

Understanding the awarding gap through the lived experiences of minority ethnic students: An intersectional approach

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Abstract

In UK universities, there is a long-standing gap in degree award outcomes for undergraduate students with white British students more likely to graduate with a 'good degree' (first or upper second class) than British students from minority ethnic backgrounds. Given its complex, systemic nature, researchers have highlighted the importance of adopting holistic, intersectional and exploratory approaches that are solution-focused. However, few qualitative studies provide a voice to minoritised students with regards to describing their individual experiences and their own suggestions for change. Through interviews and an advisory group session, this qualitative study explores the lived experiences of 14 minority ethnic undergraduate female students attending a large, public research university in the UK. The findings generated key themes with intersectional dimensions including gender, nationality, immigrant status, socioeconomic status and educational background including biased attitudes and stereotypes, feelings of being underestimated and needing to work harder, the need for greater diversity, and feelings of disconnection and lack of integration with other minority ethnic students. Participants also shared their perceptions of the awarding gap and proposed strategies for addressing the gap, including raising awareness, increasing diversity among teaching staff, enhancing academic resources and fostering connection among peers. By capturing the racialised narratives of students, this research sheds light on

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the pervasive biases, stereotypes and systemic issues that contribute to the gap. Through these efforts, the study aims to foster a more inclusive and equitable educational environment, ultimately contributing to the elimination of the degree awarding gap at universities.

KEYWORDS

attainment, ethnicity, higher education, intersectional, race

Key insights**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

Using an intersectional lens, this qualitative study explored the lived experiences of UK minority ethnic students while attending a large, public research university, focusing on their perceptions of the awarding gap between white and minority ethnic students, and their proposed strategies for addressing the gap.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Themes with intersectional elements including gender, socioeconomic status, nationality, immigrant status and educational background, underscored the pervasive biases, stereotypes and systemic issues contributing to the awarding gap. Students' proposed strategies included increasing awareness and understanding, having relatable and accessible teaching and resources, and building a sense of community.

INTRODUCTION

In UK universities, there is a long-standing gap in degree award outcomes for undergraduate students with white British students more likely to graduate with a 'good degree' (a first-class or upper second class) than British students from minority ethnic backgrounds (Office for Students, 2022). Often referred to as an attainment gap, the UK's National Union of Students refers to this phenomenon as an 'awarding gap' that acknowledges the role of wider institutional structures in perpetuating grade disparities rather than students as individuals (NUS, 2022). The degree awarding gap has long-term economic and educational implications, with entry-level positions and postgraduate education often having a 'good degree' as the minimum requirement (Wong et al., 2021). While current collaborative work at universities has had a positive impact, a substantial gap persists across the higher education sector (Advance HE, 2022).

Quantitative research has examined the factors that contribute to the awarding gap, such as poverty, prior school type, learning style and entrance qualifications (e.g. McMaster, 2021; Woolf et al., 2013). However, when these variables are included in statistical models, a substantial 'unexplained gap' still remains, underlining the role of the higher education context as well as wider structural factors. Given its complex, systemic nature, researchers have

highlighted the importance of adopting holistic, intersectional and exploratory approaches that are solution-focused to 'explain the unexplained gap' in contrast to statistical models (Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022, p. 6).

Qualitative analysis of racialised narratives of students can illuminate personal insights into the awarding gap and offers a lens through which to understand the lived experiences of minoritised students (Ugiagbe-Green & Ernsting, 2022). These narratives are positioned as 'counter-narratives', as described by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995, p. 56) as 'naming one's own reality' or 'voice' to offset the experiences of white students within the higher education system. However, few qualitative studies provide a voice to minoritised students with regards to describing their individual experiences with the awarding gap in higher education and offering their own suggestions to address inequalities (Wong et al., 2021). For this reason, this qualitative study explores the lived experiences of UK minority ethnic undergraduate students, their perceptions of the awarding gap and their suggested strategies for change.

Minority ethnic students' lived experiences in higher education

A synthesis of research evidence has identified low teacher expectations, a lack of teacher support and minority ethnic role models, and the under-challenging of minority ethnic students as key contributors to the awarding gap (Singh, 2009). Minority ethnic students are often subject to subtle racism including microaggressions from lecturers and other students which can lead to feelings of exclusion, isolation and self-doubt in their abilities, which can affect their performance and contribute to the awarding gap (Wong et al., 2020). Research also suggests that stereotypes associated with race influence minority ethnic students' sense of belonging and help-seeking behaviours in academics which, by extension, affect their overall academic performance (Stevenson, 2012).

Similarly, minority ethnic students often experience a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in university staff and the curriculum, which can further reinforce their sense of isolation and lack of support. In a qualitative study with Black and minority ethnic students at a British University, for example, Sakata et al. (2023) found that students reported a heightened sense of their minority status stemming from a lack of ethnic and racial representation in the curriculum. This was detrimental to their sense of belonging and community and negatively influenced their seeking support and academic engagement. In another qualitative study, minority ethnic students further highlighted that the lack of minority ethnic staff representation in most higher education departments left a void in terms of role models that they could identify with and turn to for support (Seuwou et al., 2023).

