Exploring learning experiences of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students in a public health undergraduate degree.

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Abstract

Eliminating the awarding gap between the respective academic performances of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students and their white counterparts is vital in higher education (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2018) and a priority for the University of Greenwich (2021). The university's statistical data on student outcomes highlight a stark difference in the achievement of students from BAME backgrounds and that of white students. In 2019-20, students from BAME backgrounds studying a public health undergraduate degree achieved mean grades for some modules 18.4% lower than did white students (University of Greenwich, 2021). These quantitative data highlight the scale of the problem but do not provide contextual information that can help academics understand how and why this situation arises.

This exploratory study used qualitative interviews to investigate student experiences from a critical intercultural perspective. The aim was to explore barriers to and enablers of learning for students from BAME communities. Participants were students on a public health undergraduate programme that attracts a small minority of white students, with the majority identifying as BAME. Thematic analysis identified three broad themes discussed in detail below: a) the role of the family within students' learning experience; b) the influence of peer groups and others in students' motivation to study; c) how participants understand the concept of 'becoming an independent learner'. Ultimately, the study recommends that a critical intercultural and intersectional perspective is needed to enable a nuanced understanding of attainment data.

Introduction

Initiatives that are intended to eliminate inequalities associated with ethnic and cultural diversity include widening access to higher education (HE). That this has increased the number of BAME students attending university should be recognised. However, education policies that focus on achieving social mobility solely by providing 'equal opportunities' assume that all students begin on a `level playing field' (Wong, 2021) and research evidence demonstrates that, on its own, this approach is insufficient to reduce inequalities (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In United Kingdom (UK) HE institutions, work to address differential degree outcomes or the `awarding gap' has gained momentum (Cotton *et al.*, 2015; UUK/NUS, 2019) and more and more universities are signing up to the Race Equality Charter, which supports HE institutions to identify and address the barriers experienced by BAME staff and students, with progress being recognised by bronze and silver accreditations (Advance HE, 2020).

Furthermore, universities are starting to look beyond the awarding gap statistics to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of their students. In the UK, students in widening participation universities often have very different identities, expectations and outlooks from the traditional, young, British, white (often male) student, especially in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects such as public health (Losh, 2010; Ong, 2005). Contemporary issues in educational research, such as diversity, inclusivity and attainment gaps, require intercultural perspectives (Yershova *et al*., 2000) and approaches (Carastathis 2014, Hankivsky, 2011; Moreno Leguizamon *et al*., 2017). UNESCO (2023) asserts that equitable interaction between diverse cultural identities facilitates the sharing of cultural knowledge and practices in a two-way system that includes dialogue and respect. This is the ideal aspired to, but evidence suggests this is not yet the reality in the HE context (Wong, 2021).

While some studies have investigated educational inequalities based on race or ethnicity, little research has considered intersectionality (Singh, 2009). This term refers to the ways in which multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage are connected to and affect each other (Rollock *et al*., 2014; Bhopal, 2018). Collins and Bilge (2016) demonstrate how intersecting inequalities can create unique challenges; for example, female students from a variety of ethnic or religious backgrounds may face varied challenges in relation to their caregiving role in the family. An intersectional approach can illuminate the complexities of students' identities and lived experiences, particularly in relation to power and privilege (Hankivsky, 2011). Intersectionality goes beyond one identity marker – such as race – to consider possible interactions between race and other characteristics, such as gender or disability. This approach challenges homogenisation by revealing the differences that exist within any group (Bastia, 2014). For example, it cannot be assumed that the experiences of students from one ethnic minority can be generalised to those in other minority groups (Wong, 2021).

