DISAGGREGATING THE BAME DEGREE AWARDING GAP: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES OF ‘BLACK’ STUDENTS.

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**INTRODUCTION**

It is well known that there is a large disparity between the percentage of White students who receive first- or upper-second class (good honours) degrees and that of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students. This gap, often referred to as the Degree Awarding Gap (DAG), remains significant despite all efforts employed by universities to address it (Universities UK [UUK] and National Union of Students, [NUS], 2022). BAME students have continued to record less likelihood of obtaining a first-class or 2:1 degree relative to their white counterparts. For instance, a recent report by the NUS noted a national degree-awarding gap to be 8.8% (UUK & NUS, 2022); a reduction from the 13% observed in 2017/2018 (UUK &NUS, 2019). While a 4.2% decrease is commendable, the disparity is still large; indicating that additional research and remedial measures are required. At Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), the degree awarding gap is currently 15.3%, larger than the national average and that of competitors including Bradford University and Leeds Trinity University, who report gaps of less than 8% at the time of this report (SHU, 2022). In fact, the SHU degree awarding gap is ranked 97th out of 129 institutions in the UK (SHU, 2022). Although there has been a decrease in SHU DAG from 19.4% in 2018/2019 to 13.7% in 2020/2021, recent reports indicate that the gap widened by a 1.6% point in 2021/2022 (SHU, 2022). Therefore, it is crucial that greater and sustained efforts be made to tackle this inequality.

Many studies examining the causes of degree-awarding discrepancy between White and BAME students as well as possible strategies for addressing it have been published. A complex blend of social, societal, personal, institutional, cultural, and structural factors has been considered to negatively impact the academic experiences of BAME students, contributing to the discrepancy in degree attainment. For instance, a review of evidence by Singh (2011) discovered "preparedness for success" as one of the major contributing factors to the attainment gap. According to Singh (2011), how prepared BAME students feel for university life is influenced by factors including financial affluence, parental participation, prior educational experience, higher education experience, as well as social and cultural capital. Additionally, in a qualitative study of 35 BME students, Dhanda (2009) and Dhanda (2010) discovered that differing staff expectations and discriminatory attitudes associated with language ability, as well as financial difficulties and the lack of ethnically diverse role models, were relevant in determining attainment levels. Similarly, a survey by the UUK revealed the main contributing variables to DAG as ranked by institutions to include a lack of role models from various ethnic minority backgrounds, curriculum delivery, a lack of ethnic diversity among senior staff, and curriculum design (UUK &NUS, 2019). In line with this, a survey of students’ perspectives on DAG by NUS also showed the absence of role models and a lack of ethnic diversity in senior leadership as the major determinants of DAG (UUK &NUS, 2019). However, the NUS survey equally revealed other significant contributing factors such as lower socio-economic background and university culture and leadership. Other variables such as a lack of sense of belonging, inadequate information, advice and guidance, subject choice, and first-generation entry have also been found to affect BAME students’ attainment at the university (UUK &NUS, 2019). Furthermore, there is an expanding amount of research that has been published by individual academic institutions (SHU inclusive) that are putting strategies into place to address their own gaps and better comprehend the experiences of their BAME students (Cotton et al., 2016; Smith, 2017; Mcduff et al., 2018; Murrell-Smith, 2022).

It is important to note however that the studies investigating DAG often consider Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic students as a homogenous group that shares similar experiences and inequalities. As students from diverse ethnic backgrounds constitute ‘BAME’ students, it is possible that individual identities of BAME students in terms of ethnicity, race, and physical appearance combine to shape their unique academic experience, in line with the general principle of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Accordingly, the use of the term ‘BAME’ to capture the experiences of students from these backgrounds is well criticised in the literature for assuming a uniform experience and oversimplifying methods intended to make a meaningful impact (Smith, 2017; Stevenson, 2012). Additionally, a number of SHU students have voiced concerns about the use of a collective term to refer to all students who identify as minoritized ethnic groups because, in their words, "grouping together in a minoritized group way can detract from the individual and unique experiences of each individual culture and fails to recognise the nuances that people of certain backgrounds may experience," and they instead preferred to be addressed with specific ethnicity (Murrell-Smith, 2022). In line with this, the NUS in their #ClosingTheGap report (UUK &NUS, 2019) recommends that universities ensure “appropriate disaggregation within the broad BAME category, ensuring practices and initiatives reflect that this ‘group’ consists of individuals with varied experiences and needs”. Therefore, the experiences of BAME students may vary based on specific identities, indicating the need for research to split the BAME group into specific ethnicities in order to better understand and tackle the DAG.

