

Decolonising Higher Education: Black and Minority Ethnic Students' Experiences at an Elite British University

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Abstract

Recent movements to decolonise the university have challenged the ideological and political position of authority, reflecting the power relations between different societal groups. Framed by postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, this paper attempts to represent the experiences, values and viewpoints of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students at an elite British university who speak for themselves about their lived realities at the university. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with seven undergraduate and two postgraduate students explored their university experience, academic success, sense of belonging, discrimination and racism. The findings revealed that the students lacked a sense of belonging at the university. Among the factors that undermined this are the predominantly White faculty bodies, exclusive curriculum representation and inter-group interactions divided by racial groups. Cultivating an inclusive university experience will allow BME students to feel a sense of belonging and integrate the racial and ethnic cultural diversity that they represent.

Keywords: Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students, higher education, decolonisation

Introduction

The demand to decolonise is not new; history has observed the spread of decolonising movements in former British colonies since the end of World War II. The War stimulated political consciousness of the colonial government and the growth of nationalism (Hyam, 1998), leading to Britain's withdrawal from India in 1945 (Porter, 2012) and the subsequent independence of the majority of its colonies by the end of the 1960s (Darwin, 2009). Today, another wave of the decolonising project has taken shape in the higher education sector. The Rhodes Must Fall campaign at the University of Cape Town in South Africa provided the first impetus to the recent upsurge for decolonising the university. In early 2015, students and staff at the University demanded that a statue of Cecil Rhodes, the British imperialist and former Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, be removed from its campus (Nyamnjoh, 2016). The statue embodied the continuing racial inequality in the participation and completion of higher education degrees in South Africa. The movement eventually problematised the curriculum, along with the differential progression between faculty members of predominantly African and European descent at universities in the country (Elliott-Cooper, 2018; Meda, 2019). The Rhodes Must Fall campaign highlighted the need to decolonise both academic knowledge and the university as an institution (Mbembe, 2016); universities had to deconstruct their Eurocentric academic model and the knowledge production processes prevalent in Africa and beyond. Such decolonisation exercises also entail de-racialising university buildings, classrooms and the student and faculty population.

The Rhodes Must Fall movement in South Africa spread to the metropolises in the Global North,¹ most notably to the United Kingdom (UK) but also to the United States (US)

¹ The terms 'Global North' and 'Global South' do not refer simply to geographic regions but concern the imbalance in global power structures and wealth (Braff & Nelson, 2021; Haug et al., 2021). The phrase 'Global South' (generally located roughly 'south' of colonial countries) has offered a postcolonial and decolonial space of resistance against perpetuating inequalities, hegemonic relationships and neoliberal capitalism (Quijano, 2007).

and Canada. Some of the marked movements include the Rhodes Must Fall Oxford campaign at Oxford University (Gabrial, 2018; Henriques & Abushouk, 2018) and the ‘Why is My Curriculum White?’ campaign at University College London (Peters, 2018). These student-led activist movements were a response to a Eurocentric institutional structure. They also endeavoured to challenge the hegemonic knowledge system delivered by the curriculum. Because a curriculum is value-laden, it manifests the ideological and political position of authority, thereby reflecting power relations between different societal groups.

Amid the upsurge of these movements to decolonise higher education in both the Global South and North, the voices of racial and ethnic minority students have been lacking in the literature (Bisit, 2012), especially in the context of the UK, where several movements of the decolonisation project have taken place (Moghli & Kadiwali, 2021; Schucan & Pitman, 2019). This paper explores the voices and experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) British students studying at an elite British university. It examines how they consider and observe their encounter with the curriculum, relationships with peers and faculty members and the institutional structure. The next section introduces postcolonial and decolonial arguments to theorise the efforts to decolonise the university in the UK as a proxy for the Global North. We then explain our approach to data collection and analysis. The findings are categorised into four themes related to BME students’ lived experiences, including their recommendations for specific actions to decolonise the university. Based on BME student participants’ proposals, the paper concludes with a discussion of how higher education institutions can move forward to decolonise the university and cultivate a diverse and inclusive university experience for students regardless of their backgrounds.

