—by campus

<i>As a student at University of Kent, have you...</i>	<i>Yes/no</i>	<i>Campus</i>				<i>All students</i>	
		<i>Canterbury</i>		<i>Medway</i>		<i>White</i>	<i>BAME</i>
		<i>White</i>	<i>BAME</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>BAME</i>		
Joined student societies ( <i>N</i> = 2341)	<i>Yes</i>	61.1*	55.6*	31.9*	41.8*	58.1*	53.0*
	<i>No</i>	38.9*	44.4*	68.1*	58.2*	41.9*	47.0*
Voted in student union elections ( <i>Years 2 &amp; 3 only</i> ) ( <i>N</i> = 2567)	<i>Yes</i>	45.7	37.2	20.9	11.7	43.1	32.6
	<i>No</i>	54.3	62.8	79.1	87.6	56.9	67.4
Had a part-time job ( <i>N</i> = 1124)	<i>Yes</i>	29.8	25.4	42.7	36.2	31.1	27.7
	<i>No</i>	70.2	74.6	57.3	62.3	68.9	72.3

*N* = 4504. *P* = 0.00, except \**P* = 0.02. Percentages by column

finds a marginally higher proportion of white students had worked part-time than BAME students on both campuses. This appears to run counter to Yorke's (2016) findings, but interviews hint at a slightly more complex picture. While the higher proportion of part-time workers at Medway is unsurprising given its aforementioned student profile, we may also question the veracity of 'part-time job' as a single variable. In other words, the survey results do not necessarily reflect what sort of jobs white *and* BAME students might be doing, how many hours they work, their employers' proximity to the campus, and the extent to which this work might be disruptive—or even beneficial—to his or her degree study. According to Darren, Medway's closer proximity to London saw Black students living in campus accommodation nevertheless opt to retain their ties to home by returning most evenings to fulfil part-time work:

The majority of Black students that I knew in the first year at Liberty [Quays, halls of residence] were working. They were going back to London almost every evening to work and coming back. (Darren, BA Business Studies—Black Caribbean)

For Canterbury-based students, the campus's greater distance from London makes commuting during term-time less viable, and as the university's main campus it also offers the bulk of sports clubs and activity-based societies at Kent. This helps create a more active extracurricular campus culture at Canterbury, with clubs and societies providing an opportunity to meet like-minded people, practise existing hobbies and interests, or 'try something new'. Nevertheless, several BAME students felt that lack of diversity of membership and leadership within many societies—particularly sports clubs—was a demotivating factor for signing up:

If societies are full of white guys people would be put off by it. I'm the only Black guy and you look for someone that looks like you. (Karl, Sports club member—Black Caribbean)

It is down to me, obviously, to join a sport but I would have been more open to joining if it felt like I wasn't going to be – I'm not going to say the only Black girl – but, in a minority. (Grace, sports club member—Mixed White and Black Caribbean)

The implicit whiteness of these clubs and societies was felt to be a problem both in terms of representativeness—with BAME students wishing not to feel hypervisible—and the cultural norms and implicit hierarchies that were reproduced as a result. In the case of the latter, Adola was deterred from joining a drama society because she felt that its lack of minority membership affected the inclusivity of its decision-making, leaving her concerned that her involvement would be limited to backstage support:

If you're doing a play about white, middle class, English people, I'm not saying that I can't be in it, but I'm saying that someone who is white and who is middle-class is more likely to get the role, because you're always going to fit better to that character. [...] Why would I attend a society where I'm going to continue to be backstage when I want to be on stage? (Adola, society committee member—Black African)

Adola's distinction between onstage and backstage participation also serves as a metaphor for how a number of students of colour (and especially those who did not see themselves as 'middle-class') felt with regard to sports societies. Though these societies were not explicitly or consciously discriminatory in their leadership or decision-making, the 'insidious' reproduction of white leadership cliques was a deterrent for BAME students wishing to get involved:

I don't feel like I couldn't join a society because I'm not white, but I feel like there's quite an insidious white culture within those societies where it's mostly run by white people and that's not as inclusive as it needs to be. (Claudia, sports club member—Mixed Black African and Caribbean)

It is plausible that these invisible barriers at least partly account for the lower membership rates documented in Table 4.2, though interviews with students who opted not to join societies recall themes of family expectation and self-reliance explored in chapter 3. This was certainly evident in Heena's explanation, as she ultimately viewed extracurricular engagement as a distraction from her studies and academic attainment:

No matter what activities are available, or whether my social skills are developing or not, the only thing that matters to me is that I'm doing academically well, and that's all I really care about if I'm being totally honest with you. (Heena, society non-member—Asian Bangladeshi)

## BAME STUDENT REPRESENTATION ON CAMPUS: KENT UNION AND THE AFRICAN CARIBBEAN SOCIETY (ACS)

The considerable rise in BAME undergraduates studying at Canterbury between 2010 and 2015 saw the issue of representation become an increasingly important one for our interviewees, with students beginning to question the legitimacy of Kent Union as a representative student body.<sup>6</sup> Data from Table 4.2 suggests that a lower proportion of BAME students had participated in recent elections, and with white students and staff dominating the sabbatical and professional services positions, many interviewees were sceptical as to how it could claim to represent students from all ethnic backgrounds.

This tension was particularly evident when it came to the union's ability to organise social events. Interviewees felt that for large celebrations, such as Summer Balls and live music events, organisers did little to accommodate a cultural diversity of music genres such as Reggae, Bhangra, and K-Pop despite repeated requests. As with sports clubs discussed in the previous section, BAME interviewees saw this as reflecting an unconscious bias on the part of the union's leadership team which was failing to reflect the increasing diversity of the wider student body:

If you're in a position of privilege, you don't understand what it's like not to be in a position of privilege. If you're in a predominately white area, you're not going to think 'how can I accommodate for ethnic minorities or marginalised groups?' (Grace, sports club member—Mixed White and Black Caribbean)

Black interviewees highlighted specific problems with the union's attempt to introduce urban club nights, claiming that they promoted a 'clichéd' representation of Black culture. Moreover, these events attracted negative publicity in the student press allegedly causing behavioural problems. Such events were felt not to have been any more disordered than regular union nightclub events, and so interviewees felt that they had been singled out for racial stereotyping. Nevertheless, Gina felt that Black students' hesitancy over participating in such union-organised events also played a part in their failure:

In [nightclub] Venue it's the same music at pretty much all the events, and I think they did have one urban event, but the Black people didn't go, so it just sort of stopped. And that was our fault, so they can't really

complain about doing things for us if we're just not going to turn up, like what's the point? (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology—Black Caribbean)

Indeed, one mitigating factor in the union's struggle to maintain a culturally diverse range of events on campus was the simultaneous increase in the membership of ethnicity-based student societies. The cultural specificity of these societies is significant: recalling Strayhorn (2012), members felt such societies were vitally important for providing belongingness in a network of students from similar backgrounds. For Eli, this was juxtaposed favourably against his mostly white course mates with whom he had a more distanced friendship:

For me, it gives me a sense of belonging. Because no matter how integrated I am, I could go to a law seminar and it's all white people, and the reality is, once we leave that seminar and we hang out and we're talking, it's clear that I'm not like you. We're different. (Eli, society member—Black African)

Given the significance of these affective ties, the exponential membership growth of the African Caribbean Society (ACS) in particular prompted new dilemmas over Black student representation. Initially founded in 2011, the society boasted over 200 members by 2015 yet its *raison d'être* remained largely focused on social activities such as organising social events, notably arranging coach travel for urban club nights around Kent and southeast London. This led some members to voice frustrations that such activities were not necessarily catering for the diversity of Black students on campus, or fully representing Black student interests:

I have been to a few ACS events, but lot of them tend to be more like club events or, you know, partying and stuff like that, and I'm just... it's not me. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science—Black African)

ACS is kind of weak. They did try really well this year, they tried things to make you be proud of who you are, whereas other years it was just about parties and stuff. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology—Black Caribbean)

Both Frances and Gina felt that the society's 'party culture' did not fit with their own particular social needs and interests, and consequently had become inactive members. On the one hand, this illustrates the fact that

joining a student society is not necessarily a comprehensive measurement of active or ongoing campus engagement. On the other hand, their frustrations revealed a growing expectation that ACS should provide better *civic* representation of Black students on campus. In this respect, ACS was increasingly viewed by its members as a de facto alternative student union for Black students, even though it was not initially set up to fulfil this role. This, in turn, reflected aforementioned frustrations with the lack of diversity within the student union, and the struggles to put forward BAME candidates for sabbatical positions:

The ACS cannot support the entire Black community alone. (Adola, society committee member—Black African)

If we see more diversity within Kent Union itself, it will make us feel like we want to get involved, seeing someone [...] like yourself campaigning, it's motivating. (Sacha, society non-member—Black Caribbean)

There is a long history of struggles for ethnic minority representation and agency within historically white institutions, evidenced most famously through the formation of independent Black student unions and cultural centres on American campuses in the 1960s and 1970s. With many affiliated to the civil rights and Black power movements, these unions had a clear activist purpose such as increasing staff and student diversity as well as improving policies designed to tackle acts of racism and discrimination (Hypolite, 2020). Moreover, as network foci for African Americans otherwise experiencing unbelonging and isolation on white-majority campuses, these organisations were arguably pioneering exemplars for fostering and practising Black cultural capital (Carter, 2005; Wallace, 2017) within universities.

Explanations for why minority groups may seek to establish their own organisations rather than seek election to the union reflect the reproductive nature of power relations in student politics more generally (Hensby, 2019; Zamponi, 2018). Although union elections are not formally contested between parties, campus branches of national political parties nevertheless exert significant influence on providing members with the training and resources to launch successful campaigns that align with their overarching principles. These powers and skills are then passed on across successive cohorts, with previous presidents and sabbatical officers grooming their successors to maintain their party or association's

monopoly hold. In this respect, patterns of underrepresentation within political party structures may serve to reinforce patterns of underrepresentation in student politics, as network ‘outsiders’ may feel that they lack the cultural capital or groundswell of support to stand for election themselves. This was evident in the accounts of interviewees who expressed frustrations with the lack of union representation for ethnic minorities. Many cited a lack of experience or self-confidence cited when accounting for their inaction, even though there was an awareness that this helps maintain a vicious cycle for BAME underrepresentation:

If you’re not seeing enough ethnic minorities, you’re not gonna stand, but if you don’t stand there’s not gonna be any ethnic minorities. So it’s a cycle that keeps going on and on because nobody wants to put themselves forward. (Ibi, society member—Black African)

### THE POLITICISATION OF BLACK STUDENTS ON CAMPUS: BLACK HISTORY MONTH AND THE CASE OF ‘ZAYNGATE’

For most of the academic year, issues and debates about Black student identity and representation were relatively lowkey, mostly focusing on smaller-scale grievances such as the diversity of campus social events. However, each October these underlying tensions were brought to the fore and played out more publicly—and passionately—in response to the university’s annual Black History Month (BHM) programme. BHM is a series of events and activities designed to honour and celebrate the achievements and contributions of Black Britons to the social, cultural, and economic development of the UK. As a concept, BHM was first proposed by educators at Kent State University in 1969 and is now celebrated every February in the US. BHM in the UK was established by Akyaaaba Addai-Sebo in 1987, and in the past two decades has become an increasingly significant fixture in the calendar for schools, colleges, and universities seeking to assert their commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusivity. For this reason, our student interviewees were familiar with BHM dating back to their secondary education, and though few questioned its importance as an initiative many were comfortable expressing their reservations about how it is typically celebrated:



I think sometimes Black History Month can focus on the negatives. We need a reminder of the achievements, not just the suffering, because we are more than that. (Hannah, society member–Black Caribbean)

If there's one month for Black history, who do the other eleven belong to? (Eli, society member–Black African)

In other words, the presentation and delivery of BHM represented a site of contestation for Black students, one that arguably reflected their growing consciousness and voice on campus between 2015 and 2016. This was of course evidenced by ACS's growing membership base, yet as an events-based society with no representative powers, the society had no formal involvement in how BHM was celebrated. During this period, Kent's BHM calendar was principally run by professional services events and marketing teams, with additional input from EDI staff networks. Student-run groups and societies were free to organise their own themed activities across October, though Kent Union had begun to take on a more active role in representing Kent students for what has become a significant UK-wide event.

Tensions and ambiguities over BHM leadership and representation came to a head in autumn 2016. With the additional support of the Student Success Team, the university opted to strengthen its programme compared to previous years by organising two major public events. The first was an exhibition titled *The History of Immigration to the UK* featuring an art installation comprised of pictures, books, and memorabilia representing the history of people who emigrated to the islands of Great Britain (voluntarily or involuntarily). The second was a guest lecture and Q&A from Professor Robbie Shilliam evaluating the impact of the Black History Month initiative, including a critical debate on its future.

The lecture lit the blue touchpaper for many students, albeit not quite the way Shilliam or the event's organisers had expected. During the Q&A it became apparent that the audience's most pressing point of reference was Zayn Malik, a former member of boyband One Direction and now an R&B-influenced solo artist. The reason for this was that Kent Union had just released (three weeks into October) its own contribution to BHM in the form of a poster and social media campaign celebrating 'Black British icons'. Though this may have been partly a response to student complaints at the bias towards African American

history in previous years, Malik was featured along with Britain's first Black footballer Arthur Wharton, retired athlete Dame Kelly Holmes, singer Shirley Bassey, retired broadcaster Sir Trevor McDonald, and the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan.

It was Malik and Khan's selection which had angered students, as neither were of African or Caribbean heritage. Initially unwilling to acquiesce, Kent Union stated that the decision to feature Malik and Khan was guided by the National Union of Students' (NUS) position on BHM to 'recognise and celebrate the immense contributions that people of African, Arab, Asian, and Caribbean heritage make to humanity'. This prompted an even stronger backlash, with ACS in particular giving a platform for Black students to express their anger at the union's ignorance and insensitivity when it came to distinguishing Black history and heritage from other 'non-white' identities. Once the national organisers of BHM UK publicly rebuked Kent Union for its campaign, 'Zayngate' quickly attracted the attention of national and international media:

Student union slammed for picking Zayn Malik and Sadiq Khan as faces for Black History Month, *The Sun* 26 October [2016](#)

UK Student Union Suffers Swift Backlash for Including Non-Blacks in Black History Month Celebration, *Atlanta Blackstar*, 26 October [2016](#)

University Of Kent Student Union Blasted For Making Zayn Malik The Face Of Black History Month, *Huffington Post*, 26 October [2016](#)

Students pick Zayn Malik to celebrate Black History Month, *The Times* 27 October [2016](#)

Forget Zayn and Sadiq, here are the top five people who should have headlined Black History Month, *True Africa*, 27 October [2016](#)

The media storm prompted deeper questions over who can or should be considered 'Black' in Britain today. Responding to students' anger, Professor Shilliam's lecture provided timely contextualisation for Zayngate as he addressed the history of 'political blackness', a term employed by antiracist activists in the 1970s and 1980s to account for the shared experiences of racism and discrimination experienced by migrants from former British colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and South Asia (Shilliam, [2016](#)). Though such debates are familiar to campaigners and

scholars working in the field of race and ethnicity (see Andrews, 2016; Modood, 1994; Virdee, 2014), the conversation was instructive for helping contextualise the issue for a younger generation while validating their frustrations with the elision of Black experience and identity within the BAME category.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile at Kent, the backlash to Zayngate prompted Kent Union President Rory Murray to issue an apology 'to any individuals who were upset, uncomfortable or offended by the image shared' while expressing a hope 'that the passion ignited in many people... will continue and that students will become further involved in leading our Black and minority ethnic work'.<sup>8</sup> Tellingly, the apology also included an invitation to meet with and apologise to members of ACS and discuss 'where we go from here'.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, Zayngate was arguably a watershed moment for Black student representation at Kent. For the union, the incident arguably brought to the fore the need to diversify its sabbatical team while also encouraging hitherto-reluctant students to stand in follow-up elections. Consequently, Kent Union saw the election of successive presidents of colour—Aaron Thompson and Sacha Langeveldt—between 2018 and 2020, as well as regularising its consultation with societies and campaigns such as ACS and Decolonise UKC.

These leadership changes brought tangible outcomes for students of colour on campus. Langeveldt, along with Vice-President for Welfare and Community Omolade Adedapo would go on to successfully lobby the University to appoint a full-time staff member to extend its 'zero tolerance' sexual harassment programme to incorporate all types of harassment including racial harassment. The union also began to take greater leadership over BHM events, pushing for a more student-led agenda (such as the mental health of young Black men at university), while ACS and the newly formed BAME Student Network led a critical response to the wave of Black Lives Matter activism following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. This included an event titled 'My Campus is Racist', attended by the university's vice-chancellor, where students were invited to discuss their experiences of racial profiling on campus with the network's chair Stephen Kamara.

In sum, Zayngate marked a watershed moment for ACS as it demonstrated that its influence and responsibilities towards the membership had outgrown its initial purpose as a cultural events society. This was evident not only in the continued growth of its membership—which had

exceeded 350 by 2018, with a separate branch founded at Medway—but in the expansion of its mission and vision to ‘educate, empower and engage students’ through providing ‘a range of events and activities that cater to our members educational, creative, social, cultural and professional needs’ (ACS, 2020). Not only did it consolidate its status as the university’s de facto ‘Black union’, ACS also began to position itself as a hub for fostering Black cultural capital on campus via networking events where students could hear from Black entrepreneurs, social media influencers, and meet with graduate employers and recruitment firms.

In many respects, Zayngate can be seen as a ‘political opportunity structure’ of the kind that is often used to explain the emergence of social movements (Tarrow, 1998). The case study shows that students were successful in seizing the opportunity to express their grievances, gaining public and community traction, and ultimately pushing for positive change. Yet while Black student leaders are likely to have accrued capital from these experiences that will prove beneficial in their subsequent careers, building and sustaining student communities on campus remains hampered by constant cohort turnover (Hensby, 2019). Graduation brings a change of leadership, and this generates risks and uncertainties as to whether such societies can protect their field position while continuing to push for progressive change.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has highlighted the importance of belongingness for students of colour within a campus that while boasting an ethnically diverse student body, is still prone to centralising whiteness within its campus culture. Whereas the previous chapter explored this in terms of learning and teaching, this chapter has foregrounded the importance of extracurricular networks, foci, and activities. Universities such as Kent may rightly see low percentages of recorded discrimination as a positive in universities’ commitment to eliminate racial bigotry and abuse, yet such data arguably fails to capture the unbelonging students will feel from experiencing racial microaggressions, as well as the lack of BAME representation in positions of leadership. This can also impact on student’s attainment as institutions that struggle to effectively support students’ psychological need for relatedness and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000) risk implicitly legitimating tendencies for self-reliance as discussed in the previous chapter.

In this respect, belongingness is more than a simple satisfaction metric. It is about feeling understood and recognised within the campus environment, which in turn can stimulate a greater sense of relatedness and competence as a student. For many years, HEIs have been arguably guilty of assuming that a more ethnically diverse student intake would automatically create more diverse student cultures NUS (2011). Yet this undervalues the ways in which elites structurally reproduce hierarchical relations, and how institutions implicitly uphold assumptions of who or what the 'ideal' or 'normal' student should be (Read et al., 2003). The data presented in this chapter shows a correlation between BAME students' more limited engagement in extracurricular activities on campus, and interview narratives where students of colour felt implicitly excluded from the often-cliquey dominant culture of sports clubs and societies.

Following a path taken by many previous generations, a number of Black students at Kent responded by forming their own groups. The popularity of ACS, and the deliberations around 'Zayngate' revealed the agency that such groups could provide for their members, and within a broader master frame of Rhodes Must Fall, Decolonise the University, and Black Lives Matter, this provided an opportunity for Black students to gain authentic representation on campus and push for policy changes that would enhance a sense of collective belongingness. This helps counter tendencies towards the 'tyranny of the majority' in student union politics, as well as reframe ideas of racial equity to incorporate some of the more silent yet pernicious indicators of structural racism. Of course, it is important to point out that BAME representation and Black representation are not synonymous. The case study demonstrates how Black students involved in Kent Union, ACS, and the BAME Student Network were able to make use of available network foci and opportunity structures to mobilise their voice and elevate their influence on campus in ways (Inquire, 2018). Moreover, this was conducted in ways which are replicable on other campuses and for other ethnic categories, including at Kent.

So, what can universities do? It is clear to us from the findings presented in this chapter that universities should work in collaboration with cultural and ethnicity-based societies who may have been sceptical and critical about the misrepresentation of BAME students. One should not underestimate the ambivalence many students of colour feel when it comes to official complaints procedures, centrally administered inclusivity

events programmes, as well as the democratic reach of student unions. The creation of formal networks would provide an opportunity for BAME student voices to be heard and empower them to gain belongingness on their terms.<sup>11</sup> As with ACS, cultural and ethnicity-based groups may not always appear as formal representative groups, but they should be taken seriously as voluntary organisations creating meaningful spaces for students who may lack relatedness in other parts of the campus.

Such deliberations need to be conducted carefully—Student Success staff acted as important intermediaries during Zayngate not only for ensuring that ACS members felt validated in their grievances, but also to identify a mutual path forward for a resolution that all parties were satisfied with. It is also important to highlight the fragile nature of these groups and societies—they are voluntary, taking a lot of students’ time and energy, and lack the capacity to consolidate resources and institutional memory like staff networks and committees do. Fostering these groups and societies, however, will help students feel confident that EDI policies and principles are more than a set of convenient statements and actually operate in students’ interests.

## NOTES

1. Individual survey respondent data was linked with the University’s student records to match responses with data relating to students’ ethnicity, postcode region, degree programme, campus, and household income. The combining of these sources of data was subject to the University’s data compliance procedure, with consent taken from all survey participants. The survey dataset was anonymised, and strictly limited for the purposes of Student Success research only.
2. Research consisted of interviews with UK domiciled, Kent Students who self-defined as BAME. Participants filled out a ‘Participant Profile’ which allowed data regarding the participants’ level of study, ethnicity, and levels of engagement within Kent Union and student societies. Students were recruited through the advertisement of the project via social media, the Kent Union website and through promotion within schools. In total, 30 students were interviewed.
3. All student names in this chapter have been anonymised, with pseudonyms applied consistently across all chapters in this book.

4. Interview data reproduced from the Student Voices report (Twumasi, 2016) does not provide information on students' degree programmes.
5. This also applies beyond the campus to the broader urban community that surrounds university campuses. Students were also keen to highlight instances of racism outside of the university's jurisdiction, such as cab drivers refusing to pick up a group of Black male students, and a rally for Britain First which came to the university's Canterbury campus in 2016. These incidents were enough to make students feel overly visible when off-campus.
6. Indeed, this perception was recognised by Kent Union itself, and was a factor in their decision to commission the Student Voices report (Twumasi, 2016), from which much of the qualitative data for this chapter is taken.
7. Zayngate has continued to serve as a key reference point in news media debates over the contemporary relevance of political blackness, including articles in in *The Guardian* (2016) and the *New York Times* (2020).
8. Published in full on NME.com
9. <https://twitter.com/KentUnion/status/791195712646160384/photo/1>
10. As a postscript, a group of students broke away from ACS in 2018 to form the Kent Caribbean Union (KCU). This was a response to the belief that ACS leadership and membership was increasingly centred on celebrating Black African culture and heritage. Though not officially a 'union', the choice of name is telling, with KCU seeking to represent students from a Black Caribbean background through educational and social events (e.g. a lecture on the Windrush scandal, celebrating the anniversary of Barbados's independence). The split with ACS was felt to be cordial on both sides, with both groups working together for events relating to Black History Month and Black Lives Matter protests. As with all student societies, however, efforts to build and sustain ACS and KCU were hampered by the effects of the pandemic, with participation in campus social life only beginning to recover in the 2022–23 academic year.
11. This is true for BAME staff as well, as evidenced in the recent formation of the BAME Staff Network at Kent <https://www.kent.ac.uk/equality-diversity-inclusivity/staff-edi/staff-equalities-networks/bame-network>

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# Bringing Vocational Qualifications into the Inclusivity Agenda: The Case of the BTEC

*Lavinia Mitton and Alexander Hensby*

## INTRODUCTION

Previous chapters have highlighted how the combination of sector-wide massification combined with widening participation drives has increased the number of BAME students entering higher education over the past twenty years. The same is also true for students with entry qualifications that are not A-level (Katartzi & Hayward, 2019; Shields & Masardo, 2017). These two trends are not unconnected, especially when we consider one of the most popular alternative qualifications for university, the BTEC. For more than half a century, students typically took

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A-levels at age 16 to 18 before going to university, yet by 2020 18.6 per cent of students from England<sup>1</sup> held a BTEC qualification (UCAS, 2020) with approximately 10 per cent of all university entrants in the UK possessing *only* BTEC qualifications (Myhill et al., 2020). This reflects a significant growth spurt in the past decade: between 2011 and 2020, the number of students from England aged 18 accepted with a BTEC qualification grew from 25,700 to 41,600 (UCAS, 2020).

The marketisation of higher education has arguably shifted the balance of power between universities and students, so that whereas once students competed to get into university, universities now compete to recruit them. This was partly driven by the development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which provides an officially recognised basis for university admissions staff to compare different qualifications. A disproportionate number of BTEC students are from widening participation backgrounds and by accepting students from this entry route, universities been able to make progress in increasing the number of students from ethnic minorities in particular. By 2019, the proportion of Black students entering HE with only a BTEC was nearly twice that of white students, with nearly a third of all Black students entering HE in 2019 possessing at least one BTEC (Atherton, 2021). National data also indicates intersections with class, as students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are also more likely to enter HE with a BTEC. Using the POLAR neighbourhood classification model, data from UCAS (2020) found that 25.5 per cent of pupils from the most deprived areas took at least one BTEC, compared to just 10.9 per cent from the least deprived quintile.

With research for this chapter focusing on the University of Kent, Table 5.1 demonstrates that entry statistics mirror the national picture. Using data that matches our survey and interview cohort, we can see that a relatively high proportion of Black students entered with only a BTEC compared to students from other ethnic groups. Table 5.1 also highlights gender differences: a higher proportion of males entered with only a BTEC across all ethnic groups.

The academic performance of BTEC entrants paints a mixed picture. The overwhelming majority do not drop out or repeat a year and most graduating BTEC entrants leave university with a 2:1 or above—the standard definition of a ‘good’ degree (Dilnot et al., 2022). These are sizable successes for these students, especially those who without access to BTEC courses might not have had the opportunity to attend university at all.

**Table 5.1** Further Education qualifications of entrants (2013 Home), by sex and ethnicity, University of Kent

<i>Student gender and ethnicity (%)</i>										
<i>Further Education qualification</i>	<i>Asian</i>		<i>Black</i>		<i>Chinese</i>		<i>Mixed</i>		<i>White</i>	
	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>M</i>
A-level	83	68	68	45	88	69	76	68	75	73
BTEC only	6	16	13	33	0	19	8	18	8	13
Mix of BTEC + other	5	10	5	10	8	6	8	6	6	6
Other e.g. International Baccalaureate	2	4	4	2	4	6	6	2	3	4
Access to HE Diploma	2	1	5	3	0	0	0	3	4	3
Not known	2	2	5	6	0	0	3	3	3	2

*Source* Qlikview. Note: Percentages by column

Nevertheless, compared with the achievement of A-level entrants we can identify areas of concern. Though more than 80 per cent continue to their second year, BTEC entrants are more likely to drop out than A-level entrants. Many studies (e.g. Dilnot et al., 2022; McCoy & Adamson, 2016; Myhill et al., 2017; Rouncefield-Swales, 2014; Round et al., 2012; UCAS, 2016) have shown that the reasons for this attrition are not simply academic, but also personal and financial. Furthermore, several lines of evidence have shown that BTEC entrants are less likely to be awarded a ‘good’ degree than their peers who took A-levels, even if they had obtained the highest possible grade in their BTEC (e.g. Dilnot et al., 2022; Gill & Vidal Rodeiro, 2014; Myhill et al., 2017). Moreover, Shields and Masardo (2015) have established that BTEC entrants are less likely to perform well academically in research-intensive institutions.

Quantitative analysis has shown that this attainment gap cannot be fully explained by their entry qualification, although it is a cumulative and exacerbating factor. Rather, ethnicity, gender, and social class interact with, or have additive or cumulative effects on, a student’s disadvantage, and BTEC entrants are, on average, more likely to have a cluster of characteristics associated with lower academic attainment (Shields & Masardo, 2015). To be clear, it is widely acknowledged that while degree results in general are lower for students from disadvantaged socio-economic

groups, they are lower still for BTEC entrants (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). As Dilnot et al. (2022) report, these gaps in degree outcomes between students who took BTECs and A-levels, are evident even when comparing students with similar backgrounds and prior achievement.

Therefore, an important question to ask is: to what extent is the attainment gap explained by (1) the curriculum, delivery, and student experience of BTEC courses; (2) structural barriers in society faced by BTEC learners, or (3) by universities' failure to appropriately support BTEC learners? The Department for Education has focused on the first of these, citing the higher dropout rates and poorer graduation outcomes as reasons to make significant reductions in the number of BTECs that it will fund in favour of a new qualification called T-levels by 2024. Anecdotal evidence suggests that lecturers confronted with the attainment gap are prone to criticise the quality of BTEC programmes for insufficiently preparing students for university. However, as this book has already shown with regard to the white-BAME attainment gap, deficit readings risk absolving universities of responsibility to consider the inclusivity of their own learning culture—including methods of teaching and assessment, and the expectation that students will adapt as independent learners (Leathwood, 2006; Read et al., 2003; Stuart et al., 2011; Thomas, 2002). This is especially pertinent for HEIs which rely on students with vocational qualifications for recruitment.

In this chapter, we argue that if universities truly want to embrace widening participation, they need to prioritise the needs of students in possession of vocational qualifications such as the BTEC. While it is clearly important to address the gaps in outcomes between students with different entry qualification types, we support the use of routes into higher education that lead students from widening participation backgrounds to success at degree level. At the time of writing, the new T-level qualification will soon usurp the BTEC as the preeminent vocational route to university but the analysis and conclusions drawn from this chapter are relevant for all vocational or 'non-traditional' qualifications.

As with the previous three chapters, we draw on interviews with undergraduates ( $N = 62$ ) studying at the University of Kent in the 2014–5 academic year to capture their path to higher education, and their experiences of adapting to the university field. Our focus is on interviewees who entered university through a vocational route, drawing on narratives of white as well as BAME students to trace how their student identities were

shaped by their entry qualification. Findings unpack the different factors that may lead to a student choosing to study BTECs and highlight their particular value as a learning environment that develops self-confidence. The chapter goes on to explore BTEC entrants' experiences of adapting to higher education, paying particular attention to curriculum and assessment differences as well as the stigma students often feel as a result. We conclude that entry qualifications do not define a student's academic capability, but universities need to rethink how students who do not possess A-levels are recognised and supported institutionally. This necessitates bringing the BTEC—along with other vocational qualifications—into the inclusivity agenda of HE.

### THE POST-16 QUALIFICATIONS LANDSCAPE IN ENGLAND: THE RISE OF THE BTEC

Qualifications in England are characterised by a deep and longstanding divide between academic and vocational education (Baker, 2019; Brockmann et al., 2016). In education policy since the 1940s, vocational education has consistently been conceptualised as a separate and distinct form of learning, with its qualifications generally undervalued and treated as second-best to academic qualifications (Avis, 2004, 2009; House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility, 2016). This hierarchy has been further sustained by the attitudes of parents and teachers and societal norms, despite the evidence of significant benefits for learners, business, and the economy that derive from young people taking vocational courses (Jin et al., 2011; National Foundation for Educational Research, 2015; Wolf, 2011). Vocational qualifications are positioned as 'other' and lesser to the more established currency for progression to university of A-levels. This arguably fuels students' own perceptions of their worth and suitability for higher education.