Among BAME students, significant differences exist in university experiences and degree awarding gaps across different ethnic groups. For example, evidence has shown that although the drop-out rate of every ethnic group is higher than white students, black students were the most affected, that is, the rate of non-continuation among black students was 15.8%, compared to the overall rate of 9.9% (Hubble et al., 2021). Additionally, Keohane and Petrie (2017) reported that Black students were 1.5 times more likely to withdraw from the University than Asian or White students. In terms of DAG, which is an indication that the students in question have overcome the barriers that lead to drop-out, Black students remain the most affected both at the national and SHU level. In 2020/2021, the DAG between Black and White students was 18.4%, significantly higher than those of Asian, Chinese and mixed ethnicities that were 5.7%, 0.2% and 2.4% respectively (UUK & NUS, 2022). At SHU, the gap between White students and students of black background is about 21% over the past five years, outpacing every other ethnic group with the exception of Arabs, whose increase has been roughly equal to that of Black students (SHU, 2022). This implies the need to address BAME students as a diverse group, through an intersectional approach, as their experiences differ based on individual identities.

**‘Black’ student experience in UK universities**

Although limited, some studies have actively disaggregated the experiences of black heritage students in UK higher institutions and have explored factors that influence black students’ academic success. In mixed-method research by the NUS (2011), it was found that 34% of black students feel unable to express their views during lectures and tutor meetings due to non-black lecturers not considering diverse backgrounds during teaching. This study also revealed that Black students frequently cited lecturers' racial and cultural bias as a barrier to their academic attainment and overall satisfaction with higher education and as a result, would prefer anonymous marking to avoid such prejudice. Similarly, a review of evidence by Guiffrida et al. (2018a) showed that black students often encounter stereotyping and outright racism from academic staff and peers, which can negatively influence their academic success. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that black students’ academic success can be impacted by their culture, relationship with family, as well as the value placed on education by their families (Guiffrida et al., 2018b). As black students have frequently reported less positive university experience, it is crucial that the experiences of this group of students at SHU be thoroughly understood in order to have insights into how best to bridge the DAG between black and white students at SHU. Therefore, the aim of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of 'black' students in order to illuminate explanations for the wide degree awarding gap at SHU.

**Objectives**

1. To understand students’ identity in relation to being “Black”
2. To explore the personal (i.e., lived experiences) and educational stories of “Black” students.
3. To understand “Black” students’ experiences of university so far, to enhance their academic and overall student experience.

**Research questions**

1. What are the lived experiences and educational stories of ‘Black’ students?
2. How does it feel to be ‘Black’?
3. How do ‘Black’ students experience the university?

**METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative approach, which allowed for deeper description and in-depth insights to understand the full context of the research problem (Mohajan, 2018; Queirós et al., 2017).

**Population**

The sample of this study was made up of students who self-identified as black. That is, students from any of the following ethnicity categories: Black or Black British- Caribbean, Black or Black British- African, Black or Black British- Others, Mixed- Black and White British, and Mixed- Black and others) at Sheffield Hallam University.

**Data collection**

Data for this study was collected using three sets of focus groups. Purposive sampling was used to recruit black heritage students through promotion on Newsletters, social media platforms, and word of mouth. While participation was voluntary, each participant was incentivised with a £30 Amazon voucher. The focus group discussions took place online via Zoom. This was to encourage participation from commuting students and students with additional responsibilities by saving time, reducing costs, and promoting comfort and convenience (Oliffe et al., 2021). The first two focus groups were made up of 4 participants each, while the last focus group consisted of 5 participants, giving a total sample size of 13. Each focus group ran for at least 2 hours. Three main topics were covered in the discussions including identity with relation to being black, educational story, and university experience (Appendix A). These topics were informed by a previous study that disaggregated the experiences of Asian students at the University of Winchester (Islam, 2021).

All discussions were audio recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Word. The researcher then manually verified the transcripts, and all errors were edited. As the sample of this study is such a specific group, only information related to ethnicity, level of study, and fee status were collected as sociodemographic details in order to promote confidentiality The majority of the participants (84.62%) were Black or Black British- African. A full description of the participants can be seen in Appendix B.