Related to this, the literature reveals that minority ethnic students may feel persistent pressure to work harder than their white peers. Steele (2010) introduced the term 'over-efforting' (p. 104) and explains it as a tendency for ethnic minorities, especially Black students, to put in more effort than their white peers in a bid to offset negative stereotypes about academic ability. According to Steele (2010), this is an inherent and deep-rooted belief system among Black students resulting in both a drive and pressure to work twice as hard as their white peers. A report highlighting experiences of Black women in the UK work force reflects Steele's (2010) concept of 'over-efforting' with women describing a constant burden to represent their race and needing 'to be better and do better' (Brodnock & Lordan, 2021, p. 30).

Perceptions of the awarding gap

There are surprisingly few studies examining minority ethnic students' views of the awarding gap. In a recent exception, a thematic study explored the perspectives of 16 Black

undergraduate Psychology students who took part in two focus groups. Three main themes included exposure to signals of 'unbelonging' in a university environment marked as a 'non-Black space', relationship dynamics with their strict parents which impacted their need for relatedness, and unfavourable tutor experiences which negatively influenced their engagement with their programme (Marandure et al., 2024). Another qualitative study by Wong et al. (2021) interviewed white and Black, Asian and minority ethnic university students in England, focusing on those in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics disciplines to explore their perceptions and awareness of the awarding gap. They found that minority ethnic students were reluctant to place responsibility on others for the gap and attributed it to individual capabilities, while others attributed it to economic and social barriers. Some minority ethnic students also highlighted the role of racism, in terms of racial mistreatment and microaggressions, as a key factor in the awarding gap. White students in the study were not able to articulate why the gap exists but many believed that academic performance is dependent on, and a fair reflection of, one's ability. In particular, some students asserted that Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics degrees are objective and therefore independent of any cultural bias and influences. Others, especially minority ethnic students, noted the lack of diversity in historical examples, content and research. Some students, particularly white British students, conflated minority ethnic students with international students, assuming they had weaker English language skills which explained the gap. However, it is important to point out that the awarding gap exists only for UK-domiciled students in university and most Black, Asian and mixed minority ethnic students achieved above the national average prior to attending university (DfE, 2019).

Suggested strategies for change

Research has also highlighted strategies to eliminate the awarding gap. With respect to teaching content, recommendations include greater acknowledgement of curricula as historically, socially and culturally situated, with more emphasis on ensuring courses reflect students' own experiences and identities (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Ethnic diversity in higher education, especially a more diverse and relatable curriculum, can be beneficial to Black and minority ethnic students' academic achievement and encourage them to seek help when needed (Gurin et al., 2004).

Few studies have elicited minority ethnic students' own views on potential strategies to address the gap. Of these, a qualitative study, which conducted focus groups with Black and Asian minority ethnic undergraduate students, found that students mentioned wanting more group work with other diverse students to meet their peers as well as more staff and student minority ethnic role models, factors which may have contributed to their feelings of isolation and reduced satisfaction with their course (Smith, 2017). Students have also highlighted the importance of diversifying and decolonising the curriculum and ensuring greater representation of minority ethnic staff and students in higher education to strengthen their sense of identity and belonging (Wong et al., 2021).

Current study

While the degree awarding gap has been well documented, only a few studies have explored minority ethnic students' perceptions of the awarding gap and their proposed strategies for reducing the gap. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research investigating the awarding gap which has adopted an intersectionality lens by examining intersectional dimensions (e.g. sexuality, gender, ethnicity, education, religion, socio-economic status, disability) of

one's experiences. Coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality considers the interface between social identity factors such as ethnicity and gender and power structures such as racism and sexism. An intersectional lens applied to qualitative research allows an exploration of the differences that exist within groups, socially locating individuals in the context of their 'real lives' (Weber & Fore, 2007, p. 123). Such an approach is crucial to addressing the awarding gap, as it acknowledges the diversity of people's lived experiences and does not 'essentialise' the minority ethnic experience by treating minority ethnic individuals as a single, homogenous group (Wong et al., 2021).

Using an intersectional lens, this qualitative study explores the lived experiences of UK-domiciled minority ethnic undergraduate students. Through interviews and an advisory group session, the following research questions are examined: (1) what are the lived experiences of minority ethnic university students at a large public research university; (2) what are their perceptions of the awarding gap; and (3) what are their proposed strategies for addressing the gap?

METHODS

Participants

The participants were undergraduate students in Psychology at University College London (UCL). The study was advertised via email through the course administrator. Inclusion criteria included being a UK citizen and identifying as an ethnic minority. A total of 21 students contacted the researchers with an interest in participating but six were international students and did not meet the inclusion criteria. The remaining 14 were sent a participant information sheet, consent form and pre-interview questionnaire. The consent form obtained permission from participants to be contacted for an interview, follow-up interview and advisory group session. The pre-interview questionnaire had demographic questions including age, gender, ethnicity, disability and religion. An online interview was scheduled when the signed consent form was received.

Table 1 presents demographic information about the participants based on the pre-interview questionnaire. All of the participants were female. Most of the participants were in the final year of their undergraduate Psychology degree ($n=7$), four were in their second year and three in their first year. The age range of the participants was 18–23 years. In terms of ethnicity, eight self-identified as South Asian including Bangladesh, Indian and Pakistani, five participants identified as Black (British or African) and one identified as Asian (Hong Kong). None of the participants reported having a disability. In respect to religion, six self-identified their religion as Islam, five as Christianity, two as Hindus and one as spiritual.