The qualifications that are the subject of this chapter are 'Applied General' qualifications that are taken as part of a full-time two-year course. These are classroom-based in broad vocational areas such as leisure and tourism, business, or health and social care, and do not include work experience. They are aimed at a broader range of students than an A-level curriculum. They are pitched at young people interested in a particular sector or industry, but unsure about what specific job they would like to do (Department for Education, 2016). Applied General qualifications are also aimed at students wanting to continue their education



through applied learning while simultaneously fulfilling entry requirements for HE courses. The BTEC falls into this category. ‘BTEC’ stands for the Business and Technology Education Council, which was established in 1984. Today the BTEC is organised and awarded by Edexcel, a privately owned examination board. Sitting midway on the academic-vocational continuum, the BTEC can be considered a hybrid, distinguishable from both academically focused A-levels and pure work-based training (Davey & Fuller, 2011). BTECs are not the only general vocational qualifications available in England, but they are the most popular.

Major reform to government education policy has taken place following the recommendations of two landmark reports by independent panels set up by the government: The *Review of Vocational Education* (Wolf, 2011) and *The Sainsbury Report* (Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016). Since 2010, the Conservative Government has sought to discredit the view that a vocational curriculum is inferior to academic options by making pupils choose at age 16 between an academic route with progression to university, and at the time of writing the recently established T-Level is intended to function as a technical vocational route on a par with A-levels. The government narrative in favour of distinct academic and vocational routes has since evolved to emphasise that students entering higher education with A-levels have ‘better outcomes’ than those taking non-A-level alternatives. This diagnosis does not address whether the problem lies with universities’ neglect to adapt to BTEC students, and this chapter identifies areas where they have arguably fallen short. Despite the introduction of T-levels, it has become clear as the reforms have taken shape that BTEC qualifications will continue to be offered, so it remains necessary to understand how different types of qualifications affect trajectories and successes within higher education.

For many HEIs, accepting BTEC entrants has become an essential part of their recruitment strategy. With marketisation and massification policies transforming higher education in England for more than twenty years, universities compete with each other to maximise institutional growth and sustainability through undergraduate recruitment. Undergraduate tuition fees make up such a large fraction of universities’ income that there has been a commercial imperative to accept ever more students. Consequently, universities have become increasingly willing to admit students with vocational qualifications. Data presented in Table 5.2 shows that the acceptance rate for BTEC-only applicants has increased by 13 per cent

**Table 5.2** Proportion of UK 18-year-old accepted applicants by qualifications held, England, 2011–2020

<i>Applicant's qualifications</i>	<i>Proportion of applicants who were accepted (%)</i>	
	<i>2011</i>	<i>2020</i>
A-level only	86.7	90.7
BTEC only	76.9	87.9
A-level & BTEC	83.1	90.1
Total	82.0	89.4

*Source* UCAS (2020). UCAS Undergraduate Sector-Level End of Cycle Data Resources 2020

between 2011 and 2020, and at 87.9 per cent is now comparable to A-level applicants.

Behind these overall figures, however, the proportion of BTEC entrants varies widely from one institution to another according to their position in the multi-level nested hierarchy of HE. The highest A-level grades remain the ‘gold standard’ for selection at the most prestigious research-intensive institutions (UCAS, 2020). Furthermore, there is marked variation in the proportion of BTEC entrants by degree subject, as data presented in Table 5.3 shows. The pattern was broadly replicated at the University of Kent, which had relatively high numbers of BTEC entrants to its arts, business, sports science, and computing courses, and few to humanities and law. Table 5.4 further demonstrates how this intersects closely with ethnicity. Sports and Physical Education was the most represented subject among Black students by a considerable margin, followed by business. A high proportion of Asian BTEC entrants had taken Information Technology or Business and Marketing.

## CHOOSING BTEC: THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

The world of post-16 education is complex and there are a wide variety of reasons why young people might choose a BTEC course. However, choice is to some extent conditioned by the availability of different qualification types and individual subjects at FE level. There are four common types of settings that cater for 16 to 19-year-olds in England: Further Education colleges (FEC); specialist sixth form colleges; sixth forms within secondary schools and grammar schools; and private schools.

**Table 5.3** Degree subjects taken by BTEC entrants, England, 2013/2014

<i>Degree subject</i>	<i>% of BTEC entrants</i>
Creative Arts and Design (incl. Performing Arts)	19.1
Business and Management	16.1
Biological Sciences (incl. Psychology and Sport)	15.7
Mathematics and Computer Sciences	10.2
Subjects Allied to Medicine (incl. Nursing)	8.0
Social Studies (incl. Economics and Geography)	7.1
Communication Studies (incl. Media Studies)	4.3
Engineering	4.1
Law	2.7
Physical Sciences	1.9
Architecture, Building, and Planning	1.7
Linguistics and Classics (incl. English Language and Literature)	0.8
Historical and Philosophical Studies	0.5

*Source* David MacKay, Head of Stakeholder Engagement (HE), Pearson, The review of the BTEC Nationals and implications for Higher Education, (Presentation to University of Kent, 12 February 2016)

**Table 5.4** Entrants with BTEC (2013 Home), by BTEC subject area and ethnicity, University of Kent

<i>BTEC subject area</i>	<i>% by ethnic group and BTEC subject</i>				
	<i>Asian</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Mixed</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Total</i>
Sports and Physical Education	12	28	6	19	20
Information Technology	21	10	18	10	12
Maths and Science	9	7	6	15	12
Performing Arts/Arts	3	11	24	14	12
Business/Marketing	21	20	18	5	11
Health and Social Care/Childcare/Social Work	9	8	18	11	10
Design and Engineering	3	0	6	5	4
Humanities	6	3	6	5	4
Other Social Sciences	6	6	0	4	4
Music/Music Tech	0	2	0	4	3
Finance and Economics	0	2	0	3	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

*Source* University of Kent *Qlikview*. Note: Percentages by column

BTECs are offered as well as, or in place of, A-levels in all these, but are much more commonly offered by FE colleges (Kelly, 2017; Smith et al., 2015). Furthermore, because of the cost of employing suitably qualified teachers, A-level or BTEC courses in any single subject can only be offered when a critical mass of pupils wishes to take it. Theoretically, pupils can choose to attend schools or colleges with the courses most suited to them. However, travel and the associated costs affects many young people's choice of post-16 destination. Consequently, a major restriction on choice of course is what is on offer locally. Stevenson et al. (2019) established that the close correlation between schools with high numbers of minority ethnic pupils and schools which offer predominantly BTEC rather than A-level qualifications means that many BAME secondary school leavers are prevented from accessing many university degree courses. Since schools in more disadvantaged areas are much more likely to offer only BTECs, young people do not have equal opportunities to access A-level courses over BTECs, and this may lead them to choose a set of qualifications that are not a good match for their aptitudes and work aspirations (Wolf, 2011).

Constraints in the range of FE options available may lead to young people taking BTECs out of necessity rather than choice. This may be further compounded by 'pupil inertia', the marked tendency for young people to remain at their current school and transfer into its sixth form at 16, rather than fully consider other choices (Kent County Council, 2022). Recalling arguments made in Chapter 2, it is therefore important to consider the subjective rationality of pupil and student decision-making (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014) rather than assume that the policy rhetoric of consumer choice operates on a level playing field.

This is not to say that BTEC does not represent an informed and positive choice for many young people. Interview accounts highlight the value of BTEC particularly for restoring students' confidence in their academic ability, providing a new beginning in a personalised and supportive learning environment. In particular, following negative experiences at GCSE level the BTEC's greater emphasis on coursework assessment was often emphasised as a key factor in students' decision-making. This was certainly true for Emily and Lauren, both of whom stated that they had struggled with A-levels. BTEC provided a fresh opportunity that helped them re-form possible selves as successful students, motivating them to apply to university:

At first, I did four A-levels... I did pass some, but some of them I didn't do as well. So, then I decided to take the route of doing a BTEC course. (Emily,<sup>2</sup> BA Business Studies – Black African)

I did my first year at A-levels ... I completely failed Psychology, and English I wasn't that great at. So, I thought, 'OK, my next challenge, I'll go to college'. (Lauren, BA Business Studies – White)

A key factor in the power of BTEC to restore students' confidence is the learning culture and environment. As we saw in Chapter 2, the competitive nature of contemporary state schooling can cause stress and anxiety for many young people, especially when this is presented as the only model for efficacious learning. This was particularly evident in Miranda's experience, whose academic potential made her a target for school expectations via its 'gifted and talented' programmes:

In high school they tried to get me on gifted and talented programmes where they try and make you do extra things. But we didn't really have the funding for it so it didn't really help me much. It ended up hindering [me] if anything, which was part of the reason I hated high school. They predicted me A\*s, which unsurprisingly, my mum was annoyed about. (Miranda, BSc Anthropology – White)

This competitive schooling culture is especially evident in the county of Kent, which retains a grammar school model. These state secondary schools select their pupils for academic ability by means of an examination taken at age 11, known as the '11-plus'. Grammar schools can be a good fit for those who enjoy intense academic subjects and thrive in high-pressure, high-expectation environments, but this can intensify the pressure young people feel to maximise their educational outcomes from an early age:

I first started off at a grammar school, for like three months, and then I hated it, so I went to do IT [as a BTEC]. My mum was like, "You need good grades, you have to go to a grammar school, blah, blah, blah, and they have to be perfect. Now I'm a year behind the standard age, but in the long run I don't regret it. She's happy because I'm doing quite well. (Hannah, BSc Business Information – Black African)

The combination of institutional and parental pressure at FE level echoes BAME interview accounts presented in Chapter 2. In the case of Hannah this is intensified further when we recall her need to make a financial contribution to her single-parent household while at university, as discussed in the same chapter. For Amy, the decision to study BTEC at college rather than her grammar school's sixth form represented a desire for more freeing environment where the atmosphere was less rigidly conformist:

I wasn't being told off for wearing, like, clunky shoes or stripy hair or having piercings, which is fantastic, because I could actually, like, just be myself. And once I could just be myself in the situation that was fine, because that was the only problem I really had at school, I couldn't be myself and I was always very about expressing myself. (Amy, BSc Anthropology – White)

As this suggests, studying BTEC represented for many students a positive choice from the outset. Megan, for instance, studied a combination of BTEC and A-levels, but favoured the former for studying performing arts as it offered a more practical and personalised learning experience than was offered in the A-level curriculum:

They rock! People go, 'Oh BTECs,' because they're stupid or whatever but it got me into Kent, you know, so yeah. Like you created crazy bonds those two years with five people in my class and it was just the most amazing experience [...] I was to go into performing arts A-level it would be really studying the history of drama and all that boring stuff. (Megan, BSc Psychology – Mixed Asian)

It is also important to note that for many students, the enjoyment and satisfaction of studying at BTEC opened a door to the possibility of applying to university—an option that some had initially excluded following their experiences at GCSE and/or A-level. Indeed, some were unaware at the start of their BTEC courses that it could even be a route into higher education. As Joseph explained, BTECs can build motivation to enter HE:

I was really doing well in my IT classes, so I just thought, 'you know, if I'm good at this, maybe progress on this road, maybe go to [university]. (Joseph, BSc Digital Arts – Black African)

Despite such motivations, the value of studying BTEC was tempered by inconsistencies in how vocational qualifications were recognised and integrated into the HE admissions. Amy, for example, was critical of the advice she received from teachers when choosing to study BTEC, claiming not to have been made aware that some universities and degree programmes did not recognise BTECs as a valid entry qualification. This puts more emphasis on schools and colleges to provide pupils with the right information that will enable them to make decisions that best correspond to their interests and ambitions. However, this is arguably compromised by schools' concerns to remain competitive in their league table performance, especially if it is felt that BTEC courses are more likely to yield consistently higher success rates than certain A-level subjects (Richards, 2016). Nevertheless, for many students BTEC was valued specifically for offering a pathway to academic success and university entry that circumvented examinations as the core mode of assessment.<sup>3</sup> As we have already seen, Lauren chose BTEC having failed her first year of A-levels. The opportunity to study at FE level without the stress of exams was crucial to restoring confidence in her academic ability:

I did my first year at A-level and that's when it all went to pot, really. I have panic attacks when I'm sitting exams. [...] I found the perfect [BTEC] course for me, and I gained three distinction stars which is the equivalent of three A\* at A-level, but that was for doing all coursework and no exams at all. (Lauren, BA Business Studies – White)

James had a similar story, deciding to drop out of A-levels after struggling with his first-year exams. He was initially more circumspect about transferring to BTEC, assuming it to be an inferior qualification. However, by allowing him to foreground his oral skills together with the experience of working closely with his teacher, the BTEC helped him develop confidence in his academic ability and readiness for university:

My problem is that verbally in class I am fantastic but then when it comes to the exams, I don't do that well. So, I ended up dropping [A-levels] and doing a BTEC in Business. I was like, "Oh it is a BTEC." But I thought, "Screw it, I am just going to get the highest grade possible." Which I did. [...] I put a lot of hard effort into that, and my teacher wanted to put us through uni standards. I am really grateful for him, he wanted to show us that just because you are only doing a BTEC, it doesn't mean that it is to any standard less than doing A-levels. Doing the BTEC showed me

what I am possibly really good at. My BTEC teacher is a solicitor, so he decided that we would do also a couple of law modules and from there I really liked law, law seemed really interesting. So, I think it was good that I failed that year because [otherwise] I wouldn't have done the BTEC and I wouldn't be here now and doing a course which I really, really enjoy. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

James's experience illustrates the suitability of BTEC as an alternative pathway for university, to the extent that his teacher's professional background helped him identify a combination degree in law and business matched his interests and career goals (see Chapter 2). However, the heterogeneity of BTEC entrants should not be overlooked. A number of studies (e.g. Gartland, 2014; Gartland & Smith, 2018; Reay et al., 2005; Slack et al., 2014) have concluded that the strong emphasis in sixth forms compared to FE colleges on university as the 'natural' next step means that their pupils tend to be somewhat more informed, prepared, and confident about going to university. Like James, Megan benefitted from this encouragement for progressing to university:

The fact I went to a sixth form was maybe one of the reasons I actually ended up getting into university because they pushed, pushed, pushed. (Megan, BSc Psychology – Mixed Asian)

To sum up, it should be evident from the narratives in this section that the choices students make regarding their post-16 qualifications are complex and not necessarily shaped by academic ability, but rather a combination of structural factors, personal preferences, and the influences of peers and families. This is consistent with previous studies—as well as findings from Chapter 2—which have questioned the extent to which pupil and student choice operates from a level playing field, highlighting inequalities of class and race in particular (e.g. Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Archer et al., 2007; Ball et al., 1996, 2000, 2002; Glaesser & Cooper, 2014). Moreover, BTEC offers an alternative pathway to university which can not only restore young people's self-confidence following negative educational experiences, but also provide a nurturing learning environment in which they can flourish. However, BTEC entrants' transition to university



poses new challenges which not only point to questions over their readiness for university, but also universities' readiness to fully recognise and support BTEC entrants. This is the focus of the next section.

## BTEC ENTRANTS' TRANSITION INTO HIGHER EDUCATION

The previous chapters have highlighted how universities uphold a dominant culture which presupposes a model of the 'normal' or 'ideal' student, both inside and outside of the classroom (Read et al., 2003; Stuart et al., 2011; Thomas, 2002). Though students from any background may experience pressure and anxiety to 'fit in and get on' once at university (Bathmaker et al., 2016: 77), students who lack prior academic and social capital to conform to these norms and expectations are likely to struggle the most. While this has shown to apply to students from working-class backgrounds and students of colour (Jessop & Williams, 2009; Read et al., 2003; Yee, 2016), we argue that attention should also be afforded to students with vocational entry qualifications—particularly those for whom multiple characteristics apply. All of our BTEC entrant interviewees expressed at least an awareness of how the qualification was negatively perceived in popular culture. This perception is aptly illustrated by the multitude of user-supplied definitions of 'BTEC' in the popular wiki site Urban Dictionary. A typical example reads thus:

Used to express something of lower-grade, a downgrade of something, or a rubbish version of something. Also used to refer to a dumb or idiotic person. Originates from the BTEC qualification, said to be taken by dumb people in order for a work-force job. Examples include: *'Nokia is the BTEC iPhone'*; *'You're some BTEC wasteman'*; *'Ebay is the BTEC Amazon'*. (Urban Dictionary, 2019)

Such stereotypes arguably derive from derogatory readings of the sorts of narratives presented in the previous section, namely those of pupils who succeeded at BTEC after initially struggling with A-levels, or those who sought to avoid taking exams. This stereotype may also be fuelled by the uneven way BTEC operates as an entry qualification for higher education. While the sector as a whole has become more accommodating of BTEC entrants, they are not accepted by all universities or degree programmes. According to Dilnot et al., (2022: 4) approximately 7 per cent entering the often higher-ranking and 'prestigious' Russell Group

universities possess BTECs, with negligible numbers admitted at Oxford and Cambridge. Though Kent admits BTEC entrants onto many (though not all) of its degree programmes, our interviewees frequently found their qualifications unfavourably compared with A-levels by fellow students:

I get constantly asked by foreign students ‘Oh, the BTEC, that’s easier, isn’t it?’ Or, ‘Oh, it’s lower?’ (Amy, BSc Anthropology – White)

People go, ‘Oh BTECs,’ ‘cause they’re stupid. Everyone’s like, BTEC, like you’re dumb or something because you’re doing a BTEC. And I don’t know, I thought that as well. (Megan, BSc Psychology - Mixed Asian)

The power of this stigma is most evident in Megan’s admission that despite her aforementioned positive experiences of BTEC (‘They rock!’), she was nevertheless vulnerable to internalising such perceptions from peers. Some students were more bullish in asserting their BTECs’ grade equivalence to A-level, as well as the fact that it had got them into university regardless. Indeed, some cited the fact that they the university had awarded them an ‘academic excellence’ financial stipend in recognition of their attainment at FE level. In any case, though, the widespread nature of this stigma posed a challenge for incoming BTEC entrants, one that has the power to compound existing feelings of unbelonging relating to ethnicity or class background. It is therefore essential that universities admitting BTEC students seek to challenge this stigma, especially as the impact may easily go under the radar. After all, vocational entry qualifications constitute neither an identity group nor a protected characteristic. Yet as we will see in the next section, this is an issue for university learning and teaching as much as it is for wider campus culture.

### TRANSITIONING INTO DIFFERENT MODES OF TEACHING, LEARNING, AND ASSESSMENT

According to Bernstein (1996) and Young (2008), a key challenge in students’ adaptation to university relates to the need to re-position themselves in a hierarchical field that valorises certain forms of knowledge over others. Where students perceive a misalignment, they may question the value of their existing knowledge and its suitability for the HE field. Recalling findings from Chapter 3, this relates not only to curriculum-based skills and knowledge but also the academic capital that students

are expected to accrue to successfully navigate the rules and conventions of university study (Bernstein, 1996; Watson, 2013). Despite providing a pathway for university access, stigma surrounding the value and rigour of a BTEC qualification are given credibility by the way higher education learning and teaching presupposes A-level knowledge and skillsets. BTEC courses typically privilege applied knowledge and work-related skills, which many students specified as a key attribute of their courses compared with A-level equivalents. This is well illustrated through Amy's recollection of her Countryside Management BTEC:

We had to go out and do species identifications and just really practical work, and then would be back in the classroom, I was so happy to be learning about stuff that actually applied to me. (Amy, BSc Anthropology – White)

Megan also enjoyed the practical side to studying her BTEC in performing arts on the grounds that 'you see the result', one which contrasted with her chosen BA in Psychology where outcomes were limited to 'a piece of paper'. While Megan's adjustment issues are overshadowed by her change of subject, Daniel felt that his BTEC in computing provided only partial preparation for his BSc in Business Information Technology. He believed that the degree's greater emphasis on programming implicitly privileged his A-level peers:

The course that I did in computing at BTEC is very different to what I'm doing in university. I don't think there is anything actually like my BTEC offered as a course, my BTEC was quite hands-on, whereas the computing I'm doing is very much programming, which is two very split ends of the discipline. (Daniel, BSc Business Information Technology – White)

Similarly, Joseph felt that his BTEC did not align with the prior knowledge course conveners took for granted when studying for his degree in Digital Arts:

The level of math was above what I've done. [The BTEC] gave me the knowledge when it comes to the computer side, understanding what a computer does, about components, tech, and all that. But what it did not give me is the mathematics. (Joseph, BSc Digital Arts – Black African)

Rebecca had assumed that her decision to study a BA in Health and Social Care would entail a smooth continuation of her BTEC of the same name. However, she felt unprepared for changes in the expected styles of writing and referencing, as well as the emphasis on critical thinking:

Obviously, many people go to uni and say, ‘Oh, it’s difficult, more reading,’ so I was expecting it to be difficult compared to college... but it’s way different from the health and social care we do in college. Referencing in college and referencing in university is very different, and then the things we learn here. Criticising a book or something, we didn’t do all that in college. [...] Sometimes when I’m doing my essay it’s difficult, it’s difficult to write in academic language, especially in second year because that’s when they expect you to do more. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

Of course, some readers may feel that these struggles are an inevitable and even necessary part of the process of adapting to university-level learning and assessment. This may hold some truth, but what remains significant is how students often felt *disadvantaged* in their preparedness for higher education. Whether this constitutes a valid criticism of their course or not, it brings to the fore perceptions among BTEC entrants that A-level students were more suited to the learning they encountered at degree level. Such experiences arguably also reinforced the impression that stereotypes about BTEC entrants held some credibility. As noted in Chapter 6, this perception can also be unwittingly reproduced by academic staff (i.e. statements such as ‘you should know this from your A-levels’) which may diminish students’ motivation for study.

Admittedly, the transition from BTEC to degree-level study is smoother for some academic subjects than others since BTEC qualifications were initially designed to prepare pupils for fields of employment rather than higher education. The smoothness of this transition can also be dependent upon the optional units offered by any single school or college. In contrast, the Russell Group (2017) promotes the view that certain A-level subjects (notably mathematics, English Literature, modern and classical languages, history, geography, physics, chemistry, and biology) are uniquely effective as ‘facilitating subjects’ for a diverse range of disciplines at degree level. This may account for Joseph and Daniel’s struggles with the amount of maths in their respective degree subjects, though the presumption of A-level skills for a degree programme

that admits BTEC entrants represents a misalignment that is the institution's responsibility to address rather than the student's.

This returns us to one of the book's key themes, that of staff–student interactions. We have already seen in Chapter 3 that the pressure to succeed academically, combined with a fear of ‘sticking out’, has resulted in many students of colour misconstruing independent learning as akin to ‘self-reliance’. This entails the avoidance of interactions with academic staff, even when students admit to struggling with their work. The transition to a more impersonal and distanced relationship at degree level—owing both to larger cohort sizes as well as the modular system—is arguably more pronounced for BTEC entrants than it is for A-level entrants. BTEC courses tend to have smaller class sizes than A-levels and involve regular interaction with one main tutor, a model that particularly benefits pupils who respond well to teacher-directed motivation. This was particularly the case with regard to assessment. With the greater emphasis in the BTEC on mastering a task before moving on to the next one, the tutor typically provides feedback until the required level of competence has been achieved. This could involve, for example, repeated marking of drafts and extending submission dates. Moreover, summative assessment generally takes place *after* the learning outcomes have been achieved. These teacher–pupil interactions have the potential to engender strong relations of mutual trust, relations which stand in stark contrast to student–staff interactions at university. Both Daniel and Charlotte admitted to struggling with the lack of regular assessment feedback they had received at BTEC, as well as the opportunity to revise and improve their work incrementally:

It was very different from a BTEC where you had constant feedback, where you could constantly go back and forth between your tutor, coming to university where you hand the work in and that's final. (Daniel, BSc Computer Science – White)

[At BTEC] you have that guide, that fallback in case like you're a bit confused on what to do, or you do a draft and say, “Can you read my essay for me?” And then they actually go through it. But in university you can't do that. You can only ask your peers to help you proofread [or] double check if you've done something right. And it's a bit more independent, which is good to some degree, but at the same time it's hard because you want that someone of greater authority to make you feel like, yes, you've done the right work, just to give you that reassurance. (Charlotte, BSc Psychology – Black African)

As we saw in Chapter 3, Charlotte was at least able to build her own peer networks to help support her transition to independent learning, though this did not necessarily compensate for—or help facilitate—a more proactive approach to seeking support from academic staff. Moreover, some students were also conscious that their degree programme would also entail a return to exams as a core mode of assessment. As noted earlier in this chapter, assessment methods are where the divide between A-level and BTEC learning is most evident. For many years, BTEC assessment patterns did not include exams as courses prioritised the development of ‘industry ready skills’ (Wolf, 2011). Though some courses have since introduced timed written tests (itself a belated recognition of their additional function as an alternative pathway to higher education), BTEC courses continue to favour continuous assessment and portfolios. To some extent, this is also true for degree programmes, though written exams comparable to those at GCSE and A-level are also prevalent—especially on core modules. For this reason, BTEC entrants felt relatively prepared for the self-discipline of doing coursework but acutely aware of their disadvantage relative to A-level entrants when it came to sitting exams. Indeed, for interviewees such as James the experience of transferring to BTEC had internalised a belief that they were poor exam performers:

I was like, ‘Exams are not for me.’ I do better when I have coursework... When it comes down to the exams, I don’t do that well. (James, LLB Law – Black Caribbean)

The return of exams therefore had an unsettling effect on BTEC entrants’ sense of competence as university learners. This was further compounded by a perception that module conveners were oblivious to how exams specifically disadvantaged the BTEC learners in class. For Lauren, this was felt to have negatively impacted her performance in her first year of study:

When I was at college, I was on a BTEC which is obviously all coursework and I’m so much better at course work than I am at exams. So, when I came here, I didn’t realise I was going to be faced with six exams at the end of the first year. That’s what really held me back. (Lauren, BA Business Studies – White)

Debates have of course raged for many years over the value of exams as a model of assessment, with familiar critiques including their tendency to capture a ‘snapshot’ rather than performance over an extended period, that they reward ‘shallow’ rather than deep engagement with the subject, and that they advantage pupils and students from privileged backgrounds (Hyman, 2021). This has gained intensity in recent years following the sudden shift to remote ‘open book’ exams during the Covid-19 pandemic, with concerns over exacerbating the ‘digital divide’ countered by the benefits of eliminating performance anxieties associated with high-intensity examination halls (Bansal, 2022; Shakeel et al., 2021). Whichever way one feels about this debate, however, they lead us to fundamental questions over what degree-level education and achievement should mean in an increasingly massified HE system. With there no longer being a common transition to university (Christie, 2009), it is not sufficient to pursue BTEC recruitment while upholding norms and expectations that directly inhibit their capacity to succeed from the onset.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the increasing numbers of students entering higher education with BTECs, universities have hitherto struggled to arrest their differential attainment compared with A-level entrants. This should be a priority for the sector for a number of reasons. First, it exposes inconsistencies in the way vocational qualifications are recognised within higher education. In embracing the BTEC as a valid pathway to higher education, many universities (including Kent) have been able to expand their recruitment reach and income. Yet once these students arrive at university, they encounter a learning environment that still largely presupposes—and thereby privileges—A-level curricula and assessment skills. Though it might be true that some BTEC entrants were poorly advised at FE level, or they pursued educational pathways which reflect inequalities of subject and qualification choice in their local colleges and sixth forms, their performance could be improved through a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Second, this chapter has foregrounded an important intersection between entry qualifications and the white-BAME awarding gap. We can see familiar themes and dynamics across both: the structural privileging of an ‘ideal’ or ‘normal’ student profile both inside and outside

of the classroom, reduced access to modes of support which have hitherto supported educational success, and the onus placed on the students themselves to make up the difference. Though this chapter has drawn on the accounts of white as well as BAME BTEC entrants, the former does not at least have to contend with racial unbelonging. Recalling themes explored in Chapter 3, the combination of these factors (as well as class) is likely to exacerbate a desire to self-protect from interactions that risk drawing attention to students' competence as a student. Indeed, as the next chapter will show, this can negatively affect BAME BTEC entrants' motivation to seek improvement in their academic performance.

Third, the awarding gap between A-level and BTEC entrants raises questions over the learning environment of higher education more generally. As we will later see in Chapter 8, the massification of universities places academic staff in a quandary over the interactions and support they can and should offer to students. It is our belief that insufficient attention has been paid to the lives of BTEC entrants as a group of students in their own right, including their educational backgrounds, motivations for studying at university, and the challenges many of them face. While the BTEC itself may have an uncertain future as a pathway to higher education, the same challenges are likely to apply to those with other vocational qualifications, including the T-level.

It is for this reason that we argue that vocational qualifications should be brought into universities' inclusivity agenda. Through no fault of their own students with BTEC are positioned outside of common constructions of the normal student, though much like commuters they do not constitute an identity or protected characteristic and so are less likely to mobilise as an interest group. Moreover, any institutional strategy seeking to improve the academic attainment of students of colour should also take note of BAME students' prior educational qualifications.

## NOTES

1. Unlike previous chapters, contextual data and analysis focuses on England rather than the UK. This is because the BTEC qualification is not offered in Scotland or Wales. Instead, they respectively award the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and the Welsh Baccalaureate (Bacc) as vocational alternatives to A-Level.



2. All student names in this chapter have been anonymised, with pseudonyms applied consistently across all chapters in this book.
3. Examinations were not formally included as part of BTEC assessment until 2016.

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# The Role of Motivation in Student Engagement and Attainment

*Stephen R. Earl*

## INTRODUCTION

It has been established throughout the chapters of this book that disparities are consistently found in the attainment of white and BAME students (Richardson, 2015; Tatsi & Darby, 2018). Students from BAME groups are less likely to achieve a ‘good’ degree (i.e., First and 2:1 classification) than their white peers, with the most notable discrepancies being between white and Black students (Iliescu et al., 2019; Smith, 2017). Moreover, BAME students are more likely to enter ‘low tariff’ institutions, undertake courses requiring lower entry-qualifications, and have worse post-university employment rates (Cabinet Office, 2018). Given the importance of policies regarding equality, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI), addressing these attainment inequalities seems all the more pressing within higher education.

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In addition to race-related inequalities, attainment discrepancies have also consistently emerged between students with different entry-level qualifications. As noted in the previous chapter, increase in vocational qualifications has seen a rise in the number of students entering higher education with BTEC qualifications or Access to Higher Education Diplomas (ACCESS). These qualifications typically offer greater flexibility to students in how they fulfil UCAS entry criteria (i.e., tariff points; Baker, 2020). Nonetheless, students with vocational qualifications, namely BTEC entrants, typically obtain lower degree classifications (i.e., First or 2:1 degrees) and gain lower-paid graduate employment than students with traditional A-levels (Chansarkar & Michaeloudis, 2001; McCoy & Adamson, 2016). This pattern is somewhat concerning given that BTEC qualifications are designed to equip students with attributes, interpersonal skills, and a sense of agency which, in theory, should enable them to do well at university (Shields & Masardo, 2015). Controlling for demographic factors such as entry-level qualifications has been found to partially account for some of the overall attainment gap between white and BAME students (Iliescu et al., 2019). Thus, exploring the white-BAME attainment gap in conjunction with entry-level qualifications may offer new insights into explaining inequalities across multiple student groups.

Students attend university from a variety of cultural backgrounds and with array of qualifications, motivations, and aspirations. For some students, university may represent an instrumental pathway to gain qualifications for a chosen career, whereas others may be driven by an inherent interest in a particular field of study. Alternatively, some students may attend university to meet expectations from their school or family, or feel they have no alternative in a period of limited employment opportunities. These considerations make it increasingly apparent that students are now attending university from different starting points. Thus, it seems unrealistic to expect all students to adapt to university procedures and structures in the same manner. In order to bridge any academic disparities that may exist between students, greater effort may be required from universities to respond to the motives and experiences of their students.

Building on the book's overarching theoretical framework, this chapter seeks to foreground a more psychological approach to explore differences in undergraduate students' motivational experiences. Specifically it draws upon self-determination theory (SDT) to explore how distinct types of

student motivation may differentially explain academic attainment, university engagement, and student well-being. A mixed-method approach was undertaken for the research, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. A key aim was to examine how students' motivational experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness at university may impact their academic and personal development, and whether these experiences differed between distinct student groups. The results are detailed in the hope of identifying unique motivational patterns that shed further light on why attainment disparities may exist. Practical implications are also discussed with the intention of informing new targeted initiatives and teaching strategies that may have substantive value in lessening any discrepancies in student motivation and academic attainment.