**Data Analysis**

The data collected from the three focus groups were analysed using thematic content analysis. Specifically, the processes and framework laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006) were adopted for this analysis. As stated by Clarke and Braun (2013), thematic analysis allowed the researcher to explore and identify patterns, concepts, and themes across the data set; thereby, gaining deeper insights into the experiences of black students at Sheffield Hallam University.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee (Ethic Review ID: ER53541754). Throughout the research process, it was ensured that the study followed the guidelines and standards set out in the ethics proforma. Prior to participation, all relevant study information including data management procedures and potential risks was provided to participants in the form of an information sheet. Participants were also informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their right to decline to answer any specific question or withdraw entirely from the research without repercussions. Thereafter, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the focus group discussions. Additionally, confidentiality was upheld throughout the research process by eliminating any personally identifiable information and ensuring secure storage of data on a password-protected Sheffield Hallam University Q drive. All names in the interview transcripts and final report are false.

As discussions about topics like race and racial disadvantages may potentially cause emotional discomfort to participants, the researcher modified the discussions based on students’ willingness and emotional capability to share their experiences. Furthermore, a debrief form containing referral information to both Sheffield Hallam Students’ Union and external wellbeing centres was provided to participants at the end of each focus group session, so that participants could access further support and advice if required.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Nine (9) themes emerged from the data of this study and were further grouped into three general themes, namely: The black Identity, University and On-Campus Experience, and Learning and Teaching Experience. The naming of most of these themes was informed by previous study (Islam, 2021). All themes are discussed below.

**GENERAL THEME 1: THE ‘BLACK’ IDENTITY**

**Identity development**

It was found that black students in this study generally formed a unique and clear view of themselves and their identity, mainly through being in a predominantly white environment. While some of the students had recognised their ‘difference’ relatively early in life, others especially those who grew up in African countries only came to terms with who they were after relocating to the UK for studies.

*‘‘I didn't really know I was black in a way, until I got to the UK, if I can put it that way’’ (Stanley)*

*‘‘So growing up, I went to like a very multicultural primary school. So, to me, skin color wasn't really something that I was necessarily focused upon because everybody around me, they were all different colors. But then when I got to like secondary school, I was the only person of color in my entire year group and it was like everybody knew that I was different, and I was their example of what a black person was because there were no other black people’’ (Kofo)*

All the students had reached a point where they accepted and acknowledged the value of their identity as black. However, the journey to this stage had been impacted by other people’s perceptions of black people and was not the same for every student. While some have always held their black heritage in high regard because they were ‘‘raised to be confident’’, others have had to undergo what is termed ‘Nigrescence’ in the literature (Ritchey, 2014); where a black student begins with less awareness of their black identity and then proceeds to develop a sense of pride in their black self, culture, and people, based on the information they have gathered about race.

*‘‘Because I was born in a country in which black people are not seen as like not competition but are not seen as like people. I've always had that thought that we were not valuable. And also, that made me not treasure the fact that I'm black, but the more I grow up, the more I learn that as a black person we have potential…’’ (Amber)*

Additionally, for some students with biracial parents and light skin tones, it was evident that they experienced a constant struggle of not properly fitting in with either a black group or a white group. Thus, even though they possessed a strong sense of black identity, they were often seen as not ‘‘black enough’’ in everyday social interactions.

*‘‘I've had conversations with people and they're like, oh, well, you're not really that black because my dad's biracial and my mum is like quite light-skinned for a black person, so I've always had to kind of be in that weird situation where it's like- I know that I'm black, I don't need to prove it and continuously feel like I have to prove it just because of my light skin tone’’*

*‘‘I really value my identity as being black even though I don't feel like I look black enough.’’*

Having one’s identity denied or misrecognised can lead to a sense of inauthenticity and a loss of agency due to the inability to act in accordance with one’s self-concept (Blackwood et al., 2015). Given that this was peculiar to only mixed-race black students, the importance of disaggregating the term ‘BAME’ can be seen here. This study, therefore, provides evidence that the term ‘BAME’ cannot capture the heterogeneity of the experiences of minoritized ethnic students, in line with previous studies (Smith, 2017; Stevenson, 2012).