In addition, it should be recognised that cultural identity is fluid and related to context rather than being permanently determined. The concepts of non-essentialisation and non-dichotomisation are critical here. Non-essentialisation (Chao and Kung, 2015) refers to the need to avoid stereotypes and the idea that cultural features are fixed and essential to an individual's identity and its intersections. Meanwhile, non-dichotomisation refers to the need to avoid assigning traits in a binary way – for example, describing a cultural group as either collectivist or individualist (Gudykunst *et al*., 1996; Wood *et al*., 2021) – when, on the contrary, cultures may flexibly attribute importance to both individualistic and collectivist characteristics, depending on the circumstances (Canclini *et al*., 1995). For instance, within the context of a family, traits such as independence and ambition could be as important as social ones, such as caring for others.

The next critical element in understanding the experience of HE students is the evaluation of teaching and learning processes to ensure that no ethnic identity or cultural trait is implied to be superior or inferior compared to others. Moosavi (2022) found that students from east Asian countries were under-represented in the literature and concluded that '*academic literature about ethnic minorities in Western universities has often exclusively focused on [experiences of] those who are racialised as black*' (p. 496). Whilst this doesn't explicitly place one group as superior or inferior to another, it does show bias. The majority group's prioritising of one group of marginalised students over another must be considered in discussions about the decolonisation of the curriculum.

To address differential outcomes, it is essential to understand student experiences in relation to their intersectional background(s) rather than ethnicity alone, as many awarding-gap projects currently do. We argue that to dichotomise ethnicity as white/ BAME students and compare student outcomes according to ethnicity alone is a blunt and reductionist way to assess students' learning realities and experiences. It is also important to consider awarding-gap data as just one measure of student success. For these reasons, while considering intersectionality, we took a more nuanced approach to understanding student success by focusing on the lived experience of BAME-background students studying at the University of Greenwich.

The aim of this small-scale study was to explore the experiences – and in particular, the barriers to and enablers of learning – of BAME public health undergraduate students at the University of Greenwich. Previously, awarding-gap research projects have often focused on collecting quantitative data. In this study, we collected qualitative data produced from semi-structured interviews that would then complement the university's quantitative data and provide a richer picture of the students' experiences.

Methodological approach

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data on the experience of being an undergraduate student on the BSc Public Health degree at Greenwich from the perspective of students from different ethnic backgrounds.

The research team included two white British females and one male academic from South America. One of the females is a senior manager in a faculty of education and health and the other is a junior member of the same faculty. The male is a researcher and academic on health inequalities among minority groups in the UK and abroad. The three researchers are aware of the debates about inequalities experienced by different groups in health and education and this perspective guided the overall aims and approach taken in the study.

Participants

In 2020-21 there were approximately 150 students studying at each level of study on a BSc Public Health degree. Potential participants were invited to take part in the study via email.

Purposive typical case sampling was used to ensure that the study aims would be met. All nine participants were female, reflecting the demographic profile of the programme. The self-reported ethnic breakdown of students who participated was: 55.55% Black, 33.3% Asian, 11.11% Other (difference from 100% owing to rounding). This meant that, although there is likely to be some transferability of findings (Polit and Tatano-Beck, 2014) with other BAME undergraduates at Greenwich, the experiences described are based on the lived experience of a group of students who self-identify as females from BAME backgrounds and as such demonstrate some intersectional elements.

Data collection

Ethical approval was obtained via the University Research Ethics Committee, which included a review and approval of the recruitment process, interview guide and participant information sheet. The study received internal funding from the university's Institute for Lifecourse Development to cover the cost of incentive vouchers and transcription.

Given the time commitment required, it was important to choose a point in the year when students would be more likely to be available to participate. Interviews were conducted in term three of 2020-21 and term one of 2021-22. Owing to lockdown restrictions, interviews were carried out via MS Teams, except for that with one participant, who was interviewed on campus once restrictions were lifted. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes. Once collected, the interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with sensitive data removed prior to analyses.

Participants were asked to share their experiences at the University of Greenwich, particularly on the undergraduate public health programme. We did not specifically ask students about the awarding gap. We were interested in the lived learning experience in general, i.e. being an undergraduate student, rather than solely on their experience of success as measured by grade outcome (Green and Thorogood, 2018; King and Horrocks, 2010). A £20 shopping voucher was provided to thank each participant.

