
Research article

The BAME awarding gap: understanding student perspectives

Gideon Sappor,^{1,*}  Josh Franks¹ 

¹ UCL Institute of Education, London, UK

* Correspondence: gideon.sappor.14@ucl.ac.uk

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Abstract

A gap exists between the proportion of White British students receiving top degree classifications (first and 2:1) and students from minority ethnic groups. In the literature this gap is called the 'BAME awarding gap' or the 'awarding gap'. The awarding gap has a deleterious effect on students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (BAME) because there is a market premium on 'good grades'. This research is aimed at generating knowledge about the issues and factors that impact the awarding gap between BAME students and White students of a module at a UK university. One risk factor that the research hypothesises is the relative reluctance of BAME students to seek help and support from the tutoring team when faced with academic challenges. A sample was drawn from a master's level module using a convenience sampling strategy. In total, 10 students volunteered for the study. Focus group interviews were used to frame the perspectives of participants relating to the academic space, and their attitudes towards help seeking and factors that influence their decision whether to seek help or not. The results showed a complexity of factors, including heightened impostor syndrome in the academic space, allied to an unfavourable sense of belonging and stigma in relation to

help seeking. To better understand the issues faced by BAME students, it is essential to actively seek their perspectives within the academic environment. BAME students must be involved in designing interventions and support systems. The study makes a valuable contribution to knowledge about some factors that impact the awarding gap and how they might be mitigated.

Keywords BAME awarding gap; awarding gap; BAME; help-seeking; equity; inclusion

Introduction

The issues of fairness, equity and justice in diversity have been part of the social and political discourse in the UK for a long time (for example, see Brennan and Naidoo, 2008; Zaijda et al., 2006). This is a result of the quest to create an equitable, inclusive and just society where an individual's lot in life is not determined by the colour of their skin, the family they were born into or their place of birth. Since the Black Lives Matter movement came to the forefront in 2020, there has been increased attention and focus on issues of racial injustices and inequities. This has been the case across all four nations of the UK despite differences in educational curricula, healthcare systems and legal traditions (Codioli and McMaster, 2021).

The higher education sector has equally been involved in the conversation surrounding equity and diversity, as there is a discernible gap in the number of degrees awarded to White students and their non-White peers (Codioli and McMaster, 2021). The nations of the UK have different educational systems, but they share a common issue regarding the BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) awarding gap (Codioli and McMaster, 2021). According to Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting (2022), this is due to systemic racism in the higher education sector. The sector as a whole and universities at the individual level have adopted several projects and programmes aimed at addressing the gap, with varied degrees of success. Recent data show that the gap has persisted, suggesting that more work needs to be done to understand the issues and how they manifest in disadvantaging students from non-White backgrounds. It is particularly important to understand the issues from the perspective of the students concerned – those from non-White backgrounds (Wong et al., 2022).

This research is aimed at generating knowledge about some of the issues and factors that impact the 'awarding gap' between BAME students and non-BAME students at a UK institution and in wider higher education. It aims to provide academic staff with practical as well as theoretical guidance concerning the provision of support for all students. The reasons suggested for the awarding gap are multifaceted and complex (Gutman and Younas, 2023). It would be useful to identify and explore aspects of academic life where non-White students may encounter disadvantage. (The authors prefer the term 'non-White' to 'BAME' as the appropriateness of the latter term has been contested.) For example, a better understanding of the factors that facilitate or hinder academic help-seeking behaviour by non-White students may provide the necessary impetus to design appropriate strategies that have a higher potential for success. This is of crucial importance if higher education institutions are to successfully close the awarding gap. The study is set against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, with its associated lockdowns. Even though the lockdowns have been reported to have had a disproportionately larger impact on non-White students, the issues surrounding the awarding gap existed before that period.

The study sets out to address the following research questions:

- What are the factors that determine whether a non-White student would seek help with their academic work?
- How do non-White students perceive academic help seeking?
- What are the barriers to non-White students' academic help seeking?
- What conditions would foster academic help seeking by non-White students?
- What, from non-White students' perspectives, are the barriers encountered in their studies?

The awarding gap

Authors such as Lynch and O’Riordan (1998) have suggested that there is a disparity in advantages and disadvantages received by students from different social groups and characteristics in the education sector, from primary to tertiary levels. These disparities translate into different experiences and outcomes for individuals and groups of students depending on their characteristics. Participation and outcomes of students in higher education are of crucial importance because they determine life chances to a large extent and have implications for social justice in wider society (Brennan and Naidoo, 2008). It is therefore of interest to policymakers, practitioners and wider society to ensure that there is fairness, equity and full inclusivity in higher education institutions.