Procedure

All 14 students participated in two online interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams. The first interview lasted around 45 min; the follow-up lasted around 30 min. Participants were offered £25 and £15 vouchers for first and follow-up interviews, respectively. Questions in the first interview probed students' awareness and feelings about the awarding gap, for example, 'Are you familiar with the awarding gap? Where did you learn about it? How do you feel about the awarding gap?' The interview also asked students to reflect on their intersecting identities and how this impacted their education. For instance, 'Do you think any aspect of your identity (e.g. age, gender, ethnicity) limited you from seeking academic support? Did you find it easy or difficult to understand or relate

TABLE 1 Participant demographics.

Participant no.	Year of study	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability	Religion
P1	3rd	23	Female	Black British–Caribbean	No	Spiritual
P2	3rd	21	Female	Bangladeshi	No	Islam
P3	3rd	21	Female	South Asian	No	Islam
P4	3rd	22	Female	Asian Pakistani	No	Islam
P5	3rd	21	Female	British Bangladeshi	No	Islam
P6	3rd	20	Female	Black African	No	Christian/Agnostic
P7	3rd	20	Female	British Pakistani	No	Islam
P8	2nd	20	Female	Black British	No	Christian
P9	2nd	19	Female	Bangladeshi	No	Islam
P10	2nd	20	Female	Asian/Hong Kong	No	Christian
P11	1st	18	Female	Black African	No	Christian
P12	1st	19	Female	Black	No	Christian
P13	1st	20	Female	Indian	No	Hindu
P14	2nd	20	Female	Indian	No	Hindu

to course materials (e.g. presentations, lectures, readings)?' For the follow-up interview, example questions included, 'What can, in your opinion, close the gap?' and 'How do you think course materials could be improved to be more equitable and inclusive?'

For a 'shared understanding of problems and solutions' (Conklin, 2021, p. 45), the study then employed a co-design approach to generate and substantiate strategies that can be put in place to promote inclusivity in the higher education context for minoritised students. To this end, an advisory group session was arranged, and all of the participants were invited to attend. An advisory group session involving the participants of research helps to ensure participative decision-making, transparency and a collaborative approach to the exploration of insights which can ultimately help to refine the findings (Scher et al., 2023). Eleven of the 14 participants attended the session, which included lunch, and received a £50 voucher for their participation. Co-design principles such as sharing power, being honest and welcoming (dis)agreement were followed. The session was chaired by the first author, which began with sharing and discussing the themes. Students spoke freely and topics of discussion included their own experiences in relation to the themes and proposed strategies to tackle the awarding gap. The session lasted for 3 h and was audio recorded.

Data analysis

Qualitative research was employed to capture the complexities and contradictions inherent in students' lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012), allowing a more in-depth understanding of the diversity that characterises their intersectional identities and circumstances. Transcripts from the interviews were analysed using an inductive thematic analysis approach undertaken by the second author (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). For the themes related to minority ethnic students' lived experiences in higher education and their perceptions of the awarding gap, transcripts from the two interviews were read thoroughly for familiarisation.

At first, segments of the transcripts were highlighted which corresponded with the aims of the research and captured students' experiences. With each highlighted text, short phrases and words were noted that captured the essence of the text. Once this was complete, the second author looked for patterns and commonality among the codes and the similar ones were grouped together to form inductive themes. The first author reviewed the themes and with some discussion, the themes were refined with overlapping themes removed or combined with other themes while new themes were added to ensure the data were represented adequately. For example, the themes of diverse lecturers and diverse peers were combined into a single theme named 'need for diversity'. For the identification of strategies for change, the first and second authors analysed data from the two interviews as well as the advisory group session using the same approach as noted above.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from University College London's Research Ethical Approval Committee (23571/001).

RESULTS

Minority ethnic students' lived experiences in higher education

Five themes were generated that encapsulate the lived experiences of minority ethnic students in higher education. These themes include biased attitudes and stereotypes, feeling underestimated and working harder, the need for diversity, feelings of disconnection and lack of integration and socio-economic influences. Intersectional dimensions were explored and highlighted, when relevant. Quotes from the interviews are shown with the participant's numbers, while quotes from the advisory group session do not have participant numbers as it was not possible to distinguish among the participants' voices in the transcript.

Biased attitudes and stereotypes

Students mentioned their perception of biased attitudes and stereotypes in higher education, emphasising the burden of representation and perceptions about their contributions being undervalued. One student said, '... in university, people don't really know much about me, so it could like as a result, I feel people probably could rely on stereotypes to assess how I might perform' [P6]. Another student emphasised the representation of race, 'I feel like I represent my race because I think there's always been, like, a stereotype that we're not as smart as our counterparts, which is extremely dumb and sometimes I feel like the pressure is on me' [P8]. This underscored the burden of representation that was felt by this student and highlighted an additional pressure that minority ethnic students may face during their academic journey. One student noted a sense of tokenism, 'if you are from a BAME [Black and Asian Minority Ethnic] kind of background, you are kind of like a token student'. The same student further explained that stereotypes about race intersected with those about educational background, 'And so I feel that when you see a BAME person, you kind of expect them to not come from like, a private school background or like, have, like a strong educational experience' [P2]. This particularly highlights how intersecting stereotypes can compound biases as minority students may also face assumptions about their socio-economic background. Another student recounted their own experience of working in a

group with their peers and how biased stereotypes reduced her experiences being a leader, 'I've always felt like an intellectual equal to my peers ... But it I definitely felt like I was being seen as like, you know, kind of the stupid one. And I definitely realised that my white peers would definitely always take the lead in the projects' [P2]. The specific phrase 'my white peers would definitely always take the lead' suggests a broader and more systemic issue where the contributions of minority ethnic students may be overlooked or not valued as much as their white counterparts. A few students also noted that, as minority ethnic women, others' biased viewpoints about their capabilities were often more potent, 'Just ask like what you said, like as a woman, it doesn't matter, I feel like if I ask, I'm like succumbing to the idea they already have in their head. It's like I'm gonna admit I'm dumb, but it's not being stupid' [P12]. There is some intersection of race and gender as the student recounts her experience as a woman from a minority ethnic background. The student also exhibits a fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes resulting in the student not engaging in discussions or asking questions to further understanding.