Analysis

The data were analysed thematically by reading and re-reading the transcripts after micro-coding (Braun and Clark, 2013). This method generates distinct themes from patterns emerging from the data where similarities and differences surface. The sample was small in scale but not in complexity, with transcripts providing many 'bits' of data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). A constructionist perspective underpinned the data analysis. This understands social phenomena as socially constructed and discursively produced (Crotty, 2009). The research team engaged in detailed discussion of the data to identify and agree on the themes and identify key conclusions as well as the limitations of the study.

Findings

The aim of the study was to gain an understanding of the learning experience of being a BAME undergraduate student on a public health degree. Thematic analysis of the transcripts identified three themes: a) the role of the family in students' learning, b) the influence of peer groups and others in students' motivation to study; c) becoming an independent student. However, there was significant overlap between the themes.

Because of the timing of the recruitment and interviews, COVID 19 became a dominant issue for students. It featured heavily in the interviews as part of the immediate prevailing context of the study rather than as a theme per se. Since qualitative research endorses flexibility and context immediacy as significant elements in data collection and analysis, we have, before reporting the themes, provided contextual information to recognise how this global pandemic burst into the students' learning experiences at this time and thus could not be ignored.

The immediate context of the study: COVID 19

Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2021 – following periods of national lockdown in response to the COVID 19 pandemic – at a time when physical attendance at university was restricted. Though the interview questions did not seek to explore experiences of blended learning, students often volunteered a comparison between traditional face-to-face learning and the blended approach adopted by the university in response to the pandemic. During 2020-21, the Public Health portfolio delivered blended or fully online teaching depending on the level of social restriction at the time. Several participants expressed a preference for face-to-face teaching. They valued the interactive online teaching styles of their lecturers, which facilitated understanding. However students felt that the blended model removed additional communication opportunities with their lecturers as there was insufficient time at the end of lectures or seminars for further discussion or individual questions. Students had a negative experience when information technology (IT) poverty precluded optimum engagement in online seminars. All students had access to IT of some sort, but the quality of this varied, with some accessing learning materials via their smartphone. Students reported knowing that their lecturers were willing to help, but they were frustrated by the extra steps that remote learning required to raise issues or access help. This was presented as an additional burden for students to navigate. For example, one student reported:

> *"The help was still there, I can say that. It wasn't completely prevented from to learn something. It was just a bit hard to get the support and it was just more…and we had to do some of more steps to get the help. So, if normal, the tutor is... We are in a classroom in a lecture theatre, we can go straight to tell the tutor what the problem is. But if we are virtual learning, or if we are doing something online, or sometimes if we have any problem, any things... Or just like we have to do something extra to get the help. We have to inform them. We have to explain the situation." (Interview 2)*

There were aspects of blended learning which students found beneficial. For example, in addition to pre-recorded lectures and slides, students valued the availability of additional accessible learning materials which leveraged independent learning. For example:

> *"…all these readings that were given to us, they obviously made us think more. We used to connect theories together and how everything used to like... Or how everything is linked together. And I think that really helped. It helps think outside the box a bit and it makes you question everything."*
> *(Interview 3)*

Most students studying within the BSc Public Health programme live off-campus. The removal of a stressful commute was experienced as a convenience by some students who reported that it was easier to engage in activities and learning without travelling. However, one student who expressed this early in the interview later volunteered a contradictory view that it was more difficult to maintain engagement when participating from home, consistent with previous findings that commuting can adversely affect participation and a sense of belonging to the institution (Smith, 2018). The sense of belonging is important in the discussion of themes below. For example, students' feeling of belonging to the family may be a source of comfort to them in their learning, but may also, by its very strength, challenge their ability to belong fully to a student body and all that that entails. Our findings suggest that challenges to 'belonging'

were not COVID 19-specific, but the physical separation of students from each other and the university during the blended learning of this period can hardly have helped them to feel fully part of things there.