It is concerning that higher education in all the nations of the UK shows a trend where White students seem to have and enjoy a privilege not afforded to peers from non-White and ethnic minority backgrounds. Advance HE, a charity of professionals working to promote the highest standards in higher education, reports the existence of a considerable gap between the proportion of White British students receiving top degree classifications (first and 2:1) and the UK-domiciled students from minority ethnic groups (Codioli and McMaster, 2021). Advance HE data show that the gap exists in all the nations of the UK, and although the data mention individual nations where relevant, the data and its discussion are an aggregation (UK level); this is the usual approach taken by researchers (for example, see Banerjee, 2024; Singh et al., 2023; UUK, 2022). In the literature this gap is called the BAME awarding gap, degree awarding gap or simply awarding gap (Codioli and McMaster, 2021; UUK, 2022). The difference in degree award that has attracted attention and concern is the gap that remains when variance in entry qualifications of students has been taken into account. Codioli and McMaster (2021) defines the gap as ‘the difference in proportions of white and Black, Asian and minority ethnic students awarded a first/2:1 degree’. The gap was reported to be 9.9 percentage points in the academic year 2019/20. It is slightly bigger when only first class awards are considered, at 10.2 per cent. Disaggregating the groups shows that the gap is wider when White students are compared with Black African students, at 19 per cent, relative to a White versus Chinese/Indian Asian gap of 2.8 per cent. This gap has not changed or improved much since 2005, when the first report was compiled by Advance HE.

An implication of the awarding gap is the deleterious effect it has on prospects of non-White students. This is because there is a market premium on ‘good grades’ – firsts and 2:1s (Bunce et al., 2021). In effect, the awarding gap presents another layer of disadvantage to the life prospects of students from minority groups – the good and higher paying jobs favour White students, further entrenching the inequity in wider society (HEFCE, 2018).

Attribution for the existence of the awarding gap is a complex undertaking. According to Rooney (2020), the magnitude of the gap varies from one university to another, and from one subject or discipline to another; this suggests that some of the variability might be due to contextual factors. In addition to some factors (such as financial pressures, disabilities and work pressures) that may be experienced by all, students from minority groups face additional barriers and challenges (Bunce et al., 2021; Mahmud and Gagnon, 2020). One such barrier is dealing with cultural differences: the challenge of settling in, and of coping with a culture with which one may be unfamiliar, along with the quirks and idiosyncrasies of academia that set some students back on their academic journey (Hillen and Levy, 2015). According to Shaheen (2016), the culture barrier is exacerbated in students who have been educated in another country. Wong et al. (2021) discuss a different perspective on the ‘culture’ issue: the culture deficit model. Although contestable, the culture deficit model postulates that ‘racial/ethnic minority groups do not achieve as well as their White majority peers in school and life because their family culture is dysfunctional, and lacking important characteristics compared to the White population’ (Salkind 2008, cited in Wong et al., 2021, p. 1149). This predisposes a White cultural hegemony in the academic space in ways that impact students from minority groups negatively. Other factors identified include societal and institutional racism and discrimination (Cabinet Office, 2018), microaggressions (Wong et al., 2020) and covert and subtle racism or overt bullying (NUS, 2011). The National Union of Students (NUS) further report that non-White students think that the curriculum lacks diversity and is restrictive. It has also been argued that institutional practices and biases within universities contribute to the gap. This includes curriculum design, teaching methods and assessment practices. In the NUS (2011) study some students further expressed frustration about the lack of diversity in teaching staff, mostly being taught by White staff, not representative of the student body. The lack of diversity among staff may contribute to both conscious and unconscious negative stereotypes of the academic abilities of

non-White students, and hence to having lower expectations of them (Bernard et al., 2011, 2014; Wong et al., 2021). A structural issue in wider society that has been argued to impact the awarding gap is intersectionality of characteristics associated with disadvantage. BAME students often come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and it is suggested that this limits their access to resources such as private tutoring and extracurricular activities, and even to basic necessities such as accommodation and nutrition. This socio-economic disadvantage intersects with racial discrimination, exacerbating the awarding gap (Arday et al., 2022).