### STUDENT MOTIVATION: A SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY (SDT) PERSPECTIVE

A concise definition of motivation is that it reflects a simple desire to 'want change'—either to one's self or environment (Reeve, 2016). This interpretation is somewhat fitting of university students given that many students, with some exceptions, will typically attend university with a desire to develop their knowledge within a particular subject (i.e., their self) or enhance their prospective employment opportunities (i.e., their environment). A deeper understanding of student motivation, however, can be gained by considering the general orientation, or *quality*, of motivation. That is, the underlying reasons and goals that direct students' actions and learning (Ryan & Deci, 2016). From this qualitative perspective, the type of motivation that students develop will be an important determinant in understanding their cognitions, learning, engagement, and performance within a university context (e.g., Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

SDT is a theory which encapsulates the quality of motivation by distinguishing motivational sub-types based on their degree of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Advocates of SDT propose that self-determined forms of motivation will be experienced autonomously as behaviour will emanate from one's self and be aligned with personal values and goals (Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). The purest form of autonomous motivation is *intrinsic motivation* which originates solely from oneself. Intrinsically motivated students will be driven by an inherent interest and satisfaction towards their learning. Whilst it may be hoped that all students will be intrinsically motivated at university, the reality is that



many students' approach to academic study will be influenced by external contingencies brought about by financial or employment goals. These external incentives can still be experienced autonomously providing they have been internalised by the students in line with their personal values (i.e., *integrated regulation*) or identified as being instrumental in fulfilling a desired objective (i.e., *identified regulation*; Howard et al., 2020). For example, students that perceive university to be an integral part of their personal development, or important for achieving their career goals, will still be motivated by a sense of autonomy and volition. Empirical evidence has shown that students who are autonomously motivated at university are more likely to report higher levels of well-being, use more effective study strategies, and obtain higher grades (Müller & Palekčić, 2005; Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

In contrast to autonomous motivation, motivation that is less self-determined will be experienced as controlling. Controlled motivation reflects behavioural regulation that is instigated by feelings of pressure, coercion, or reliance on external contingencies (Deci & Ryan, 2008). For instance, feelings of control can manifest through negative internal feelings of pressure which relate to proving one's self-worth, meeting others' expectations, or avoiding feelings of guilt and shame (i.e., *introjected regulation*). Students attending university for introjected reasons will likely do so out of a sense of obligation rather than choice. Although these feelings of compulsion can act as a motivator for students, they are typically associated with a higher propensity for withdrawal and adverse feelings such as anxiety (Ratelle et al., 2007) or emotional disaffection (van der Kaap-Deeder et al., 2016). Alternatively, students may be entirely controlled by a desire to adhere to external demands (i.e., *external regulation*), such as gaining a financial reward or avoiding reprimand. This external form of motivation can result in some achievement-oriented behaviour, yet this behaviour tends to be short-lived and are often detrimental to general well-being (Deci et al., 1999).

Although externally orientated students may be able to have success at university (e.g., Sturges et al., 2016), it is often autonomous and intrinsic forms of motivation which contribute to higher levels of quality performance (Cerasoli et al., 2014). Previous studies have demonstrated the fundamental importance of autonomous motivation for higher academic attainment (Próspero et al., 2012) and student retention (Black & Deci, 2000). Exploring whether specific student groups differ in the distinction between autonomous versus controlled motivation may be telling of how

they perform and engage at university. For instance, students entering university from traditional A-level routes have been found to typically select courses based on an inherent interest in a subject (Bates et al., 2009). In contrast, students arriving with vocational entry-qualifications are generally driven by career-oriented motives when choosing a university course. Inferring from SDT-based evidence, it is possible that the higher intrinsic motives for selecting a course may, in part, explain why A-levels students demonstrate higher attainment than BTEC students.

At the lowest end of SDT's motivational taxonomy is *amotivation* which is synonymous with a lack of any motivation. Amotivated students will typically feel they do not have any reason to be at university and consider their ability or effort to be futile in achieving any desired outcome (Legault et al., 2006). Empirical findings have indicated that students high in amotivation are less likely to have an interest at university and often struggle to adjust socially and emotionally to university life (Bailey & Philips, 2016; Jung, 2013). Furthermore, amotivation has been strongly associated with poor academic performance in both university (Próspero et al., 2012) and secondary school settings (Leroy & Bressoux, 2016). Identifying students with high levels of amotivation may be useful as these students may be at particular risk of becoming detached and underperforming at university.

## CONTEXTUAL MOTIVATIONAL INFLUENCES: THE ROLE OF BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS

In moving away from a 'deficit model' approach, a central tenet within SDT is that motivation is dynamic and can be supported, or diminished, by influences within a social context. That is, students' motivation will be shaped by the cognitive and social experiences they have within the university context. Specifically, autonomous motivation and optimal functioning develop within environments that support the satisfaction of three psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). When fulfilled, these psychological needs enable students to act authentically, explore intrinsic tendencies, and master challenges. Conversely, structures and contextual procedures that thwart the satisfaction of these needs will result in students feeling detached, disengaged, and often helpless at university (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

The need for *autonomy* refers to the experience of psychological freedom and volition in ones' endeavours (Weinstein et al., 2012). Students experiencing autonomy satisfaction will engage at university out of a sense of personal choice, feel they can be themselves, and will view university activities to be aligned with their personal values and interests. Alternatively, *competence* refers to students' need to feel effective and capable within the university environment. Students experiencing competence satisfaction will believe they are able to achieve their desired goals and will be aware of ways to accomplish these goals. Finally, the need of *relatedness* refers to the basic human necessity to develop close connections with others that harvest mutual feelings of trust and acceptance. Students experiencing relatedness satisfaction will experience a sense of belongingness at university and feel that support will be available if needed. It has been well-documented that the fulfilment of students' psychological needs has an array of positive consequences, including autonomous motivation (Faye & Sharpe, 2008), enhanced subjective well-being (Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011), positive university course ratings (Filak & Sheldon, 2003), and higher academic attainment (Guiffrida et al., 2013). These associations have been found consistent regardless of social or ethnic culture (Chen et al., 2015). The reverse tends to occur when these needs are frustrated and students feel forced to do activities which they perceive to be irrelevant (i.e., autonomy frustration), that they are inept or helpless (i.e., competence frustration), or that university is a place where they are isolated or excluded (i.e., relatedness frustration).

There is a growing acceptance that differences in students' contextual experience at university may be a key explanatory factor underlying various attainment gaps (Office for Fair Access [OFFA], 2015). Issues relating to a sense of belongingness, akin with relatedness, have often been cited by BAME students within UK higher education (e.g., Cureton & Gravestock, 2019; Jones et al., 2020). Compared to white students, students from BAME ethnic groups have indicated that their cultural identity was less compatible with their university context (Frings et al., 2020). Qualitative findings have further suggested this may derive from socio-cultural influences which hamper the fulfilment of BAME students' psychological needs, such as a lack of ethnic diversity on campus, cultural misunderstandings towards assessments, and pressurise to comply with non-BAME norms (Bunce et al., 2019). Similarly, BTEC entrants have indicated that lower feelings of preparedness for higher education and

a lack of educational support have been detrimental to their university experience (Baker, 2020; Shields & Masardo, 2015). Such evidence is suggestive that differences in students' psychological experiences, namely distinct psychological needs, may potentially explain why certain students adjust better at university than others.

## THE RESEARCH

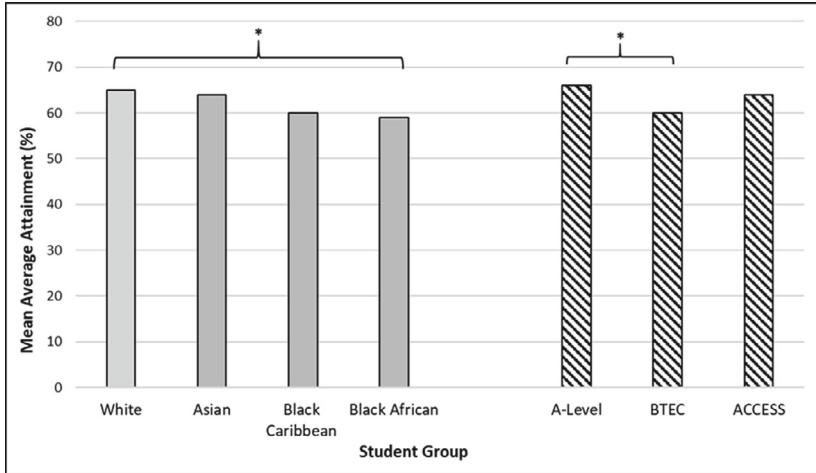
Through a lens of SDT, the aim of the current research was to investigate whether student motivation and psychological need satisfaction may help explain differences in academic attainment and subjective well-being. These associations were examined with a view to determine if specific motivational differences between distinct students groups may exist, relating to ethnicity and prior entry-qualifications. The research was conducted over the 2016–2017 academic year across both the Medway and Canterbury campuses of the University of Kent. In the first instance, a quantitative methodology was employed to measure student motivation, psychological need satisfaction, and subjective well-being. This involved a series of self-report questionnaires being administered to students, including the Academic Self-Regulation Scale (Ryan & Connell, 1989), a measure of basic psychological need satisfaction (Chen et al., 2015), the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (Thompson, 2007), and the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al., 1983). Subsequently, a qualitative approach was taken to conduct follow-up focus groups and semi-structured interviews with students to gain in-depth insights into factors that may influence their motivational experiences at university.

A total of 647 undergraduate students (mean age = 21.01 years; 51 per cent female, 49 per cent male) completed the questionnaires from the Canterbury (49 per cent) and Medway (51 per cent) campuses. The sample comprised of students who were studying a variety of degree programmes which included law, business, engineering, and sport science (although this is not an exhaustive list). Across the participants, 57 per cent classified themselves as white in ethnicity whereas 43 per cent identified as being from a BAME ethnic group, such as Black African (13 per cent), Black Caribbean (5 per cent), Asian or Chinese (15 per cent), or a combination of other races (10 per cent). Regarding entry-level qualifications, a slightly higher proportion of the students had entered university exclusively with traditional A-levels (53 per cent) compared to those

who entered with vocational qualifications such as BTEC or ACCESS qualifications (47 per cent).

All students provided informed consent to take part in the research and gave permission for the researchers to access their attainment and attendance data from their official records. Academic attainment was collated at the end of the academic year to reflect students' overall attainment percentage across all their modules. Inspection of these attainment scores indicated that higher average attainment was exhibited by white and Asian students compared to Black African and Black Caribbean students (see Fig. 6.1 for percentage scores). This pattern echoed previous data indicating that larger attainment discrepancies tend to be found between white and Black students, rather than between white and Asian groups (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017). Nonetheless, analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that only attainment differences between white and Black African students were statistically meaningful ( $p < 0.05$ ; see Fig. 6.1). In addition, BTEC entrants were found to display statistically lower academic attainment compared to students with A-level qualifications (see Fig. 6.1). Similar differences in A-level-BTEC attainment have been previously found even when disaggregating exam grades and coursework-based assessments (Iliescu et al., 2019). The attainment of students with ACCESS qualifications was found not to meaningfully differ from students with either A-level or BTECs. Nevertheless, this preliminary analysis confirmed the existence of the respective attainment gaps within the recruited sample.

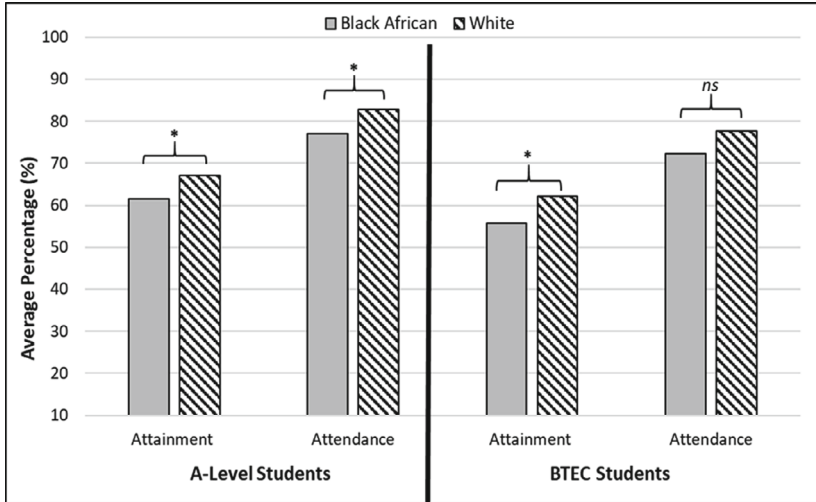
Further linear regression analysis revealed that students' average attendance across the academic year was positively related with end of year attainment ( $\beta = 0.48$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.23$ ). Interestingly, this positive association between attendance and attainment was more pronounced for Black African ( $R^2 = 27$  per cent) and BTEC ( $R^2 = 35$  per cent) students than for white ( $R^2 = 19$  per cent) and A-level ( $R^2 = 15$  per cent) students. These relationships are indicative that student attendance may be an important determinant associated with the academic attainment of Black African and BTEC students. In fact, the existence of any attainment gaps relating to ethnicity and entry-qualifications tend to be minimal when only considering students with high attendance (see Iliescu et al., 2019). It should be noted, however, that the direction of any relationship between attainment and attendance should be viewed cautiously in the present cross-sectional data. For example, whilst it is plausible that



**Fig. 6.1** Differences in academic attainment between ethnic groups and entry-qualifications (*Note* \*indicates statistical significance at a level of  $p < 0.05$ )

students attending less may obtain poorer grades, it is also possible that poor attendance may be a symptom of previous poor attainment.

An additional line of inquiry was to examine how average attendance and attainment may differ when accounting for ethnicity and entry-qualifications simultaneously. Given that the most meaningful attainment differences emerged between white and Black African students, comparisons between these two ethnic groups were a key focus. Figure 6.2 indicates that discrepancies in attainment existed between both ethnic groups regardless of entry-level qualification (i.e., A-levels and BTECs). As shown, white A-level students demonstrated statistically higher academic attainment ( $t = 2.94$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) and attendance ( $t = 2.13$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) compared to Black African A-level students. The equivalent analysis with BTEC entrants revealed that white BTEC students obtained statistically higher attainment than Black African BTEC students ( $t = 2.46$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ), yet no statistical differences emerged between these groups in attendance ( $t = 1.45$ ,  $p = 0.15$ ). It is also worthwhile noting that Black African BTEC students were statistically lower in attainment than Black African A-level students ( $p = 0.03$ ) yet did not differ in attendance ( $p = 0.23$ ). Thus, in addition to attendance, there may be alternative



**Fig. 6.2** Ethnicity differences in attainment and attendance when categorised by entry-qualification (*Note* \*statistically significant [ $p < 0.05$ ]; ns = statistically non-significant [ $p > 0.05$ ])

underlying factors which may explain why Black African BTEC students demonstrate lower attainment levels.

## MOTIVATIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENT GROUPS

Prior to exploring motivational differences between student groups, it was sought to determine the association between the five SDT-based motivational regulations and academic attainment. A regression model, across the whole sample, revealed that the motivational sub-types only explained a small amount of variability in attainment ( $R^2 = 0.05$ ). Specifically, the autonomous motives of intrinsic motivation ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and identified regulation ( $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) were positively associated with end of year academic attainment. These relations are aligned with previous evidence which found students are more likely to perform better when they develop an intrinsic interest and identify with the value of learning activities (Burton et al., 2006; Vecchione et al., 2014). Conversely, amotivation was the only regulation negatively associated with academic attainment ( $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Amotivated

students will typically develop self-defeating mindsets, synonymous with learned helplessness, which are predictive of both low academic performance and engagement (e.g., Próspero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Próspero et al., 2012).

Deviating somewhat from expectations, no association was found between academic attainment and the controlled motivations of introjection ( $\beta = 0.02$ ,  $p = 0.77$ ) and external regulation ( $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $p = 0.53$ ). The existence of internal pressures and external incentives may be an inevitable part of contemporary university life for all UK-based students, especially considering the recent increases in student fees and pressures relating to post-graduate employment. In this regard, controlled motives may not be an influencing factor of academic attainment per se and have been found to be useful for academic achievement when accompanied by autonomous motivation (see Ratelle et al., 2007; Sturges et al., 2016). It is worthwhile noting, however, that introjected regulation was associated with higher feelings of negative affect in the present sample ( $\beta = 0.25$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.21$ ). Thus, although feelings of introjection may not adversely impact academic attainment, students driven by internal feelings of pressure may likely report poorer well-being at university.

With the above insights in mind, comparisons between white and Black African students revealed the existence of some distinct motivational discrepancies. Black African students were found to be statistically lower in experiences of intrinsic motivation at university compared to their white counterparts ( $t = -2.55$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). This difference may be indicative of why Black African students obtained lower academic attainment. Intrinsic motivation was also found to be associated with students' positive affect at university (including the current statistics) ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.30$ ). Hence, a lack of intrinsic motivation may be detrimental for both Black African students' academic progression and general levels of enjoyment at university. In contrast, Black African students reported higher levels of external regulation at university than white students (keeping the same statistics). ( $t = 2.74$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). These external motives may be underpinned by a high desire from students of colour to attend university to 'give back' to their home communities or families (Guiffrida et al., 2013). In turn, such motives may increase the pressure students put on themselves to achieve highly at university (akin to themes discussed in Chapter 3 of this volume). Indeed, discourse in the follow-up focus groups revealed students from BAME ethnic groups often referred to



family and cultural influences as guiding their decision to study a particular subject. Knowledge of these cultural influences may be important for higher education institutions in considering how to accommodate the aspirations and goals of their BAME cohorts.

Motivational differences also emerged when shifting the focus towards students with different entry-qualifications. A-level entrants were found to report statistically higher levels of intrinsic motivation compared to BTEC entrants ( $t = 2.25, p = 0.03$ ). Perhaps more concerning was that BTEC students were found to display higher levels of amotivation ( $t = 2.08, p = 0.04$ ). This finding is indicative that BTEC entrants seem more susceptible to losing a sense of purpose at university which is often associated with poor academic performance (Próspero et al., 2012) and maladaptive coping (Bailey & Philips, 2016). Drawing on qualitative work by Baker (2020), A-level students are often afforded crucial opportunities in their transition to university such as access to open days and greater outreach activities. These opportunities can broaden A-level students' sense of choice when entering university and reinforce their intrinsic interest. In contrast, these opportunities are often less readily available for BTEC entrants which can restrict their sense of preparedness for higher education institutions. The motivation of BTEC students may also be hampered by a stigma of being seen as 'less academic' than A-level students (Hurrell et al., 2019). Finding ways to close these motivational inequalities may be important in narrowing the attainment gap between A-level and BTEC students.

Motivational discrepancies between A-level and BTEC students were most prominent for Black African, rather than white, students. For example, Black African BTEC students were found to be statistically lower in intrinsic motivation ( $t = -3.40, p < 0.001$ ) and identified regulation ( $t = -3.44, p < 0.001$ ) compared to A-level students of the same ethnicity. Moreover, Black African BTEC students reported higher levels of amotivation ( $t = 1.88, p = 0.06$ ; although this difference only approached statistical significance). These findings point to a distinct motivational issue for Black African BTEC students in which they have a higher tendency to be demotivated and are less likely to identify with the purpose of university. Contextual factors within the university domain have often been cited by students of colour as being detrimental to their motivation, such as being unable to express their cultural norms and being perceived as less capable than their white peers (see Bunce et al., 2019;

Chapter 4 of this volume). This evidence reinforces the call for more equitable learning contexts which can cultivate autonomous motivation for all students regardless of race or prior qualification.

## STUDENT DIFFERENCES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL NEED SATISFACTION

The next analytical step was to investigate whether students' experience of psychological need satisfaction within the university context may explain their motivation and academic attainment. In regard to academic attainment, regression analysis revealed that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness all explained higher academic attainment when analysed in separate models. However, when analysed simultaneously, it was perceived competence which yielded the only significant relationship with academic attainment ( $\beta = 0.38$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.12$ ). These findings are not dissimilar to existing evidence which portray strong associations between students' perceived competence and higher academic performance (Hilts et al., 2018). Nevertheless, as proposed with SDT, the three psychological needs operate in an interconnected manner and should be experienced in equal balance for optimal engagement and performance (e.g., Sheldon & Niemiec, 2006; Tóth-Király et al., 2020).

The fulfilment of students' psychological needs was also associated with adaptive forms of motivation. The satisfaction of all three psychological needs was associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation across the whole sample ( $R^2 = 0.28$ ). As expected, students appear more likely to endorse and act upon their intrinsic interests when they are fostered opportunities for psychological need satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Alternatively, it was students' experience of competence and relatedness satisfaction, but not autonomy, which yielded positive associations with identified motivation ( $R^2 = 0.16$ ). This suggests that students may internalise the value of higher education when they are enabled to feel a sense of capability towards their academic work and develop a sense of connectedness at university. Fostering this process of internalisation may be important for engaging students who may arrive at university without any explicit intrinsic interest (Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). Conversely, the satisfaction of all three psychological needs was negatively associated with student amotivation ( $R^2 = 0.24$ ). Considering that BAME and BTEC students appear to be at higher risk of amotivation, developing initiatives

to better support their psychological needs may be helpful for university institutions.

Further exploration indicated that certain student groups may be prone to experience low satisfaction of distinct psychological needs. Reports of relatedness satisfaction were found to be statistically lower for Black African students compared to white students ( $t = -2.89$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). These lower levels of relatedness were most noticeable for Black African BTEC entrants when compared against Black African A-level students. No significant differences, however, emerged in the satisfaction of autonomy and competence between Black African and white students. Expanding on literature relating to feelings of belongingness (e.g., Cureton & Gravestock, 2019; Masocha, 2015), it seems a lack of relatedness may be a specific issue impacting BAME students' experience within higher education. Moreover, the experience of relatedness satisfaction has been linked to higher levels of academic development and motivation (Beachboard et al., 2011; Müller & Palekčić, 2005), particularly when students' relatedness is experienced towards their academic school and faculty (see Guiffrida et al., 2013). In light of growing reports of BAME students feeling misunderstood or disconnected at university (e.g., Bunce et al., 2019), continual provisions to enhance their feelings of relatedness may be of substantive worth.

Alternatively, the only difference in psychological need satisfaction emerging between A-level and BTEC students related to perceived competence. BTEC students were found to report statistically lower levels of competence satisfaction ( $t = -2.40$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ), as well as higher levels of academic stress ( $t = 2.80$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ), compared to A-level students. Moreover, a difference in competence was the only distinguishing discrepancy between white A-level and BTEC students. Such findings indicate that BTEC students may experience a sense of low academic confidence (Hurrell et al., 2019). Focus group discussions revealed that many BTEC entrants felt unsure of how they were progressing and had minimal understanding about how to be successful at university. This was often indicated by phrases such as 'feeling lost' or 'doubting themselves'. As noted in Chapter 3, higher education typically promotes the ideal of the 'independent learner' (e.g., Hockings et al., 2018; Mckendry & Boyd, 2012), whereby greater value is placed upon self-directed learners who autonomously monitor and manage their own progression. The current findings, however, suggest that BTEC students may not be fully prepared for this, and may require additional support and guidance to

help prepare them to autonomously regulate their own competence. Indeed, a common train of thought raised by BTEC students was that they had to evaluate their academic performance retrospectively, following assessment feedback, rather than via forethought or self-awareness. This sense of uncertainty may derive from feeling unfamiliar with the nature of assessment and teaching offered at university or from having had limited opportunity to cover some of their subject material in extensive detail during their BTEC qualification (Shields & Masardo, 2015).

BTEC entrants also referred to specific statements from lecturers, such as ‘you will/should know this from your A-levels’, as having a profound negative impact on their sense of competence. These statements seemed to portray a subconscious message that BTEC entrants were already somehow lacking or behind those with A-level qualifications. Such assertions may inadvertently validate A-level students’ sense of place at university whilst potentially demotivating those students arriving with more vocational credentials (Baker, 2020). Moreover, BTEC entrants expressed that these early perceptions of feeling unprepared at university often stayed with them over the course of their university course. Thus, the transition into the first year of university may be a pivotal time for institutions to help integrate BTEC students into higher education and emphasise how the skills they may have developed over their BTEC qualifications can be useful at university.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The present research provides insights into students’ motivational experiences at university. Adopting SDT as a theoretical framework offers an alternative perspective into why specific attainment gaps may exist between distinct student cohorts (e.g., Iliescu et al., 2019; Tatsi & Darby, 2018). Undergraduate students who experience greater satisfaction of their psychological needs appear more likely to autonomously engage, perform better, and have a generally more satisfying experience in higher education. These processes will likely be beneficial for all students, yet it is apparent that certain student groups seemingly face unique motivational issues at university. For students from BAME ethnic groups, most notably those of Black ethnicity, a lack of relatedness satisfaction may underlie difficulties at university. It seems unlikely that BAME students will be autonomously motivated at university if they do not feel a sense of belongingness or connectedness with their institution. In addition, a lack of

competence satisfaction may explain why students entering university with BTEC qualifications often lose motivation and perform worse compared to A-level entrants.

It has become increasingly clear that undergraduate cohorts now encompass students from a variety of cultures and educational backgrounds, and whose experience at university can be vastly different from one another (Baker, 2020). Developing structural provisions to best respond to the distinct needs and experiences of students may be valuable in ensuring that every student has the opportunity to maximise their academic potential. Inferring from the present findings, strategies that support the psychological need satisfaction of students may be particularly useful in helping students thrive at university. Such an approach would place an emphasis on the university context adapting to the needs of students, rather than the onus being on the students to fit within university structures. Extrapolating from existing attainment gaps (e.g., Smith, 2017), certain student groups may continue to become void of motivation and underachieve academically if contextual changes are overlooked within higher education.

Embedded within the framework of SDT is the notion that students' psychological need satisfaction will be fostered in contexts that are autonomy supportive (e.g., Jang et al., 2016; Kusurkar & Croiset, 2015). Autonomy support centres on offering flexibility to students so they can make personally meaningful choices over their learning, being accommodating of different cultural norms or beliefs, and providing learning opportunities which are relevant to the values and goals of students (Su & Reeve, 2011). Such contexts will convey an interpersonal tone of understanding which puts the student experience at the heart of any activities or decisions (Reeve, 2015). Importantly, autonomy support is distinct from promoting student self-reliance (Weinstein et al., 2012; Chapter 3 of this volume). Rather, it centres on methods of empowering students to become more volitional in their engagement so that they feel sense of personal relevance, direction, and capability towards their learning endeavours (Reeve & Cheon, 2021; also see Reeve et al., 2022). Structured informational guidance is also integral to autonomy support and instilling a sense of agency in students, with additional support being available should they be required (Hospel & Galand, 2016). Consequently, the notion of autonomy support seems concordant with Broad's (2006: 121) view of independent learning which centres on "teaching

students to learn for themselves and empowering them in their learning whatever the context”.

Extant evidence has indicated that university programmes and support systems may often be delivered in ways that impede students’ sense of autonomy by projecting lecturer identities upon students, emphasising compliance rather than volitional choice, and being incongruent with learners’ academic needs (e.g., Tymms & Peters, 2020). Within the confines of university contexts, autonomy support can be facilitated through structural provisions (e.g., curriculum design, virtual learning platforms, and career opportunities), as well as through the social ambiance created in teaching sessions, on campus, and within support student services. A wealth of SDT-based research has linked student perceptions of autonomy support with a range of adaptive cognitive, emotional, and academic outcomes. For example, the use of autonomy support by academic tutors and graduate teaching assistants (GTA) has been shown to be a strong predictor of students’ autonomous motivation for their course and a higher-grade point average (Langdon et al., 2017; Sheldon et al., 2015). Moreover, the provision of autonomy support has been directly associated with enhanced student satisfaction (Gutiérrez & Tomás, 2019), as well as lower student disengagement (Tze et al., 2014). Developing more autonomy supportive university contexts may therefore be conducive to both higher attainment and student satisfaction scores (i.e., the National Student Survey in the UK [NSS]).

Fostering autonomy supportive approaches within university procedures may also help address distinct motivational issues for student groups. The support of BAME students’ autonomy may help cultivate their sense of relatedness and connectedness, particularly in higher education spaces which are predominantly ‘white’ (Gamsu et al., 2019; Chapter 4 of this volume). The satisfaction of relatedness develops when one perceives their feelings and culture are acknowledged and accepted by those around them (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Students high in relatedness will feel they can be themselves and express truthful opinion without reprimand. A high proportion of BAME students, however, have cited feeling culturally misunderstood and find it difficult to sometimes report incidents of racial prejudice at university (Bunce et al., 2019; Frings et al., 2020). These difficulties have often been attributed to a lack of ethnic diversity on university campuses. In response, reports such as *Leading Routes* (2019) have outlined procedures to diversify the representation of BAME ethnicities across all levels of higher education (i.e.,

management, staff, and students). Greater diversification across universities may help decentre a sense of ‘whiteness’ as being the implicit cultural normal for students and help BAME students feel better understood by others of the same ethnic culture (Alves, 2019; Jones et al., 2020). In such cases, BAME students may be offered more opportunity to engage with academic role models, through relevant pastoral tutoring and peer mentoring programmes, which can cultivate a perception that university is a place relevant to various cultural backgrounds (Peterson & Ramsay, 2021; Stevenson et al., 2019).

The notion of autonomy support also raises the question of how best to maximise BAME students’ actual academic potential, as opposed to simply determining their progression in relation to white students. Campaigns to ‘decolonise’ the curriculum have gained growing acclaim within higher education by seeking ways to better meet the educational needs of ethnic minorities (Begum & Saini, 2019; Bhambra et al., 2018). Data has indicated that BAME students may become detached from taught programmes or prescribed reading lists which are biased towards white or Western perspectives (Morreira & Luckett, 2018). Identifying authors of colour may be difficult within some academic disciplines, yet there appears to be an opportunity to broaden course curricula to reflect different ethnicities and identities (Bird & Pitman, 2020; see Chapter 10 of this volume). This may be exemplified by lecturers providing practical examples of how learning materials may be applied, or be relevant, within various cultural demographics. Such attempts would align well with SDT-based recommendations by helping BAME students internalise the relevance of taught topics with their own cultural identity and foster a sense of connection with the information they learn.

Likewise, BTEC students may benefit from targeted strategies which help enhance the satisfaction of their competence. Competence satisfaction is fostered by instructional guidance that is clearly structured, informational, and delivered in an autonomy supportive way (Jang et al., 2010). This involves communicating how to complete academic work successfully and being accommodating of any student misunderstanding in order to provide tailored guidance. Alleviating academic insecurities is at the core of competence support by offering students a sense of control over their performance, rather than solely emphasising work requirements and deadlines (Naude et al., 2016). Developing methods to offer structured academic guidance may be beneficial in raising BTEC

students' sense of academic confidence. BTEC entrants are typically well-acquainted with completing coursework and module-style teaching, as they are central to a BTEC qualification, yet they are often less prepared for examinations, or the depth of knowledge required at university. This may stem from BTEC courses often providing limited time for students to recap or process the subject content (e.g., Gartland & Smith, 2018; Hurrell et al., 2019). Incorporating supportive initiatives into the fabric of taught modules and programmes (e.g., recapping subject knowledge, academic writing, exam preparation, and referencing) may be useful to ensure all students develop the essential skills required for a respective course.

Furthermore, the detrimental impact that 'assuming' statements appeared to have on BTEC entrants' motivational experience was particularly insightful. For example, staff references to 'A-level knowledge' seemed to deter their academic motivation. In emphasising independent learning (Hockings et al., 2018), higher education institutions may need to be less presumptuous about how prepared and quickly 'non-traditional' students are able to adapt to this 'ideal'. This may be especially prominent given the differences in the delivery of BTEC versus A-level curricula, as well as BAME students' sense of belonging in a predominantly white higher education space. Training for all university staff on topics relating to 'subconscious bias', 'institutional racism', and 'equality, diversity, and inclusion' may help staff bodies become more aware of any potential biases they may have. Such training may also give staff greater confidence to discuss topics regarding *educational inequality* in order to implement effective change. Importantly, these initiatives would need to be embedded within regular working practices and staff training, as opposed to being more ad-hoc exercises which staff are often required to undertake as a 'tick box' exercise.