Theme 1: the role of the family in students' learning

There were various views about how the family affected students' ability to study. Cultural traditions of multigenerational households can limit the availability of a quiet and private place to study. One student stated that the demands of family life made it hard for her to study at home and she would have preferred to be in the library:

> *"I feel like, for me, where I live, we don't really have many books around here. I feel like if I went to the library more often, I could do my own work there. Because someone like me, I have my whole family at home, and it is hard to do work with everybody at home. I've always preferred the library."*
> *(Interview 3)*

Another, however, considered that the blended model enhanced her learning, for, as a mother to a young child, its accessibility and flexibility enabled her to attend seminars and lectures, revisiting them as often as she liked. Further views were that online learning opportunities sat comfortably with the family responsibilities of motivated mature students who also undertook paid part-time employment and lived on a tight budget and that condensing the attendance requirement into two or three days was helpful in allowing for part-time work.

> *I've benefited most from the online learning, so the blended learning, obviously because of Covid. But it also enabled me to be able to attend all these seminars and lectures freely as a carer for my younger son, and obviously as a mum, as well. Yeah, being able to have the lectures recorded and seminars live-streamed was quite good, yeah" (Interview 5)*

> *"In the first year we used to go uni three days a week, which was fine, as doing full- time study. And you can even do the part time work"*
> *(Interview 2)*

> *".. as a mature student, I was able to do a part-time job. I was able to manage my time very well" (Interview 7)*

It became evident as the interviews progressed that many participants were either parents or primary carers for family members. Moreover, many also had part-time paid work. As such, students were juggling the demands of a full-time degree with considerable family responsibility. Attending university often coincided with embarking on motherhood or began *after* raising the children:

I gave up a lot for me to look after my three children as a single mother...
But then I said to myself, this is my time to do what I had intended to achieve
in life....That is why I went back to university" (Interview 7)

Interviews also demonstrated that many participants were the first in their family to attend university and that families placed high expectations on them to succeed, demonstrating the intersectionality of their identities as students and caregivers. Their sense of belonging to their family and wider community often challenged their desire to engage with student life fully.

"The way these lectures or seminars were held, it allowed me to do my work
as best I could and still be able to run my family life, as well.....So I didn't
quite engage with the university campus.... I think I just came in for
registration and that was it. That's   the only time I've been. So, I probably
missed out a little bit on that and, in that wayI probably didn't use all the
facilities that are available to us students" (Interview 5)

Theme 2: the influence of peer groups and others in students' motivation to study

Students' views about their peer group were varied. Some found their interactions with peers to be positive and others expressed frustration, with varying levels of tolerance for peers who were not engaged with learning. These views manifested themselves when students reflected on the experience of group presentations. At one end of the scale, a student attributed the non-engagement of peers to a lack of interest in the course, whereas, at the other, there was recognition of underlying circumstances such as mental illness and learning disabilities that precluded full engagement because of reduced concentration span.

"I think that the experience of university, Public Health particularly, is quite
difficult for people who have hidden disabilities. So, people that have maybe
mental illness or learning disabilities, because those don't always show up
obviously. Sometimes, they show up in very subtle ways like attention span,
concentration, and stuff. " (Interview 6)

Group presentations were a source of resentment for some students who felt a lack of effort by others had lowered their own grades. Responses tended not to include reflection on their own part in the group process but to externalise the reasons for poor performance as the result of 'others'.

"Because with group presentations there is so much room for not putting in
the effort because someone else could do it, and it's hard for me to not do it
because I don't want to fail as well. Someone has to put the effort in or the
presentation won't go anywhere. Yeah, it has affected some of my grades,
purely because no one else has put effort in." (Interview 1)

Conversely, another student regarded group presentations as motivational, a boost to engagement and an opportunity to collaborate with peers in a positive way.