The preceding discussion illustrates the complexity and multiplicity of factors influencing the awarding gap. What is of interest is the effect on non-White students, impacting their experience and engagement in the academic space. It has been reported in extant literature that non-White students may be relatively less likely to seek help with their academic work (for example, see Arday et al., 2022; Seuwou, 2021). This is theorised in the academic help-seeking model, which considers the self-regulatory attitudes of students in knowing when and how to seek the right kind of help (Karabenick and Dembo, 2011; Payakachat et al., 2013). Academic help seeking has been defined as a learning strategy applied by students to seek information or assistance from others – help that they cannot provide for themselves to meet academic goals (Karabenick and Dembo, 2011; Pintrich and Zusho, 2007). It is now widely evidenced in a large body of research that academic help seeking is one of the key determinants of academic success (for example, see Karabenick, 1998; Payakachat et al., 2013). Yet asking for help can be a challenging undertaking for some students. There are a complex set of factors that determine whether help will be sought by a student or not, including their perceptions and beliefs, social norms, the culture of a classroom and the relationships between the student, teacher and peers (Payakachat et al., 2013). Given the emergence of literature that suggests that non-White students are less likely to seek help with their academic work, it is important to understand the antecedents to this behaviour. The present study sought to explore this and other factors that may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of the awarding gap.

The data from a UK institution that the authors were given access to also report a grade profile that reflects the awarding gap. Evidence from the institution's sources indicates that there exists a small, yet statistically significant, discrepancy (the so-called awarding gap) in grades achieved by BAME students relative to their White counterparts, despite entering with the same high entry qualifications. This gap has persisted over many years. The institution has acknowledged its responsibility to address it, as the existence of such a discrepancy contradicts its ethos. This is reflected in the institution's strategic aims.

This is consistent with the target set by the Office for Students (OfS, 2019) to eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes by 2024/5 and to eliminate the gap caused by both structural and unexplained factors by 2030/1. Various strategies and projects have been put in place to address the awarding gap, such as the Awarding Gap Project. This aims at achieving the goal of closing the gap and creating a more equitable and fairer higher education system, with its attendant impact on a socially just wider society.

As argued by Rooney (2020), there is variance in levels of the awarding gap based on contextual differences. It is therefore important to generate knowledge and understanding of the challenges and barriers from the perspective of students in relation to specific contexts, so that relevant steps can be taken to address them.

Theoretical framework

The study will use critical race theory as a theoretical framework. Critical race theory seeks to understand and challenge the ways in which race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices and discourses (DiAngelo, 2011; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). In the context of the present study, it will frame an understanding of the ways in which the structures and practices of society and the higher education space implicitly and explicitly impact students from non-White backgrounds.

At its core, critical race theory posits that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice but is embedded in systems and policies. This theory challenges the traditional views of racial neutrality and colour-blindness, arguing that these concepts often serve to maintain the status quo of racial inequality (Callender, 2019). It emphasises the importance of historical context and the recognition that racism has been a foundational element of many societal institutions.

Critical race theory also highlights the importance of ‘counter-storytelling’, or of giving voice to the experiences and perspectives of marginalised groups. By centring the narratives of those who have been historically oppressed, critical race theory aims to reveal the limitations and biases of dominant cultural narratives.

A study to develop an understanding of individuals’ perspectives, and how and why they interact within specific contexts, requires a theoretical framework that generates theory from the data rather than the reverse (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is useful as a robust and adaptive theoretical framework due to its capacity to derive theories directly from collected data, rather than relying on pre-existing hypotheses. At its core, this methodology emphasises an inductive approach, allowing theories to organically emerge from meticulous analysis and coding of qualitative data. By systematically sifting through the interviews, it is possible to distil meaningful patterns and relationships. This iterative process fosters the development of concepts and categories, gradually forming a coherent framework that elucidates the complexities of the phenomenon being studied. In this case, it relates to students’ experiences of the higher education space that impact their help-seeking behaviour and their perspectives on the awarding gap. Its adaptive nature allows researchers to remain open to unexpected findings and encourages the exploration of multiple perspectives within the data, fostering a holistic understanding of the subject under investigation. Grounded theory’s iterative process not only generates theories; it also serves as a guide for further research, offering a dynamic framework that can evolve alongside the ever-changing complexities of social, psychological or organisational phenomena.

Method

Data were collected from a master’s level module. This module is completed by between 250 and 300 students each year. The 2019/20 final grade data from this module show that the awarding gap exists despite attempts at addressing inequalities and disadvantage on the course. The final grade is awarded based on a 5,000-word written assignment, and it is noteworthy that the assignments are marked anonymously.