In the present project, a conscious effort was made to communicate the research findings to University of Kent staff and academic schools via research seminars and school planning meetings. These forums helped raise staffs' awareness of the motivational and attainment discrepancies that existed in the student body and facilitated healthy discussion about how to best address these inequalities at both a school and institutional level. To facilitate open dialogue and staff 'buy in', the research findings were presented alongside practical teaching examples to illustrate how the findings may manifest in practice. This also provided an opportunity to clearly explain terminology, such as *institutional racism*, which



some staff may be unfamiliar with. Similar to frameworks such as the Continuing Professional Academic Development (CPAD), institutionally wide training on matters relating equality and diversity may be valuable in enhancing the psychological needs of minority student groups.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Overall, this work may hopefully garner greater discussion regarding student autonomy and how best to foster it within higher education. Specifically, SDT is a valuable framework to unearth potential new understandings for why certain motivational and academic discrepancies may exist between students. In enhancing students' individual agency, the present findings indicate that nurturing BAME students' sense of relatedness may be worthwhile in nurturing their autonomous engagement at university. Likewise, greater support for BTEC students' perceived competence may be required to help bridge attainment discrepancies with traditional A-level entrants. Knowledge of these unique distinctions may be helpful for higher education policymakers and academic leads in developing targeted ways to address the evident motivational and attainment gaps.

From an applied perspective, considering student motivation through a SDT lens emphasises greater need for university institutions and staff to work closer with their students. Borrowing from the concept of value affirmations (e.g., Brady et al., 2016), the concluding step of the present research was to pilot a brief intervention which offered academic support to students in their exam preparation, whilst getting them to identify with their own values and how the learning material may be personally relevant to them. In general, students who attended the intervention performed better in the respective module exam compared to those who did not attend (although these initial findings would need replicating on a larger scale). Psychological and motivational interventions have often been viewed as ineffective or unnecessary in addressing wider educational issues (e.g., Yeager & Walton, 2011), yet the present findings are suggestive that nurturing students' autonomous motivational experiences at university may be a useful avenue in promoting academic behaviour, regardless of culture, ethnicity, or prior educational background.

It is also worthwhile to note that closing these motivational gaps will not be resolved through a 'quick fix'. Often attempts to address racial inequalities at university have been reserved to one-off or 'tokenistic'

initiatives and lectures, usually held in Black History Month (as discussed in Chapter 4). Similarly, narrowing inequalities between students with different entry-qualifications will unlikely be accomplished through temporary workshops which rely on students to independently volunteer or sign up. Rather, widespread structural, procedural, and contextual revisions may be required which accommodate the autonomy, culture, and values of all students (Peterson & Ramsay, 2021). In fact, some explanation for these attainment gaps may derive from factors external to the university context, such as students' socio-economic status or secondary school education (e.g., Stevens, 2007; Strand, 2010). Outreach strategies which build effective working relationships between schools and universities may help provide aspiring students, from all backgrounds, with a clear and accepted pathway into higher education. Consequently, a collective strategy will likely be needed to integrate educational policy-makers, university management, administration teams, and academic staff in finding the most effective approach to enhance student motivation.

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## CHAPTER 7

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# Doing the Work: Institutional Policy, Research, and Practice for Closing the White-BAME Awarding Gap

*Alexandra De La Torre, Elizabeth Buswell, Ellen Dowie,  
and Jan Moriarty*

### INTRODUCTION

Previous chapters have highlighted how the massification of higher education since the 1990s has resulted in a significant development of widening participation policies (Moore et al., 2022). These are aligned to equality

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policies that, since the introduction of the Equality Act in the UK in 2010, have applied to higher education in terms of equality of opportunity to access, success, and progression for underrepresented groups of students. The implementation of these policies and government targets to increase the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and in particular from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME), have required a significant investment and resource from government and HE providers to meet these targets and, to some extent, comply with their equality duties under the Equality Act.

However, it has been argued that very little has changed in the structures and systems that have underpinned higher education institutions to meet the expectations and aspirations of a rapidly growing and diverse student body (Harrison, 2022; Chapter 1 of this volume). In addition, inequalities embedded in the whole education system continue to exist and are exacerbated in HE. Attainment disparities are a reflection of these inequalities and have increasingly become more prominent between white and BAME students, and within this group, Black students are most impacted by awarding differentials (Williams et al., 2019).

The government response to attainment differential patterns has been addressed through the introduction of regulatory frameworks and mechanisms for compliance in line with the aims and duties of the Office for Students (OfS). Established in 2017 by the Department of Education<sup>1</sup> as an independent public body, the purpose of the OfS is to ensure that HEIs deliver positive outcomes for students in England. It aims to make sure that students from all backgrounds, particularly the most disadvantaged, can access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.<sup>2</sup> These aspirations are operationalised through the requirement for HE institutions to submit an Access and Participation Plan (APP) to the OfS. In their APP, HE providers state their vision, their plans to meet OfS targets in terms of access, success, and progression of students, the activities they propose to undertake, and an account of how outcomes and impact of such activities will be evaluated.

The University of Kent's Student Success team is one of the more ambitious and long-running institutional responses to this framework. Initiated in 2014 under the preceding model of Access Agreements under the stewardship of the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), Student Success was originally conceived as a two-year pilot project to investigate attainment and retention gaps (now referred to as awarding and continuation gaps) and to address associated targets from Kent's APP. This involved

conducting institutional research into the causes contributing to attainment gaps, while concurrently delivering experimental, predominantly student-facing, interventions to establish ‘what works’ in improving academic attainment.

There were strong grounds for initiating such a project at Kent. Between 2008 and 2012 the attainment gap for BAME students reached 19 per cent, which mirrored the national picture, but in some academic schools the gap was as large as 25 per cent. Moreover, the data available at the time indicated that these gaps persisted regardless of entry grades. This prompted senior leaders to develop a two-pronged action strategy to address these gaps. The first was to conduct original research on the attainment differentials across the schools, utilising qualitative as well as quantitative methods. The second emerged from the need to work in collaboration with academic schools and gather thoughts and ideas from heads on how to address the attainment gaps at school level. Concurrent to the research, nine academic schools with the widest gaps were selected and funded to take a creative, and at the time experimental, approach to reducing them. This was overseen by a governance structure including a steering group led by members of the University’s senior leadership team, and research and evaluation committee featuring research experts and academic representatives from across Kent’s subject areas and UK campuses.

This strategy continues to underpin Student Success work today, though over this period its structure and organisation has altered significantly. Following this initial pilot phase, ‘phase two’ saw Student Success become a targeted development project with greater central oversight to drive the agenda and provide expert resourcing. The third and current phase has sought to consolidate a programme that could be delivered across the whole University—‘mainstreaming’, but with guided specialist central support. Across these phases, lessons have been learnt on how best to challenge the student deficit approach which informed the delivery of many initial institutional responses, as well as address the *structural* inequalities preventing BAME students from succeeding and progressing in higher education (Miller, 2016).

The following sections of this chapter outline the features of each phase, the academic debates, and key events informing research and practice. They explore how principles, processes, and systems have been developed within the institution that have enabled Student Success to become a central and relevant fixture within the University’s equality,

diversity, and inclusion (EDI) policies and practices. We also highlight the opportunities brought by key events and social debates that have informed Student Success approaches to research, practice, and student and academic engagement. It provides a critical self-reflection of the challenges faced through the journey and those that continue to exist, the lessons learnt, and plans for the future.

### PHASE ONE (2014–2016): FROM STUDENT DEFICIT TO POSITIVE ACTION

Financial devolution was the model for the pilot phase of the Student Success project. As awarding and continuation gaps were considered the responsibility of academic schools, it was felt that the schools themselves were best placed to develop strategies to reduce these gaps but lacked adequate finances to implement them. The process of operationalising this vision was thus devolved to nine academic schools that voluntarily expressed interest in participating in the pilot project having been presented with data showing their attainment differentials. Senior leaders in each school were required to apply for funding, indicating their intent for rollout and use of resources. Progress was monitored through the schools' reporting to Student Success governing committees—the aforementioned steering and research and evaluation groups—which were responsible for defining the project's mission and ensuring that it met the requirements and commitments of the University's access agreement and wider EDI agenda.

As the schools were targeted on the basis of having the largest gaps, some eagerly accepted the invitation while others were initially reluctant, and it took time to get all on board. Once these schools presented their plans, it was hoped that each school had at least one senior leader who would have an interest and concern about the awarding gaps disparity. At the time, participating schools opted to use some of the resources to recruit Project Officers to develop interventions aimed at improving outcomes for students most affected by attainment differentials, and to collect data for central analysis. There were no available models, no blueprint for change, and creativity was encouraged. This was supported through the Student Success University Network (SSUN), which brought together project officers (along with the central project team and researchers) each month to share good practice, disseminate research findings, and receive training on data systems and EDI policies.

This resulted in innovative initiatives that were simultaneously creating new debates and a momentum for Student Success at Kent.

Every school involved in the original pilot developed initiatives with the aim to reduce the white-BAME awarding gap. However, at the time there was very little understanding and knowledge of these differentials and how they should be addressed. Consequently, this tended to produce interventions that took a student deficit approach. Participating schools rolled out skills workshops, support sessions, peer mentoring, improvements to induction and orientation, and though well-intentioned, the mentality of student *support* overrode the need for student *success*. In an institution with predominantly white European staff, discussions about race were rare beyond areas of academic specialism. It was relatively straightforward to engage staff in interventions to ‘fix’ students to help them to adapt to the HE environment, the University’s well-established systems, and its overarching institutional culture. BAME students were thus expected to engage with interventions without the institution questioning underlying causes, while attempts to discuss the inequities created and sustained by these systems and culture proved more challenging.

Despite these challenges, however, the two main components of the pilot project managed to generate pathways for meaningful action. The first component was the quality and granularity of the institutional data that became available at the time. However, without clear and careful contextualisation, such data could be easily misinterpreted. Data was initially presented as ‘speaking for itself’, but this all too easily led academics and practitioners to focus on BAME students as if *they* were the problem to be fixed. This highlighted the imperative need to develop data literacy among Student Success professional services and academic staff, but also resulted in significant efforts to ensure that the data was carefully contextualised within literatures on race and HE.

The second component was institutional research, running concurrently with action research interventions in the schools, which encouraged institutional practices to work towards cultural change. The importance of qualitative as well as quantitative institutional research was paramount from the start, and one of the distinctive features that initially distinguished the Student Success project from its equivalents across the sector. As evidenced throughout this book, themes such as student transition and adaptation, assessment and feedback, academic tuition, and belongingness ensured that school action plans were tailored to a framework of institution-specific research findings, allowing for the development of

focused actions in areas that were more likely to see positive outcomes. This institutional self-knowledge was valuable for countering deficit and outdated assumptions about students and resulted in a greater understanding of these areas of research. For example, data on BAME expectations discussed in Chapter 3 arguably should not come as a surprise, but qualitative evidence gathered at the time was important for steering away from the perception that the awarding gap reflected BAME students' relative lack of motivation. This forced academic leaders to think about conversations and experiences that BAME students were not sharing with advisers and support officers, exposing a wider need for university staff to think more self-critically about how they engaged with students of colour.

This was still the early days of the project, however, and at a time when Student Success was led by a predominantly white workforce. Early conversations were enthusiastic but, on reflection, naïve. Project staff reflected on how to develop a more critical debate and assessment of the contextual and structural causes of attainment differentials, drawing in particular from the lessons of critical race theory (CRT). This prompted the team to organise a national conference called *Mind the Gap* in 2016, hosted at Kent's Canterbury campus. Significantly, the event brought together both HE practitioners and scholars of race and ethnicity to discuss the structural foundations of the awarding gap. High-profile academics such as Kalwant Bhopal, Leon Tikly, Kehinde Andrews, and Robbie Shilliam, as well as HE specialists and senior HE leaders from OFFA such as Les Ebdon were invited to deliver keynotes and act as panel discussants.

In combining these fields, the conference helped foreground some of the more challenging issues and debates around issues such as white privilege and racialised microaggressions. Significantly, it prompted senior managers at Kent to recognise some of the deeper and broader issues relating to differential attainment, and in hindsight the conference came to represent a turning point for Student Success. One of its outcomes was the foundation of a cultural competence training programme for academic and professional staff. Moreover, it sowed the seeds for pursuing organisational change, rather than student change, a less comfortable but ultimately more profound approach for addressing systemic inequity.

The conference also provided momentum for the University to strengthen staff buy-in from academics. Liberal complacency as described by Back (2004) has long made self-criticism difficult in HE, and even supportive staff may realistically have time to devote for just one of the

many liberation/equity projects and networks that typically exist within universities, be it Athena SWAN, LGBTQ networks, or disability forums. Academics were sometimes wary of Student Success taking an interest in their work, feeling that the sanctity of curriculum should protect them from outside interference. There were understandable reasons for this, as staff concerns about a growing audit culture and massification and professionalisation risked diminishing a sense of agency in their own work. Such challenges indirectly influenced the initial suite of Student Success interventions, as project officers ultimately found it easier to pursue deficit ‘add-ons’ than engage with academic staff over matters relating to programme curriculum or assessment. To overcome this challenge, academic engagement strategies focused on knowledge transfer via institutional events such as the aforementioned national conference, annual symposia, a research seminar series, and the regular dissemination of newsletters. Some of these activities were successful in establishing an initial network of supportive advocates across all spheres of the University but after a period an echo-chamber effect was evident, with strategies failing to engage harder-to-reach colleagues.

In this context, the transition to the second phase of the Student Success project was informed by key lessons learnt from the journey of its first phase. These lessons included: the need to increase efforts to engage academic staff in the understanding and development of academic practices to address attainment differentials, challenging the student deficit approach, and developing a theoretical grounding to inform interventions and practices based on theoretical frameworks such as CRT and literature on decolonisation of the curriculum in HE. On the operational side of Student Success, it became evident from phase one that there was a paramount need to consolidate a central team while providing human resource within the schools to implement interventions. A centralised approach to the planning and development of Student Success through an overarching implementation framework, and the need to develop consistent mechanisms of data collection monitoring and reporting, combined with a localised resource in each of the schools, became a major undertaking in the planning of phase two.



## PHASE TWO (2017–2020): INCREASING RESOURCE AND SCOPE FOR GREATER ENGAGEMENT

The transition to phase two involved a significant shift from phase one, particularly in the operational setup of the project. While it retained the fundamental principles and original aims of Student Success and the sector-wide policies that informed its work, new structures and mechanisms were put in place to reach out to a wider level of engagement of students and academic staff. Leadership and governance platforms were consolidated, levelling up decision-making powers, accountability, and representation. The Student Success implementation framework was enhanced by improving the mechanisms for data collection, monitoring, and reporting on the delivery and implementation of interventions, and indicators and expected outcomes were better defined to inform an evaluation framework to measure the impact of Student Success at a micro and macro level. These transformations also laid the groundwork for the consolidation of Student Success as a mainstreamed ongoing programme across the whole University in phase three. In this sense, phase two was a watershed moment for advancing our understanding of awarding gaps and processes of engagement with student platforms and with academic staff.

A transformative feature of phase two was the focused efforts to better embed Student Success work within learning and teaching, as well as pressing for cultural change. This entailed a targeted approach to reach out to schools with significant awarding gaps rather than recruiting schools that voluntarily wanted to join the pilot. Making the case for Student Success in these schools required a high level of leadership engagement but also a genuine conversation and negotiation with professional and academic staff to find the most suitable approach. This involved an operational shift from phase one. The expectation that school-based project officers would lead Student Success interventions had proven challenging as they lacked influence in teaching and academic practices. This limited their capacity to widen the scope of student interventions and influence areas such as curriculum and assessment.

Consequently, in phase two project officers within each participating academic school were accompanied by dedicated Student Success Lecturers (SSLs). These lecturers were part of the school's teaching staff, which enabled greater academic engagement, with ongoing data and administrative support provided by the project officers. Initially, this new

staff structure allowed for more fluid conversation between the schools and the central team. Schools were encouraged to produce plans that circumvented a student deficit approach, such as involving academics in activities to reflect on their own teaching practices. In specific terms, this included the development of the Diversity Mark framework, an initiative that engaged academics and students in a conversation about the diversity and representation of authors from different backgrounds in reading lists and curriculum content (see Chapter 10 of this book). The SSLs and project officers were also instrumental in the establishment of Student Success networks within the schools to help join up with existing academic and student support structures such as EDI committee, Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) coordinators, and directors of education.

The introduction of SSLs required greater financial outlay from the University than had been the case in phase one. By this point, project interventions had achieved small reductions in the white-BAME awarding gap, but Kent was not obligated to continue this investment under the Government's new Access and Participation Plan model (though any significant strategy change would require robust explanation). Nevertheless, continued senior leadership buy-in during this time was helped in no small amount by Student Success's recognition in two key public-facing honours. In 2017, the Project team won the award for 'Outstanding Support for Students' at the Times Higher Education awards. The same year, Student Success featured prominently in the University's TEF submission, resulting in Kent being awarded a 'Gold' award. This strengthened the argument for sustaining—and increasing—financial investment in Student Success for phase two as these successes provided incontrovertible evidence that the University's investment was beginning to pay dividends.

Expanded investment enabled the strengthening of the Student Success central team, providing it with the resources to plan, develop, coordinate, and oversee the all-encompassing implementation framework across targeted schools, as well as manage the budget allocated to cover staff costs and intervention delivery. This was supported by the recruitment of a Data and Evaluation Manager, a Systems Development Manager, an Assistant Manager, and two central Development Officers (DOs) to work more closely with academic schools. Regular data reports and updates on school awarding gaps were developed to improve institutional practices such as academic tuition (see Chapter 8). The central

team also supported avenues for the development of structures within targeted schools to embed interventions and practices on an ongoing basis responding to their own context, specific awarding gaps, and needs.

A key principle for phase two was the advancing of meaningful cultural and structural change across the institution. This incorporated the acknowledgement that ‘success’ cannot be framed primarily by the realisation of targets and benchmarks, and that something as structural as the awarding gap requires sustained cultural change (Thomas, 2012). To this end, the central team helped facilitate the grassroots development of student representation that supported spaces and opportunities for students to voice their views and concerns. It funded student initiatives to influence change such as Kent Union’s ‘BAME Student Voices’ research conducted in 2016–2017, findings from which feature in Chapter 4 of this book. The report’s recommendations continue to hold the University to account and are monitored by a collaborative working group. It also prompted a series of conversations between the union and the African Caribbean Society (ACS), to provide a space for opinions to be shared. These were not always comfortable conversations, with both the University and the union facing criticism, but they provided valuable insights relating to Black students’ experiences and perceived lack of representation. Over the next three years, Kent Union recruited its first Black presidents Aaron Thompson and Sacha Langeveldt, and a group of students from Kent’s Law School formed the University’s first ‘Decolonise’ collective (Thomas & Jivraj, 2020). The collective conducted their own research, hosted a conference, and produced their own manifesto, with Student Success playing a supportive role in event planning and administration.

In the meantime, SSLs at schools were pushing for greater representation of BAME speakers in school seminars and student events and were leading debates and events to engage more academics in discussions about attainment differentials. This created momentum for academic buy-in and a domino effect across a number of schools. As a result, Student Success plans started to incorporate more and more staff interventions, re-balancing the weight hitherto given to student interventions. Nevertheless, pushing for cultural change under this model was shown to have its limitations. SSL roles recruited mostly junior-level academics, some of whom lacked sufficient institutional knowledge to effect meaningful change in their own schools. In addition, subject-specific expertise was countered by a relative lack of skill in HE strategy and evaluation,

creating a tension between their Student Success remit and their duties as teaching staff within school structures. The former aspect of their role was supported centrally by a Student Success staff network which provided a forum for sharing good practice, disseminating research findings, and consulting and agreeing on mechanisms for monitoring and reporting. This helped promote a balanced approach to the implementation of Student Success interventions across the institution, as well as avoiding student deficit approaches, but within schools SSLs remained limited in their capacity to influence teaching practices and curriculum development beyond their own modules.

This placed greater significance on the role of the SSUN network. In phase two, it provided a space for SSLs to share their own experiences and strategies to influence academic practices, and to consult and agree on mechanisms for monitoring and reporting that became consistently adopted across all academic schools. Funds were also made available for SSLs and project officers to attend or present at EDI conferences and workshops hosted by Advance HE, HEFCE, and BERA, among others. The network was fundamental for ensuring a balanced approach in the implementation of Student Success interventions across the institution, while developing interventions geared towards structural and cultural change.

The network was also a key space for driving improvements in the mechanisms for monitoring and data collection across the schools. This allowed schools to move from phase one's experimental approach, which was undermined by the absence of data and suitable monitoring systems, to a more consistent model for measuring the impact and effectiveness of interventions. This set the foundations for the development of the Student Success Evaluation Framework, informed by the Theory of Change. This initially provided a process evaluation mechanism, which evolved into a systematic approach to intervention planning and a road map (Fox et al., 2017) to address attainment differentials across academic schools by considering their particular context and circumstances. The Theory of Change also provided the university with an evidence-based model of impact assessment for Student Success interventions at a time when examples and models of evaluation were very scarce in the higher education sector.

The framework was designed to meet new requirements from OFS for reporting progress on the University APP targets. Expectations for a strategy of impact evaluation includes three dimensions: the narrative

evidence through Theory of Change applications; the analysis of the data through empirical enquiry to establish correlations or associations between participation in interventions and improved attainment; and the assessment of causality through the evidence collected when using control or comparison groups. The standards of evidence guidance from the OfS illustrates the extent of the challenge for higher education institutions to meet these expectations in terms of the quality and accuracy of data and evidence presented when reporting progress (OfS, 2019). As a result, a number of discussion forums and evaluation networks have evolved within the higher education sector to overcome these challenges through generating discussion and sharing practice. These include the NERUPI network (Evaluating & Researching University Participation Interventions) and TASO (Transforming Access and Students Outcomes in Higher Education).

The Student Success evaluation framework evolved under two distinct strands of evaluation—process evaluation and impact evaluation—which were combined into three main methodologies of analysis: Theory of Change, as a means to evaluate the process of implementation; mathematical testing, to address the empirical enquiry in terms of impact; and Contribution Analysis, which brings together Theory of Change and mathematical testing to establish the contribution causal chains of outcomes that lead to the impact of the Student Success interventions. The Theory of Change strand has become instrumental for explaining how Student Success activities and interventions were defined to produce a series of expected outcomes that should contribute to, and have an impact on, the reduction of attainment differentials at a micro level. In principle, theories of change can be developed for any level of intervention, programme, or policy (Rogers, 2014) and for Student Success this framework assisted in the mapping of the different aspects of the implementation cycle, including specific steps with regard to the engagement process, decision making around indicators and expected outcomes, contextual analysis, the preconditions for change, definition of priorities and timeframe, and monitoring and evaluation. Adopting a Theory of Change has provided the mechanism to trace evidence of outcomes and impacts resulting from the implementation of Student Success interventions across the University (Fig. 7.1).

The mathematical testing of the Evaluation Framework was developed in line with the ongoing monitoring and data analysis of students' attainment and attendance and alongside the record of students' participation

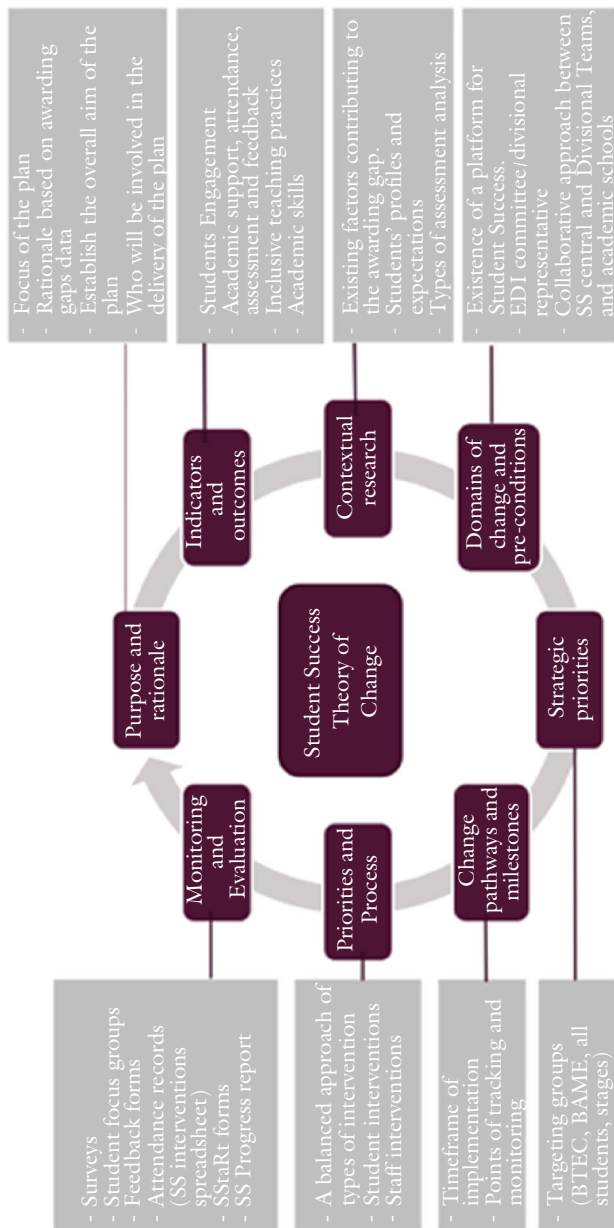


Fig. 7.1 Student success theory of change

in the interventions. To this end, schools have been required to keep accurate information on student attendance at a variety of interventions which have been collated centrally for evaluation. Through this methodology of analysis, the evaluation team has been able to identify the interventions delivered in the schools during the academic year which have shown correlations with improvement in attainment and attendance. The test also allowed the team to extract the types of interventions that mathematically show correlations for these interventions to be subjected to Contribution Analysis, our third methodology of analysis. Contribution Analysis helps to define the causality chain of the outcomes and impact of an intervention (Mayne, 2017). Through this technique the evaluation team was able to assess if an intervention has contributed to the observed outcomes, such as an increase in attendance and attainment, by tracing all the stages of implementation and capturing the evidence collected during this process. This also allowed the team to verify the theories of change and assumptions made around the expected outcomes of an intervention to find plausible association between activities, outcomes, and impact (White & Phillips, 2012).

The process of developing this framework prompted new challenges for Student Success staff, particularly those embedded in academic schools. Not only was the process of collecting and recording evaluation data time-consuming there was also a lack of experience in data collection, the evaluation of academic practice, and knowledge of the different approaches to, and conditions for, measuring impact. It was evident that students' enjoyment alone was not sufficient to demonstrate the impact of these activities, and in some instances such an approach diverted from the core aim of reducing awarding gaps. The SSUN network represented a key space for providing staff training and support for managing these issues. As the evaluation framework was progressing in its form and content, it required shifting back to collecting mainly quantitative data, as was the case in phase one, while also emphasising the importance of students' qualitative feedback to support the data.

It was also important that data collected through the development of the evaluation framework was contextualised to the particular issues concerning the schools implementing Student Success interventions. In addition, targets from OfS were at the time mainly quantitative and meant to be a clear illustration of the systemic issues that prevented BAME students from achieving and succeeding in their education journey. However, developing a culture of evaluation in phase two did enable the

central team to emphasise progress and recognise the initiatives undertaken by academic staff, as well as attribute students' improvement and academic performance to these activities. The Student Success evaluation also demonstrated where resource was best placed, a key advantage when considering academics' limited time to commit to interventions.

To facilitate continuous monitoring of these gaps and to avoid a 'rear-view mirror' approach (by which point the university might have already failed in supporting students who have since graduated), multiple check-points became the norm to identify areas of concern before they became definitive. This also enabled the identification of optimal timings for interventions to be most efficacious. Although there have been differing check-points for continuation and awarding of students, it became apparent that monitoring at least termly on attainment, and as often as possible on attendance, allowed for the early identification of students at risk of withdrawing or failing, and the capacity to provide better support for those students and the academic schools they belonged to.

By the end of phase two, Student Success had reached its highest level of engagement across the University, with 12 academic schools formally involved, and four of the remaining eight in discussion about their future participation. The evaluation framework continued to evolve as a reflective tool to review the practices and interventions, though difficulties remained in assessing their impact. These were not easy to quantify, and challenges persisted with regard to gathering data and evidence of impact in an accurate, sustainable, and consistent manner. It remained clear to the central team that student-based interventions should not be the only activities to focus on, as these would prevent the project moving away from the student deficit approach. Structural and sustainable change was required to address the University's culture and challenge systematic inequalities contributing to awarding gaps. Yet the transition period to the third phase featured major challenges due to organisational changes within the University, followed soon after by the catastrophic effects of the Covid-19 global pandemic.

### PHASE THREE (2020–): CONSOLIDATION AND MAINSTREAMING

At the time of entering the mainstreaming phase of Student Success, evidence pointed consistently towards meeting the OfS targets on the white-BAME awarding gap at Kent. This was particularly evident in



most of the schools with a more long-term trajectory in implementing Student Success interventions. Targeted schools were delivering interventions which followed much-improved implementation mechanisms for monitoring and reporting. The balance between student and academic staff interventions was also becoming more evident. Initiatives around decolonising the curriculum found support in an increasing number of schools through the Diversity Mark programme (see Chapter 10), with BAME students more involved in discussions about the diversity of module reading lists. Interventions such as ‘Inspirational Speaker’ seminar series brought together a diverse body of participants and audiences, generating meaningful debates on how to redress racial inequalities and create a more inclusive education community. These were significant initiatives directed towards achieving cultural change at a time where the EDI Strategy was finally on the way to becoming a reality at the University.

Given how the landscape was changing for Student Success both internally and externally, these advances were certainly timely. On the one hand, the proportion of BAME undergraduates studying at Kent had surpassed 40 per cent, intensifying the need to provide institutional platforms and interventions that were collaborative and empowered the student voice.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the national landscape saw increasing social and political awareness of BAME perspectives within HE. Informed by decolonise and Black Lives Matter movements, both of which had gained considerable traction in the UK by 2020, and the growing influence of CRT perspectives, higher education institutions became the focus of attention to support students and assert their progressive credentials. This provided leverage for Student Success’s aim of mainstreaming its agenda across all schools within the University.

‘Mainstreaming’ is not a strategy without risk in HE. Crofts’ (2013) study, for example, warns that in practice it can risk mean incorporating EDI targets into existing managerial workloads at the expense of specialised leadership and support. In this context, mainstreaming effectively means de-prioritisation, as managers are likely to lack the knowledge, resourcing, or motivation to make meaningful progress in these areas. The ongoing work of the central team thus remained paramount for any mainstreaming agenda to operate successfully. Indeed, the combination of greater embeddedness of Student Success priorities in levels of management between senior leadership in academic schools and centrally located DOs, had become a successful formula to provide bespoke support for

schools to develop their own interventions and strategies. The DOs' expertise was built and drawn from accumulated learning of good practice over years, high data analysis skills, and operational knowledge at the central team. This model continues to be very effective in reaching out to a wide range of academics and students and to consolidate Student Success practices.

However, longstanding challenges in obtaining accurate, robust, and consistent data collection and academic engagement were escalated by a period of significant organisational change, with the University migrating from a faculty to a divisional structure made up of new clusters of academic schools in late 2020. The restructuring was controversial, but to some extent provided an opportunity for Student Success to become mainstreamed in all the academic schools. Across all divisions and across the institution, the need to embed the principles of the Student Success agenda became apparent, with the understanding that the white-BAME awarding gap was not a problem of a single school or group of schools but was, and continues to be, an institutional problem that needs to be addressed at an institutional level.

In addition, as part of the reorganising strategy the Student Success team was relocated from access and participation to the education directorate. The move provided an avenue for the Student Success team to highlight and develop links with other areas of work within the directorate, such as the work on the University's Race Equality Charter and Anti-Racism Strategy, as well as learning and teaching support including the training of new academics. In practical terms, this meant that the central team were no longer employed on 2–3-year rolling contracts. Having suffered job insecurity and staff turnover for many years, this provided a much-needed foundation for consolidating institutional expertise and memory while allowing Student Success to start engaging in long-term strategic planning.