"Because as I was learning the concepts, I was already crafting it in my head how I could use them, because the lecturers were quite clear that you will be delivering a presentation on this, so when you get this piece of information you should incorporate this in the presentation. So I'm already thinking, okay, how is this going to fit into my presentation....I think that the group presentations are incredibly helpful and I think that because they do boost our grades up...its less pressure … as opposed to writing up a single piece of work...and it's all up to you because that can be quite intense" (Interview 6)

Interestingly, and overlapping with the importance of the expectations of others, as identified in theme above, students often cited their family as providing motivation to participate and study.

"Because I believe to be a mature student wherein you have extra responsibility, for someone like me who has family back home, the best I could do was to focus on myself, and the most important thing for me was to achieve my goal" (Interview 7)

Aside from formal assessment activities, students valued the help and support that their friends and classmates offered. Some felt this was evident in the physical space but diminished in the blended learning environment (although was somewhat revitalised through MS Teams breakout rooms). Socialising was nevertheless still possible at a distance. There was mention of the use of 'WhatsApp' groups to build relationships with peers based on shared experiences as students, although it was commented that, on campus, these associations would have developed more effectively and would have enhanced the sense of belonging to a peer group earlier in their academic experience. One student explained how the lack of a sense of belonging to a peer group negatively affected early experience of university:

"I used to go home and cry because I didn't understand what the tutor was saying, because English was just going over my head…I had no friends and I don't know anyone." (Interview 2)

"Despite not being able to meet with some of our student colleagues, we did manage to form into Teams groups for group work. We were able to have WhatsApp groups...we still managed to have some sort of relationship as students, so that was good" (Interview 5)

Students enjoyed being taught by lecturers who had real-world experience and were motivated by exploring potential career options in context, some of which are already encompassed within the degree. For example:

"...She had community work, lecturer...She was brilliant. And the way she did her lectures was that she…there were a lot of speakers, expert speakers, coming in to give the lectures on a topic...So it was good having people with actual real-world experience actually doing the things that they are talking about...and that was good and made it easier to engage." (Interview 5)

"I'd say maybe more volunteering work, I'd say, rather than sticking to the course. But I think even giving practical works or saying, okay, now this is your time to actually get involved in that kind of field" (Interview 4)

"I liked the work experience aspect of it because that was a chance to add the practical to the theoretical. It gave us the opportunity to take everything that we had learned during the course, so all of the theory and all of the modules, and see how, in practice, that actually works" (Interview 6)

Students expressing these views tended to be at the latter stages of their degree programme and had started to identify themselves, currently or in the future, as belonging to the public health workforce. Some students, however, felt that the professional context could have been made more explicit. For example:

".... Public Health is really broad, and that's fine, but I would like to see the different like sectors." (Interview 9)

Theme 3: becoming an independent student

Many participants commented on aspects of independent learning. This was a new way of being a student for some and, for several of them, the expectation to be 'an independent learner' was troublesome. An example of this was the way in which students are expected to take responsibility for accessing university support:

"When you visit the library, it was difficult to ask someone for information because everybody looks at each other as if you are infected, so to speak. So, most of the time, I find it difficult to reach out or to ask someone for assistance, so I would just leave and return home." (Interview 7)

Another example related to the timing of when to seek out support beyond that of the immediate classroom lecturer. Students often delayed asking for help; for example, a student for whom English was a second language eventually received support from the Academic Support Team with English and statistics. Despite having been given information about such help in numerous formats and at various points since starting university, she was unaware that the service existed until halfway through the first year and felt she would have benefited from their expertise earlier.