The most recent data, taken from 2019/20, reflect the completion of the module during the first lockdown in the UK as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is widely reported (for example, see Arday and Jones, 2022; Botticello and West, 2021; Lander et al., 2021) that any detrimental impact of the pandemic, such as reduced access to technology, lack of work space and conflicting commitments, disproportionately impacted students who self-classify as BAME (non-White). This has highlighted risk factors for non-White students; one such risk factor that the proposed research hypothesised is the apparent relative reluctance of non-White students to seek help and support from the tutoring team when faced with academic challenges (Grove, 2013; Jacobs and Pentaris, 2021; UUK, 2019).

Participants

The sample was drawn from students on the module using a convenience sampling strategy (Robson and McCartan, 2016). In total, 10 students who took the master’s level module volunteered for the study. Of the participants, 7 had obtained their undergraduate degree in the UK and 3 from abroad; 7 had been born and raised in the UK, and they were all female, reflecting the high proportion of women on the programme. There were no data collected on disaggregating ethnic groups, but 1 of the 10 identified as White and the rest as non-White. Furthermore, data on age were not collected, as this was not deemed relevant. The sample size of 10 was deemed adequate for the purposes of the study, as it enabled the generation of sufficient data and subsequent reflexive analysis with themes that addressed the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Procedure

BERA (2024) guidelines for ethical approval were followed. The participants were assured that their decision to participate or otherwise was entirely voluntary and would have no impact on their studies, and that they could withdraw consent at any time without having to provide a justification. They were also reminded that assessment on the module was completely anonymised. Participants chose time slots to take part in focus-group interviews. Four groups were constituted altogether. The first group comprised a White student and a non-White student, and that combination presented a unique insight into the

contrasts in the worlds of the students from these different backgrounds. This was allowed to happen because even though the study was aimed at non-White students, the White student volunteered, and a decision was made to explore the fortuitous opportunity to see what emerged. The remaining focus groups were all comprised of non-White students (two groups of three and a pair). The interviews took place virtually using Microsoft Teams, enabling recording and transcription. The focus group interviews were framed around the following questions:

- What barriers do you face in your studies?
- Do you think the university is aware of the barriers you face in your studies?
- What help and support do you know are available to you?
- Do you think they are adequate in addressing the barriers you face?
- What do you think about having to seek help from your tutors or the university system?
- What could make you reluctant or willing to ask for help?
- What do you do when you need help with your studies?

Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, because this offered a systematic yet flexible approach to analysing data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The guide as outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006) was the main procedure for analysis. The steps and process were a very simple, yet effective and transparent, way to analyse the data.

Familiarising with the data

The first stage involved listening to the interview recordings and checking the transcript for accuracy. Kvale (1996) advocates that researchers determine for themselves what a useful transcription for their research purposes will be. Furthermore, Lapadat and Lindsay (1999) also advocate greater reflexivity about the transcription process. In this light, the interviews were transcribed with an awareness that the transcripts are constructed texts and so they should give as detailed a description of the process as possible.

The researchers opted to maintain a transcription of only the verbatim orthographic utterances (questions and answers). There was no note taken of the pauses, tone or body language, because this was not deemed to be important for achieving the research purposes. The interest was more in what was said and less in how it was said. Cook (1990) therefore acquiesces with a researcher's right to determine a suitable approach to transcription, since it cannot ever be complete or objective.

Generating initial codes

Codes were generated through a semantic coding process (Byrne, 2022) – a descriptive identification of codes using the surface meanings of what participants said without looking for any hidden or inferred meanings. The initial codes were framed using the participants' own words or phrases as much as possible. This is consistent with the verbatim approach to transcription of the interviews.

Generating themes

The codes were collated and represented by the creation of a mindmap. The mindmap facilitated summaries of domains and patterns of shared meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2019), which were labelled as the themes.

Defining and naming themes

The themes generated from the analysis were reviewed and defined so that they were clearly delineated. The themes were: help-seeking influences, belonging, heightened impostor syndrome, communication and inequities. Themes are intertwined and interrelated.

Help-seeking influences are the factors that influence the decision to source, access or seek help with academic work. This includes the level of awareness of the provision at the disposal of students at the faculty.

Belonging is related to the participants' sense of belonging and identity in the academic space of the faculty. This includes the impact of past experiences on their sense of self and belonging.

Heightened impostor syndrome is closely related to the sense of belonging. This encapsulates how experiences – prior and unique – interact to impact the self-beliefs of participants, accentuating the so-called impostor syndrome (Bravata et al., 2020).