Feeling underestimated and working harder

In this theme, students expressed that perceptions of bias led to feeling underestimated and the belief that they had to work significantly harder to achieve the same level of recognition as their white counterparts. This created additional pressure and often led to burnout and fluctuations in motivation. One student articulated, 'So, it's almost like, OK, yeah, we have to do more than everyone else ... just to get to the same level as everyone. And I think sometimes that can very much weigh down on us as individuals. You know, it has been ingrained in us. This is something we do feel like we have to actively try harder' [P1]. Another commented on needing to prove and differentiate themselves, 'I feel like I need to prove myself in some sort of way by doing things that are different from other students, so I have tried to like seek opportunities that make me stand out because I feel like that there's this really strange need to like stand out and like really prove to other people that I can do it' [P2]. A few students noted that working harder was a 'default' position and that they expected barriers, 'the whole having to work harder than everyone else ... It's so weird talking about it in a way, because I'm so used to it, it's almost my default. And it never feels like enough ... if I wasn't Black, I think I'd have a completely different mentality for sure' [P1]. This idea of having to work harder is further compounded by the recognition that the academic journey of minority ethnic students is always going to be filled with obstacles, as one student remarked, 'the pressure that I have to kind of keep going. And it doesn't just stop here. I have to keep working harder. I'm a person of colour. There's always gonna be barriers. There's always gonna be things stopping me, so I can't. I have to kind of keep going, upping each level ... I feel like you can only really understand that if you're a person of colour' [P1]. Some students also noted feeling pressure from having to work harder. And 'that's a lot of pressure I put on myself. I guess it comes from like, you know, having to do everything on my own. Again, being like a BAME student for a long time, you have to put that kind of expectation on yourself to, like go ahead and push yourself' [P3]. A few students highlighted that the intersection between being an ethnic minority and a woman increased the pressure to work harder, 'Like I have to prove myself. I think that's a really common theme within like ethnic minorities, especially for women. It's you have to become independent from quite a young age and very early on.' These statements underscore the inequity that students from a minority ethnic background face in their academic environment whereby they must go above and beyond just for equal recognition with their white counterparts. This strain led some students to experience burnout and lack of motivation, as expressed by this student, 'I think it has contributed to

like fluctuations in motivation and because I do feel like at times it's just you have to work harder to get the same recognition' [P5].

Need for diversity

This theme encapsulated students' concerns about the lack of diversity among lecturers and peers and the consequential impact. Some students stated they felt like outsiders while a few reflected on the positive impact of being taught by minority ethnic staff. Students also discussed the lack of inclusivity in the curriculum and highlighted the need for authentic representation in learning materials. Students expressed their views on the lack of diversity among professors, 'it would be nice if we could have more diversity in the professors, because mostly they've been white' [P10]. Some students recounted their positive experience of being taught by a minority ethnic lecturer and how this was such a rare experience for them during their university education, 'I got a Black lecturer and I got emotional and I was like, why am I emotional? I was speaking to my friends ... Oh it's because I've never had a Black teacher before' [P12]. Another student recounted how the exceptional experience of having a Black lecturer helped her connect to the teaching content, 'Like the way she was teaching, the way like, she communicated her ideas. I was like, wow, like that that it feels too good to be true that someone like her is teaching in this module because everyone else like that was teaching kind of felt so far to me' [P2].

Students also commented on the lack of diversity among their peers and in the classroom, 'it does feel like even on my course like I do feel like they're probably not as many South Asians in general and Black people, I have barely seen any' [P9]. For some students, this lack of diversity made them feel like an outsider, 'I definitely realised ... that there's not a lot of ethnic minorities in that module. So, I am aware that there is something different about me being there' [P2]. While another added, 'there's a handful of us. There were only two in my research methods class altogether. There's not a lot of us. And I feel like I'm representing, or I grew up representing Black people in a way' [P8]. One student expected the lack of diversity among peers, 'bracing yourself to be like, OK, there's like a 50% chance that I am the only person with this ethnic variety in my class ... The only person that matched my ethnic identity was the student advisor'.

Lastly, students spoke about the lack of diversity and inclusivity in their modules. 'Personally, I think it's because in our modules, there's no lecture on like cultural differences. There's not much on that' [P3]. While another referred to modules focusing more on research emanating from the West, 'you know the acronym ... what is it Western, educated, industrialised ... a lot of the studies that we covered are quite westernised' [P12]. Several students felt that when inclusivity was addressed in module content it was either incorrect or felt forced. One student emphasised how discussions around diversity can feel contrived, 'Sometimes when they talk about specific cultures and whatnot, it felt like either that I was not being included or they were making rash generalisations about certain cultures' [P11]. Meanwhile, another student reflected on the need for authentic representation of diversity in the curriculum, 'I think in some ways. It does feel like being singled out, but that's because when it is spoken about, it's very rare. If it was kind of something that felt natural and felt didn't feel like a tag on it, didn't feel like trying to tick a box' [P1].