Theoretical Perspective

Postcolonial and decolonial theories commonly problematise and challenge the established ways knowledge is produced, albeit deriving from different disciplinary and geographical origins (Bhabra, 2014). Postcolonialism emerged from diasporic work by, among others, Said (1980), Bhabha (1994) and Spivak (1988) in the humanities and geographically based in the Middle East and South Asia. It seeks to analyse and critique the knowledge and representation that have constructed the notion of an inferior ‘Other’ (Said, 1980). By attending to diverse experiences, values and viewpoints, postcolonialism strives to understand the voices of the subaltern, considering how the Other can represent and speak *for* themselves (Spivak, 1988). Decoloniality, on the other hand, came out of the scholarly work in sociology and philosophy by Quijano (2000, 2007), Lugones (2010) and Mignolo (2000), and has a geographical origin in South America (Bhabra, 2014). Decolonial theory also engages with a longer time frame, going back to the 15th century, when Spain and Portugal colonised Latin America, compared to Postcolonial Studies associated with British and French imperialism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Quijano’s notion of the ‘Coloniality of Power’ (2000) points to the coloniality/Eurocentrism of knowledge production. Mignolo developed Quijano’s earlier work to elaborate the concept of ‘modernity/coloniality’, claiming the need to fight against the epistemic violence brought by Whites/Europeans (Bhabra, 2014). Santos (2015) later coined the term ‘epistemicide’ to signify the injustice that knowledge originating from the Global South is unrecognised as knowledge. Engaging with the geopolitics of knowledge production is a necessary process to realise epistemic decolonisation.

Both postcolonial and decolonial theories acknowledge the significance of the discourse and episteme in relation to power, specifically the power of the Global North as the former coloniser (Said, 1980; Santos, 2015). That said, whilst Postcolonial Studies is often seen as a collection of contributions by individual scholars represented by, among others,

Said, Bhabha and Spivak, the field of Decolonial Studies emerged as ‘a more planned endeavour’ (Bhabha, 2014, p. 129) following the success of postcolonial pursuits within academia. In this process Postcolonial Studies gradually coalesced into Decolonial Studies (Acha, 2021). This suggests that the current decolonial theories and movements encompass postcolonial theories, and thus in this article we use the term ‘decolonisation’ to embrace both postcolonial and decolonial perspectives.

The rise of the decolonisation project in the Global South and North is a response to decolonial struggles, in that they challenge the colonial schemes that have produced widely accepted norms and authority. Several authors, such as Mirza (2018) and Bhabha et al. (2018), have documented the trajectory these movements have undertaken, including the ones introduced above. In an effort to decolonise the curriculum and pedagogy, Zinga and Styres (2019) share their experiences of developing and implementing anti-oppressive pedagogy to communicate teaching and learning in a Canadian university. They urge university faculties to reflect constantly upon their positionality, or their cultural locations vis-à-vis power and privilege, because who, what and how to present challenging content becomes crucial in the decolonisation process. Dennis (2018) also describes ten approaches to decolonising higher education pedagogy. Drawing on the Ubuntu philosophy that calls for solidarity between self and others and between humans and nonhumans, the author suggests specific stances and actions that university tutors should take, including questioning the dominant knowledge system and methodologies, presenting diverse views rather than a single authoritative view or approach and providing a safe space to discuss decolonisation. Doing so should help decolonise epistemic practices of teaching, learning and knowing, and recognise underrepresented voices as mainstream.

Although a rich array of literature introduces student-led movements and proposes ways to engage with course contents and pedagogy for the decolonisation of the university,

little has been written about students' lived experiences in universities in the Global North (Basit, 2012; Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021; Schucan & Pitman, 2019). Postcolonial and decolonial theories have emerged from a critique against the dominant discourses formulated in the Global North. The voices of the Subaltern and the Other, in this case the student as a signifier who engages with university education, must be revealed to inform university curriculum and higher education policy development. This study thus explores students' lived experiences at an elite British university.