"There should be extra support with the writing and, with things like this, to be more clarified to the students for them, because English is not our first language. So, it's a bit more struggling." (Interview 2)

Generally, students expressed the desire for their classroom lecturer, with whom they have an existing relationship, to be the source of support. Independently accessing separate educational services was not a way of operating that they were familiar with and was uncomfortable. This is exemplified by one student approaching her third year and, despite knowing where to get help, being anxious about her impending dissertation:

*"Although it was frightening when I first heard the word 'dissertation', I was
not sure where to start, and I was asking myself would I be able to do this?"*
(Interview 7)

*"You know, like students like me. Final year. I have to do a dissertation, but I
don't know what is that, and how to choose that," (Interview 2)*

Students knew the dissertation was a large piece of independent work for which they did not receive the familiar academic-led teaching on but were 'supervised' instead. The prospect of working more independently in this way appeared to loom very large from the end of year two onwards.

Despite the misgivings about group assessments outlined in the previous theme, many responses indicated a preference for a collective approach to 'being a student', with class-based teaching and activities forming the majority part of work they were required to do. Students expressed a lack of confidence in their own personal ability to operate more individually.

Discussion

Analysis of the students' narratives has revealed barriers and enablers in their lived experiences. In interpreting the findings, it is important to note that, while our intention was to investigate the experiences of BAME students, all the participants were also female, although we did not stipulate this in recruitment. However, since the research was conducted on a programme where ninety-seven per cent of students are female, the intersection of ethnicity and gender is an important and valid consideration. The findings were consistent with the critical literature on intercultural communication which suggests that the dichotomisation of cultural features and behaviours into individualistic versus collectivist traits should be avoided (Gudykunst *et al*., 1996; Wood *et al*., 2021).

Findings in relation to the first theme, the role of family, indicated that for many participants, learning was shaped by the realities of family life. Some participants found it challenging to study at home because of their role as carers. Others reported that the point at which they were expected by others to start a family coincided with attending university, which also influenced their learning and attainment. When considering the awarding gap, it would be easy to attribute some of the difference in outcomes to the high number of students of certain ethnic background who are mothers or primary carers. However, we argue that this would be a superficial analysis of the situation and would perpetuate the cultural deficit model that locates the 'problem' within the individual. In some cases it may imply that the lives of these students are 'dysfunctional' merely because they do not meet the Eurocentric idea of university students (Salkind, 2008).

As for the second theme, students' motivation to study appeared to relate to how they interacted with peer groups and others. Some students found that completion of group assessments, such as oral presentations, stimulated active contribution and collaboration and gave opportunities for leadership, while others felt their peers to be so uninterested and unmotivated that outcomes would be adversely affected. Some tended to regard perceived

group failings as the fault of others and not their responsibility. Nevertheless, despite these tensions, some students seemed to prefer on-campus tasks with face-to-face interactions and shared endeavour. Responses in this theme indicated the high value some student's placed on relational aspects of university life, whether with staff or peers.

Turning to the third theme, it may be helpful to make the point here that UK HE is based on meritocracy, with educational success or failure being a reflection on individual effort, ability and merit. University services and structures are designed to support and promote independent learning, but, as we saw in the quotes above, students' experiences of using these services are not always positive. Our findings show that students faced a layer of 'hidden' challenges when entering university as they learnt how to navigate between the complexities of two often unrelated worlds. For example, students' home lives are often shaped around their specific culture and gender determined roles such as those of carer and / or homemaker which have an element of co-dependency built in. Conversely university life is geared towards students' ability to operate as independent learners where individual achievement is rewarded. This hidden learning that arises from transversing this dual ontology does not appear to have been previously acknowledged and yet it is a reality for some.

Students were not always prepared for the independent nature of university learning and found it difficult to adjust to taking responsibility for their learning. In the first year, achieving familiarity with the role and function of the library in relation to their education and, in the third, acquiring the confidence and skills to manage an undergraduate dissertation were both seen as challenging and intimidating. Based on their responses, some participants appeared more comfortable with a traditional model of education, delivered in the classroom, with one or two key teachers as the 'go-to' for everything, more similar to the approach used in schools.