Communication refers to the issues raised that relate to their perceived competence in both understanding the language used in the academic space, and in being able to write at the right standard for the course.

Inequities are the disparities in support systems and other factors related in intersections of characteristics that are associated with disadvantage.

Producing the report: findings and discussion

The five main themes that emerged from the analysis (belonging, help-seeking influences, heightened impostor syndrome, communication and inequities) will be discussed in more detail in this section.

Belonging

Participants' sense and feelings of belonging were influenced by several factors, including positive and favourable ones. They were complimentary about the approachable and supportive programme staff. The cohort of students had a high level of diversity, while the academic staff was somewhat diverse, and better than institutions where participants had studied previously. These were positive influences on their sense of belonging. A strong influence on participants' sense of belonging was their prior experiences related to their sense of identity and self-beliefs. There is a sense of participants feeling that the complex nature of their identities is not acknowledged in the programme. They are seen simply as students, but they are more complex than that. This is captured in this quotation from a participant:

What I think about is, number one, I've got so many other responsibilities. I've got a part-time job because I need to bring money for the family ... So, I want you guys to think of us as not just students. We have responsibilities that fall on us. And these responsibilities starts [sic] from a really, really young age. I ... from what I know from Year 3, Year 4 ... I walked to school alone. 'Cause I had a little brother, my mum had extra responsibilities, my dad worked most of the time, so we have kind of gotten used to doing everything on our own, and how that translates to university is because we're so used to getting things done on our own.

This suggests that, from the perspective of this participant, the institution does not understand who they are, and that may have a deleterious effect on their sense of belonging. This is because, as Sedgwick and Yonge (2008) assert, a sense of belonging is developed through an individual's perception of being accepted and understood, and feeling secure in the social context, impacting how and whether they feel connected to the institution (Ahn and Davis, 2023). This is coupled with the fact that a sense of identity that involves surviving on their own, and a sense of self-reliance due to prior experiences, could impact help-seeking behaviour when a sense of belonging is weak. This is important because the decision to seek help is impacted by perceptions and beliefs, and the relationships between the student, teacher and peers (Payakachat et al., 2013), which are at the core of a sense of belonging (Ahn and Davis, 2023).

Help-seeking influences (prior experiences)

The experiences of participants, both in the academic space and in wider society, seem to have a substantial impact on perceptions of themselves and of others on the course and studies. They influence the expectations they have of themselves, of peers and of academic staff. Furthermore, experiences influence their expectations of how well they could achieve in terms of grades. The issue of prior experience in the academic space, and of how that could influence expectations and help-seeking decisions, is captured in this quotation from a participant:

The reason it was always 2:1 and not first was mainly because of grammar and spelling. I always put it down to, oh, it's OK. I'm just EAL [English as an additional language], I'm doing the best

that I can, and if it means I'm getting a high 2:1, that's possibly my limits. And maybe, um, it was my attitude of that's as far as I can achieve.

This suggests that the participant is resigned to the fact that they are incapable of getting the topmost grade because of the perceived deficit in writing at this level; this is from feedback received at undergraduate study. Even though staff on the present module may not have expressed any such sentiments, the perceived inefficacy in writing in the academic space is ingrained. Such perceived low academic efficacy is strongly correlated with a reluctance to seek help, according to Payakachat et al. (2013). This is of crucial importance in understanding the awarding gap. Help seeking has been posited to be an essential component of self-regulated learning, which has a positive relationship with high academic outcomes (see Hayat et al., 2020; Panadero, 2017; Xiao et al., 2019). Zimmerman's (2000) model of self-regulation proposes three phases of self-regulation during a task performance. The first, the forethought phase, involves the learner making strategic decisions regarding the level of effort to be exerted and actions to take. In this phase, self-motivational beliefs about outcome expectations are extremely important. According to Zimmerman (2000), the individual, who through prior experiences is attuned to expecting a lower grade, would not have the incentive to seek help in the face of difficulty (see also Karabenick and Berger, 2013). The performance phase that follows is influenced heavily by the self-motivational beliefs that involve the goal orientation of the learner – centred on whether the orientation is to strive for mastery or just a performance, bifurcated by an approach or avoidant concerns (Karabenick and Berger, 2013). In the face of low self-motivation beliefs, the learner is focused on a performance avoidance (Elliot and McGregor, 2001), where they are orientated towards avoiding losing face or experiencing negative judgement or perceptions by others. Dweck (1999) argues that performance-avoidance orientation is akin to a fixed mindset where the learner does not expect to develop, improve or get better at tasks. This could be an impediment to help seeking because it is not expedient due to having an orientation driven by a ceiling regarding how much improvement the individual thinks is possible or achievable.