Research Design and Method

The study was conducted at an elite university, hereafter called Sunny University, in the south of England. The study adopted a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to gain an in-depth understanding of student experiences, academic success, belonging, racism, discrimination and recommendations. After ethical approval was obtained by the Institutional Review Board at the University, the participants were approached via email through two strands. First, a recruitment email was sent within one Faculty, which received funding to conduct this study. To recruit additional participants, another email was sent to students throughout the University by the Student Affairs Office. The participants included seven undergraduate (six females, one male) and two postgraduate (female) students (Table 1) who are UK national and identified themselves as BME. Their time was compensated with a voucher and refreshments.

Table 1: Participants' Background

Pseudonyms	HE Level	Course
Emma	Undergraduate	Psychology
Beth	Undergraduate	Medicine & Psychology
Anna	Undergraduate	Psychology
Linda	Undergraduate	Psychology
Isabela	Undergraduate	Geography
Samantha	Undergraduate	Arts and Sciences
Ethan	Undergraduate	Arts and Sciences

Sarah	Postgraduate	Psychology
Eva	Postgraduate	Special and Inclusive Education

We did not record individual ethnicities or age at the time of recruitment to maintain privacy and encourage participation. We recognise the value of the different kinds of experience relating to students' specific ethnicity, but we also appreciate that there are issues that might affect all BME students regardless of their ethnic identity at an elite university, which are the focus of this article. Participation in the research was also entirely voluntary, and only one male student expressed interest in taking part. Representation of more male students would have enabled a comparison between different genders to consider some of the intersectional experiences of traditionally underrepresented and marginalised groups within UK Higher Education (on the lived realities and obstacles Black male students face in universities in the UK and US, see Byfield, 2008; on the role university environment and mentoring programmes can play in promoting their self-efficacy, racial pride and masculinity, see Goings et al., 2017).

Five of the nine students were recruited widely from the entire university, while the remaining four all belonged to the same Faculty. The former five students engaged in semi-structured interviews and a follow-up FGD. The interviews contained several sensitive questions to extract individual students' experiences related to the meaning of race and ethnicity, making one-to-one interviews an appropriate method. In contrast, the FGD was mainly designed to discuss suggestions and possible solutions to improve the university life of BME students. Here the choice of FGD, as opposed to individual interviews, allowed exchanges of opinions among the participants that could generate collective, and sometimes creative, ideas. The four students from within one Faculty nonetheless only participated in an FGD due to the funding available at the Faculty, and the willingness of a small population of students to participate. The interviews and FGDs protocols included questions about the

participating students' experiences in classrooms and at the university, their thoughts about academic success, their experiences of racism and/or discrimination and their recommendations to improve their university experience. The sessions were recorded with a digital voice recorder with the written and oral consent of the participants.

The data were transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis, during which all personally identifiable information was anonymised. The researchers read and re-read the transcripts and generated 27 codes. The wide-ranging codes included, but were not limited to, some of the following themes: diversity, belongingness, pedagogy and academic success. They were inductively developed and coded not only at the semantic, manifest or directly observable level, but also at the latent level, to uncover underlying concepts (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Smaller chunks of codes were then grouped into the four larger themes of 'belongingness', 'minority status perceptions from peers', 'culturally diverse and inclusive curriculum' and 'lack of diversity around campus'. Below we present our analysis of the results according to these four themes.

Findings

Sense of Belongingness

The participants described 'belonging' as feeling a sense of community in which their gender, race, ethnicity and/or culture are represented in various ways. There are several forms of belongingness that students described that shaped their sense of inclusivity, physical spaces, confidence, empowerment and identity (i.e. personal identity, collective identity).

Eva, one of the two postgraduate students, described it as:

[A] feeling that the community you're in reflects yourself not just in terms of your colour but also your culture. Whether you're female, male, whatever you are, you just want to see a reflection of who you see yourself to be.

In a similar vein, an undergraduate student, Samantha, mentioned race and ethnicity specifically, explaining the concept of belonging to be a community that is inclusive of minority or marginalised groups. Belonging for Samantha involves 'the spaces that prioritise a voice of women of colour'. The only male participant, Ethan, related exclusively to physical spaces; the departmental common room, libraries and cafes at the university are very important because 'it feels like we're not just in the global city, we're in something that's Sunny'.