Many students, of all ethnicities, take time to move confidently into the role of independent learner, but, for some, the distance between applicant and independent university student is greater. Other studies in the field have reported that negative attitudes towards BAME students can undermine their sense of belonging and even academic performance (Chang *et al*., 2011). We suggest that this may indicate that we need to do more than 'de-colonising' the curriculum to ensure that it is not just 'white' and Eurocentric in content and representation and must also critically review the very structure of university processes and curricula to ensure that unconscious bias does not remain. Without this, meritocratic ideals may hide disadvantages that operate at a structural level.

Further research is needed to understand the identity markers that can strengthen an independent attitude to learning. For example, cultures that are organised in smaller groups or individualistically, such as the UK, tend to favour individual independence, which may then be reflected in the classroom, but an independent attitude to learning also varies according to social class, gender, ethnicity and other characteristics of learners (Hofstede Insights, 2023; Rashed Khan, 2021).

Limitations

The main limitations of this research are related to scale, gender and COVID 19: First, the project is small-scale qualitative research. In this sense, the findings should be understood mainly in the context in which the study took place: an undergraduate programme of three

years with ninety-seven per cent female representation and a BAME background. Nonetheless, the themes are good indications of issues to be followed up in larger-scale research projects. Second, the voice of BAME male students (or any other gender orientation) is not included in the research. While the sample was representative of the typical cohort of students on the programme, in terms of gender, it cannot be assumed that the findings will generalise to others. Third, as presented, the study took place during COVID 19 lockdowns, so the pandemic loomed large in the learning students' reality. A question for further research would be to see whether, were the same study to be carried out today, when COVID 19 is not such an overwhelming reality, the findings would be similar.

Conclusion

This paper[1] presents an empirical analysis of students' experiences. The complexity of this experience is not reflected in the reporting of awarding gap data, or in the way in which institutions have engaged with this subject to date. Approaches tend to focus on representations and de-colonisation of curricula, but this is at risk of being superficial and ignores the intricacies of BAME students' experience that is based on more than race alone. By concentrating efforts of 'BAME students' as a homogenous group we ignore the individual circumstances of these students. HE institutions must look at how they are interacting with all students and accept that current structures and strategies do not promote staff to acknowledge and understand student needs at the level required to stop some failing through the net. Communication channels between staff and students should be strengthened in a way that is relational and not purely operational as we have seen recently with the introduction of more and more portal interfaces for student to access information in a one-way dialogue. Instead, systems should be developed to monitor progress more closely so that staff can intervene and work with student who are struggling earlier, before they fail, not after. Staff will need training to recognise and responds to signs that students may need additional support. Through this form of enhanced communication and support students are more likely to develop the independent and collaborative skills required to thrive.

This paper details a small pilot study using qualitative methods and as such it has highlighted some otherwise unknown knowledge about the experiences of BAME students. Institutions must review their use of only viewing this issue through the lens of quantitative awarding gap data. This is insufficient to truly understand the nuances of these students' experience beyond that of their final grades. Therefore, institutions must invest in research that uses a variety of qualitative data capture methods to explore student realities and experiences in an intercultural and intersectional context. Communication flow between students and universities at all levels must be improved. It is vital that students feel confident to express their personal concerns and needs, have the means to do so, and have their voices heard and

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[1] This project is a joint work between academic staff and a Graduate Teaching Demonstrator, who graduated from the BSc Hons Public Health in 2020. It is anticipated that she will lead on the implementation plan for any changes to our current curriculum and delivery. This was presented at International Conference of Social Science (online) 2021 and SHIFT2022. This pilot project demonstrates our commitment to the co-creation of teaching and learning.

responded to. It is incumbent on universities to encourage student support networks in and out of learning situations.

Lastly, if we in HE are to narrow and ultimately eradicate the awarding gap we must address the underpinning issues in a way that reflects the nuances of individual student experience. We need to take account of individual differences and the complexity of each and every student's personal circumstance and tailor learning opportunities appropriately. It is only by recognising and responding to students as individuals and not as one homogenous group will outcomes be improved.

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