Help-seeking influences could be related to a sense of belonging in the academic space through an individual's perception of themselves in the eyes of others:

I think asking for support is weakness. I think that's how I think personally that if I ask for support, then I'm owning up to being lesser than, and I don't want to be seen as lesser than because there's already less people that look like me on the course. So, I think that's like, yeah, I mean it probably my own downfall because my White peers won't have a problem getting their hand up, whereas, for me, I just don't want to be seen as lesser. I don't want people to look down on me because I feel like already they already are. So, I think that might be another thing. When I think about, like, learning is, I just don't want to ask him. I don't want to be seen as less.

In response to a question about why they may be reluctant to access help and support, the response was:

... 'cause, we think it's not for us. I think that's the problem. And the people asking us the questions don't look like us. So, like [researcher], you're my first ever Black teacher, lecturer ever. I've never been asked a question by someone who looks like me. So, I think it's not for me, which sounds so silly when you've had a whole life of being dismissed and being lesser, then you would think of it like that as well. And that it's like there's a White student with me on placement I've, like, unpicked her mind so many times, it's like she has an entitlement to an answer because of the way that she looks. She knows whatever she asked, people will take time with her to answer the question, me, if I feel like that question is even slightly silly, there's no way I'm asking it. No way, because I don't feel like you will answer me. Not you personally, but my lecturer because I'll just get dismissed. Or, as for her [White colleague], she'll ask every day. Everybody else will always give her the answer because she knows that she can almost get, whereas me, I don't want to ask for pure embarrassment or being dismissed. But I'm programmed to think my question is silly. That's why I'm not asking it.

There is an experience of being perceived as 'lesser'; hence, an identity has been formed over time through interactions in mainstream society, as well as in the academic space. This has led to the

reluctance to seek help being a mechanism for self-esteem preservation and defence. Bornschlegl et al. (2020), in a scoping review of academic help-seeking literature, reported that students from non-White backgrounds were more likely to report a negative attitude relative to their White peers. They found that one of the factors that related to help seeking was prior experience of academic help seeking. They used the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) as a framework to analyse the relationships between the various variables and the intention to seek help in academic situations. They reported that factors such as cultural backgrounds, prior experience and level of acculturation influenced personal attitudes, subjective norms and their perception of control over outcomes. Subsequently, that determined their intentions to perform the relevant help-seeking behaviours. The theory of planned behaviour was very useful in Bornschlegl et al.'s (2020) study because it enabled an explication of the importance of prior experiences and background factors to the formation of attitudes, either positive or negative, towards intention to perform help-seeking behaviours. Bornschlegl et al. (2020) also reported that the factors were mediated by the context. A student whose prior experience had 'programmed' them to think that their questions were silly would form negative attitudes towards help-seeking behaviours. This is particularly relevant in a society where there is structural racism and discrimination in various sectors – for example, in education (McGee, 2020; Miller, 2021); in health (see Gopal and Rao, 2021; Razai et al., 2021) and in law enforcement (Lea, 2000; Rucker and Richeson, 2021). The experience of discrimination in education starts from primary schools in some cases, and it lingers throughout an individual's school life. Students from non-White backgrounds are often placed in lower or special needs groups, and less so in gifted and talented ones. This contributes to the feeling of being seen as 'lesser', as captured in the data for the present study (Wong, 2015). This resonates with the cultural deficit model, as discussed by Wong et al. (2021). The culmination of the incidences of discrimination and inequality experienced by individuals from non-White backgrounds in their daily lives translates to the higher education environment, where the context, in some cases, may be equally hostile (Owusu-Kwarteng, 2021).

The issue of representation in society, and in higher education more specifically, could be important in this context as well. An individual who has gone through at least three years of undergraduate study in a multicultural UK university, but who has never had the experience of being taught by a non-White academic is an indictment of the sector. This was highlighted in the transcript above, as the participant noted going through their entire education, including undergraduate level, without being taught by a non-White teacher. According to Rana et al. (2022), this lack of representation impacts negatively on non-White students' sense of belonging. Furthermore, Rana et al. (2022) posit that the lack of representation in the faculty means that the work being done by institutions to address issues of inequality is designed and implemented largely by a group of individuals who have never experienced the issues themselves; this is not ideal, they opine.