A sense of belonging is also described as shaping the students' confidence in a community. For instance, if Sarah can sense belongingness, she could 'feel like I can talk to the group and feel like it's natural, like a natural communication rather than forced communication'. Likewise, Isabela felt at ease when she was surrounded by people who are similar to her in terms of their physical features and mentality. Eva elaborated on the positive effect belongingness engenders:

It helps you feel empowered. It makes you feel that you're not just here as an individual, but you're here as a collective. And everyone's interested in working together for the same kind of goals. [...] It would make me feel more confident about ideas and things that I have. It would make me feel really encouraged, enthusiastic, empowered. It would make me feel great, really.

The participants also described that a sense of belongingness can shape their academic life, as Sarah articulated:

I think it's really important because it makes life easier. You can feel like you can talk to your peers, you're all studying the same subject. If you can speak to each other, then it makes the student experience easier, because you can relate yourself with issues and become successful. [...] [Y]ou can ask for help from other students and that makes it feel like you're not alone when you're doing assignments. I know some assignments have to be individual, but just talking to other students who are also struggling helps, rather than doing them on your own.

If students feel that they belong to a community, they could feel empowered; conversely, if they do not, the students could be negatively affected. For example, not having a sense of belongingness made Isabela worry and question 'what might people think if I do this? Do I have to behave in a certain way?'

In addition to discussing the potential benefits of belonging, many participants also explicitly spoke of feeling a lack of belonging on campus. For instance, Ethan reported that it was 'hard' to relate to his course-mates. This was due to his perceived difference between him, as a self-identified BME student, and other students, a lot of whom 'are from quite privileged international backgrounds'. Ethan went on to say:

It's weird. I'm the only person from the North (of England), or the only ethnic minority guy. [...] It's great there is diversity. I wouldn't like it if it's 100% Britain. But at the same time, I haven't really found my department to be my main source of

friends. [...] I feel like some people might not feel they belong at Sunny because it is fairly middle class and White, or it's either that or very international, wealthy.

Two participants who took part in one of the FGDs also did not feel a sense of belonging at the university, due to the number of students it accommodates. A medical student, Beth, revealed, 'it's hard to feel a sense of belonging in a medical school because it's just so big. There're over 300 people in a year, so I don't think I necessarily feel that sense of belonging there'. Anna, an undergraduate student, echoed Beth in another FGD: 'here, no-one really cares about you. I feel like that. I think this whole year I've probably been to ten lectures. I don't really get along with people on my course'.

As a strategy to feel a sense of belongingness, some participants were inclined to gravitate towards similar others and create groups with people of their own race and ethnicity. In an FGD, Anna noted, 'Sometimes I feel like they [students] just stick together. Say if they're a group from a particular religion or a particular race, because of that culture they'll just stick together'. Another female participant in the same FGD, Linda, agreed with Anna that, 'It happened kind of by accident. Without realising, I was like, oh, all my friends are of a certain race'. Sticking to students of similar ethnic and racial backgrounds, however, can induce overt and covert discrimination. Linda, from a Muslim background, had a module where students shared interview accounts from their research projects and published their analysis on a virtual learning space, Moodle, where the students responded to each other. Linda noted, 'I remember reading a couple of responses that were like, "all the hijabis stick together"'. Because there were five of us on the course who wear the hijab out of a hundred and something, it just seemed kind of natural to gravitate towards each other. I was just like, why is that an issue?'

These students sought to find their place outside their academic circle in clubs and societies, only to find that they did not belong to them either. They had joined societies but stopped attending, either because of the drinking culture (Beth) or the superficial connections people tend to make in these societies (Linda). Samantha pointed out, 'I definitely see that there are certain societies on campus that are either very heavily BME or very White, and that's where I think some of the problems lie, because there's no intersection and community-building. And it ends up being quite divisive'. For instance, Samantha mentioned the horse-riding club being all White female students, which made her feel uncomfortable. Likewise, an FGD participant, Emma, wished to join a few sports societies. She nonetheless found that the hockey society was a very White, private school sport: 'I was like, okay, there's no way I can join this. [I] crossed it off of my list'. As a result, as Ethan suggested, some clubs and societies may not appeal to BME people: 'For people who are kind of feeling marginalised, I think there are times when they wouldn't feel confident doing that activity even though that it might be fine, they just wouldn't want to take the risk'. Linda reached a similar conclusion that 'if you want to belong, you can throw yourself in, but it's a lot of effort'.