However, cascading this strategic planning across the institution was still hampered by the need to maintain a careful balance between central organisational planning and support, and preserving the autonomy and subject-specific knowledge of schools and divisions. Schools continued to produce their own Student Success plans in response to their own context, their students' needs and to reduce their specific attainment differentials with the support of the central team. Nevertheless, the oversight of such interventions and the alignment of the Student Success strategy across all schools was the responsibility of divisional structures. This created

some tensions between schools and the division they belonged to in terms of their scope and decision-making remits. Student Success and student experience functions became jointly the responsibility of divisional Student Success and Attainment Managers, with the support of a Student Experience Coordinator and Officer. The definition of these roles intrinsically exposed a disparity of prioritisation and time dedicated to both agendas, but it also exposed the confusion between the two.

As phase three progressed, the Student Success agenda continued to be accountable for the University meeting its APP targets, and in particular the white-BAME and white-Black awarding gaps. Interventions under these remits therefore still needed to be defined to meet this purpose. While student experience served to increase student satisfaction and performance, there were not any particular equality targets in this area. In addition, the evaluation mechanisms to measure the outcomes of Student Success and student experience differ. While the quality of the students' experience has been measured through the rankings of the National Student Survey, Student Success outcomes are measured by the OfS assessment of the reduction of awarding gaps according to the University APP commitments. This involves penalty implications if the University consistently fails to meet these reduction targets.

Nevertheless, since its inception the Student Success central team has supported and encouraged the inclusion of student experience initiatives into its plans, provided these are aligned to the Student Success indicators and data collection requirements. The benefits of this approach have resulted in the provision of additional resource from the Student Success central team budget to student experience initiatives. Some of these programmes have included support to enhance the role and scope of academic peer mentoring, initiatives around academic tuition, and academic skills. In some schools, these activities have contributed to raising attainment and attendance levels for BAME students in particular, as revealed by the evaluation pilot results.

The team's unique position of having a dedicated research team to maintain ongoing institutional research on attainment differentials continues to provide an evidence-based approach to developing interventions to support students most affected by attainment differentials. Mainstreaming has enabled the team to develop more long-term research projects which would not have been possible in the previous context, including a 3-year qualitative longitudinal study of white and BAME undergraduates, as well as follow-up on the 2016 Student Voices report

through a new study of Black extracurricular belongingness. The consolidation of Student Success expertise and increased school engagement have also allowed opportunities for building networks and supporting education-specific initiatives, such as the One Hour Degree,<sup>4</sup> Diversity Mark, and the BAME staff network. The latter especially has brought together a number of advocates to focus on cultural change, with senior BAME staff of colour given a platform to encourage management to recognise structural issues while also using their knowledge of the organisation to gain leverage and academic buy-in.

The contextual factors determining the development of the mainstreaming phase of Student Success at Kent were not the sole factors influencing new ways of working of the central team in particular, and the University in general. Since 2020, the University was subjected to extreme pressures to deliver its functions when the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world. Although it is outside the scope of this chapter to discuss further the complexity and impact of the pandemic on student outcomes, it is important to briefly mention, and not to ignore, how the pandemic transformed ways of working for the University, and how this influenced Student Success implementation and delivery.

The global Covid-19 pandemic exposed existing inequalities affecting the Black and the BAME community. Exponential cases of Covid-19 among this community showed how far the UK was from being an equal society. Poverty and social exclusion underpinned structural causes that increased the vulnerability and risk of the BAME community. Like many universities, Kent was acutely aware of how these factors affected BAME students and their families, recognising that immediate action was required to mitigate the impact of Covid-19 for these students and the university community as a whole. Covid-19 restrictions necessitated that the University reach out to students and to keep them up to speed with online learning, while introducing quick mechanisms of support to address issues such as digital poverty, food poverty, and mental health, among other issues. In addition, the University introduced ‘no detriment’ policies to facilitate examinations and assessments to take into account how the pandemic and lockdown was affecting students’ performance in assessed work.

The impact of these policies on overall variations in awarding gaps across the institution is still unknown and more retrospective analysis of the data on degree classification during the Covid-19 period needs

further interrogation. However, in terms of Student Success implementation, the move to online interventions prompted a significant increase in student and staff attendance, and the number of interventions delivered in most of the schools also increased. The monitoring and recording of these interventions benefited from the automatic records provided by online platforms used across the university for online teaching. At the time of writing, the evaluation of the interventions for the academic year of 2020–2021 is still ongoing. However, following the pilot and testing of the Evaluation Framework for the years 2019–2020 already completed, it is hoped that the outcome of the evaluation of both years will provide a comprehensive picture of the impact of Student Success interventions on BAME students and awarding differentials, considering the challenging circumstances of this period.

### LESSONS LEARNT: REFLECTING ON THE STUDENT SUCCESS JOURNEY

This final section of this chapter summarises some of the key lessons that will continue to inform Student Success practices and strategies to achieve a greater engagement of the academic community and impact on the reduction of awarding differentials at the University of Kent.

The key difference between the phase one pilot phase and phase two was the shift from student-focused interventions that gained staff approval, to initiatives that challenged staff attitudes and behaviours, policies, and procedures. Interventions in the early stage tended to either support the staff in schools or not require much input from them: summer schools, skills workshops, peer mentoring programmes. In phase two, the targeted approach for which schools were funded was mirrored by the way staff worked in those schools.

There is no doubt that phase two broadened the scope of work, with the recruitment of full-time academic posts to develop and challenge teaching and assessment practices and, alongside central team researchers, to contribute to institutional research. This research revealed that academic outcomes were dependent on more than the availability of services for students. Curriculum, belonging, transition, the expectation that students must adapt to the dominant culture, all impacted on how well students were able to achieve. Senior leaders became aware that the very fabric of the institution was potentially disadvantaging some of its

students and that these disadvantages were linked to race, socio-economic status, age, and entry qualifications.

Leaders within academic schools called for dedicated academic staff to bring the same innovative approach that project officers had engendered in the pilot phase, but with a greater focus on teaching and learning. It was proposed that this approach would increase academic buy-in and stimulate conversations about teaching practice. Student Success lecturer posts were developed, in most cases to run alongside project staff, though their cost meant funding could not be provided to all schools. The new model was controversial, and ultimately less successful at engendering culture change than anticipated. Though some innovative techniques and examples of good teaching practice were developed, some of which continue today, dissemination of good practice across entire academic schools was limited.

There are positives and negatives in devolving project staff and resources to academic schools. School staff can have a unique school perspective of a particular problem and tailor their interventions for that environment. School specialists, whether academic or not, provide insights into those environments. However, it has become apparent through all these years of implementation, that developing a Student Success agenda within schools does not always require school or subject specialists. This work requires data specialists, development staff, curriculum and teaching specialists and researchers, alongside monitoring and reporting procedures, cross departmental evaluation, and accountability.

Investing in a broad spectrum of initiatives has been necessary to gain impetus. A more scientific approach, based on testing single interventions, may have provided proof of efficacy, but would not have injected the urgency for institutional change. Neither would it have reduced awarding gaps quickly enough. Evaluating what works has therefore been more challenging. There have been instances where academic schools have developed extremely popular and well-attended schemes of work, but tracking data has clearly indicated that these have had little effect on academic outcomes. Such situations make for difficult choices about future investment; they become a calculation between a school environment that will reflect well in the National Student Survey or making the unpopular decisions to discontinue activities that are not having the desired impact in terms of academic outcomes, even if students show satisfaction with these interventions. Activities and interventions have

predominantly been driven towards meeting pre-set targets, which has satisfied the need for measurable gains, but there is still a need for interventions and work that is wider in scope and looks at altering the culture organically.

The empirical approach endorsed and resourced by the University had created valuable lessons: the importance of ongoing research that demands institutional self-reflection; a centrally driven, locally delivered model that maximises the reach of specialist skills; and the need for a long-term commitment that sees beyond ‘fixing’ awarding gaps to developing and maintaining equity in higher education. With several years of meaningful data since the inception of Student Success, a sustainable model for the future has been designed that is maximising the benefits of specialist staff inside the central team, with a network of academic and professional staff across schools and academic divisions.

Over time, the Student Success team has developed a set of strategies for increasing staff buy-in, reflecting a pragmatic approach to achieve Student Success objectives and requirements. The Theory of Change framework has also helped set mutual expectations and ensure these are realistic and that evaluation is built in from the start of the planning of interventions. It has also become evident over the years that strategies to engage staff need to be flexible, taking account of the audience, the history of contact with the different schools, background information and data, and the emphasis placed on both the moral case, in terms of ethical and fairness principles to reduce gaps and build trust, and the business case, supporting student recruitment, emphasising the conditions of registration as a Higher Education Provider and highlighting the implications for not meeting targets. More granular data has also been important in stimulating staff interest in their own student trends.

In addition, a key priority for the Student Success team is the continued support for research initiatives led by students to support our understanding of student experiences in the institution. At time of writing, new student-led research is underway—The Black Student Voices Project—to investigate and understand the complexities of the experience of Black students at the University of Kent. This research is again in collaboration with Kent Student Union, employing student researchers.

It has been important to recognise that individuals working in the institution are at different stages of learning about these issues and may express insensitive views based on lack of knowledge and understanding of the complexities of awarding gaps, and it has been necessary to address

these in a constructive and engaging way. Encouraging some ‘quick win’ interventions has to some extent been effective in building trust and buy-in as a precursor for more challenging interventions further down the line.

In reflecting how to approach Student Success engagement, one of the lessons learnt is to balance strategies with a willingness to listen to staff and to be sensitive to how Student Success works. Academic schools are sometimes accused of being too introspective, but this can also belie significant differences in how education and student support is delivered. It has been fundamental to recognise that one sole model does not fit all contexts; differences in school size, recruitment profile, types of learning, campus, are especially important in systems development. Being mindful of the risks of relying too much on specific individuals to carry this work at a school level has also been an important lesson. Promotions, sabbaticals, and staff leaving or taking on new roles, can all affect sustainability of buy-in and success of interventions. For this reason, it has become a key part of the Student Success implementation strategy to make sure that advocates of this work report up the chain, while ensuring that senior leaders repeat messages from above to maximise coverage of the whole chain of command.

The authors of this chapter see the future of Student Success as an exciting venture with promising prospects and important goals to accomplish. For the programme to develop further, two key priority areas are recognised. First, maintaining stable resources and expertise within the central team will make a significant difference in addressing the remaining challenges the team continue to experience in terms of Student Success implementation. Second, there is a need to embrace and maximise the opportunities brought from the consolidation of a solid and well-grounded structure for Student Success under the University’s education directorate. At the time of writing, a new Student Success programme is emerging to complement the existing work of the central team, to support and enhance academic engagement, and to respond to the constraints faced in evaluating interventions that are meant to address cultural change in teaching and learning. The new What Works at Kent programme is embarking on a journey to set the foundations for an evaluation framework that will allow the Student Success central team, on an ongoing basis, to research and increase its understanding of the impact of staff interventions and academic practices on student outcomes, and to assess



how these contribute to addressing the unexplained awarding and continuation gaps. The What Works Evaluation Framework aims to measure and evidence educational gains as required by the TEF in terms of student outcomes, through a process of engagement with academics to identify existing practices across subject areas and determine the educational gains these aim to achieve for students.

## NOTES

1. The OFS was established by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 which also sets out the powers and general duties of the OFS as independent public body reporting to the Parliament through the Department for Education (DfE).
2. OfS website Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England—Office for Students.
3. The Office for Students, 2018. *Difference in Student Outcomes* [Online]. Available at: How do student outcomes vary by ethnicity?—Office for Students.
4. The One Hour Degree (OHD) is a web-based adventure game was launched at the end of August 2019, just after students received their FE results. The game's objective is to allow prospective students to familiarise themselves with the Canterbury and Medway campus facilities and resources, plus the terminology and procedures needed to gain a fictitious degree before they join the university for real. The game also helps develop a feeling of community and belonging before students arrive at Kent and helps improve retention by highlighting all the support mechanisms available. The game has been played thousands of times by users across more than 130 countries worldwide. The game was shortlisted and subsequently won the 2020 Guardian Higher Education Awards for Digital Innovation.

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# Academic Advising in the Massified University: Facilitating Meaningful Staff–Student Interactions

*Alexander Hensby and Louise Naylor*

## INTRODUCTION

The massification of higher education has been a key theme across this book, and its transformative effects are especially apparent in the case of academic tuition (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016; Tight, 2019). Once at the heart of universities' contact provision, personal tutors—or academic advisers, as they are increasingly known—now sit alongside a range of professional services and systems including wellbeing counsellors, academic skills advisers, and employability officers. To some extent, this

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reflects changes in student needs. In 2019, a WonkHE survey revealed that 45.5 per cent of students identified mental health as one of their top three concerns while studying at university, with a further 41.6 per cent citing ‘gaining the right experience and skills for my career’. The survey also indicated that these issues were especially pertinent for BAME students, with a disproportionate amount admitting to feeling lonely on a regular basis (see also chapter 4 of this volume). The impact of this shift is arguably evidenced by that fact that between the 2005–2006 and 2017–2018 academic years the number of student experience professionals more than doubled across the sector (Wolf & Jenkins, 2020: 6). Today, new benchmarks for student support hold strategic significance for universities’ growth and sustainability, as the government-mandated National Student Survey (NSS) provides key metrics for university league tables, which in turn shape future recruitment cycles.

Though this may have resulted in the decentring of tuition in students’ lives, academic advisers remain unique in offering all undergraduates one-to-one interactions with a designated staff member for the duration of their degree. Given the themes discussed in this book so far, these conversations should create a space for students—especially ‘non-traditional’ ones—to ‘feel acknowledged and integrated within university’ (Holland et al., 2020: 6). Although their precise impact on academic attainment remains notoriously difficult to prove (Holland et al., 2020: 5), adviser systems retain strategic value as a standard model response to fulfil governmental expectations that students ‘will receive effective support to achieve educational and professional goals’ (BIS, 2015).

However, it is less clear how effectively advisers can facilitate *meaningful* staff–student interactions in a massified environment. Staff–student ratios have remained mostly stable despite the considerable increase in undergraduate numbers across the sector, but this obfuscates significant changes to the structure of academic staffing. Between 2005–2016 and 2017–2018, ‘traditional’ academic staff—i.e. teachers who are research-active—rose only by 16 per cent, whereas the number of teaching-only staff rose by 50 per cent (Wolf & Jenkins, 2020: 6). This, perhaps, reflects the growing importance of other staff commitments, such as submitting to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which carry institutional value and personal prestige—particularly in academic promotions criteria.

Permanent academic staff members are also responsible for acting as academic advisers, yet this generates a structural tension as for senior staff their experience is countered by a more limited involvement in

core undergraduate teaching, as well as their restricted responsibilities regarding students' pastoral care. Of course, professional services staff (particularly those working in mental health and wellbeing) are better equipped to provide students with specialist support, but this arguably contributes to a perception that academic advisers are defined more by what they *do not* do than what they actually *do* (Grey & Lochtie, 2016). This definition problem is further exacerbated by the fact that tutor and adviser systems are often inconsistently implemented and poorly monitored within universities (Gidman, 2001; McFarlane, 2016). The role is subject to minimal institutional guidance or training (Race, 2010), and seldom recognised through work allocation models or promotion criteria (Kenny & Fluck, 2022; Myers, 2008). In sum, this contributes to a perception that the role lacks value and recognition compared to other aspects of the job.

Nevertheless, the literature does indicate a strong desire from students to have meaningful and timely interactions with academic staff, particularly in their first year of study (Braine & Parnell, 2011; Calabrese et al., 2022; Yale, 2017). This chapter considers how academic advisers can facilitate such interactions within the constraints posed by massification. In doing, we demonstrate how original research can help identify areas for improvement in the structure and delivery of adviser systems. The chapter begins with a critical analysis of the academic adviser system at the University of Kent. Drawing on interviews with students and staff, this captures student and staff definitions and expectations of the role, systemic and operational issues, and the extent to which advisers are able to satisfy students' needs. Second, we summarise examples of changes in the policy and practice of the adviser system that have been enacted in response to our research findings. These address a number of issues, including improving staff knowledge and understanding of student demographical change and individual performance, approaches to embedding adviser systems within programme curricula, and improving adviser training and recognition.

## PERSONALISED ACADEMIC TUITION: THEORY AND PRACTICE

What is the purpose of an academic tutor or adviser? There is a lack of consensus within the literature as to a precise definition, not least due to its role (and title) varying across different institutions and subject

areas, but we can at least begin by identifying some core characteristics. Fundamentally, advisers provide students with a single academic point of contact who ‘oversees individual progress and takes action if necessary’ (Thomas, 2012: 31). The role provides an overview of support that spans a student’s entire degree programme, and continuity across what is usually a modular structure of study. Of course, not all tutor/adviser models necessarily uphold these core characteristics: some, for example, assign different advisers on a yearly basis to aid specialisation of support and enable greater flexibility for staff taking sabbaticals or research leave. Despite these variables, we can establish that an adviser in the contemporary HE system is expected to offer personalised guidance on aspects of the undergraduate experience that fall outside the remit of conveners or seminar leaders, including helping with module selection, monitoring attendance, reviewing progress and feedback, and writing references (McFarlane, 2016).

Whether academic advisers should act as ‘mentors’ to students is perhaps less clear. Certainly, mentorship is embedded in the more traditional ‘pastoral’ model of academic tuition commonly associated with the collegiate system of Oxford and Cambridge universities. According to Wheeler and Birtle (1993: 15), the role is akin to ‘a moral tutor’ who ‘gives guidance on personal and moral issues as well as academic support’. Notwithstanding the somewhat anachronistic emphasis on morality, the pastoral model has long served as the inspiration and template for tutor systems across the sector, including those that bear little structural or historical resemblance to the Oxbridge collegiate system (Earwaker, 1992; Tapper & Salter, 1992).

Arguably underpinning the pastoral/mentor definition is the belief that the tutor represents an agent for integration into the university’s community and culture. Tinto’s (1997) work famously posits that the greater the students’ involvement in college life the greater chances of their retention and academic success. His work ascribes a high value to engagement with academic staff, with tutors serving as conduits for learning university’s culture and conventions (Wootton, 2006). In addition to the acquisition of institutional knowledge and academic skills these interactions should help facilitate a sense of belonging, with tutors able to act as representatives and confidants for safeguarding a student’s wellbeing (Tinto, 1997; see also Endo & Harpel, 1982; Astin, 1993; Malik, 2000; Braine & Parnell, 2011; Small, 2013).

Though the pastoral model foregrounds the value of facilitating meaningful interactions, its success arguably rests on certain assumptions which limit its relevance to many contemporary HEIs, especially in a massified context. Tinto's work presupposes that universities foster high levels of 'institutional commitment' from incoming students, which may apply more easily to Oxbridge, the Ivy League, and liberal arts colleges. Yet as Thomas (2002: 426) argues, this commitment derives from (and is reinforced by) longstanding status hierarchies that facilitate pathways into similarly prestigious careers. It is neither required nor desirable for students to 'break ties' with their former communities in order to experience a sense of belonging. This reflects the loss of a common transition to university following decades of widening participation drives, as well as a more standardised and professionalised learning and support provision (Christie, 2009).

This is not to say that universities do not retain an institutional habitus. As seen in chapters 3 and 4, BAME students and students from lower-income backgrounds may feel alienated by some of the assumptions and priorities that implicitly inform institutional practice. Successful adaptation requires students to accumulate and deploy 'legitimated forms of academic skills and knowledge' recognised as such by the university (Watson, 2013: 416–417). While advisers may serve as facilitators for the accumulation of this 'academic capital', the onus is placed on the students themselves to navigate this field effectively and proactively. With this in mind, it has also been argued in chapter 1 of this volume that the adaptation of Bourdieu's sociology to literatures on educational retention and attainment runs the risk of endorsing a deficit reading where traditional hierarchies of knowledge and status continue to be upheld. Moreover, lessons from critical race theory imply that staff–student relationships should be a two-way process, especially given the continued underrepresentation of academic staff of colour (Bhopal, 2018; Rollock, 2019). In other words, academic advisers should not simply serve as conduits for imparting institutional knowledge onto students, they should also use these interactions to broaden their own knowledge and understanding of contemporary student needs and experiences.

Academic staff are not solely responsible for delivering efficacious tuition, however. This requires a system that is clear in its purpose and well-supported in organisation and content, but massification has arguably rendered the pastoral model unfeasible in most HEIs due to the increased in adviser–advisee ratios restricting the spaces and opportunities



for traditional, collegiate relationship-building. This is evidenced by the widespread switch to a ‘professional’ model where tutors have been widely rebranded as ‘academic advisers’. Under this model, advisers are expected to stick within an academic advice remit and required to refer advisees immediately to specialist services should their support needs become more pastoral in nature (Owen, 2002: 10). Such models help fulfil a university’s contact provision more efficiently while ensuring that support will always be delivered by a relevant specialist, though this arguably repositions the adviser role more as a ‘signposter’ than confidant.

This returns us to the essential question: how can academic advisers develop meaningful relationships with undergraduates—particularly those who may initially feel greater feelings of unbelonging—within a massified system? Though such relationships remain possible within a professionalised adviser model, research indicates students may feel the role has diminished in significance. Yale’s (2020) study, for example, found that students often worried that their tutors were ‘too busy’ to meet them, whereas Small’s (2013) research indicated students were more likely to approach their tutor if they had also marked their assessments. For those that *did* meet their tutor, students from Holland et al’s (2020: 5) study voiced frustrations at the ‘generic’ nature of the advice they sometimes received.

Ironically, to make the most of this system students are implicitly required to employ ‘independent learner’ attributes that staff members typically uphold as essential for achieving highly at university. Yet as we have seen in chapter 3, not all students are equally equipped to quickly acquaint themselves in an environment that may seem impersonal and alienating compared with school or college. For BAME students especially, the combination of high expectations and a fear of ‘sticking out’ leads to independent learning being repurposed as self-reliance. This includes a reluctance to seek help from academic staff, raising questions of whether an adviser system should embed a stricter model of regularised meetings to improve the quality of these interactions, or allow it to remain largely voluntaristic in nature. Through our study, we seek to address this issue directly, as we recognise the limited applicability of the traditional pastoral model in an increasingly massified HE environment while acknowledging the limits of an overly clinical, mechanical system that risks reducing tutor meetings to a ‘tick-box exercise’ (Mynott, 2016).

## THE STUDY

As with previous chapters in this book, our research draws on findings from interviews with 62 undergraduates from the University of Kent, conducted in the 2014–2015 academic year. In addition to this, we make use of 24 interviews with academic staff members across 10 academic schools, conducted in 2015–2016. All staff are teaching-and-research academics who act as academic advisers, though some also have managerial responsibilities for monitoring the system within their school.

Similar to many UK universities, the adviser system at Kent was introduced in 2012 in response to the 2010 NUS Student Charter which recommended ‘institution-wide procedures for personal tutoring’ entitling each student to a named tutor. This replaced a patchwork of tutor models that varied by academic school, many of which were largely voluntaristic in nature. The adviser model, which was defined and developed by the University’s central education committee, asserted its role and purpose through a handbook stressing its provision of academic advice and an ‘agreed referral route’ for pastoral support. Further, it states:

It is important to stress that no matter how helpful you think you can be, you should not stray into counselling or therapy. It may be difficult not to get embroiled in students’ personal problems, but you should not attempt to try and solve students’ personal problems yourself. Students should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own decisions and actions and make contact with professional support services themselves. In cases where students are unable or unwilling to contact professional support services, the academic adviser should encourage the students to agree to referral for specialist advice and support.

Emphasis is placed on students’ own responsibility for their self-care, though through forms of ‘encouragement’ advisers remain part of this conversation. The handbook states that advisers ‘will play a proactive role in supporting the student’s general academic development’, but that individual academic schools retain responsibility to ‘determine their preferred mode of delivery to suit their own academic and support structures’. In sum, this system strictly asserts an academic remit for advisers, which falls in line with the ‘professional’ model as defined by Owen (2002).

## FROM TUTOR TO ADVISER

There was a general recognition among staff interviewees that the original tutor model needed overhauling to better respond to changes to the size and composition of the undergraduate population. The functionality of previous models was felt to be over-reliant on either staff and students arranging meetings as they saw fit, or ritualised administrative activities enabling tutors to informally ‘check in’ on the general wellbeing of their tutees. The latter process was described by two tutor-turned-advisers:

Students had to come and sign in to say they were here, and then they had to sign out at the end of the term. That’s how we maintained contact to make sure they were around, so that had gone a bit woolly and drifty. (Karen,<sup>1</sup> Sciences academic adviser)

They [had] to sign a bit of paper. It’s clearly pointless. But it brings them in and then you talk about other things, although it turned out that not all colleagues were doing this and that some people just basically ignored it. In those days we were free to do what we liked. (Rhianne, Sciences academic adviser).

The expansion in undergraduate numbers exposed the limitations of this largely voluntaristic model, resulting in a decline in student attendance while making it harder for tutors to maintain a personal familiarity with their tutees. The latter also reflected the lack of integrated informational support to monitor a student’s general performance:

We didn’t have anything like the infrastructure or the resources we have in place now. We used to rely on members of staff, tutors telling us if students were missing their classes and we would follow up on that. But not everybody does that, so it was hit-and-miss. (Clive, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

The formalisation of the adviser system arguably helped generate a shared consensus among staff interviewees on the role’s academic remit. This involved providing an overview of students’ progress, creating a space for self-reflection, and picking up early warning signals if students were struggling with their assessment or attendance. But whereas some stuck rigidly to providing ‘academic advice’, others placed added emphasis on their role as conduits for students’ learning of the university’s ‘habits

and ways'. This implied a more proactive role for the adviser, one where students were socialised into the schools' 'academic culture':

Some of the things I think they have genuinely found quite useful is to talk to them about how the University works – about the faculty structure, the peculiarities of the marking systems; stuff about reading materials. It's just to try and get them to relax a bit about the fact that we know that this is a culture shock for most of them, because the difference between school, college and here in every way is a huge gulf. (Elise, Social sciences academic adviser)

This explanation displays a sensitivity to the academic capital advisers are capable of imparting to their advisees. Knowledge of institutional systems—particularly those relating to learning and assessment procedures—should clearly not remain 'invisible pedagogies' (Bernstein, 1996) with students required to absorb as if by osmosis. The opportunity to transmit this knowledge, however, rests on a shared commitment to the adviser relationship from staff *and* students. Simply put, the former need to promote and encourage adviser meetings and the latter need to recognise the value of attending them, yet undergraduate interviewees (particularly those studying in their first year) were often uncertain what an academic adviser was, with some not even sure if they had one:

*[Have you ever met your academic adviser?]*. No never. *[Have they invited you to meet them?]* No, not to my knowledge at least. I don't think so, I've never met him or her, I've no idea. I haven't heard anyone, any of my friends talk about their academic adviser. (Shappi, BA Classical & Archaeological Studies – BAME Arab)

The lack of engagement from first year undergraduates stemmed partly from a perception that the principal role of advisers was to provide advice *in response* to specific queries or problems. But this left little room for meaningful interactions which might occur organically or at the behest of their adviser:

Maybe the only time I will contact him is if I'm not sure about something like if I want to change my module and I'm not too sure, then probably I would go to him. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

I'm not sure if she cared about us. I don't feel like I can go to see her about anything that concerns me about my studying. (Vicki, LLB Law – White)

Rebecca's comment recalls concerns over students' perceived lack of entitlement to support from academic staff, with advisers only worth contacting for specific procedural matters that students are unable to do themselves. Though a preference for self-reliance was associated with BAME and lower-income students, feelings of unbelonging may also be extended to mature students such as Vicki. Like Rebecca, her disinclination to approach advisers outside of specific troubleshooting requirements reflected a more general perception of the unapproachability of academic staff. One BAME interviewee revealingly kept referring to his recent adviser meeting as an 'interview', analogous to interrogation from an authority figure rather than a relaxed and productive conversation. This reticence was recognised by advisers, who despite trying to keep conversations during meetings 'chatty and informal' found it difficult to break from students' preconceptions of staff–student dynamics:

Many students feel very shy when it comes to meeting up with academic advisers, outside the scheduled meetings. They feel that we may be unapproachable, or maybe annoyed by them visiting. (Nicholas, Social sciences academic adviser)

I think there is obviously a sense that you're going to your teacher's office. Some of them are very shy and even if they come here, they're not quite sure what to say. It's possible they might feel like they're being called in, which is a bad thing if you're at school. (Lydia, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

Students' apparent reading of adviser meetings in terms of 'being called in to the teacher's office' arguably captures some of the limits of Tinto's engagement model in a massified context. Though new students may recognise the need to acclimatise to the university environment and begin absorbing its habits and ways, this is tempered by an apparent disconnect in staff–student relations. Advisers disagreed on whether this disconnect was an inevitable part of the student lifecycle or whether it pointed to broader sector-wide shifts. Some felt that the initial lack of engagement reflected students' prioritisation of their *social* adaptation to university life, with the adviser role taking root in the second year once they require more personalised support on issues such as module choice, placements,

or dissertations. Others felt that engagement diminished even further as students' growing independence left them feeling less obligated to arrange or attend meetings when their time and engagement could be more effectively invested elsewhere.