Feeling disconnected and lack of integration

Students spoke about feeling distant and unconnected with both their lecturers and classmates and noted challenges in approaching lecturers. Some students reflected on

the divide between UK-based and international minority ethnic students and remarked on ethnic self-segregation among students which limited opportunities for connection. Speaking about lecturers, one student highlighted the perception of distance and lack of accessibility, 'I felt very distant from lecturers, and I didn't really have it in me to [approach] them directly'. Another student emphasised the disconnection between UK and international ethnic minority students, highlighting the intersection between nationality and ethnicity. She stated, 'there's also a disconnect between students as well, because I've found, like I did see students from the UK, and I think there's a really big difference between BAME from the UK and [international] BAME students. They have their completely different perspective, and they have different views and things, so it was really hard, I found it much easier to connect with someone else just solely based on them being from the UK.' Commenting on peers, one student said that even among minority ethnic students, most preferred to stay with their own race rather than mix with everyone. 'So funny because you can see everyone segregate them by themselves. They just do it by themselves like it's not on purpose'. Another student commented, 'It's like people want to congregate with their own ethnic groups. But if you do that, you're going to limit yourself to knowledge.'

Socioeconomic influences

Students highlighted the influence of their background characteristics such as immigrant status, parental education, schooling experiences and socioeconomic factors on their learning. One student reflected on the intersection between her immigrant status and parents' educational background and, consequently, felt unable to share her experiences with her family. 'Being an immigrant to this country and not like having anyone else to talk to about these things. So, for example, when I was struggling, there was no one in my family that first had done psychology that I could talk to, or even anyone in my family who's done a higher education degree in this country. So, it's quite a different experience. I don't know who to talk to about whatever I'm struggling with' [P3]. Students also compared themselves with their white counterparts in terms of their schooling experience and overall learning. 'I mean, some of my peers do come from a more affluent background ... so they went to better schools, and they're experienced. My experience was terrible. I went to a really crap school ... So I think that [they] probably found it easier' [P12]. One student expressed a lack of enriching experiences compared with her peers, 'The cultural capital, which is like having experiences like I know a lot of my peers have had experiences that I literally cannot even imagine. And I think that probably played a role in their understanding and identification with some of the topics that came up' [P12]. Another student highlighted the intersectionality between race and economic disparity, 'I think it is definitely to do a lot with like what we're exposed to. I think not only is it the fact that we are minority also a lot of us are from like low-income areas' [P3].

Extending from socio-economic influences and background characteristics, some students also struggled with academic language as a barrier to expressing themselves. Remarking on this difficulty, one student presented the challenge of 'code switching', 'I feel like the need for like academic speech like hinders things at some point ... trying to like sound like academic nearly made my life worse in a way and I wondered like you know how the idea of code switching. I wonder if the need or like the prospect of having to code switch potentially to your lecturers and ask questions in a way that think it was palatable, like further prevents us from asking questions.' This student further explained how some minority ethnic students feel the need to change their accents at university and adopt a 'white voice' to communicate more effectively, 'this friend has a really, really strong accent ... and she's always talking about how she feels like she needs to put on her white voice before she

talked to people. And like, it makes her not just want to ask any questions. Cause like oh, I have to go and change myself, make myself more digestible ... So, it's not like I'm doing this all-uppity voice the entire time.' Another student further elaborated on how some students feel the need to code switch due to their accents, 'like the need to code switch like change yourself to be more palatable, but I don't wanna have to change myself. Just ask the simple question, it's just a hassle really.' The student further highlights how these pressures to conform to perceived academic norms are self-imposed rather than external, 'I feel like no one really pressurises you to do it, but it's something that like in yourself that you feel like you have to do. I guess I can't find an instance where like any of my peers or lecturers made me feel like I had to do that to like my accent. I think it's just something very internal, like in a lot of BAME students.'

Perceptions of the awarding gap

There were three themes representing students' perceptions of the awarding gap. These themes reflect students' understanding, negative feelings and personal motivation.

Understanding of the awarding gap

In this theme, students expressed some basic understanding of the awarding gap; however, the nuances and underlying factors contributing to the gap remained less clear. While most students had heard about the gap, there was also a sense of uncertainty about why the gap exists. One student said, 'I've heard of the term, but I'm not really sure what it truly means. I know that it's kind of like, so if you're less likely to pass with higher grades if you're from an ethnic minority background than their white counterparts' [P2]. Another student expressed confusion about the gap and wondered where it came from, 'I don't even understand, is it coming from my ethnicity ... my part as an ethnic minority student that I didn't understand is contributing to my performance'. One student identified that as marking is anonymous that is unlikely to be a contributor to the gap, 'with the anonymous marking and stuff, I'm not sure how like BAME students are getting marked down or getting lesser grades compared to white students ... they don't know who they're marking. It's not racially based' [P8].