Another participant, Isabela, felt isolated in terms of academic level. The university is among the top in the league tables, attracting hard-working students.

I think the thing I don't really feel belonging about is about academic success.

Because I think a lot of people are very hard-working and have their standards very high. They really push themselves. Good work ethic, basically. But I feel like I'm not quite the same level. I know I was at a very good school. So I was able to do well without pushing myself too hard. But I feel like a lot of people around me have really had to push themselves. So, that would be one way I don't really feel in place.

These accounts from the participants indicate resonance with working-class students in the study by Reay et al. (2009). Surrounded by elite peers in a privileged university in England, the students found themselves ‘out of place’ and reported that they ‘never fit in’ (p. 1106). Our participants did not feel a sense of belonging to Sunny, partly because their racial and ethnic backgrounds differed notably from the majority. Whilst Reay et al.’s working-class interviewees developed their sense of belonging as hard-working learners with their elite peers by adapting to the hegemonic norm, the participants in our research highlighted their distinctiveness from the majority group both academically and socially. Some participants did not feel that they were ‘fitting in’ in their departments and courses due to the perceived difference of their social class from other peers or due to being one of many students. Another student felt behind in her modules, being surrounded by ‘hard-working’ peers. Forming racial and ethnic groups was one of the strategies they adopted to cope with the feeling of isolation, but this could also exacerbate that feeling of isolation for certain students. This was especially prominent in social clubs and university societies. A university setting with one majority and a number of minority groups can contribute to a culture divided by race and ethnicity. This then makes minority groups feel isolated or sometimes leads to blatant and subtle discrimination. Their feelings of isolation appeared to influence and be influenced by their perceived status as minority students, to which our discussion now turns.

Perceptions of Minority Status from Peers

Within UK higher education, the professors and lecturers are predominantly White. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2020), in 2018–2019 when this study took place, 17% of academic staff and 12% of non-academic staff in British universities identified as BME. At Sunny, around 20% of staff (academic and professional service) identified as BME during the same time period, suggesting that the ethnic diversity of the

university was broadly reflective of the sector. This results in students adopting a minority status perception from White members of the community (Brown & Jones, 2004).

Thus, Sunny represents a typical example of the sector, which was pointed out by several students. Eva highlighted this minority status perception, noting, ‘I’ve never seen any kind of professors or tutors here that look like me’, whilst Ethan wondered ‘why are my teachers all so different from me?’ Samantha had a similar view; having been around Sunny for five years, she was taught by a person of colour for the first time in 2019. This experience ‘completely changed my way of being able to feel safe in a classroom space’, resulting in her recommendation that the university needs to hire more faculty members of colour. This point of view further corresponded with Sarah’s; just having professors from a BME background makes her feel at ease. For instance, she might approach them to seek help and better relate with the curriculum.

Most importantly, even if a White faculty member teaches a class, BME students would have appreciated if the curriculum were sensitive to racial and ethnic minority issues. In one of the FGDs, Isabela described her classroom experiences with a White professor from North America.

[H]e was so active and engaging in issues around BME identity and discussing minority stress theory and all these different theoretical frameworks. Obviously, it would be great if we had more BME representation in our faculty, but it’s about the White professors being aware of these issues, not just employing more BME people.

Samantha also noted that ‘if I had professors of colour or White professors critiquing race and things around academic viewpoints that don’t just come from the West, my experience of this institution would’ve changed dramatically’.