Prior experiences and the lack of representation of non-White academics is also manifest in a different, but equally deleterious, way. The data suggest that students are less likely to trust the judgement and opinion of academics who look like themselves. This is significant, and it was captured in these exchanges between participants in the present study:

I do try to go out of my way to find academics of colour to refer to, but I'm not sure if what I'm finding is right. Good enough to be included. Because you question it because a White person writing a piece of academic writing makes sense, whereas if I see a Black person, it sounds so bad, but I question it because I'm questioning myself ... Yes, you second-guess it because the person looks like you ... 'erm... I mean constantly being dismissed, I think.

This throws a curveball into the discussion about attempts to increase representation of non-White academics in higher education. If students, even non-White ones, are less likely to trust them, then it merits a serious and dispassionate consideration. Johnson (2014) acknowledges the implicit bias that could be developed by Black people, for instance, against fellow Black people. This is attributed by Johnson (2014) to the politics of responsibility, explained as the standards of expected behaviour set by the hegemonic group, which are deemed to be the appropriate ways to conduct oneself. This leads marginalised groups to judge each other by those standards, creating a situation where they may perceive those similar to themselves as not being good enough. This has been corroborated by Valla et al. (2018), who reported that the majority of the participants in their study, including people from minority background, were more likely to associate Black faces with violent acts relative to White

ones. This was the case even when the actions shown were deliberately ambiguous. This is because how individuals are perceived is heavily influenced by priming – implicit and unconscious biases that have been entrenched from a phenomenological perspective. An important step to addressing this phenomenon in higher education is to acknowledge its existence.

Heightened impostor syndrome

The feeling of impostor syndrome is heightened in the non-White students for reasons including their lower sense of belonging in the academic space. This is also related to the prior experiences discussed in the previous section. One expressed having to work very hard to get a good grade yet doubting if the good grade was deserved. There were also issues of feeling lucky enough to have been allowed to settle in this country, and of being lucky to have an opportunity to train to be a teacher, but not necessarily deserving it:

I was quite lucky that I came to the country ... So, like, teaching is like the one thing I think I can do, if you give me another option career wise, I can't think of anything, if that makes sense. So, I'm, like, oh, you know, this is the one thing. And then having had so much pressure, like. Not having the support, people thinking you're not going to get admission to [this type of UK] institution, you're not gonna get in, and then me getting in and I'm like, no, I need to stay and maintain that sort of standard that, yes, I've gotten in and, yes, I can stay consistent with it. Not just I've gotten in and then just fail, no, I'm just, yeah, it's that pressure of, oh you've gotten in, so you know now you can't just leave.

The combination of factors discussed in the other themes, and some subjective pressure and the sense of gaining admission to study at this UK institution, given its reputation, seem to exacerbate the impostor syndrome that affects a lot of students in the academic space (Feenstra et al., 2020). The feeling of being an impostor is common among students, but it seems to be compounded in the non-White students.

Communication

The issue of communication appeared on two levels. One aspect concerned the perceived ability or reality of finding it challenging to comprehend the language and nuances of the academic space. The second concerned competence with academic writing at the level required for the course of study. Academic writing is very different from the language used in everyday conversation. As Cummins (1999) clarifies, there is a distinct level of cognitive understanding required to structure and frame analytical and critical engagement within the academic space; he calls this cognitive academic language proficiency, contrasted with basic interpersonal communicative skills, which are used for everyday conversation. Acquiring basic interpersonal communicative skills is relatively easy for non-native speakers. Developing cognitive academic language proficiency, however, could take up to five times longer in terms of years. This raises the question of whether the level and nature of academic writing support provided by the institution takes cognisance of this fact:

You're aware that you might struggle with the language. It's like a language barrier sometimes. ... like the unpacking of questions ... and phrases in English. If you haven't been brought up learning the English language or it's your second language, it's very hard to unpack, and there's silly little phrases that I still don't get like someone says, and I think, what are you on about.

I know English is my second language. It's because you have to think it in Spanish and then you have to translate it into English, and the sentences are backwards in the two languages.

Say I don't know how to do critical thinking because I didn't learn it, and when I went to schooling in [country of previous study], they didn't teach us to criticise a piece of work. You just wrote a piece of work and that's it, without critique. And now because you had to.

A deeper level of understanding of a language is achieved when the structures of sentence construction, grammar and comprehension of the idioms and figurative expressions are mastered. The technical subject/discipline-specific language also needs to be acquired (Srikrai et al., 2016). And finally, there is the issue of cultural and pedagogical differences in the past educational experiences of those who are new to the UK.