## SYSTEMIC ISSUES

Questions of whether students should feel obligated to arrange or attend meetings reflect how the adviser system is organised and executed. As with many universities, staff on short-term contracts at Kent are typically not expected to act as advisers, even though they often fulfil a large fraction of core undergraduate teaching. According to advisers and advisees, this impacted on whom first year undergraduates were most likely to approach for advice and support:

Our part-time teachers are very good teachers. I mean, a lot of the time, they're better at relating to the students than I am. (Elise, Social sciences academic adviser)

I don't see my academic adviser because I feel my seminar leaders all know more about the questions, if that makes sense. I can't go and ask my academic adviser what I'm going to write in an essay, I would rather ask my seminar leader who teaches that particular module. And I don't really have any classes with my academic adviser. (Chloe, LLB Law – Black African)

This divide was made worse by the fact that advisers could be assigned as many as 30 advisees across all years. Under these constraints, the University recommended that schools make introductory meetings compulsory followed by at least one interaction per year thereafter. The purpose of this was to establish a foundational relationship that students could then build on, though in practice this still resulted in a system that was largely voluntaristic:

There always a couple of students who come with particular questions, but the vast majority – I have 30 – don't come either to the first meeting or to any subsequent meeting. You might get a reference request in three years' time. I always invite my advisees in to see me. You're not policed on that, so I expect some people just never see their students. I always invite mine but if they don't turn up, I can't force them to come. (Lydia, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

Constraints imposed by the adviser–advisee ratio also limited the extent to which initial meetings—usually 15 minutes per student—could be made to feel like the beginning of a more meaningful relationship. For some students, adviser meetings arguably exacerbated feelings of unbelonging as staff struggled to make interactions seem personalised:

I do have a tutor, [but] I don't have a very personal relationship with him. Like, he doesn't know my name and we just meet up when he sends an email. That's just my personal experience. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

We had an academic adviser. I'm not sure if she just cared about us. I don't feel like I can go to see her about anything that concerns me about my studying. (Vicki, LLB Law – White)

I haven't had a relationship [with my academic adviser] I have met them twice. The first time was the first week, just to introduce. And the second time was just telling me "I'm here in case of anything." (Emily, BSc Business Studies – Black African)

As Emily's comment suggests, the impersonal nature of adviser–advisee relationships provided little incentive for students to arrange follow-up meetings. Despite the low uptake, however, there was little enthusiasm among staff for these to be made compulsory. On the one hand, this reflected a capacity issue as staff did not have the availability in their workload to accommodate eight hours of adviser meetings per term. On the other hand, some staff interviewees felt that compulsory meetings would only fuel the 'teacher's office' impression, believing interactions under this model fared poorly in comparison to the 'naturally occurring' mentorship that develops through teaching or dissertation supervision. There was little doubt that academic workloads caused by massification were largely to blame for problems with the adviser system and student engagement more generally. With staff negotiating multiple competing demands on their time, the adviser role's relative lack of reward and recognition saw its status suffer in comparison to other responsibilities as academics:

No one gets a chair for being a tutor, do they? And it's a difficult one for [the work allocation model] because things go swimmingly for a couple of week and suddenly all hell breaks loose and some really knotty problem comes up. (Warren, Sciences academic adviser)

For Ingrid, the lack of adviser recognition was laid bare by the fact that she was not initially aware that her responsibilities as a lecturer included acting as academic adviser for twenty students when she started her tenure:

I've been here for three years now. In the first year – I shouldn't say this – I didn't even know I had tutees. And then I got this message saying, 'Oh, we have to give you an additional tutee because this lecturer has gone on maternity leave.' And I thought, "One *more*?" I had no idea, because nobody told me about it. (Ingrid, Social sciences academic adviser)

This pointed to fundamental issues with how the adviser system was being promoted to staff and students. Although frustrated with the lack of student engagement, advisers recognised that running the system in a largely voluntaristic manner carried the risk of it falling into abeyance:

If academic advisers are not promoting the scheme, we can't complain if the students don't know anything about it. (Danny, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

I understand how students don't feel engaged. Because there's so many of them, and they're getting almost a remote service, but there's a lack of engagement or buy-in to the academic adviser system as a whole. (Martin, Sciences academic adviser)

These systemic constraints did not necessarily reflect a reluctance from staff or students to meaningfully engage with each other, however. For those who fell outside of the model of the 'ideal' student (Read et al., 2003), feeling personally recognised and understood by academic staff was considered particularly important for gaining a sense of competence as a student. As mature and lower-income students respectively, Stew and Lauren's frustrations were clearly expressed:

There's been nothing there which has said, "Right, academically, what do you want to achieve? Academically, what do we need to do to help you achieve it? Are you on the right course? What are your needs?" That's been absent. (Stew, BSc Psychology - White)

I never had the support of anybody. I had nobody come and check up on me, ask if I was okay, have the monthly meetings or whatever. Maybe if I'd had that, I would have been able to have a bit more strategy laid



out for me. I could have worked to my own goals. (Lauren, BA Business Studies – White)

Similarly, staff members believed that meaningful interactions with students could still be among the most rewarding aspects of their job, but that the clinical, remote nature of the adviser system had struggled to facilitate such engagements:

It reminds me of the film *Almost Famous*. Philip Seymour Hoffman plays a rock journalist mentor, who says, “I’m too busy, I’m too busy. I can’t talk to you,” to this 15-year-old. Cut to him to talking to him in a café, right? I think most academics are like that. Actually, when you talk to them, they’ll give you a lot of quality. I mean, it’s not that people aren’t as busy as they say they are. I think people like to have that face time. (Les, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

### ADVISER OR MENTOR? ESTABLISHING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Part of the problem staff faced was judging how ‘personal’ such relationships should be. This stemmed from the adviser system’s emphasis on providing academic rather than pastoral support, and how easily these could be separated in practice (Race, 2010). Despite these complexities, staff responsible for monitoring the system maintained that advisers were ultimately responsible for drawing a clear line between the two:

What we tell our advisers is, “You are supposed to be giving academic advice rather than pastoral advice.” If it is health problems or personal problems, we send them off to the [wellbeing] advisers. Of course, the two are very intertwined but that is what we tell our advisers now, “You are strictly speaking giving advice on academic matters rather than on personal problems.” (Elaine, Social sciences academic adviser)

A minority of advisers outright rejected this separation. Though initially unaware of her adviser allocation (see above), Ingrid came to take her role very seriously, believing that she was responsible for helping incoming students settle into university life socially as well as academically. This definition was arguably more akin to the pastoral/Oxbridge model as summarised by Owen (2002):

For me personally, I see myself as an academic adviser who is like mother hen, and I have all my chickens and I just want to check whether they are all right, have settled in, are homesick or not, have made friends. If not, can you help them along a bit. (Ingrid, Social sciences academic adviser)

The majority took a middle ground with varying degrees of confidence. While keen to stress the importance of avoiding crossing boundaries of expertise, advisers still felt the removal of a pastoral remit was unrealistic in practice as discussions over ‘academic matters’ could easily reveal problems related to students’ overall wellbeing and vice-versa. For Samantha, the separation of the academic and the pastoral also overlooked how arts subjects in particular are studied and experienced:

We are not trained to do pastoral care and there should be lines around that. [But] we have a much more meaningful transaction with students in terms of their academic development which I am afraid always overlaps with some form of pastoral stuff because people are working with the stuff of their lives. (Samantha, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

Samantha’s comments reflected grievances among some staff that the standardisation of support systems had imposed a ‘one size fits all’ model across the University. Though the new system at Kent gave schools freedom to tailor their adviser model to their own curricular needs, this was still felt to presuppose a lecture-seminar model more common to social sciences and humanities degrees. Even within these subject areas, however, staff still struggled with the arbitrary separation of academic and pastoral support. Peter, for example, highlighted how the *process* of referring advisees to specialist support usually required advisers to be pragmatic about providing personalised engagement:

I’ve had to cross over into that pastoral thing and advise them about getting counselling and that sort of thing. I’m fine with that. I’m not sure that everybody is, and we’re advised to try to separate them, but I think it’s a bit unrealistic. I think there are a number of colleagues who would feel uncomfortable going into the more pastoral side of things or dealing with personal matters. (Peter, Social sciences academic adviser)

The need for a pragmatic approach does not necessarily contradict advisers’ deference to specialist support staff when it comes to pastoral matters, but Peter’s comment perhaps indicates that some academics

might have been more comfortable taking the University handbook's guidance at face value. Warren voiced strong concerns in this area, believing that advisers who stuck rigidly to the academic advice remit were ultimately contributing to a fragmentation of meaningful staff–student engagement:

[Students] need to know that they've got somebody there who is worried about their pastoral side rather than just the academic side. The fact that I'm supposed to be giving academic advice and not much else, if they're in trouble and they come and see me I can't just say, "Oh it's not my problem, it's somebody else's". [...] Brand new lecturers coming in would say, "I didn't come here to be a bloody social worker". You could tell they were not going to be very sympathetic on a Friday afternoon if someone turns up because their world has collapsed. (Warren, Sciences academic adviser)

Danny, on the other hand, believed that the professionalisation of student support had given increasingly little cause for advisees to approach their adviser on pastoral *or* academic matters. With a specialist referral route for many academic issues—including appeals, concessions, and academic skills—as well as counselling services, wellbeing officers, and peer mentors for pastoral matters, he felt that many advisees were increasingly opting to contact the relevant service directly. This, he felt, effectively cut the adviser out of the support network altogether:

You just don't tend to hear from academic advisees. When it comes to balancing academic stuff with other aspects of their lives, I think they're most likely to contact [other] members of staff about that. If it's a concession request, they go to the student support people, which is where I'd direct them anyway if it was that sort of concern. (Danny, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

Academic staff tended to endorse this sort of behaviour for showing 'independent learner' traits, even when this involved bypassing their academic adviser altogether. Nevertheless, concerns over students' lack of independence remained a strong theme among staff. While there was some sympathy for the ever-intensifying target culture of secondary education in British schools, which was seen to privilege 'teaching to the

test' above critical thinking, many voiced concerns that incoming undergraduates lacked independent learner attributes compared to previous cohorts:

We were much more independent at what we did in school. You had to be and because if you failed in the same year twice you got kicked out and that was the end of it. Not all great, but independent learning was just normal to us. Clearly that is very, very different now. (Walter, Social sciences academic adviser)

I'm not sure schools are really preparing them for independent thinking and independent actions. I think the school system is very much about targets and jumping through various hoops, and I don't think they get a huge amount of time to have a lot of independent thought. I don't see much of that when they get here. (Martin, Sciences academic adviser)

I think they're not coming from school with that independent study mindset that perhaps they did have a few cohorts ago. I think if you were to leave them to their own devices, I would be a bit worried. (Sally, Social sciences academic adviser)

Though 'independent thought' is of course widely recognised as a key attribute in university-level learning, we should be mindful of unreflexively upholding an 'independent learner' discourse as it risks reproducing longstanding hierarchies of race and class in higher education (Leathwood, 2006; Yee, 2016). As we have seen in chapter 3, students already in possession of academic capital are more likely to possess the self-confidence to quickly establish themselves at university and proactively access support services as and when they need it. Non-traditional students, on the other hand, may lack the academic capital to engage with the university field in the same way, especially in an institutional environment that implicitly privileges white, middle-class values and culture. For BAME and working-class students in particular, self-reliance is an interpretation of independent learning that makes it easier to obfuscate personal academic struggles and thereby manage underlying feelings of unbelonging (Stuart et al., 2011). In this context, academic advisers are one such example of an underutilised service due to students' desire to avoid appearing needy or generally ill-prepared for higher education.

Yet, recalling the earlier comments of academic adviser Les one can argue that most academic staff *do* want to help when a student reaches

out. Likewise, we may also recall from chapter 3 BAME student Joseph's reflections on receiving valuable support from his academic adviser that 'when you're not looking for something, you don't really see it'. This arguably highlights the ways that the promotion of an independent learning discourse within a massified HE environment has created barriers for establishing meaningful staff–student interactions. To illustrate, Amy, a BTEC entrant, found the experience of proactively asking for, and receiving, support from her academic adviser as confounding her preconception of what it meant to be an independent learner:

It's just weird that I wasn't used to doing that – actually emailing someone to find out how I'm doing. It just didn't feel independent. It felt really strange. It's not that you're nagging, [or] asking inane silly questions, you know. But if you do realise that there are areas of your work that you need support on, to actually sort of be proactive about going to someone and saying, "Look, I'm struggling with this," or, "I've got this feedback. How can I make this essay better?" it's you taking ownership, rather than, you know, surrendering your independence. (Amy, BA Anthropology – White)

Although it may be the case that some staff members were happy for students to conflate independent learning with self-reliance, interviewees such as Nicholas and Lydia were cognisant of the ways staff allowed this myth to proliferate. Though students were expected to develop their organisational and time-management skills to become effective learners, these skills and attributes students are necessarily capable of deploying as soon as they arrive at university. This suggests that advisers have an important role to play in laying the groundwork for students to develop as effective and autonomous independent learners:

Students are being taught that entering higher education means you're an independent learner. But what do we mean by independence? We mean independent to do the work at home, on your own but you can certainly collaborate with your colleagues, your module conveners, and seminar leaders. You have to develop those relationships that will help you do this work independently. (Nicholas, Social sciences academic adviser)

There is that tension between us going, "No, do it for yourself" and getting them to recognise when you have to come and ask for help when you need it. But with that first meeting, actually, it's fine if they come here

and go, “Hi. What is this?” because that’s the point of it. (Lydia, Arts & humanities academic adviser)

## WHAT CAN BE DONE? STRATEGIES AND SYSTEMS FOR ENHANCING ADVISER–ADVISEE RELATIONSHIPS

The research presented in this chapter has underlined the importance of facilitating meaningful interactions between academic adviser and advisee. Against a backdrop of massification and growing professionalisation, the role and value of the adviser has arguably become lost within universities’ student support provision. That said, students continue to express a desire for personalised support from academic staff, and the continuity and overview of support advisers offer remains unique. If deployed effectively, advisers can help address students’ desire for recognition and validation while at university—especially for those who arrive on campus with feelings of unbelonging. Though it remains the case that advisers should not provide advice on matters that are the provision of specialist support professionals, staff uncertainty over the role’s pastoral remit is symptomatic of the fragmentation of staff–student interactions more generally. The challenge, therefore, is to identify ways that will help refurbish the adviser role with a status and distinctiveness to both students and staff.

This was the initial purpose of our interviews with advisers and advisees, as well as follow-up survey research conducted as part of the University’s involvement in HEA’s Collaborative Retention Project (2018). The presentation of findings to senior managers and subject leaders within the University of Kent prompted a flurry of new strategies and practices. These can be grouped into four broad categories: knowledge and communication of student needs and experiences; integration of the adviser role within broader support systems; the use of technologies; and adviser reward and recognition. With exemplars of good practice across the sector continuing to indicate that ‘no one size fits all’, these strategies and practices sought to uphold the principle that institutional systems are most effective when locally delivered by schools with central guidance and training (Lochtie et al., 2019). That said, the localised implementation of the adviser system was found to be highly variable, requiring greater coherence and co-ordination to enable effective collaborative working between academic and professional support staff.

The first of the themes for action sought to improve advisers' understanding of wider shifts and trends in the student lifecycle. To close this knowledge gap, academic schools began conducting annual 'new student' surveys, with results shared in subsequent staff meetings and away days. Surveys sought to capture students' expectations of success, concerns relating to their adaptation to university life, as well as a self-assessment of academic skills. Resultant data has succeeded in not only prompting intra-school conversations about pedagogy and assessment patterns, but also ensuring that individual advisers are more informed about the contemporary student experience and thereby better equipped to anticipate their support needs.

Our second theme for action relates to the relationship between the academic adviser system and the University's wider learning and support systems. Follow-up student survey research revealed that attendance in adviser meetings was highest in schools where the system was more strongly integrated into course curricula. In these cases, meetings were not only scheduled more frequently but also had a specific theme and purpose which pre-empted specific milestones in the student journey, such as discussing feedback from students' first assignment; module selection; and choosing a dissertation topic. Admittedly applying this model to all schools was not possible, especially those offering undergraduate degree programmes that varied in structure. However, these schools were at least able to reorganise their allocation of advisees to provide certain advisers with specialist portfolios of students studying specific degrees and combinations.

Most schools sought to publicise the adviser system to new students by integrating them into 'welcome week' activities. Advisers participated in ice-breaker activities with their advisees, and introductory group meetings were timetabled as part of the programme timetable. As well as helping put the adviser role at the centre of the school's contact provision, the ice-breaker activities in particular helped humanise advisers as a friendly and supportive point of reference. Advisers, too, regained a sensitivity to incoming students' needs and expectations, particularly those who had little involvement with first year undergraduate teaching. Echoing findings from Calabrese et al. (2022), some schools opted to formally timetable subsequent adviser meetings to improve student attendance and de-emphasise their optional status.

The third theme for action focused on adviser meetings themselves, specifically how information technologies could help give conversations

greater meaning and purpose. Many advisers felt that the University's online student record system was designed to benefit administrators rather than facilitate discussion with advisees. Indeed, some advisers interviewed lamented the loss of paper-form documentation that could be handed to students as part of a more meaningful interaction. To address these issues the University developed 'progress profiles'<sup>2</sup> to provide a more user-friendly presentation of learner analytics than the student records system. The profiles, which feature 'traffic light' classifications and graphs showing performance across all years, were designed to help advisers review student progress in advance of meetings, as well as act as the (printable) focal point of discussions.

The fourth and final theme concerned reward and recognition for advisers. These activities were arguably easier to implement as they were the responsibility of central University governance and could thus be applied across all schools. To begin, the University used its learning and teaching networks to organise academic adviser workshops. The purpose of this was to identify exemplars of good practice both at an organisational level (including the exchange of different approaches to integrating the system into school curricula) and for specific adviser-advisee scenarios. The latter featured pragmatic ways of managing the intersection between academic and pastoral support, as well as developing more personalised ways of communicating with advisees.

The workshops precipitated a second intervention, an adviser training e-module. The purpose of this was to outline to new and existing staff the role's purpose and responsibilities, offer guidance on referral processes, and provide supporting resources such as template forms and good practice case studies (the latter as identified through the aforementioned workshops). The e-module represents a core template which academic schools have been able to adapt to include subject-specific content and support needs, as well as differences in the way the adviser model was integrated into programme curricula.

Staff dedication to their adviser role was further supported by changes to its promotions policy, as good adviser practice was identified as an example for fulfilling academics' 'citizenship' responsibilities. Good practice was made easier to identify and evidence through the development of annual 'above and beyond' staff awards, voted by students and managed by the student union.



## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Academic tuition and advising has an important role to play in enhancing student success and belongingness in higher education, but its role and purpose has arguably become lost amid sector-wide massification and professionalisation. With rising student numbers and undergraduate teaching increasingly delivered by teaching staff on fixed-term contracts, the traditional Oxbridge-style pastoral model of tuition has ceased to represent a realistic template for most universities. At the same time, the rise of professional student support has stripped tutors of much of their traditional remit, with universities providing specialist wellbeing, employability, and academic skills services across its entire undergraduate population.

There is no denying that the latter trend has strengthened the quality of student support while necessarily reducing the burden of responsibility on individual academics to act as ‘catch-all’ problem-solvers. In theory, professionalisation should free advisers up to help their advisees learn the ‘habits and ways’ of the university, and reward engagement and attainment with the micro-affirmations that will spur students on further. In turn, through these interactions students can help impart on staff greater sensitivity to the changes to the contemporary undergraduate experience, and how this may generate different support needs to when they themselves were at university.

Yet technocratic solutions on their own only take us so far. Drawing on evidence from our own institution, we found that the implementation of a new, professionalised adviser system had achieved a greater consistency in organisational terms but was insufficiently integrated with other academic and pastoral support systems. For staff, amid a myriad of competing responsibilities the adviser role lacked resourcing and prestige, making it easier for the system to remain largely voluntaristic in practice. For students, the role’s definition and value was ambiguous, thereby reinforcing the ‘self-reliant independent learner’ ideal among non-traditional students in particular. Despite this, however, students still expressed a wish to receive personalised, meaningful engagement from academic staff throughout their time at university, even if they did not necessarily possess the tools to proactively seek this out for themselves.

The interventions and strategies presented in this chapter have gone some way to addressing these needs by affording the adviser role and system greater attention and resourcing than it has received in the past.

Nevertheless, we should be mindful that these interventions and strategies only offer scope for improvement within the systemic constraints of massification. Adviser–advisee ratios of the kind detailed in this chapter are symptomatic of these constraints and will always limit the scope for building meaningful staff–student relationships. To challenge the status quo, more work is needed across the sector to rebalance academic workloads—making possible more sustained, scheduled, contact between advisers and advisees—and to support new students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds.

## NOTES

1. All staff and student names in this chapter have been anonymised, with pseudonyms applied consistently across all chapters in this book.
2. <https://www.kent.ac.uk/student-success/progress-profile>

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# Reflections on Teaching and Negotiating Race in Social Work and Sociology

*Bridget Ng'andu and Barbara Adewumi*

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers our personal experiences of teaching race to a diverse group of students in Higher Education institutions including at the University of Kent, in the School of Social Policy, Sociology, and Social Research. Our experiences are our own and do not reflect those of other colleagues teaching the same topic within the school. We reflect on our experiences of teaching race on the social work and sociology programme. Our reflections consider some of the feelings and anxieties that arise when teaching race to students on both programmes.

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We reflect on the experience of teaching students both from Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) and white backgrounds. We should note here that we are using the term BAME as this is the one currently being used in the UK, although contested by many. The term 'BAME' is problematic due to its reduction of heterogeneous communities, groups, and individuals to an acronym. This raises some of the challenges of teaching race and racism, when the terms that aim to define the groups, are not generally agreed upon.

We draw on critical race theory (CRT) as a framework that informs our reflections on how issues of race and racism are part of a complex system in society. CRT has gained academic popularity in understanding the intersecting and systemic factors embedded in societal institutions and how these impact the daily lived experience of people from BAME backgrounds (Crenshaw, 2004). Reflecting on our experiences helps us to develop our skills and their effectiveness when teaching race and racism on our programmes. It is about questioning, in a positive way, what we do and why we do it and then deciding on how we can further improve our teaching in the future.

This chapter is important in that it provides an insight into our embodied identities as two Black women in academia who have lived experiences of racism and navigating white spaces. Du Bois (2007) introduced the concept of double consciousness in the late 1800s, which he defined as a sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others and reconciling one's identity in a predominantly white society. Du Bois's ideas have come far since his original publications and remain relevant in current society.

### BRIDGET NG'ANDU: AN INVITATION TO A CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE IN ACADEMIA

The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.  
(hooks, 1994)

I was born in Zambia, in Southern Africa. Both my parents were teachers, and our home provided an extended classroom of academic possibilities and development of radical thinking (hooks, 1994). My parents raised me with a sense of pride about my Black African heritage. With that also came the realisation of the challenges being Black poses in the world today. As a child I grew up at the height of the Apartheid

system in South Africa and came to learn about the politics of racism early on. Although Zambia had not experienced racial discrimination to the same extent as South Africa, history lessons were a constant reminder of what it means to be Black and the negotiation that lies ahead. I also grew up watching the American TV Sitcom, 'Roots' starring John Amos, which brought to light the experiences of slaves and racism in society.

As I grew up, I had a great passion for equality and bringing change in society. Through this the principles of human rights became important. My parents instilled in me the drive to achieve and seek a better education for myself. This led me to work abroad and eventually settle in the UK. I have taught at two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Australia and two in the UK. Over the last 12 years, I have delivered sessions on race and racism to social work students.

As a Black lecturer, teaching on race and racism brings with it taking a position. It took me a long time to feel comfortable with teaching racism and being explicit about it. Readings and gaining knowledge on theories such as CRT has helped me contextualise race and racism and how this manifests itself in society. CRT was first developed in the United States and focuses on the various ways in which the received tradition in law adversely affects people of colour not as individuals but as a group. In recent years, CRT has been enhanced by authors such as Kimberlé Crenshaw (2004), who have gone further and embed intersectionality in the analysis of the impact of structures on BAME communities. In her writings, Crenshaw states that intersectionality 'grew out of trying to conceptualise the way the law responded to issues where both race and gender discrimination were involved. What happened was like an accident, a collision. Intersectionality simply came from that if you're standing in form of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to be hit by both' (Crenshaw, 2004: 2). This framing of CRT and intersectionality is important to my teaching of race on social work programmes. The aim is to help students understand why issues of race and racism are important in social work, and how these intersect with other factors such as poverty and gender. I am reminded by bell hooks (1994), in her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, when she says that it is important, we teach in a manner that is respectful and cares for our students. This is an essential ingredient if we are to provide an environment that promotes deep and intimate learning.

This journey has taught me that I occupy two spaces, one of being a Black academic, required to navigate white spaces including those of



privilege, and that of being Black with my own experiences of racism that has formed my identity. In this reflection, I share my experiences of teaching, conversations on race, finding comfortable spaces, emotional labour, and support from within academia.

### *Teaching Race on Social Work Programmes*

As a profession, social work has a commitment to issues of social justice and human rights. The definition of social work provided by the International Federation of Social Work states that ‘social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work’ ([www.ifsw.org](http://www.ifsw.org), 2014). The art of teaching evokes emotion and anxiety. As a teacher you want to inspire your students to do well. You also want to come across as confident, knowledgeable, and trustworthy (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983). You want students to engage with the subject matter so that they can go back home, with ‘new knowledge’. This is something that I have always aspired to and wanted to achieve in every class that I have conducted.

Skills for Care (2023: 16) reports that ‘the ethnicity distribution of students enrolled on social work courses in 2021/22 was 65 per cent with a white background and 35 per cent with a Black, Asian and Minority ethnic background. This ethnic diversity has increased over time as the proportion of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students has increased from 29 per cent in 2009/10’. The report further states that ‘social work enrolments had a greater proportion of people from Black, Asian and Minority ethnic background (35 per cent) than the average across all higher education (26 per cent) as well as social workers across the adult social care workforce (29 per cent)’ (Skills for Care, 2023: 17). This picture is similar to my observations on qualifying social work programmes at the University of Kent, where numbers of BAME students has increased. The cohorts are diverse in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, education background, immigration status, and class, representing the larger representation of non-traditional students (Jones, 2009).

Research from across the UK suggests that social work students from BAME face challenges such as poorer continuation rates and attainment outcomes and take longer to complete their studies compared to

their white peers (Fairtlough et al., 2014; Hillen & Levy, 2015; Tedam, 2014). According to Fitzhenry et al. (2022: 6) ‘students from ethnic minority groups who experience intersectional disadvantage may be at greater risk of unsuccessfully completing their social work course’. The authors further state that ‘Black and Asian social work students experience discrimination during their practice placements, and they can experience a lack of support from their placement team and/or agency in dealing with racism and discrimination. They may also be expected to be experts on race and anti-racist practices’ (Fitzhenry et al., 2022: 6).

This creates a burden on Black students to lead on issues of race and offer solutions of what needs to be done to address this. One of the noticeable responses is that of silence when I introduce the focus of the day’s lecture. A sense of hesitancy to be the first student to speak. These observations are widely noted, as an initial response to what is a very sensitive topic in society (Dyer, 1997; Lavalette & Pinketh, 2014). For Black students, there is a perceived expectation to lead the discussion, and for white students, there is a sense of anxiety and worry about what will be said. There is the fear of saying the wrong thing and risk being labelled a ‘racist’. On the other hand, I have also observed this to be a space that opens up involvement in the session of Black students. I remember a colleague at another institution saying, ‘it is like the Black students have finally found their voice’. This observation reflects mine. These sessions can be empowering for BAME students to open up and discuss their experiences of race and racism in society. In these discussions I see resilience, passion for the profession they have chosen and commitment to succeed despite the challenges placed in their way. Speaking about my own experiences of racism further provides a space for Black students to reflect on theirs. But these discussions can also be a reminder of the negatives associated with being Black.

### *Comfortable Spaces to Explore Difficult Issues*

Black students have expressed concerns about the current focus on telling and re-telling of negative history, when there are so many positive stories to tell. Positive stories to tell which highlight potential individual provide inspiration, thus installing in the reader a sense of ambition rather than that of victimisation. This is certainly correct but at times it is important to give the context to the issue, so we do not forget that much more remains to be done to address racism. However, it is also important that

when I am teaching, I am not pathologising students and further adding oppression to their experiences of racism (Freire, 1973).

Providing a comfortable space to discuss difficult issues is not very easy. In my teaching, I have incorporated concepts of white privilege and whiteness. Frankenberg (2001: 76) states that 'whiteness as a site of privilege is not absolute but rather cross-cut by a range of other axes of relative advantage and subordination; these do not erase or render irrelevant race privilege, but rather inflect or modify it'. Discussing whiteness with social work students can pose challenges in class, such as how to frame this in a way that will involve participation from students. In 2017, I wrote a chapter titled 'Being White – Feeling Guilty?' (Ng'andu, 2017), aimed at engaging social work students and practitioners in the discussions about race and practice. When I started writing the chapter, I felt an anxiety and vulnerability, about going public with my thoughts about race, but also on an area that generates much emotional response for both white and Black students.

I remember someone saying to me 'but these issues are so out of date – this is not the 1980s!'. This response dampened my enthusiasm, as I wondered if I was trying to rehash a topic that was no longer relevant. This response did not stop me as I had very good support from colleagues in academia that were exploring these very issues. I heard the concerns about discussing 'whiteness' but I also did not agree that this was outdated. Looking back and reflecting on this, it has made me wonder whether talking about whiteness is about making white students feel guilty. Teaching and talking about whiteness and privilege is aimed at opening up discussion to help students contextualise race and racism in current social work. This can be a difficult issue to discuss as some white students may feel guilty about the privileges they enjoy due to being white (Fairtlough et al., 2014).

What has helped in these situations, is my ability to use my example as someone who benefits from whiteness and privilege, as an educated woman and an academic. This has opened up privileges that I can access but are not so easily accessed by other Black Africans. I further draw on why these discussions are important to social work practice, especially when supporting service users from BAME backgrounds (Ng'andu, 2017). I draw on research to further provide a context of the impact racism has on BAME groups. Students have expressed lacking confidence in being able to speak about issues of racism. Some students state that discussing whiteness and privilege although uncomfortable is an area they

need to engage with but may not have the skills to give them confidence. Like hooks (1994: 41), I understand the ‘pain’ involved in this learning process. In my teaching, I ensure that I approach this issue sensitively, so as not to close discussions. hooks (1994) talks about the importance of creating a safe space for white people to speak freely without judgement.

It was in one of the class discussions that a student spoke about wanting to be an ally but not sure how to do this, without coming across as offending anyone. The moment the student said this, other white students joined in: ‘we want to stand alongside colleagues, but how do we do this?’, they asked. We explored how we can do this—listening to the lived experiences of Black people and willingness to engage with the discomfort that arises from these conversations. And remembering that we are all on a journey every time learning about how we can become better anti-racist practitioners and activists. At the end of the session, a few white students stayed on, to say how I had made them feel comfortable with exploring whiteness. ‘We hope we did not come across as offensive’ and ‘you provided a safe space to share but also challenging’.

This response is not always what I get, I have had some white students approach me after a class, and say, ‘I am not racist, but I was made to feel like I am. I was not involved in the oppression of Black people, so why am I being blamed?’ DiAngelo (2018) talks about white fragility as the responses of defensiveness demonstrated by white people when challenged about the impact of racism on Black people. This defensiveness can come across in conversations about race in and outside of the classroom as demonstrated by the responses from these white students. On reflection about this response from students, I have sought to find ways to engage students in a broader understanding of race. The work of Patricia Shine (2011) is helping me think about how I can further open up conversations about race in class. She states that ‘before there can be a conversation on these topics [race and racism], there must be a shared definition – what is race? What is racism?’ (2011: 51). She states that many students do not have a good understanding of these definitions. I think there is merit in her observations and proposal—it certainly is helping me think about the next time I teach on race, perhaps invite students to say what these concepts mean to them.

### *Emotional Labour*

As alluded to earlier, teaching carries with it an element of emotional labour involved (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983). Students share their stories with us on issues affecting them, and through these conversations we get to know them better, and they of us. I like to see myself as a someone who is interested and cares about people. This I hope shows in my engagement with students. I always encourage students to share their experiences of the course, and this includes experiences of race and racism. Most of the conversations for Black social work students centre around placements. Students on social work programmes are expected to undertake two placements in an agency that enables them to meet the requirements set by the regulator, Social Work England. The placements provide an opportunity for students to demonstrate knowledge and skills are expected to qualify and practice as a social worker. Black students (mainly women) come and share their experiences of both subtle and overt racism on placements. Some of the racism is from white colleagues and some of it from service users. Students talk about feeling scrutinised more than white colleagues with their work. These experiences are captured in research by Bernard et al. (2011: 126), stating that the experiences include, 'being subjected to derogatory stereotypes, sometimes because of their accents; feeling excluded; being expected to work harder and to demonstrate more competence than their white counterparts to pass their placement; being placed in agencies where racist practices were in evidence; and being subject to racial discrimination by service users'. This is further highlighted in the recent report by Skills for Care (2022) referred to earlier in this chapter. A few students will raise these issues during placement, but often they share their experiences when they have completed the programme. These conversations tend to be on the last day of the course, when students feel they can relax, and feel safe to speak honestly.

I have often been left with the emotional burden of what to do with this information. When I have asked students why they did not say this before so that we could have intervened, the response has been the same 'I did not want to cause any problems and put my placement in jeopardy'. I am then left with a question, of what about the ones that do not say anything, and just leave after the programme? The emotional labour of 'knowing' but also feeling guilty that you had not been there to help is immense. I am humbled when students say, 'we know we are leaving this

with you, and that there is nothing much you can do about it'. I reassure them that this will be addressed, but am left with the question, 'will it?'. This empathy perhaps indicates a sense of awareness and resignation that no matter what they say about their experiences of racism, there is nothing that can be done about it. We talk about the racism in the agencies and institutions they are going to be working in, and a feeling of powerlessness looms. We reflect on the challenges ahead of how much more needs to be done to address racism. Patricia Hills-Collins (2000) talks about how Black women contribute to the political landscape through activism and being role models in their communities. I ask myself, 'how do I instil in these students hope and inspiration? What kind of role-model am I to these students? And how do I continue with being an anti-racist activist?'

However, I have also experienced moments of joy when students have contacted me whilst on placement, seeking advice on preparation of presentations to colleagues on issues of race and racism and how this informs practice. These conversations have often been with Black female students presenting to mainly white colleagues about race and racism. These conversations have mainly focused on sharing our anxieties of discussing race, and how to manage this in a group where you are the minority. We would reflect on what could be left out of the presentation to not come across as confrontational or accusatory. I would ask 'why?' and the students would say that they did not come across as the stereotypical 'angry Black woman'. I have realised that during these conversations, students are anxious about how they should approach the subject so as not to offend the white colleagues. In most cases students will choose the softer approach and, on some occasions, some have included issues of whiteness and privilege. Reflecting on this has reminded me of a comment made by the Right Reverend Dr Rose Hudson-Wilkin, Bishop of Dover, when she gave a lecture at the University on International Women's Day in 2021, organised by the BAME Staff Network. She said that it should not be about either a soft approach or hard approach. It can be both depending on the context. The important thing is to plant the seed.