In addition to the faculty, the classrooms are also dominated by White students. In several classes, Samantha was the only person of colour, making her feel ‘as if I can’t make an issue or raise a point about something because I come across as that angry person of colour’. Sarah further elaborated on this stereotype threat – the phenomenon where people’s behaviour can conform to a negative group-based stereotype (Steele & Aronson, 1995):

[T]here’re just fewer numbers of BME students compared to the majority. I think if you’re part of the majority, it’s easy for you to feel a sense of belonging, and it’s easy for you to feel comfortable in your department or at university. [...] I think being part of a minority, it’s just hard. It just gets hard sometimes and when you’re struggling in your work [study], sometimes you might feel like you can’t ask for help. Because if you see other students doing really well, when you’re struggling and you’re also part of the minority, sometimes I get scared of being judged.

Being part of a minority made students feel isolated, which could in turn prevent them from forming a community. One female participant in the FGD echoed this sentiment:

[M]aybe BME people aren’t as used to having support networks or people they can ask for advice. If you have trouble doing your course, you wouldn’t always think to speak to your friends or a lecturer, maybe because being BME you can’t relate to them as much. [...] For whatever reason you find it hard to reach out to people and you just end up doing stuff on your own.

As mentioned above, professional staff are also primarily White (more than 70% at Sunny in 2018–2019), a feature of the university that participants noticed. Emma was reluctant to file a racial complaint due to difference between her and the staff:

If there was ever a time I felt I had to complain, I would feel cut off by it, because I would be complaining to White people generally, and there's that kind of thing where you bring it up and they just automatically get so defensive and it just discourages you from doing anything.

When asked whether they would use the Student and Wellbeing services at Sunny, Beth, who participated in the same FGD with Emma, rejecting this, saying, 'All the therapists reflect the lecturers [in terms of their racial and ethnic backgrounds]. I wouldn't feel necessarily comfortable booking an appointment to tell them about these kinds of things. They are therapists but they wouldn't understand'.

These narratives reveal a multi-layered barrier BME students face due to the lack of diversity: merely being a minority has a negative effect on their self-esteem, contributing to a fear of being judged based on a stereotypical image attached to their race and ethnicity. Being a minority not only makes students feel isolated, but also may prohibit them from seeking help, possibly influencing their study and academic performance. Saeed (2018) urges the building of a community support system to actively communicate with marginalised students who may be more likely to experience psychological pressure, and one way to achieve this can be to increase the BME staff in university welfare offices. In addition to their internalised experiences of being in underrepresented groups, the curricula they are taught do not represent their experiences as BME students, as detailed in the following section.

Efforts to Decolonise the Curriculum

Some of the curricula students encountered were not reflective of their experiences as people of colour. One participant in an FGD disclosed:

Within the curriculum offered here at Sunny, it's been such a struggle to try and get my experiences validated through academia or through societies. [...] I felt like it's been a bit of an uphill over my time here.

The same student, Samantha gave a specific case in this regard in her individual interview. When she learned storytelling in an anthropology module, the lecturer introduced photographers who had pioneered storytelling but who 'were all White and men'. Samantha went up to the lecturer at the end of the class, arguing that those were not the only methods for storytelling, and that the class should deal with other photographers from diverse, underrepresented backgrounds and cultures. However, the lecturer 'just dismissed me and other students of colour who raised the issue.' This case embodies the resistance to the postcolonial push; Samantha's endeavour to challenge a 'Eurocentric epistemic canon' (Mbembe, 2016, 32) was disregarded by those who acknowledge only a single perspective of photographers as having legitimate knowledge. As Spivak (1988) highlights, it is not that subalterns are not capable of speaking up in a biological term – they can and do voice themselves – but they are not heard in the face of power. The fact that Samantha's suggestion to decolonise the curriculum was rejected gave her a feeling of discrimination, albeit in a subtle form. To an interview question of whether to agree or not that racism in higher education is hidden, Samantha responded:

You don't obviously get shouted any slurs or anything [on campus], but you'd experience it more in an institutional level. I felt that especially through academia, and the way that my professors have spoken to me in classes and when I've asked for more inclusive material to be included in certain modules, it's been denied. I was expected to do the research for it, instead of the professor. So, I've felt it [discrimination] more on a very micro-aggression level at Sunny.