Inequities

Inequities are experiences unique to individuals that, due to intersections with other factors, may work together to accentuate their impact. These may intersect with other factors, such as the socio-economic status, race and additional learning needs. There was a reported case of challenges symptomatic of dyslexia, yet at the time it was difficult to ascertain whether the issue was due to having English as an additional language instead (Su, 2018):

I also have dyslexia, so apart from being a BAME student, I also had the barrier of finding it difficult with understanding wording of questions, and it was I'm not sure whether it's because I'm a BAME student or because of my dyslexia, but both kind of contribute to me finding it difficult to express myself in written format and I find it easier to talk my ideas through.

There were statements about having to work to support themselves and their families. A participant remarked that they have accepted that the institution is unable to help with their unique need – financial difficulties – so they get on with things as best as they can. This is consistent with the findings of Hlosta et al. (2021), who reported that students from BAME backgrounds have a greater representation in the lower socio-economic bracket (32 per cent). This is a relatively large proportion, considering that their White peers have a 10 per cent representation. The intersection of race and socio-economic status accentuates the disadvantage (Ahn and Davis, 2023).

There was also the sentiment that, in some cases, non-White students do not have any other form of support outside the university; they noted that they had White peers who had family members that could, at the very least, check if what they had written made sense:

... whereas I feel like my parents, they barely speak English, so they couldn't help me at all. I don't have anyone in my family who could come essentially proofread my work.

These inequities were brought to the fore during the lockdowns resulting from the global Covid-19 pandemic (Arday and Jones, 2022). This is because the associated impact on education and outcomes were disproportionately high on students from non-White backgrounds. This drew attention to pre-existing barriers, challenges and inequity in resources, access and outcomes.

Conclusions

The awarding gap is pervasive, and the higher education sector is appropriately giving it the attention it deserves in many instances (Codioli and McMaster, 2021; UUK, 2022). Nevertheless, there needs to be a continued generation of knowledge and understanding of the issues faced by non-White students. To achieve this, non-White students' perspectives on experiences within the academic space must be sought, especially more so since there can be significant differences in cohorts from one year to another (DfE, 2023; Walsemann et al., 2023). Such research must be done with these students, and by researchers who 'get it'. Identifying with participants in joint research is crucial for fostering trust, improving data quality and ensuring that research outcomes are relevant and beneficial to the community involved. A close engagement with participants can lead to more accurate interpretations of data and more effective interventions. Interventions and support systems provided must be reviewed from the perspectives of the students for whom they are designed. Better still, the systems must be designed with the intended beneficiaries, so that they are fit for purpose in meeting their needs (Mirbahaeddin and Chreim, 2022; NIJ, 2023).

The knowledge generated from this study suggests that it will be helpful if students are given lots of opportunities to collaborate and share thoughts and ideas with peers. This has the potential to address some of the issues raised under the 'communication' theme. This is because talk has been found to support students' development of cognitive academic language proficiency, which is needed for effective communication (spoken, written, comprehension) in the academic space (Layton, 2013; Lee et al., 2020). Talking helps to clarify their thoughts, understanding and relevant vocabulary and language (Vasileva and Balyasnikova, 2019). Furthermore, language used in assessment tasks could be simplified, providing scaffolded support. If there is recognition of some of the challenges that students with certain backgrounds and characteristics have with communication, every effort must be made to provide the necessary scaffolds. This might include presenting tasks with guidance that enables a step-by-step

approach to completing them. With the advent of artificial intelligence, students could be supported to use technology in an assistive way to help with translation, structuring or proofreading of text.

On an affective level, language use around support may need modifying in the light of the finding regarding conditions that could foster academic help seeking. Students may find it less threatening if their needs are identified and actions taken to address them as part of routine provision. Actions taken to mitigate inequities and disadvantage should not need the 'support' label. This is because of the findings around non-White students' heightened impostor syndrome, and issues regarding sense of belonging and identity in the academic space (Kilby et al., 2022). Careful thought and consideration must be given to all processes in order not to perpetuate the feelings of being seen as 'lesser'.

Last, Trolan and Parker (2022) argue that genuine efforts must be made to ensure that faculty reflect the higher education community and wider society, including senior roles and positions. It is apparent that representation matters to students, and seeing themselves represented in academic faculty is a strong vicarious source of efficacy (Larsen and James, 2022). Understanding some of these barriers from the students' perspective raises the likelihood of identifying more successful strategies to eliminate inequities in HE that contribute to the awarding gap.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the UCL Institute of Education ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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