### *I Have a Voice*

Writing this chapter has just reminded me how much my voice counts in sharing these experiences. It has helped me look back on my experiences of teaching, be it in class or having conversations with students, and reflect on my own journey of being an anti-racist activist. I have learnt that my

voice counts, whether it is in those quiet moments when I do not say much or in those moments where I am the lead, opening up to anxieties and vulnerabilities, but equally contributing to the discussion on race.

There are also times I think I have not responded as well as I could have, both in challenging racism and supporting students. I have felt at times that I have not spread the word of solidarity when it comes to issues of race and racism in social work, as well as I could have done. In the summer of 2020, we saw protests around the world after the murder of George Floyd in the United States by the Police. The protests were led by the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM). Like many people across the world, I was appalled by George Floyd's death and the racist actions that led to his death. I was keen to be part of the movement, and when a colleague suggested that we host an event organised by Social Work students, through Student Action for Diversity (STAND), I saw an opportunity to be part of a global voice against racism.

### *Being on a Journey with Students and Colleagues*

STAND is a social work student-led initiative developed within the social work programme to provide a safe space for students to explore and discuss issues of diversity, oppression, and discrimination in social work education and practice, within the context of wider social inequalities. The group was formed following a report by Bernard et al. (2011) which highlighted the challenges faced by BAME students, lesbian and gay students, disabled students, and students with caring responsibilities, and these impact on retention, progression, and attainment on social work programmes in the UK. When I joined the social work team in 2017, I was interested in being involved with the group, and later took on the role of co-facilitator. It has given me the opportunity to work alongside students and support them with planning and delivering events that highlight issues of inequality in society.

The opportunity to change the negative narrative of Black people has never been more important especially now following the death of George Floyd in 2020 and the protests around the world led by the BLM. I feel renewed that discussion around decolonising the curriculum in social work is being raised and discussed. Within the Social Work Team, colleagues with expertise in decolonising the curriculum offer a space to reflect on these experiences.

Remaining in contact with students that have now graduated and practising social work is important. I smile when I hear from them, that they have succeeded in securing a job but also worry if they have a safe space, we had to continue sharing their experiences of racism in practice.

### BARBARA ADEWUMI: WHERE 'I STAND' IN THE CORRIDOR OF ACADEMIA

If you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else... [Morrison, 2003]

This quote by Nobel Prize winner in literature Toni Morrison reflects how I feel about having spent years being a Black female lecturer in higher education. I held a responsibility to help others reach further than I have and make the journey more accessible for those aspiring students who wish to follow. I am a Black female with Caribbean heritage, I was a sociology lecturer; and I am now a senior research fellow in race, inequality in higher education, and I am a devoted mother and wife. In defining who I am from the onset provides me with self-empowerment by reclaiming my identity and resisting objectification as the other. The path I chose was not an easy one as I swam against the tide of prejudgement and became an academic in higher education. Born in Britain with Trinidadian heritage, my parents found life tough having to work long hours and live in crowded drafty accommodation in North London until it reached a point when my mother decided to send me 'back home' to live with my grandmother to enjoy my childhood with the sun on my face rather than the cold bitter winters in London. Those fun and tender years of freedom provided me with a positive outlook on life. The president and prime minister were Black, my teachers were Black, and I could be anybody I wanted to be. My father sent money home for my upkeep and my very proud uncle decided to use the money (taking advantage of the exchange rate) to provide me with a private education.

It all came to an end when I was brought back to London at the age of nine where I was to begin to 'know my place' in the British state education system. Its fifty-two years since Bernard Coard's critical research on Black children growing up in a British inner city in the 1960s and 1970s which revealed the ignorant portrayal of African Caribbean young people as destined to be under-achievers in state schools, they were regarded by teachers to be intellectually and culturally inferior to



their white peers (Coard, 1971). Early research on the experiences of young children of Caribbean parents demonstrated low expectations held by white teachers labelling and targeting young Black children into school units for children deemed 'educationally subnormal' (Coard, 1971). It is only when I attended further education college, I realised the extent to which my aspirations were overshadowed by such negative labelling from schoolteachers, but I slowly began to reclaim my confidence at university.

Fast forward to my undergraduate years, my parents observed up close the commitment I had towards seeking social justice for the working class and the Black and Asian communities. As I grew up, my dad was a union man and fought for factory women's workers' rights in need of better pay and better working conditions. His Windrush generation stories of seeking justice for the socially and economically oppressed since his arrival in the early 1950s fascinated me. The existence of inequality and the class system in Britain made me constantly question why was Britain referred to as Great Britain? The one great thing I knew about Britain were the educational opportunities, my parents told me if you worked twice as hard as your white counterparts, you could dispel the stereotypes that surround you and succeed. I sought to pursue my interest in sociology and what better way but to teach what I found pleasure in. I taught in further education for five years and then taught in higher education for another six. During that time, I met many wonderful students who have impressed me with their courage and determination, they have grown in confidence to challenge the status quo and provide critical views of the inequalities in British society and genuinely wanted to make the world they live in a better place.

When I first began to teach in higher education, I had three small children and was embarking on a PhDs. I entered a space where career advancement in my field of race and equality in education was a far-reaching goal. I had made a career choice and quickly learnt how to acclimatise into a white institutional space that was not designed for women like me. In this chapter I focus on highlighting the thought process and strategies needed to successfully survive in a white institutional space where very few academics at the university were Black British females. Being a space invader describes the position of Black women as outsiders in the British academy, occupying a white middle class dominated space (Puwar, 2004). Sadly it is an apt definition since it is argued that we do not embody that which is deemed 'normal' or natural and so are viewed as alien sometimes exceptional as we go against stereotypes

and as the white male body is taken as the norm (ibid., 149). Essentially for me, this meant that no one was looking out for you, you had to create your own opportunities in a predominantly white university and find ways of developing strategies to help navigate and be successful within a white space.

### *Negotiating My Dual Existence in the Institution*

The well-known phrase ‘publish or perish’ in academia really created a state of anxiety for me as I had no protected time or head space to discuss or shape a desired paper from my PhDs thesis. Many teaching staff find themselves in this position. With my annual perpetual precarious teaching contracts attached to high volumes of teaching and marking commitments, I felt restricted in what I wanted to achieve. As a lecturer I experienced a double consciousness that made me hyper aware of both my professional and personal identities as a Black woman in academia (Du Bois, 2007; hooks, 1992). There was a noticeable absence of discussion of these negotiations at an institutional level. I felt that to be taken seriously, to be acknowledged as an academic I had to stay alert and work twice as hard to be viewed as a valuable member of staff. From the level of work endured I internalised the separation of personal and professional. Negative interactions within the institution were expressed as ‘personal’ whereas positive interactions were expressed as ‘professional’. Though I had spent many years teaching in the same department, I did not feel entirely part of the team because my fixed-term contracts limited my access to conferences, funding bids and even attending team away days. All these essential networking opportunities and exposure to spaces in academia for career advancement was difficult to access. I felt that other teaching staff were in a more secure and clearer pathway than me particularly those on permanent contracts.

My experience in higher education is one that was divided and at times compromised. In his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (2007) coined the term double consciousness to describe how Blacks have had to navigate both their African and American identities and the psychological implications of this potentially irreconcilable process. He describes Blacks’ struggle to view themselves from their own unique perspective whilst also thinking about how whites intentionally misrepresent and misperceive blackness. Du Bois explained that ‘it is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the

eyes of others... One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Ibid., 3).

From Du Bois's resonant words of struggle and the notion of double consciousness, I use Du Bois as a metaphor and conceptual lens to explore how I was often met with conflicting ideals when making decisions that potentially position Black students when teaching the social construct of race. Double consciousness describes how a Black person can have multiple competing and contradictory identities that make it difficult or nearly impossible to have a collective and integrated identity. I embody an awareness of a potentially irreconcilable twoness: one as a Black female and two an academic, this twoness revolves around positions as a professional and compliant agent of the education system whilst being a conscious person of blackness aware of the systemic racism that racialises students in higher education.

Du Bois discusses the conflict Blacks people experience in the United States as they struggle to reconcile their identities as Blacks and as American citizens who experience racial oppression because of their blackness. Recent Black Lives Matter protests by students in Britain are claiming very much the same devaluing of their blackness in white institutions (Black Liberation Collective, 2020). As I continually negotiated race, I needed to constantly decriminalise the content of blackness to value the presence of my Black students and dispel the myths and pathologising of Black bodies. My position and having a voice made me cognisant of my double consciousness because of my educational experiences in Britain.

### *Teaching Social Work Is Good Work*

During my time at Kent, I had achieved my PhDs and having taught sociology for four years, I was also invited to teach with the social work team and my perspective and engagement with students led to finding more ways in negotiating race. In the social work department, I was teaching racially minoritised students. It made me feel responsible; I felt there was even more of an expectation and element of respect from African, Caribbean, and Asian students. My surname is Nigerian, even this seemed to have carried a lot of weight in the eyes of African students particularly the mature students who took me in as one of their own and freely talked about their cultures and learning styles as they felt that I knew where they

were coming from. The social work students were nice and so down to earth, and the white students had personal experiences of hardship so to a certain extent they had some sympathy and understanding of the sorts of clients they would be assessing as social workers. Some white students were open to the fact that they had a lot to learn about race and ethnicity and the complex intersections of identity. During one of my introductory sessions of a social work module one white student gasped and said, 'surely racism is not as bad as it used to be, we are living in a multicultural society' and another uttered 'I thought social scientists said we were living in a post-racial society' (see chapter 1). Such views were quite common with students who then embarked on a journey of critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1999) with me came to understand the systemic racism that still very much exists in institutions they will eventually serve in as social workers.

When I taught race and ethnicity, I taught it through my lived experiences and having to reimagine students' abilities through whiteness was frustrating, having to measure British society's standards through white standards alienated students who thought and felt social experiences differently from others, I wondered did all teachers acknowledge this? In Mirza's (2006: 153) article on 'Race', gender, and educational desire', she explains how Black women are at the core of the struggle for inclusion as they continuously 'seek social transformation through educational change'. Through my experiences of exclusion, I believe I had a responsibility to interrogate the embodied nature of systemic institutional discriminatory practice, as a teacher I was responsible for navigating students learning and improving their understanding and making sure they understood that their clients will be from all walks of life, that racism was a construct and pervasive whiteness in the outside world continues to devalue these human truths and limit our knowledge.

### *Is White Privilege a Real Thing?*

The message that 'race still matters' underpinned my teaching and my students learnt to accept its importance when teaching them about wider participation in the curriculum. It provided them with multiple perspectives and there was more than one way of experiencing and thinking about how people feel and act in the world. I recall teaching a seminar on white privilege to a room full of white social work students. Only one Black female mature student attended that day. Having been introduced to CRT

they were asked to read a letter posted on the internet in advance of the session called 'my white friend asked me to explain white privilege, so I decide to be honest'. Lori, a Black female wrote a personal response to her white friend who she described to be oblivious to her daily encounters of microaggressions. Her friend thought they were very nice to Lori and were not aware. Lori revealed ten practical examples of white privilege and instances of racism she encountered akin to CRT's argument that whiteness has become the norm in society. When describing this story, I had to think carefully about how uncomfortable white students would feel about discussing racism. The topic focused on whiteness and pointed out the unassumed privileges they take for granted.

The key message for my students was to acknowledge that white privilege exists in institutional systems and if they do not accept this then they are failing themselves and their future social work clients. During this seminar they were intrigued by the one Black student (who was West African) who voluntarily spoke about her experience of racism (which she described was more severe than those who are Black British) but the rest of her white class peers felt annoyed that she made them feel that they would never fully understand what it is like because they were not Black. I too included my anecdotal lived experiences and as a teacher (with authority), this quickly shifted the paradigm of power and privilege of which my white students possess by the virtue of their race (McIntosh, 1989). I used this strategy to alert students to the realities and truths of injustice in British society through critical thinking. As hooks (2010: 9) points out, critical thinking is not passive but a work of the mind that is 'interactive' involving both teachers and students. The end of critical thinking is to 'understand core, underlying truths'.

In this seminar students felt their discomfort when asked to evaluate their own social location when it came to power structures, they became more aware of their implicit biases. Some admitted that they should question their behaviours towards people who are different to them and that they needed to do more. By the end of the session, they appreciated being able to understand the damaging impact of generalisations and wanted to find ways of becoming an ally. By using inclusive pedagogy, many of the students reached a level of consciousness and self-awareness.

### *Teaching Alternative Truths in Sociology*

To effectively teach a range of diverse students with varying abilities teachers need to provide perspectives or utilise techniques that raise new questions and alternate solutions that challenge traditional epistemologies and explore new frontiers in research and in the classroom (Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Recent studies and commentaries about sociology have questioned the assumption that it is one of the more critical of the social sciences when in fact its origins and key thinkers were formulated and institutionalised during the height of colonialism and imperialism. According to Meghji (2021) the discipline itself internalised colonial ways of thinking and represented the entire world from a very Eurocentric perspective. To decolonise sociology would mean to reimagine sociological thought stepping away from its colonial episteme, its way of thinking and knowing about society, and reaffirm what is legitimate knowledge and how this knowledge should be reframed and legitimately produced.

Joining forces with the Kent Law School on its Decolonise UKC campaign in 2019 I set about introducing students to a wider range of authors that provide lived experiences and global South views of society (Adewumi, 2020: 65). By introducing more diverse authors to my students, Black intellectual thought could finally be acknowledged as authentic knowledge. Contemporary movements such as Rhodes Must Fall and campaigns for equality diversity and inclusion warrants the need for us to teach a diverse curriculum that focuses on race as well as class, gender, age, and disability for both social work and sociology students.

### *My Experience Matters*

I am compelled to share a little of my personal self to gain recognition and legitimacy in the space I interact with students, these spaces are normally dominated by patriarchal white normativity and white homogenous discourse. In so doing, I know this leaves me exposed and vulnerable, it is a risk, but my experience and my voice is what I give to be heard rather than to be silenced, this creates relationships with students and personal consciousness and confidence. Students from all backgrounds find that they enjoy these lectures and seminars as they do not feel intimidated or singled out as I use so many examples from my real-life experiences and case studies. I do the research to show them the variety and complexities of life that exists. White students saw me

as a Black British lecturer who made it through to the other side in the British education system and achieved a doctorate. What was special about my circumstance was that I could directly relate to the barriers and challenges that students face in higher education today. One strength about teaching sociology and social work is being able to apply it to everyday life. You can contextualise ideas about the social construction of race and gender with events in modern society such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo commentaries wrapped up in current social media discussions. Race matters in every aspect of life and I made it a point to provide my students with a clearer and holistic picture of why.

### *Connecting with Students*

Making those emotive connections with students has been essential to my students' engagement. I recognise there is a bond with BAME students because my teaching comes from a place of love and being humane as well as being professional. Students need to know that as a lecturer you are approachable and that no question is a silly question. A good student is one with a curious mind that wants to learn, but many students are afraid of failing because they have been taught that as a Black student there are no second chances. This belief puts up an invisible fence between the lecturer and the student. Towards the end of term when the time arrived to complete an assignment, I began to observe their inhibitions and lack of confidence which is natural as it is all new to them. Some looked for reassurance, some required clarity some held onto micro-affirmations when you told them they are more than capable, and it will be OK. In student one to one tutorials, I felt I could be more myself, so the students tended to be more like themselves and this helped them to be less self-protective. I recall a Black mature student who was late in her pregnancy when she joined the course and knew she was going to miss a key part of the module, she kept in touch and I kept her informed of the seminars she missed. Feeling engaged, she returned soon after her baby was born, we would talk and (being a mother) I always asked about her family and called her new baby son by his name. This is known as cultural responsiveness (Ladson-Billings, 1995): a small gesture of wanting to know how she was doing made her feel connected to her student group and that her contribution to discussions were missed. I would always find something in common with them to provide an element of comfort against the multiple struggles they encounter as an ethnic minority student.

Even though BAME students tend to feel more at ease connecting with staff of colour the onus should not always fall upon us as all staff have a duty of care. In order for students to feel a sense of belonging they need to be confident that support services and support staff are approachable. This will prevent them from becoming too self-reliant (explored in Chapter 3). With the aid of competence training white staff need will be able to step out of their comfort zone and have more meaningful staff-student interactions (discussed in Chapter 8). This will only come about with understanding the significance of being culturally sensitive to a diverse student group. Inviting and encouraging students to have a conversation with academic staff will bring staff closer to understanding the realities of marginalised students.

I came to the realisation (along with my fellow Black lecturer on the course) that small micro-affirmations and a genuine concern for our students was like a form of informal mentoring. With ethnic minority students there was a cultural synergy and understanding such as a nod as you pass each other across the corridor and a friendly wave across campus grounds made you both feel there was a connection a sense of belonging with someone familiar. This understanding of our relationship is a continual journey not ending with my teaching but has effortlessly been conveyed into my current role as a researcher in Student Success.

## CONCLUSION

I want to suggest that there is something that may even be more important than Black students having Black teachers and that is white students having Black teachers! It is important for white students to encounter Black people who are knowledgeable and hold some level of authority over them. (Ladson-Billings, 2018)

Overall, this chapter may hopefully provide teaching staff with an alternative lens and for them to become aware of the sensitivities of teaching race whilst being raced within the institution. Part of the role we play and the weight we carry on our shoulders is because of who we are and the colonial histories we are tied to. We have sought to express our personal experiences of the complexities of twoness through Du Bois, intersectional experiences, bringing the race lens and critical consciousness to the core of our teaching and research. Our meaning and existence in higher education is to contribute to cultural change in our teaching and research



practices and provide truthful experiences and practices that reiterate the fact that ‘race still matters’, and students need to acknowledge and be aware of the contemporary narratives that are shaping our perspectives in the world (Du Bois, 2007). It has taken time for us both to establish the confidence to talk about race to all students and finding a balance of who we are within academia. The telling of our journeys has been a cathartic process, but the battles, the private and public troubles, the learning, and our lived experiences that paints the picture for all to understand.

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# Race Equity and Inclusive Curriculum: Diversity Mark and Making a Lasting Impression on the Institution

*Barbara Adewumi*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade there has been a call to decolonise the curriculum which began in South Africa with the Rhodes Must Fall movement (Bhambra, 2018). The murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests reignited critical discussions about the lack of diversity in university curricula, students began to challenge the status quo of knowledge production. There was now a more synergised call to decolonise the university and rid institutions from its legacy of institutional racism and its ties to its colonial past. The University of Cambridge, like many other major UK and North American institutions, benefited both directly and indirectly from enslavement, the slave trade, and imperialism more

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broadly including Glasgow and UCL (Beckles, 2020). In the summer of 2021 institutions witnessed a rise in the questioning of British racial injustices and the legacy of colonialism. The pulling down of the Colston statue in the city of Bristol signalled a turning point in current debates that British institutions must awaken to today's generation's call for social justice and equity in higher education (UUK/NUS, 2019).

Closely linked to this demand is the need for curriculum reform and inclusive teaching within the white walls of higher education. A number of UK universities have held public lectures such as University of College London's 'Why isn't my professor Black' and 'Why is My Curriculum White?' and began challenging the institutions epistemological authority through movements such as the University of Oxford's 'I, Too, Am Oxford'. Such questioning of the pillars of intellectual Western thought has inspired a wave of critical engagement from students and staff about the reproduction of a Eurocentric curriculum that continues to reproduce white privilege within the structures of higher education. Some universities across the UK have taken up the challenge to decolonise their curriculum and provide a more equitable learning space where global perspectives of knowledge are recognised and valued and are no longer marginalised against Eurocentric canons of learning. Students and staff as part of these campaigns have found there to be some resistance to the concept of decolonising perceiving it to be the removal of core texts and key contributors to knowledge. Some fear that the freedom of speech will be removed, and liberal ideology challenged for the sake of equality in the classroom (The Times, 2022).

For centuries university curricula has been framed through a Eurocentric lens where whiteness is centred as the norm. Whiteness has been used as a tool to privilege certain types of knowledge whilst certain global knowledge(s) remains hidden and written out of British colonial history (Arday, 2018, Olusoga, 2021). The coloniser's culture is repeatedly portrayed as superior above the colonised culture viewed as the 'Other'. Postcolonialism provides a more authentic view seeing the contentious but intertwined relationship with the coloniser and the colonised (Rodney, 1972). Within postcolonial thought scholars were able to decentre patriarchal, white Western systems of knowledge (Loomba, 2005). With all that the world has witnessed from the Rhodes Must Fall movement and Oxford's (RMFO) campaign, it would be valuable if postcolonial studies were brought in from the margins and

more into the curriculum to address systemic racism and create inclusion within higher education institutions. African and Caribbean authors of the decolonial tradition such as Kwame Nkrumah (1968), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1987), Ibekwe Chinweizu (1987) Frantz Fanon (1963), Walter Rodney (1972) and Eric Williams (1964) who were great journalists, literary figures, politicians, and scholars of their time. “The cruelties of property and privilege are always more ferocious than the revenges of poverty and oppression. For the one aims at perpetuating resented injustice, the other is merely a momentary passion soon appeased”. This quote by C. L. R. James (1938: 88) and the aforementioned scholars of the Black radical tradition have critically argued about the ways in which the West have manipulated social, economic, and political systems through Eurocentric epistemologies and ideologies. Epistemological experiences of the global South are deeply rooted in the logical processes of induction whereby knowledge is socially constructed from specific observations and nuanced behaviours to broader generalisations and theories. Such ways of knowing remain marginalised and misunderstood by Western ideologies. Which brings us to the inevitable question where do we start? This chapter argues for students to become co-creators of the curriculum and be part of a new beginning.

Discussions about equality in the classroom and the advantages of learning from global South authors helped the University of Kent to develop more challenging and courageous conversations around diversifying the curriculum. To diversify the curriculum is to recognise the value of all differences in knowledge such as class, race, gender, disability, and sexuality. Race has always had the least focus and at the university, students have become more aware of the lack of attention paid to race and racism consequently, ethnic minorities do not feel they are equally represented in their learning (Adewumi & Mitton, 2022; Thomas & Jivraj, 2020). More and more students felt that whilst Kent marketed themselves as a diverse university, in reality on campus it remained a very white space with a predominantly white reading list (Adewumi et al., 2022). Such dominance of whiteness was in contrary to the noticeable change in the typology of the student cohort where 49.1 per cent of students at the Medway and 41.1 per cent at the Canterbury campus are from ethnic minority groups (Qlikview, 2022).

As Student Success work extended its reach across the University (see Chapter 7), realisation grew in understanding the meaningful importance of doing EDI work and committing to interventions to help reduce the

awarding gap. EDI issues began to move up the institution's agenda as the Access and Participation Plan targets for closing the white-BAME awarding gap became an issue that all academic schools needed to pay attention to, not to mention the work that needed to be done on low levels of cultural competence. EDI online training (optional for all staff) proved to be lacking in the genuine understanding of lived experiences of Kent students. Moreover, students were seeking a platform for their voice to be heard and for their own cultural identities to be recognised as a valuable contribution to classroom discussions and how the social construction of race can critically contribute to debates and arguments in group work and assignments. The concept of telling others your lived experiences based on your cultural identity rather than just your class or gender or other aspects of identity was seen to be important for some students in allowing others to understand their point of view about social issues and social justice often compounded by race.

With the heightened focus on social justice following the murder of George Floyd along with the Black Lives Matter protests and the preceding and ongoing campaigns to decolonise the curriculum the moment for change could not be timelier. The value of storytelling and lived experiences by students provided an opportunity to openly discuss their emotions and thoughts about seeing themselves in the curriculum. This chapter presents the Talis Aspire award-winning<sup>1</sup> Diversity Mark student and staff collaborative initiative that has grown in popularity across the university as a key step component of Kent's antiracism strategy which ultimately aims to decolonise the curriculum and the institution. As a theoretical framework threaded throughout this book's chapters, Diversity Mark applied CRT's method of storytelling to illuminate BAME students' lived experiences.

### DIVERSITY MARK READING LIST REVIEW: THE GENESIS

Historically, the emergence of modern social theory was shaped without the context of empire and colonialism remaining unchallenged and hidden from debate (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021). A century later not much has changed in the knowledge production of sociological practice. Sociology in particular has internalised the logic of colonial episteme (Meghji, 2021) leading to disempowering certain peoples and communities (Andrews, 2022). From my years of experience teaching sociology, race and ethnicity have always been a topic of single discussion in the

School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research (SSPSSR) modules, but my concern grew at it lacked importance and positionality within sociology, criminology, social policy, and social work modules where race was placed as an afterthought. I felt that sociology should be one of the more critical social sciences in the field.

In the summer of 2018, Dave Thomas and I developed the idea of reviewing reading lists in SSPSSR, the school I was teaching in at the time. Early sketches of the pilot initiative were conceptualised by Dave Thomas (Thomas & Jivraj, 2020) with the help of a working group.<sup>2</sup> Together we designed a pilot research study that would review the level of Eurocentric authors in social science reading lists. The aim was to review the current reading lists to see how diverse they were in terms of Black authorship. Being social sciences, the idea was at first met with some resistance with the common rebuttal ‘but isn’t the underlying issue really about class? Similarly, gender has been privileged over race in terms of addressing inequalities in higher education due to the institutions focus on the Athena SWAN charter, leaving race in EDI as an afterthought (Bhopal, 2018).

Reductivism and tokenism were seen as potential dangers of a ‘quality mark’ approach and staff and students of colour did question whether it was just a ‘tick box’ exercise. Indeed, some staff resisted reviewing their reading lists on the grounds that adding a few textbooks and articles by authors from the global South would be mere tokenism. However, the outcome was more far-reaching than that. The intention was to create a widespread momentum for change by stimulating uncomfortable conversations about the sheer whiteness of the curriculum and the lack of cultural sensitivity within pedagogical episteme taught predominantly by white academics (Adewumi et al., 2022).

When introducing the pilot project to staff, I realised it was the first time we actually had a conversation about Black authorship or any ‘alternative’ readings for that matter. A challenging discussion about actively decentring whiteness and consciously introducing more global authors in reading lists caused teaching staff to pause and reflect on how the use of founding fathers in sociology contributed to reproducing the legacy of white male heteronormative foundations and Western imperialism within the field of social theory. Some teaching staff acknowledged the existence of very few Black scholars in the curricula such as Franz Fanon (1970), W. E. B. Du Bois (2007), and Stuart Hall (2019) and agreed there was



a need to diversify the field and bring more marginalised groups to the centre of their teaching.

Another challenge was the teaching workload, some conveners admitted that they had not given much thought about how white their reading lists were and whether that mattered at all to the student provided the learning objectives were being met to pass the module. It was almost as if their hands were tied and there was no real time to consider students emotional engagement to learning or how their intellectual thoughts developed to embrace the diversity of the social world. Staff were rightly concerned about their administrative workload and this additional EDI related work would not be recognised. To encourage those to take up the initiative, we made it a point that support will be provided and most of the funds for Diversity Mark would be spent on students reviewing reading lists.

The majority of module conveners were stimulated by what the reading list review results and students' perceptions would reveal but were uncertain as to what it could achieve. Despite the dispersed pockets of doubt and scepticism by a small number of staff. That same month a sum of £3,000 was awarded by the Teaching Enhancement Small Support Awards (TESSAs) and so Diversity Mark began its voyage of discovery. The Head of SSPSSR announced to staff that improving the diversity of module reading lists was a good thing to do.

## DIVERSITY MARK AWARD

Diversity Mark is an award given to those teaching staff (module conveners) that undergo a process of reviewing their reading lists and embark on a reflective experience of their module content with an assigned Diversity Mark officer, a student employed by the university by applying the Diversity Mark online toolkit. The library has worked alongside the students and conveners and designed a toolkit to support conveners to consider diversity and find resources that can increase the sense of belonging for many diverse sectors of Kent's student cohort. The Diversity Mark toolkit includes:

- Alternative suppliers of content from diverse authors which the library have curated using a tool called Padlet and is open to contributions from students and staff.

- Tips on finding diverse authors and perspectives in the library's existing collections, sharing reading lists from liberation history months, tips of how to search databases, and set up current awareness alerts.
- Identifying 'best practice' both internally and from other institutions these include videos, sample reading lists, and case studies.
- Opportunity to participate in workshops to support colleagues and students in the co-creation of globalised reading lists.
- Library module literature review workshops to help students locate alternative readings and reading from the global South for their assignments.

Diversity Mark is very much shaped by the student voice. Student-led focus groups are conducted by an assigned Diversity Mark officer for the conveners' module with students currently studying the module to ensure that conveners have considered and will include authors and perspectives from divergent backgrounds, such as race, gender, sexuality, disability, internationalisation, and socio-economic contexts within their discipline. A full report and presentation are delivered by the Diversity Mark officer along with key recommendations on where sections of the module can be enhanced. Diversity Mark aims to support staff in understanding the importance of cultural sensitivity in module design. Through safe space conversations with their Diversity Mark officer, conveners have benefitted from directly being involved not only in actively searching and adding global perspectives and decolonised pedagogies they have also admittedly experienced a very reflexive process and for the first time for some, really came to terms with their whiteness and academic privileges that have created an unforeseen barrier towards being more culturally sensitive to students' identity and lived experiences.

Initially conducting a review of social science module core reading lists and analysing how they are selected and how the content is taught, the reading list review provided another opportunity to move the conversation forward. I arranged one to one interviews with conveners to act as a safe space to have reflective conversations around ways that the reading resources could project fairer representation of BAME scholarship which have been historically absent and silently erased since the beginning of the Enlightenment period in which the more indigenous styles of knowing (which Ladson-Billings calls ethnic epistemologies (2000)) have

all-too-often become subordinated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Qualitative analysis of these interviews was steered by a CRT thematic approach. A more personal conversation with conveners added meaning and richness to the research data as it provided a greater understanding of their level of cultural sensitivity and cultural competency towards compiling their reading lists and making more use of their e-learning platform to improve pedagogical practice.

The interviews focused on key themes such as strengths and weakness of core texts, dealing with sensitive issues in the classroom around class and race, ways of engaging students, progressive curricular changes, structural limitations relating to module team teaching, assessments, the awarding gap, and the need for institutional change. Their thoughts provided an insightful view into how they navigate towards understanding a sense of belonging of their BAME students and the limitations and practical use of reading lists towards a more diverse curriculum. Ultimately, academics embark on a process of acknowledging a system of white privilege as they strive towards embedding and acknowledging Black scholarship in their reading lists and pedagogical practices. Some revealed how they were more cognisant of imperial origins of their own learning and how that impacted on their choices of published articles and textbooks. More broadly, module conveners have come to a realisation that they need to assess how they currently operate when it comes to cultural interaction and sensitivity of their students and embed diversity better to create inclusive teaching. One way has been to listen and acknowledge counter-stories of their students' perspectives who are from different cultural backgrounds in the classroom. This is by far a difficult journey for some staff as such realisations have aided them to be more conscious of who they are, who their students are in relation to how they apply diversity to their pedagogical practices. This is a challenging time that will eventually disrupt and reform what has long been a comfortable teaching space for many staff.