The unrepresentativeness of the curriculum for BME students, coupled with the dominance of White peers in the classroom, silenced students. Samantha also shared that:

In certain academic environments, I felt silenced as a student of colour. This was something that prohibited me from being, oh, I want to speak up in sessions and classes and actually put my point forward. So you didn't want to speak out because of the environment and what was said.

Blatant racism rarely occurs at the university, but subtle racism is prevalent, making it difficult for BME students to speak up and 'speak for themselves' (Spivak, 1988). This in turn can intensify the oppressive nature of higher education institutions from the perspectives of the marginalised groups (for an account of how this can impact racial disparity discipline in schools, see Okonofuo & Richeson, 2015). Eva, a postgraduate student studying Inclusive and Special Education, had an experience similar to Samantha's.

I feel that some of those modules have not focused on areas I felt that they should have. I felt that they've missed a lot of things that would be necessarily reflective of the kind of upbringing that I've had. [...] When we did a module on education values

in society, a lot of it was focussed on issues internationally. And a lot of students, when we would have discussions, we felt that they weren't focussing on issues in communities here that we would like to be making a difference to.

She had another example of the 'colonised curriculum':

[W]hen we're learning, I know we're in England and we're studying things around English education. But I don't think we do enough about other communities that people come from. Recently, when we did our inclusive module, we all had to go off and find out about how special education and inclusion works in various countries. And all the countries they gave us were in Europe. That's about one quarter of the planet. What about giving us Asia, the Caribbean, you know? What's going on in Australia? It was just Europe, very Eurocentric. To be honest with you, I was so bored. I just wasn't excited by it. I just thought, why don't you put loads of countries from all continents into a hat, and let's see what happens. That wasn't reflective of our classroom.

The term 'abyssal thinking', coined by Santos (2015), may explain Eva's experience aptly. 'Abyssal thinking' represents a system that divides 'this side of the line' and 'the other side of the line', where the latter comprises a vast set of discarded experiences, made invisible as agencies and agents (Santos, 2015, 120). In the particular activity in which Eva was involved, any example coming from outside Europe was on 'the other side of the line', rendered unseen and non-existent. It is this stratified binary between this side and the other side of the lines that perpetuates the endless production of dominant knowledge paradigms based on European traditions, Santos (2015) argues. Eva's experience of being masked

resulted in her realisation that she was part of an institution that is old and out of date, which does not reflect the realities of her life. On the other hand, if the class had had choices of diverse, and more specifically colonised, countries to study, that would have made her 'feel really encouraged, enthusiastic, empowered', possibly establishing a bridge between this side of the line and the other side of the line. Identifying herself as having Afro-Caribbean heritage, Eva would have appreciated opportunities to learn about her culture in and outside the UK.

I've never seen much done around educational issues concerning a Caribbean context abroad, for instance. Not much of an African context. [...] Even on the disability and inclusion module, we don't touch on race disability. And those kinds of children are twice discriminated. So I have to bring that into my writing [assignment], because we don't discuss it. There are huge disparities between diagnosis amongst black young people, levels of discrimination and exclusion. I think that should definitely be part of a special inclusive education module, but it is not on our curriculum at all. So I think they need to look at ways to bring that in. Even with the readings that we get, there's never really any...Unless you go and do your extra reading, there's not enough that's brought in research-wise on those areas. So black and minority, ethnic kind of writers or researchers. Maybe there are not many out there, but I think it's still worth bringing them in.

The curriculum the University offers is not reflective of the lived realities of BME people, making it difficult to relate to the learning materials. Their efforts to alter the colonising curriculum are sometimes denied, exacerbating the feeling of discrimination among BME students.

Overt and covert discrimination can impede academic performance (Stevens et al., 2018), with a 13% awarding gap in final degree marks between White and BME students across the UK (Universities UK & National Union of Students, 2019). There is however considerable research evidence within higher education that diversity in the classroom translates to a beneficial and wide-ranging human value (Gurin et al., 2004). Making the higher education curriculum relevant to BME students would thus offer more equal and just academic experiences to all students. For some, decolonising the curriculum means introducing non-White figures and examples, and for others, it includes using class materials written by non-European authors. Such reforms might improve the academic experience of all students because they would receive an education more fully grounded in the reality of all humanity.