Negative feelings about the gap

Students' responses to the existence of the awarding gap revealed a variety of emotional reactions which included shock, annoyance, disappointment and a sense of unfairness. One stated, 'I would say, I guess shocked. I don't know. I didn't think, well, obviously knew that there would be disparities within education. But I didn't think that it affected particular modules. Yeah, just shocked, really. And just confused. I guess' [P8]. This statement reflects that while students may be aware of the disparities in higher education, the impact on their own academic experience was unexpected. Another student expressed annoyance at not just the existence of the gap but how it may impact others' perception of her abilities, 'I find it annoying as well because it also means that to some extent there is this consensus. And you know this kind of attainment gap is known. Some people may underestimate me or just assume that, generally speaking, I might not be suitable for certain posts' [P1]. One student described the feeling of shock and said, 'By the time when you hear it, like, oh, I need to be on edge like being Black, Asian, is that going to cause my downfall? That's a very shocking, shock-horror response and it's not exactly true. It's got more complexity to it, there's more

gaps.' Students also communicated that they found the gap to be unfair and demotivating and that their efforts may not be recognised. 'I feel like it's a bit demotivating knowing that you're putting in the same effort. That there's a difference like just because of your ethnicity or whatever' [P14]. Other students questioned what can be done to fill the gap. 'I just think it's kind of unfair ... one of those systemic hoops that we have to go through again ... it makes me feel like it's unfair but also makes me think like, you know, what can we do to change that? What is causing this gap if we're all receiving the same education' [P13]. A few students felt that the gap was outside of their control and wondered why they even needed to know about it, 'I think personally I wouldn't want to have known what it was because I feel like again it's kind of like out of my hand. It's just something that is there and exists and I feel like just if I was at university at that time we're like knowing about and dwelling about it. I think it can be really overwhelming ... Yeah, like, what am I doing? What should I be doing more?' This statement from the student reflects an internal conflict whereby she may want to advocate for change but simultaneously feels overwhelmed by the systemic nature of the awarding gap.

Personally motivating

Contrary to the above, a few students found the gap to be motivating. One student viewed the awarding gap as a challenge to overcome, 'Honestly, that can be motivating as well. Like in terms of, I know I have to work slightly harder because I might be disadvantaged, but you know it kind of pushes me to go above and beyond and put more effort in' [P3]. Other students expressed determination to eliminate the awarding gap and highlighted that discussions about the gap need to move away from individual experiences. 'It's literally right there and that's awareness. I'm not saying it was, but you can't just limit it to just talking about experiences and stuff, because then it kind of becomes our problem. It's like oh you know; we have to tackle it. It's not right.' In another example, a student explained how she endeavoured to personally close the gap and emphasised personal success as a way of standing out, 'It helps me in a way because if I can sort of close that attainment gap as an individual, it enables me to stand out from other people. First off, it enables me to stand out from people of colour. But also, I think because there's this kind of massive movement at the moment to increase access to people of colour ... it will make me stand out from everyone else. So not only am I attaining better, but I'm also a person of colour which is ticking boxes there for some, you know, for some institutions, businesses, that kind of thing' [P1].

Suggested strategies for change

This section highlights students' suggestions for strategies mainly to close the degree awarding gap. Some strategies were also identified to create a sense of connection among minority ethnic students and their peers as well as addressing the lack of diversity among teaching staff.

Increasing awareness of the gap

Several students spoke about spreading awareness about the awarding gap as one of the strategies for closing the gap. One student remarked, 'I think first of all, it would be important for everyone to be aware of the gap because you can't begin tackling something until, you're actually aware of it' [P4]. Another stated, 'There should be an awareness that this gap exists

... trying to delve into the reasons why this this might occur and kind of like making it known to BAME students. Perhaps some people do feel this gap, but they're too afraid to talk about it. And so, I think it's important to raise awareness as to why this might occur and kind of get them to understand that, you know, they're not alone in feeling that way' [P2]. A student said that highlighting the gap as a barrier was an important catalyst for change, 'making an effort to, you know, put the spotlight on this just because I didn't even really think too much of it as an actual issue ... I think maybe putting great emphasis on it might highlight the issues and then we could just move from there' [P9].

Students also spoke about sharing their experiences as part of raising awareness about the gap and how storytelling can be a powerful tool to raise awareness. One student said, 'Maybe it would help if more people [told their] stories. They feel comfortable sharing their stories about where they're coming from. So, what in their life has potentially held them back and that way we can build up an even better picture.' While another added, 'I feel like I could talk about my situation. I think it gives so much power to share. Makes they can take part in [too]... People feel brave like sharing their story.'

Increasing understanding of the contributing factors

This theme focused on understanding the broader context of the factors that contribute to the awarding gap from the students' perspective. One student emphasised the need to take individual factors into consideration, 'I think talking to BAME students like myself and like understanding where the gaps are, I think also maybe thinking about what other possible gaps, like what kind of factors may have contributed to it ... maybe understanding some of the extenuating factors and making room for them ... more flexible deadlines, if you know a student that's having to work part time so they can't always meet exact deadlines. And making that like more accessible and more like acceptable for people to be working part time along with the university degree' [P13]. Another student also highlighted the importance of the teaching staff's understanding of the gap and the factors contributing to it, 'Maybe like the professors knowing more about the gap and being knowledgeable that there is a gap. And obviously understanding it has more to do you know with the factors that are contributing to it, if students feel their lecturer's teaching is compromised because they're BAME then that would need to be addressed' [P14].