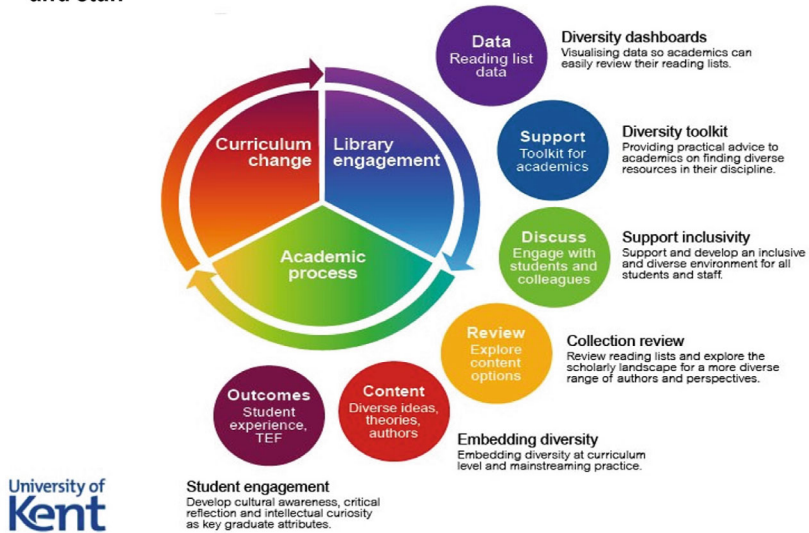
Diversity Mark illustrates how valuable knowledge can be effectively drawn from other parts of the world and from other cultures and deconstructs the levels of whiteness embedded and accepted as the norm in the Eurocentric canons of knowledge in any discipline (not just the social sciences). Diversity Mark highlights the common finding that over 80–90 per cent of module reading lists consists of white middle-class male authors and this unsurprising result has created an opportunity for conversations on how students and staff can work together to make a sustainable

change to the reading lists and the way the material is taught. The dialogue between students and staff who are involved in gaining the award surpasses any learning theory in education because it is a true reflection on the lived experiences of their own students learning and benefitting from their module in real time. The feedback is unique to the convenor's module and the recommendations from the Diversity Mark officer (who essentially acts as an EDI module consultant) can be actioned for a more suitable change in the curriculum so that in the long run belongingness and engagement will improve and help reduce the white-BAME awarding gap. The transformative efforts of the Diversity Mark toolkit start with listening to the student voice.

Due to increased demand, Student Success have employed up to eighteen widening participation students (majority being ethnic minority students and one white student with an invisible disability) known as Diversity Mark Officers through the Empower careers and employability service to work alongside module convenors wishing to diversify their reading lists. There are many other staff at Kent who want to improve and engage with a broader audience to develop their cultural competence, not just for themselves but also for white students and staff. However, the issue of staff resources has been a stumbling block for many. Student Success have provided library workshop training on diversified and decolonised resources to provide additional support to quickly review and diversify reading lists, so more time is available for convenors to work with their Diversity Mark Officer on the inclusive content of the module itself to help them achieve the award. The Diversity Mark framework that follows a collaborative approach with students and staff (see Fig. 10.1) is increasingly incentivising for staff members because of its direct innovation to teaching and learning. Diversifying pedagogical practices creates a more equitable learning environment where all students and staff can learn from each other without feeling uncomfortable talking about race along with other intersections of diversity.

The value of Diversity Mark lies in its practical approach that creates positive outcomes for its students and staff. Staff are becoming more attracted to its personal and direct application to their module and are wanting to do something to make a change. Having hands on consultancy with a Diversity Mark officer means that they are not left to work through a template or online tick box exercise on an antiracism training website, instead they are supported and encouraged by Student Success Diversity Mark officers and supported by library subject staff towards gaining a Diversity Mark award. Achieving the award indicates to students and

**Diversity Mark Project: A collaborative approach with students and staff**



**Fig. 10.1** Summary of Diversity Mark

other staff that the convenor has successfully gained the Diversity Mark award for their specific module. Once awarded, conveners are provided with bullet points about the main themes of success of the Diversity Mark awarding panel identified on their module, celebrating their Diversity Mark status. Finally, a colourful digital widget (Fig. 10.2) can be attached to their e-learning platform page making it easily identifiable to students and staff.

**STUDENTS AS CO-PRODUCERS OF KNOWLEDGE**

The collaborative work with students and staff has created a place of reflection and agency for Diversity Mark officers to voice their opinions about the demographic composition of the reading lists and the level of engagement with the curriculum some of them are currently studying. Many have reflected on their involvement through the Diversity Mark process and have seen it as a relearning of the whiteness of social sciences as well seeing themselves on the margins of the curriculum when it came



**Fig. 10.2** Diversity Mark widget

to the subject talking honestly and openly about race. These students applied CRT's method of storytelling which focuses on the role of the voice in empowering discourses for legal racial justice. The student's voice captured reflective accounts of their student experience which they presented at teaching and learning conferences, Advance HE<sup>3</sup> conferences, and external university workshops. They were invited to speak at teaching and library staff meetings and consult with the Student Union on the issues of representation, belongingness, and inclusion whilst studying at Kent. Such platforms meant students had the opportunity to convey their frustrations of being marginalised and highlighted how whiteness appeared as the norm in their reading lists and was translated in the classroom (being commonly taught by a white lecturer) and in and around campus spaces. Overall, these student experiences had a negative effect on their belongingness and level of interest and engagement in the topic area they were studying.

Diversity Mark officers have reflected on their involvement in the process and working with the library as changing their own mindset and learning more about the importance of diversity in their studies. These students became empowered and through their involvement became agents of change. The first Diversity Mark officer pioneers were Evangeline Agyeman and Collins Konadu-Mensah who were employed to conduct a review for the SSPSSR pilot project of up to seventeen module reading lists, many of which they had studied as students. Evangeline recalled not really taking much notice of the authors and admitted having a sense of trust in her lecturers to present the knowledge. The practical experience of reviewing reading lists then dawned on her that it was not

until the third year of her degree that she actually read a Black author for her degree and on reflection she began to question the institution's understanding of equality diversity and inclusion. For both Evangeline and Collins, it had been a process of relearning and reimagining the function of reading lists to promote educational equity in higher education. Evangeline said, 'I as a student I have realised more of the knowledge that I'm fed' (Agyeman & Konadu-Mensah, 2020). Whilst working in collaboration with the library they were both surprised by some of the biases built into search system algorithms, they as students had not questioned the dominant voices that prevailed in their search results, again reflecting student perceptions about the normativity of whiteness (Ibid, 2020). During this time, they were both conducting research for their dissertations and found that carrying out the reviews of reading lists offered a sharper focus and agency when undertaking their own research, and in line with the ideas of CRT, they considered aspects of identity, geographical location of authors, and colonial legacy. They found particular biases within their search results which they would not have been aware of had it not been for their participation as Diversity Mark officers.

Patrice Mighton, a 2019 Diversity Mark officer, presented her experience of reading lists to the University and was invited to share her observations and student experience with institutions such as Advance HE, the Eastern Arc consortium of universities,<sup>4</sup> and TASO (mentioned in the previous chapter). Here is an extract from one of her many insightful presentations entitled '*Hoping to find myself in the curriculum*':

Never had I thought I would not find myself in sociology I was disappointed, especially as a Black woman. I knew that there would not be a large representation of BAME men, but it was also disappointing to see how little BAME women were represented in these reading lists. (Mighton, 2021a)

Patrice went on to write a blog with the same title:

As I expected, my initial thoughts of there being majorly white male authors were correct. Predominantly white male middle class to be specific. There were however several white females, and typically that is what I came across in many of the modules I studied and reviewed. The quantity of BAME authors was extremely limited, which I was not shocked about, however I had hoped that there would be a larger variety across the large range of reading lists modules which I reviewed with three other Diversity

Mark officers. For the BAME authors that were identified, I noticed that it was often the same few authors repeated in various reading lists, and therefore although BAME authors were present in reading lists, the scope was limited to only a very few. These few BAME authors often occurred in relation to topics of race and ethnicity. Overall, my experience of reviewing the SSPSR reading lists was what I expected, however not what I hoped for and was therefore disappointed with the lack of BAME representation within such a diverse and progressive subject, further identifying there was and still is much work to be done. (Mighton, 2021b)

Such nuanced student voice extracts allow us to gain a far deeper insight into the emotional learning and sense of belonging and engagement experienced by ethnic minority students. Another positive outcome of diversifying reading lists was the opportunity to talk about different cultural truths and improve the cultural competency of white students. Bridget Ng'andu, myself, and other staff in the social work team were conscious of the need to teach about whiteness in a sensitive manner (see Chapter 9), and so we set ground rules about respect and listening and sharing opinions in a mature way so we could all learn from each other's experiences and observations about privilege. Such teachings often helped to acknowledge and shift the power imbalances in the classroom and that included the need to talk about hegemonic whiteness and white privilege to help improve the understanding of systematic exclusions and oppressions for white as well as BAME students. What is important to note here is that staff and students alike needed to understand whiteness without an unintended perpetuation of whiteness being perceived as the ideal standard by which everything and everyone is measured (Gillborn et al., 2018).

## CONCLUSION

Essentially, Diversity Mark has taught us that doing collaborative work with students sets out to better represent diverse perspectives and include global authors in their reading list, which in turn leads to a more inclusive learning experience for all students. Diversity Mark has fought certain challenges along the way, the implication being that race should not be the central focus of diversity, staff do not see the need for the award in particular disciplines such as in maths, science, and business, and those staff with REF allocation obligations have far more important research



to do than to spend time diversifying their reading lists. Moreover, precarity in academia leaves little room for diverse creativity and innovation (Sowa, 2020). Such barriers in working with Student Success have been overcome by individuals who want to see change, develop working relationships with Diversity Mark officers by finding the time to do the work and become advocates for Diversity Mark.

Diversity Mark is recognised as having a positive role to play towards decolonising the curriculum and the university with its unique ability work more closely with students, teaching staff, and the library who have dedicated staff that work towards decolonising the curriculum by conducting extensive searches for global materials and reading lists. The initiative has grown to become an institutional wide programme aligned with the Decolonise UKC's manifesto and is now embedded in the University of Kent antiracism strategy. Student Success have consistently argued that the deficit approach towards ethnic minority students with staff's particular preoccupation of BTEC and Black students as being 'the problem' was further entrenching systemic racist processes and structures. The Diversity Mark programme along with other extensive research presented in this book have provided empirical evidence that turns the gaze inwards to institutional structures and traditional pedagogical practices.

An amplified call to decolonise the university and improve inclusion in UK universities has marked a shift in thinking about knowledge production and what and who should shape the curricula. Decolonising and diversifying curricula programmes has provided the opportunity for UK higher education institutions to better comprehend and critically analyse the multiple forms of colonial legacy entrenched in higher education curricula. This is the moment for institutions to create a pedagogy centred on multiplicity where teachers can produce and facilitate a more inclusive and representative canon of knowledge (Arday & Mizra, 2019; Bhabra et al., 2018). However, we must be wary that this work does not become a performative task where universities get on the so called decolonise bandwagon, Moosavi (2020) which could be counterproductive and discourage genuine academic and professional staff activists from doing transformative work. A best practice approach is to involve students as co-creators of the curriculum so they become agents of change and work alongside staff to reflect on their pedagogical practices and intellectual outputs. This is an appealing form of authentic activism for students

and staff as it centres the students voice and develops critical consciousness. bell hooks perceived the classroom as a space to experience freedom and eventually empowerment through rethinking teaching practices that lead to systemic changes around race and representation, hooks (1994). Empowering students to transgress and think beyond the oppressive Eurocentric parameters of whiteness is the direction we must all adopt to create sustainable and meaningful change.

## NOTES

1. The Talis Aspire User Group ‘Innovation’ award is presented to the university that has shown creativity and innovation in their use of Talis Aspire an online resource list platform, fully integrated with your university library reading list and resources systems. <https://talis.com>.
2. Conversations about the lack of diversity in reading lists developed in 2016 between Student Success and academic library services (ALS). In 2017, a Diversity/Global Mark working group consisting of staff from ALS, Kent Union (involved in the BAME student voices report), Global and lifelong learning and the Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
3. Advance HE is a British charity and professional membership scheme promoting excellence in higher education. It advocates evidence-based teaching methods and awards fellowships as professional recognition for university teachers. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/>.
4. The Eastern Academic Research Consortium, or Arc, brings together three interdisciplinary universities on the eastern seaboard of England: the University of East Anglia, the University of Essex, University of Kent and the University of Sussex. They are forged in communities built on equality, respect, and intellectual freedom. <https://easternarc.ac.uk/>.

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## Editors' Conclusion

*Alexander Hensby and Barbara Adewumi*

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the ubiquity of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusivity (EDI) policies and practices in contemporary higher education, the vast majority of UK universities have struggled to close their white-BAME awarding gap (UUK/NUS, 2019). The reasons for this are complex and wide-ranging, and this book has attempted to unravel some of the structural issues that impede academic achievement for so many students of colour. Through our research into BAME students' expectations, motivations, and feelings of unbelonging, we hope to have demonstrated the importance of rejecting a deficit reading of the awarding gap. The book also assesses

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opportunities for HEIs to undertake meaningful and efficacious strategies and interventions within a context of increasing massification and market competition. In doing, its contributors are united in seeking to draw clearer lines of communication and action between research, policy, and practice to ensure that racial equity is ultimately achievable.

Of course, the book's focus on one single institution limits its capacity to speak for all HEIs across the UK. Certain trends and phenomena—such as the relationship between religio-cultural constraints and commuting, and access to and belonging within 'elite' institutions—had relatively little bearing on the gap at Kent and are better addressed elsewhere in the literature (e.g. Bhopal & Myers, 2023; Boliver, 2016; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Khambhaita & Bhopal, 2015; Reay et al., 2005). Nevertheless, we believe that the Kent case adds value to this literature for representing in many respects the 'median' HE in the UK. As a plate glass institution located outside a major city in a majority-white environment, it has seen considerable diversification of its undergraduate intake over the past decade. Moreover, unlike most equivalent studies the book has also been able to waive institutional anonymity, allowing its contributors to freely embed their analysis within the context of the University's structure and locale.

The scope of this book was made possible by the creation of one of the sector's most sustained and well-resourced institutional responses to the white-BAME awarding gap. Funded as part of the University's Access and Participation Plan, Kent's Student Success team sought to develop their understanding of the intersecting factors that sustain this gap. This has enabled us to combine multiple different sources of data and expertise across the institution, facilitating a deep dive analysis of the structural factors that inhibit BAME attainment and belonging in the sector more generally. Though other studies have succeeded in undertaking valuable institutional analyses of social class (e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2016), we believe that race has seldom been afforded this depth of institutional inquiry.

The book's original research has delved into BAME students' lived experiences—including their decision-making, adaptation to university learning and teaching, and processes of building capital and social networks on campus—and revealed findings that should interest and concern all HE professionals. First, that many BAME students' pressure to succeed academically sees them engage more narrowly with the support services available to them, pursuing a model of independent learning that

is more akin to self-reliance. Second, that this self-reliance is at least partly borne out of a need for self-protection within an environment that can feel unwelcoming. Third, that massification has limited academic staff sensitivity to changing student needs and restricted their capacity to initiate meaningful interactions. Fourth, that even ethnically diverse universities are capable of reproducing white dominant cultures through campus clubs and societies. Fifth, that the awarding gap is exacerbated by the limited attention afforded to entrants with vocational qualifications, negatively impacting their motivation to succeed academically.

These are deep-seated issues requiring persistent structural interventions of the kind universities are often reluctant to commit. Though the awarding gap remains a concern at Kent, the book's latter chapters have outlined many of the positive gains made through Student Success work to date. This includes strategies for the collecting and presentation of institutional data, an initiative to promote a more inclusive and reflexive curriculum, and reforms to the academic adviser system which facilitate more meaningful staff–student interactions. This has been a painstaking process, as it has taken time to develop a flexible model for action across all levels of University practice while building an evaluation framework that comprehensively monitors and assesses student and staff interventions. Along the way lessons have been learnt, mistakes made, and inconvenient truths uncovered, all while negotiating the many challenges and uncertainties HEIs have faced during this time. This book is a testament to the brave, innovative, and self-critiquing work undertaken by the team's researchers, managers, and practitioners.

And yet there remains so much still to be done. For all these gains, the awarding gap persists both at Kent and across the sector. As the authors of Chapter 7 make clear, the Student Success team has developed a knowledge and resource base that must be utilised to initiate more radical structural change than has been achieved thus far. Further research into the BAME student experience is also necessary, and we can point to a number of limitations and blind spots evident in the initial chapters of this book. For example, though the survey's response rate strengthened its claim to representativeness, we recognise that our follow-up sample of interviewees captured more readily the Black student experience than it did that for Asian students. Greater attention, too, was paid to intersections with class and entry qualifications than gender or disability. Moreover, in employing a 'snapshot' approach of one-off surveys and interviews, research did not fully capture the temporal nature



of students' adaptation to higher education learning. The Student Success team is addressing these knowledge gaps in its mainstreaming phase, employing the use of longitudinal methods in particular, as well as studies foregrounding intersections with gender and disability.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these limitations, we believe that this book will be of value to readers seeking to understand some of the key causal factors behind the white-BAME awarding gap, as well as providing pointers for efficacious action that can be applied across the sector. This concluding chapter offers reflections on the book's central themes and findings, before giving our final thoughts on prospects for the future.

## THEORISING INEQUITY IN CONTEMPORARY HE: CHALLENGING COMPLACENCY

Our introductory chapter identified complacency as a key factor in the white-BAME awarding gap's sector-wide persistence. This is evident both in the performative nature of many institutions' equality and diversity policies (a point we will explore in more detail in the following section), and in the attitudes of staff who 'do not see colour', preferring to equate racism only with hateful bigotry (Back, 2004). We also argue that complacency has extended to the way the awarding gap has been conceptualised sociologically. With much of the scholarship on inequalities in higher education favouring a Bourdieusian framework, race has often been effectively consigned as a subset of class. The book's resultant integration of critical race theory (CRT) and self-determination theory (SDT) is rooted in a desire to foreground race and agency within Bourdieu's theory of capitals, thereby enabling us to decisively move away from deficit reading of the white-BAME awarding gap.

This framework has helped us identify key trends and findings through our research chapters in particular. The focus in Chapter 2 on student decision-making foregrounds 'ethnic mix' as an essential precondition for many BAME students when selecting their preferred university. This reflects a desire not to endure hypervisibility on campus and is likely to be a contributing factor in the under-recruitment of students of colour in many Russell Group institutions (Boliver, 2016). Nevertheless, this is often framed in HE literatures as evidencing BAME students' lack of ambition or cultural capital to convert their FE grades into the most profitable outcomes. Not only does this write off the status and value of more than one hundred HEIs where nearly three-quarters of UK students

annually study,<sup>2</sup> it also requires students of colour to effectively serve as race trailblazers in majority-white spaces—in other words, to *shut up and learn to play the game*.

Of course, the pervasiveness of the awarding gap across the sector demonstrates that BAME student success is not reducible to their choice of university and degree subject. Nor does a diverse student body necessarily generate equity and inclusive practice in all aspects of university life. Chapter 3 analyses the learning culture of higher education, in particular the expectation that students will adapt as proactive independent learners. This is found to place added pressure on students of colour, especially those already feeling the weight of expectation to convert their parents' durable ambitions into educational success. When we consider this in tandem with the reproduction of cultural whiteness within HEIs it should come as no surprise that many opt for self-reliance. The desire to avoid drawing attention to adaptation struggles was especially evident among BAME students who came to Kent with vocational qualifications. Despite representing a key component of many universities' widening participation agenda, Chapter 5 found that many BTEC entrants encountered a learning culture that presupposed an A-level background. This exacerbated students' feelings of stigmatisation and unbelonging, with Chapter 6 identifying a motivational gap between white and Black African students in particular.

Addressing and overcoming these barriers is not simply the students' responsibility; it is vital for HEIs to facilitate more meaningful interactions between staff and students. Some of these struggles might have been more commonplace than students imagined, though in any case many perceived a lack of cultural commonality with their majority-white and middle-class academics. This partly reflects a broader context of massification and professionalisation which has left tutor systems lacking definition and remaining largely voluntaristic in practice (see Chapter 8), though some students admitted to finding staff unapproachable on the occasions they did reach out for advice. That said, Chapter 9 indicates that such barriers are less evident when students have access to teachers and advisers of colour. The authors reflect on their experiences of teaching and negotiating race in the social sciences, foregrounding the importance of creating 'comfortable spaces to discuss difficult issues' including fostering allyship and critical reflexivity among white students. Increasing staff diversity is not enough to create an equitable learning environment, however, nor should such responsibilities represent a 'cultural taxation'

for staff of colour, to borrow Padilla's (1994) memorable phrase. It is for this reason that the authors advocate for cultural competence training to ensure that meaningful interactions with students can be delivered by all staff regardless of background.

This is not to say that our BAME subjects lacked resources or adaptability when it came to adjusting to the learning culture of the university. Chapter 3 detailed how interviewees variously deployed academic capital, social capital, and Black cultural capital to establish themselves within their degree programmes and assessments. The fact that these were mostly accrued from family highlights key intersections between race and class. Black cultural capital especially was more likely to be possessed by middle-class students (see also Wallace, 2017), though for students whose family were educated overseas their academic capital did not always effectively translate into a contemporary UK context. Most students, however, were able to build their own capital on campus through the development of peer networks. This was valuable for instilling a sense they were 'doing university right' across curricular and extracurricular contexts. The latter was evidenced most clearly through the rapid expansion of the African-Caribbean Society (ACS) on Kent's Canterbury campus, though it was not until 'Zayngate' that Black students began to recognise the full extent of their institutional agency. As detailed in Chapter 4, this incident ultimately galvanised actions to increase Black and BAME voice and representation in the student union and influence EDI anti-discrimination policies.

Our emphasis on how students negotiated and helped transform the institutional habitus of the University of Kent reflects our intention to reframe the awarding gap as a structural issue. Institutional strategies for this are explored in detail in Chapter 7, but the final three chapters especially foreground the role of staff as agents for enacting cultural change from within. This is evident most clearly in Chapter 10's account of the Diversity Mark (DM) initiative. DM has so far demonstrated the benefits of encouraging staff to take greater responsibility for developing more diverse reading lists in their module curricula and utilising students as co-producers. This involvement empowers student participants to engage more critically with the racialised histories of knowledge production and fosters greater reflexivity and innovation among staff in the meaning and impact of their course materials.

In sum, it is hoped that in bridging these theories this book will help advance a more dynamic approach to studying racial inequities in higher

education. Though integrations of Bourdieu and CRT are by no means new (e.g. Adewumi, 2015, 2020; Rollock, 2012; Rollock et al., 2015; Wallace, 2017; Yosso, 2005) we believe that viewing the former through the lens of the latter has enabled us to foreground how whiteness has shaped the institutional habitus of UK universities, both in reproducing the conditions which impede BAME attainment, and in restricting the scope of programmes designed to enact meaningful institutional change. The emphasis here on structural constraints is tempered by our incorporation of SDT which helps ensure we do not lose sight of student agency. This has proven useful for better understanding students' motivations for higher education study, as well as encouraging strategies which are geared towards satisfying their need for relatedness, competence, and autonomy.

### RACE EQUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF MARKETISATION, MASSIFICATION, AND PROFESSIONALISATION: IDENTIFYING MOTORS FOR CHANGE

Even with solid conceptual foundations, efforts to close the awarding gap are constrained by the contemporary context of higher education. As discussed in Chapter 1, universities are increasingly expected to operate like businesses, with progressive institutional change driven by a combination of market competition and regulation and compliance procedures. The white-BAME awarding gap is in many respects a product of this culture, representing a 'key performance indicator' (KPI) for measuring universities' commitment to meeting sector-wide EDI goals. KPIs typically feature in Access and Participation Plans, and failure to meet institutional targets carries the threat of sanction from the Office for Students (OfS), including losing the right to set tuition fees at the highest amount (OfS, 2023).

This model for improving standards has long been met with dismay and cynicism by HE professionals, and so it is not difficult to see why some take a dim view of the motives behind targets like the awarding gap (Mirza, 2018). And yet, submerged within this unpromising picture is a radical liberation goal—that BAME students should have the opportunity to achieve the highest grades in their degree study without having to overcome systemic disadvantage or discrimination. Closing the gap might not contradict the sector's prioritisation of economic goods—after

all, high BAME attainment can drive up student satisfaction and graduate outcomes—but it nevertheless has the potential to achieve profound structural change within universities. The reason for this relates to the sheer scale of the task: the past decade has shown that awarding gaps are unlikely to be eliminated by deficit-driven ‘quick fixes’, and this has slowly (and sometimes reluctantly) pushed universities towards critically evaluating their own institutional practices and culture.

Perhaps ironically, this entitles us to draw on alternative conceptions of higher education’s purpose and value which predate the market logic of the current system. Freire (1993) famously posits that education is the practice of freedom and a tool for resistance against social and cultural oppression, and this requires educators to demonstrate their own critical consciousness in order to prepare students for a self-managed life. Burke (2012: 189) considers this philosophy within the context of contemporary HE policy, arguing that ‘we must move beyond current hegemonic discourses and practices of higher education to reconceptualise widening participation as a project of transformation for social justice’. This includes pushing for epistemic justice so that higher education can ‘nurture, enrich and fully recognise the importance of diverse forms of knowledge, subjectivity, and practice’ (2012: 189).

So, can closing the white-BAME awarding gap serve as a pathway for racial liberation in higher education? Perhaps, though not if HEIs choose to operate within a generic, performative framing of ‘diversity work’. As Ahmed (2012) reminds us, any institutional strategy that allows ‘doing the document’ to be prioritised above ‘doing the doing’ risks creating at best a simulacra of race equality. Truly efficacious work must commit to goals that lie beyond external compliance and internal window-dressing. It requires long-term commitment and active leadership from senior managers as well as sustained investment in specialist staffing to ensure that the work actually gets done. Kent’s Student Success team is fortunate to have been furnished with both, yet as we saw in Chapter 7 such assets are no guarantee of goal attainment. EDI professionals are required to simultaneously consolidate institutional knowledge and expertise, negotiate internal barriers and obstacles such as academic staff buy-in, all the while fulfilling monitoring and evaluation obligations as set by external auditors. Even under a supportive leadership this remains a steep task, one that requires patience when large measurable gains are not immediately forthcoming.

The latter chapters in this book have provided some valuable insights on strategies for making structural gains within universities. Influenced by the Theory of Change, these tend to reflect a pragmatic outlook. As detailed in Chapter 7, Student Success's Times Higher Education award and involvement in the University's TEF submission may resemble 'audit aware' acts of 'doing the document' as per Ahmed's critique, yet these wins provided institutional leverage and traction to expand the team's size and scope and thereby pursue a more root-and-branch agenda in its second phase. Such a pragmatic outlook does not betray an awareness of the overarching constraints practitioners face, however. In Chapter 8 the authors identify a number of interventions designed to improve the academic adviser role in a massified environment—augmenting central guidance and training, integrating the role into programme curricula, improving the role's recognition in staff promotions—but they warn that their efficacy will remain compromised without tackling overinflated academic workloads. Similarly, Chapter 10 emphasises how the Diversity Mark initiative has seen tangible gains in pursuing more equitable and critically reflexive course curricula, but without the collaborative involvement of students its methodology risks failing to sufficiently challenge staff into thinking holistically and self-critically about the colour of their curriculum.

A pragmatic and critical approach must also extend to how HEIs strategise for the many overlapping targets, KPIs, and external auditors that presently fall under the parent category of 'race equality' in HE. To illustrate, EDI and Student Success staff at Kent are presently responsible for fulfilling the terms of its Access and Participation Plan, submitting for a Race Equality Charter (REC) award, and developing the University's new Anti-Racism strategy. These, too, sit alongside other EDI strategies and charters, including Athena SWAN and Disability Confident. While each on its own can be a powerful driver for institutional change, they are subject to different internal or external governing bodies, and so require considerable resourcing to bring together institutional evidence, engage key stakeholders, and ultimately fill in the form. Without pragmatic, joined-up thinking to ensure that targets and audits are appropriately aligned and realistically phased, EDI teams are at risk being left 'doing' multiple documents at once while senior leaders bask in the short-term glory of having initiated another progressive strategy. Moreover, with this work often falling on female staff of colour with time-limited contracts, this can detract from the most important work of all—the interventions

and practices designed to improve BAME students' attainment and create a more equitable university. Within such a context, the decision to pursue another kitemark on the bottom of the EDI webpage is disingenuous and counterproductive.

### FINAL THOUGHTS: THE WICKED PROBLEM OF RACIAL EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In 1979, Audre Lorde was invited to act as a discussant at a conference on feminist theory at New York University's Institute for the Humanities. Angered that the event's programme had marginalised voices of Black, lesbian, and Third World (*sic*) women, she delivered a memorable riposte against what she felt was the blinkered complacency of the academy's perspective on feminist liberation:

*Survival is not an academic skill.* It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (Lorde, 2003: 26–27, original emphasis)

In the decades since, Lorde's assertion that *the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house* has been frequently invoked to capture the pessimism many individuals feel when contemplating structural change within a number of societal institutions, including higher education. It is not hard to see why. For Ahmed (2012, 2018), it captured her experiences of doing diversity work, ultimately leading her to conclude that 'working "in house" would not transform the master's house'. Andrews (2018: 275) voiced a similar critique, claiming that 'If university is the disease, then it cannot be the cure'. The language of disease was also employed by Karen Salt in her keynote at Kent Law School's 2019 Decolonise the Curriculum conference, where she expressed scepticism over any transformation project grown within an institution built on 'toxic soil' (see also Macharia, 2018; Salt, 2020).

There is no doubt that racial inequity in higher education remains a 'wicked problem', and pursuing this work can generate feelings of pessimism and guilt. The experience of listening to students of colour whose university experience and degree outcome have not measured up to their hopes and expectations can easily leave us with a sense that Student Success is failing to cut deeply or effectively enough to transform people's lives. Entering higher education incurs a significant financial burden, but most undergraduates arrive with high aspirations and a desire to grow as people. Their degree, too, often represents more than a certificate of academic achievement as it can provide a gateway out of financial hardship and a means of demonstrating professional abilities which counter racial profiling and discrimination in the labour market. It is therefore vitally important that students are made to feel secure and competent at an institution where they will study for three to four years. EDI work is designed to ensure that the institution's desire to accommodate students is built on solid and equitable foundations, but it is also emotional work. Frustration sets in when *another* published report leaves us with more recommendations to address, and with many HEIs facing financial cuts and increasingly unsustainable working conditions this work can be easily viewed by colleagues as part of the problem.

Yet for all these struggles, we retain a cautious and conditional optimism. Lorde's lesson should perhaps not be taken literally, serving instead to puncture any naïve assumption that racial equity in HE is possible without fundamental and persistent structural change. Hylton (2009: 96), for example, reads it as a call to action, arguing that academics must 'challenge tradition... and not be afraid to present experiences as valid resources and knowledge to supplement and challenge established epistemologies'. Similarly, Day et al's (2022) recent volume responds to Lorde in metaphysical terms, arguing that 'the first step in the process of decolonisation is to decolonise the mind'. Though Andrews (2018: 283) warns that Black academics 'cannot be afraid to abandon the academy', his founding and directing of a successful Black Studies undergraduate programme at Birmingham City University since 2017 indicates that there may still be value to accommodating HEIs within the pursuit of racial liberation.

Like so many institutions in the UK, universities have struggled to overcome their imperial past and forge an authentically equitable present, and we must be prepared to at least repurpose—as well as outright



discard—many of the tools available to us. But we should also not lose sight of what universities can—and *should*—offer their students and staff: a space for listening, learning, and ultimately improving our critical self-understanding as human beings.

## NOTES

1. Over the past three years, Students Success has commissioned a number of research projects to address these issues. These include a three-year qualitative longitudinal study of 27 undergraduates, encompassing the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant lockdown. Drawing on the same theoretical framework as this book, the study enables us to critically compare students' learning strategies, motivations, and resource accumulation across their undergraduate study. The sample design also enables us to compare students by ethnicity, entry qualification, and class background. Second, Student Success has commissioned annual surveys with the university's first year undergraduates to capture initial information on student's preferences, expectations, skills, and perceived needs about their subject of choice, and future orientation. The surveys are administered and at a school level, allowing for subject-specific customisations to the questionnaire template, with results shared with school staff at staff away days. Third, led by Dr Yetunde Kolajo Student Success staff are embarking on a project focusing on women in STEM subjects. Working with the Kent Medway Medical School, the research will generate new datasets to help implement relevant interventions that will improve retention and belongingness, as well as close awarding gaps.
2. <https://thetab.com/uk/2017/08/31/russell-group-unis-have-a-serious-diversity-problem-these-are-the-ones-with-the-fewest-bme-students-46742>

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# Correction to: Race, Capital, and Equity in Higher Education

*Alexander Hensby and Barbara Adewumi*

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