Lack of Diversity around Campus

A sense of being underrepresented does not end within the classroom but goes beyond towards the entire campus life. Located in the middle of a diverse city in England, the predominantly White population around the campus presents an irony. According to Isabela, Sunny does not reflect the city's population, noting that, 'If you step out of the university, you'll notice that the city is not the same as the population of Sunny, which is like, very White and lots of Chinese people. But I've seen ten black people at Sunny in three years. It's crazy'. In another FGD, Linda also unveiled:

As an ethnic minority, it's nice to see people who are like you. But just walking around Sunny, you don't see a lot of ethnic minorities. Especially, you hardly see any black people, hardly. That was weird for me because in my [home] area we had a lot of black students in our school, but we don't see any here.

Consequently, the male student Ethan asked, ‘why are there no BME senior staff? Why am I like the only ethnic minority guy in my department?’

Samantha had opportunities to take modules at a neighbouring university, which had ‘way more brown and black people, people of colour’. Because she felt more physically at ease on their campus, and because she could not justify being at her own university, she tended to spend more time at the neighbouring university. Eva held a particular view regarding diversity in relation to what she was studying, or Inclusive and Special Education.

[W]hen I came to Sunny first, I noticed all the time, in every course I’ve done, that not very many people from my background or Afro-Caribbean people have been on the courses. [...] I think, for inclusion to work properly, you have to start getting in more people from minority groups so that it’s going to be reflective for them. It’s important for students to see themselves reflected in the people that are teaching them and organising their support. So I think Sunny has to look at more ways to recruit students like myself. I don’t know why there’s not as many [minority students].

For a student studying special inclusive education, the above experience exhibited a contradiction between what she was taught and what she was experiencing outside the university. She declared, ‘I’m not feeling that they [the university] are practising inclusivity with their actual students. They’re teaching in one way but practising something different’. She further went on to reveal, ‘I think we’re alone. We’re a bit more isolated. The current module I’m on, there’s only three of us [minority students] on it. So every module you see that you’re unrepresented in that’. These narratives reveal the gap between the participants’ experiences in and outside the university. Their experiences inside and outside the classroom

do not embody the diversity they observe in their everyday lives. This then reinforces BME students' questioning of how global Sunny is, given its location at the centre of a global city.

Conclusion

Decolonising university movements must entail dynamic and diverse actions to challenge the established knowledge systems and institutional culture. As Mbembe (2016) suggests, this process must involve decolonising not only the nature of scholarships but also university buildings, classroom spaces and faculty–student and student–student relationships. To tackle epistemic violence or ‘epistemicide’ (Santos, 2015), faculty need to recognise and appreciate other forms of knowledge production. Such processes can include introducing examples from the Global South, using case studies of marginalised communities and referring to authors from minority groups. Earlier studies by Dennis (2018) and Zinga and Styres (2019) articulated how faculty members can engage in these activities in a practical manner. Nonetheless, there has been a lack of empirical evidence that considers students’ voices and experiences in the midst of such decolonisation efforts (Moghli & Kadiwal, 2021). Our research disentangled the lived experiences of racial and ethnic minority students who have been historically ‘othered’ in metropolitan universities in the Global North. This study highlighted their decolonial struggles to feel a sense of belonging while remaining the minority in a White-dominated university and to fight against the colonised curriculum and lack of diversity on campus. At the same time, the data implied that the above-mentioned decolonisation efforts will allow BME students to better relate to the course content rather than imposing the discursive practices of othering. The racial and ethnic diversification of the faculty and student population must also take place in university decolonisation movements so that students like Sarah can relate to themselves more easily. Just having more people alike can also allow BME students to feel a sense of belonging and make it easier for them to

achieve a high-quality academic education that integrates – socially, psychologically and educationally – the racial and ethnic cultural diversity that they represent and that can be found across the world.

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