Providing more resources

Some students identified having more resources to equip minority ethnic students with the necessary skills could help close the gap. 'Maybe people don't have access to resources that tell them really how to further achieve because I know that in my case, I feel that I had to kind of work out my own university experience' [P6]. One student identified specific help to prepare for assessments, 'maybe more targeted help with assessments ... I kind of walked into it a bit blind, so maybe some sort of support group or I don't know, some sort of workshops' [P6]. Students also mentioned having more accessible resources including textbooks and videos, which are tailored to different learning styles. For example, one student highlighted how their lecturer, 'rewrote the textbooks in a simple way'. Another suggested that tailored strategies could be developed to encourage minority ethnic students to seek help when needed, 'I guess maybe trying to provide extra help for BAME students ... I think maybe we could be struggling a bit more because I tend to notice that we don't ask as many questions maybe ... I think white people don't feel uncomfortable to ask questions.' This student also highlighted that strategies may need to reflect intersectional differences among minority

ethnic students. 'But I also think that the culture, I guess within minorities and even within like white students is very different ... just maybe seeing the cultural differences pertaining to education and trying to reach them through that and help them more' [P8].

Addressing diversity

One student proposed a strategy to address the lack of diversity among lecturers and said, 'you can invite guest lecturers and seeing that would be nice because it shows that UCL are interested in the experiences of people of colour' [P1].

Promoting feelings of connection

Students spoke about creating a sense of connection among their peers. One recommended having more social events for Psychology students, 'Psychology doesn't even do like the balls and stuff I've seen. I've seen medicine ball and law ball and history ball. Oh, it's like so we don't have that. Why don't we do that?' Another spoke about having more 'fresher' events, 'I feel like having like fun "freshers" events that like engage you in their course because I know history did a scavenger hunt. So, they did like a whole history scavenger hunt and ended in a pub crawl. So, they got to know each other.'

One student stated that doing more group work would help alleviate distance among peers, especially with international students, 'like home students and international students may be working together in a group and sort of share the ideas. I think more group work is quite important ... I think definitely being able to communicate more with other classmates and share your ideas' [P5]. Another student suggested more contact between minority ethnic students in other departments, 'So maybe more events that brought UK BAME students together and mixing events ... like you could do for between subjects, architecture students like I had good conversations with them. I just never saw them anymore.'

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study of students' narratives of their lived experiences while attending a UK higher education institution revealed themes related to biased attitudes and stereotypes, feeling underestimated and working harder, the need for diversity, feelings of disconnection and lack of integration, and socio-economic influences. Intersectional dimensions including gender, race/ethnicity, education, socio-economic status, immigrant status and nationality were highlighted. Students also discussed their perceptions of the awarding gap, underlining the importance of being aware of the gap and understanding its contributing factors. Although many students expressed negative emotions about the gap such as shock and disappointment, others viewed closing the gap as a motivating force. Lastly, students offered their own strategies for change.

Minority ethnic students' lived experiences in higher education

Many students noted feelings of tokenism in their cohort along with being subject to stereotypes about their racial and/or ethnic background. These biased attitudes led some students to feel underestimated in their abilities, particularly as minority ethnic women. This prompted some to work harder to achieve and feel more pressure to excel, in line with

recent research focused on Black women in the workplace (Brodnock & Lordan, 2021). Such 'over-efforting' led a few students to feel stressed and even unmotivated. To counter this, Saeed (2018) suggests that building support systems specifically for Black and minority ethnic students can alleviate their experiences of marginalisation and ease some of the psychological pressures associated with 'over-efforting'. The students' suggestions for building connections among minority ethnic students may work towards this purpose, minimising feelings of tokenism and creating a sense of community and belonging. Our findings emphasising the intersection between minority status and gender suggest that such bridging groups may be tailored to support Black and minority ethnic women, in particular.

Students also highlighted the importance of having ethnically diverse lecturers. For many, the one or two occasions when they had a lecturer of their own ethnicity were memorable experiences in their education, boosting their motivation and providing a role model for their studies. However, students remarked that these experiences were few and far between. While there has been a recent 25% increase, it is well documented that ethnic minorities are under-represented in academia, particularly Black academics (Gibney, 2024). To counteract this, in the short term, guest lecturers from minority ethnic backgrounds can be invited to teach on modules where no in-house staff are available (UCL, 2020). Longer term strategies can focus on hiring policies, such as having ethnic minority representation in committees responsible for hiring to enable recognition and valuing of diverse qualifications and experiences among minority ethnic candidates and ensure diversity among lecturers in higher education settings (Bhalla, 2019; Page, 2007). To effect systemic change which involves recruiting as well as supporting and retaining ethnic minorities in higher education roles, there is useful guidance in the Anti-Racism Toolkit, which examines institutional racism and how minority ethnic staff are treated in higher education (Turney et al., 2002). The Toolkit provides guidance on constructing an institutional anti-racist action plan and engaging and acting upon areas where the potential for discrimination exists.

Students also noted a lack of diversity among their peers. They found that students of different ethnicities tended to stick with their own group, leading to a lack of integration among minority ethnic students. This was particularly salient when considering the intersection between nationality and ethnicity, with UK and international students often keeping to themselves. Students' suggestions included more peer group work to increase a sense of connection with their peers. Also suggested was a peer mentoring scheme, which paired advanced students with beginning students, for a mentoring relationship that continued throughout the academic year. They further discussed strategies to improve social relations among minority ethnic students, such as planned social events. Previous studies have shown that participation in student-organised groups fosters engagement and social participation among minority ethnic students (Sims, 2007).

In support of previous research (Sakata et al., 2023; Seuou et al., 2023), most students in our study further reported that there was a lack of inclusivity and diversity in the learning content. For the most part, diversity was either not present or it was represented in a simplistic manner without nuance. To remedy this, teaching staff can decolonise the curriculum by embedding wider global and historical perspectives, theories and frameworks, beyond Western ones, into the teaching content (Andrews et al., 2023). Incorporating a wide range of resources, including ethnically diverse voices, perspectives and research, can enable minority ethnic students to relate the learning content to their own identities and backgrounds (Zepke & Leach, 2007). The BAME Awarding Gap Toolkit, for example, suggests including pictures of diverse authors of recommended readings to highlight inclusive and diverse content (UCL, 2020). Considering diverse cultural and historical contexts and acknowledging the limitations of a lack of representativeness can also help clarify assumptions and provide a space for inclusive discussions within the lectures, which can help prevent students' alienation from teaching content which lacks diversity (Ambrose et al., 2010).

In addition to gender and nationality, socioeconomic, cultural and educational background were noted as potential intersecting factors. One student highlighted their immigrant status and a few students mentioned being the first person to study Psychology in their family. Some students felt that their educational background placed them at a disadvantage compared with their more economically advantaged peers. Students also mentioned not understanding the academic language required for university and having to 'code-switch' their speech and accent. Literature suggests that decisions undertaken by ethnic minorities on code switching and how to linguistically represent themselves may be motivated by a desire both to conform to perceived norms and to avoid stereotypes and discrimination (DeJordy, 2008; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). Code switching requires additional cognitive effort and often causes stress and other negative psychological consequences for the individual (Johnson et al., 2021). The students suggested that offering more resources might be advantageous for new minority ethnic students. Students also mentioned the importance of accessible teaching practices such as speaking without jargon and creating safe spaces to feel comfortable to ask questions. Incorporating 'inclusive teaching' strategies can ensure that minority ethnic students have a safe space for learning and discussion (Arday et al., 2021).

Perceptions of the awarding gap

Most of the students in this study were familiar with the awarding gap and all were uncertain about the factors that contributed to it. They expressed negative emotions about the gap including shock, disappointment and a lack of control. Some students, however, felt motivated by the awarding gap, aiming to work towards its closure. These findings somewhat contradict a previous study about the awarding gap, where most students were unaware and a few were surprised about the degree awarding gap (Wong et al., 2021). This might be due to differences in the higher education institution, especially as UCL has a designated 'Awarding Gap Project' and promotes teaching and assessment practices to eliminate the gap (UCL, 2020).

When asked how the university might work towards closing the gap, students offered a number of strategies for change. Students wanted the university to promote greater awareness of the gap as well as conduct more research to understand its contributing factors. Students noted several suggestions for promoting awareness of the gap, which included sharing and learning from their experiences. To facilitate this suggestion, for example, students envisioned creating a video montage of different minority ethnic students sharing their story, which coincides with Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) recommendation for minority ethnic students to name their own reality through their own voices. Having a safe space to voice personal narratives provides a compelling way for students to share their experiences, raise collective awareness about the attainment gap and create a sense of solidarity among minority ethnic students. This can be helpful in offering insight into the specific challenges and barriers minority ethnic students face and inspire action for positive change (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Limitations

There are several limitations of the present study. First, the participants included only females studying Psychology at the same higher education institution. The study's focus on female Psychology students at a single university restricts the generalisability of the findings. Future research could expand to include diverse genders, disciplines and institutions. However,

it must be noted that this sample is reflective of the cohort, which consists of a higher proportion of females than males. Second, the students attended a highly competitive public research university; thus, students attending other institutions may have different experiences. Third, the study occurred in 2023; thus, some of the students' experiences may have been affected by the pandemic. Fourth, this study examined UK Black and Asian minority ethnic undergraduate students, as they both have reported disparities in their academic outcomes and experiences (Office for Students, 2022). However, the approach of focusing on UK Black and Asian minority ethnic students rather than more distinct groups may have been a barrier to noting distinctions among ethnic, cultural, religious and other characteristics. To counter this, our study explored intersectional dimensions among the students. Nevertheless, our sample may have been homogeneous in other ways, such as unintentionally not including students with a disability. In the future, studies with more diverse samples, including those with disabilities and/or different cultural backgrounds, could add more intersectional insights.

CONCLUSION

The degree awarding gap emphasises the significant disparity in degree outcomes for undergraduate students at UK universities, which has reverberating consequences for postgraduate education and future career trajectories. Through highlighting the voices of 14 undergraduate female students from minority ethnic backgrounds, this study provides a racialised narrative of the lived experiences of minority ethnic students at a UK higher education institution. Qualitative analysis generated key themes with intersectional elements, including gender, socioeconomic status, nationality, immigrant status and educational background, and underscored the pervasive biases, stereotypes and systemic issues that contribute to the awarding gap. The students further shared their proposed strategies for addressing the gap, which focused on increasing awareness and understanding of the contributing factors, having relatable and accessible teaching and resources and building a sense of community among minority ethnic students. In future studies, more detailed strategies or case studies demonstrating the implementation of these solutions would be beneficial. More widely, institutional and systemic changes such as equitable recruitment, hiring and retention policies for minority ethnic academics may further help to reduce the awarding gap and mend the leaky academic pipeline. Such efforts are essential to eliminate the degree awarding gap as well as foster a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, LG. The data are not publicly available owing to restrictions (e.g. their containing information that could compromise the privacy of research participants).

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from University College London's Research Ethical Approval Committee (23571/001).

INFORMED CONSENT FROM PARTICIPANTS

Participants were sent a participant information sheet and signed a consent form.

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