**The Significance of black identity**

Another important finding of the present study was that black students overwhelmingly value and embrace their black identity, regarding it as an integral part of their lives:

*“So actually, to the very large extent, I own my black heritage, I hold it in high regard. I wouldn't have it any other way. I'm black and proud” (Ivan)*

*“Yeah, I think that I personally like being black because, you know, we've got a really good culture, it’s rich, and also like we are fun to be with” (Amber)*

*‘‘But I don't feel sorry for myself for being black, I am very confident. I think it's special because I get to stand out, everyone notices me you know’’ (Timi)*

*‘‘I'm going to regard my Black identity as my pride because being black is not a crime’’ (Dora)*

The participants’ narratives demonstrate their strong sense of pride, ownership, and appreciation of black identity. The accounts also highlight various factors that contributed to black students’ positive perception of their racial identity, including cultural richness, uniqueness, and opportunity to stand out. This result is consistent with other research that emphasized the significance of racial identity in the lives of black students (Gaskins et al., 2022). This strong sense of black ethnic identity can serve as a buffer against the damaging impacts of racial bigotry and discrimination by improving both the mental and physical well-being of black students (Phinney and Ong, 2007). It is possible therefore to create inclusive learning settings where black students feel supported, validated, and empowered by acknowledging and confirming the value of black identity. Black students’ positive racial identity development can be supported by a curriculum that includes different perspectives and histories, portrayals of black role models, and culturally sensitive teaching methods.

**The role of family**

It was found that black students attach a high level of importance to family. In all three focus groups, participants expressed a deep sense of connection and attachment to their families, emphasizing the emotional support and guidance they receive:

*“So, for me, family is really important. That's another reason I still live with my family here in the UK and the experience… like, I'm going through a lot, but because of them, it's not that bad. So, every time when I'm sad and everything, like when I experience racism for example, I just go to my family and they just like, you know, talk me through it and say everything will be all right, give me advice and then I feel better” (Amber)*

*“As a black person in a foreign country, I might say my family is quite important because they are my first priority. So, I need to keep communicating with my family back at home, maybe whenever I'm depressed or I just need someone to talk to” (Dora)*

*“One of the main reasons for choosing Sheffield Hallam was because my family, they live 30 minutes in each direction. So, I know that if anything goes wrong, I know that they're just half an hour on the train, half an hour drive away” (Chioma)*

This finding demonstrates the importance of family as an emotional support system for black students. When faced with racism or other unpleasant situations at the university, black students rely on their families to validate their experiences and offer comfort, strengthening their resilience in the face of adversity. In accordance with this present finding, previous studies have shown that black students often depend on their families for support as they feel reluctant to discuss their concerns with White university staff (Singh, 2011; Stevenson, 2012).

The students also cited family relationships, values, and traditions as influential factors in their decision-making processes and academic journeys. Specifically, a student noted that “*if I make a decision or if I have to make a decision, I always ask my family first” (Amber).* Family can be seen here to be the first point of reference or consultation for black students seeking to make any decision. In addition, family members especially parents were seen as role models and sources of academic motivation. Some participants reported feelings of a strong desire to excel academically to live up to their families’ standards or make their parents proud:

*“I don't want to just pass; I want to pass exceptionally well because that's the way I was raised. My parents are academics, and my sister is over the top, so I just have to make sure that I measure up to that standard that they already set” (Ella)*

*“…I think the higher percentage of us live our lives to make our parents proud and make people around us proud. So, most times you discover that most of our decisions that we made right from childhood were majorly influenced by our family. So you're going to school, what you want to study, what you want to become in life - until you now get to a point and you realise, oh, maybe this is not what I really want to be- were majorly actually influenced by your family. (Vicky)”*

The comments above indicate family’s significant role in various aspects of black students’ lives, including academic choices, career planning, and personal goals. Although this was largely positive and reflects the fact that black British parents place a high value on education and strongly encourage their children to attend the university (Strand, 2011; Strand, 2012; Vincent et al., 2012), there were times when some of the participants mentioned the potential negative impact of family on academic success. First, some participants noted that black students may feel pressured by their families to choose a course of study that they do not find interesting:

*“You might want to study something else and your family wants you to study something else. So, because you want to make them proud and at the end of the day, they're going to be the one to sponsor the training anyway. So, it's more like you don't have an option. Then you do it and now when you're doing it, it's something you lack interest in, so it kind of like have an impact on how you attend to your academic activities because it's not something you want to do” (Betty)*

For some black students, therefore, the desire to meet family standards and expectations can occasionally conflict with their personal ambitions, forcing them to enrol in courses they do not particularly enjoy. This finding resonates with previous research that found that black families can push their children to pursue careers in socially and economically prestigious fields like law, medicine, engineering, and other science and technology-related fields, even if their children do not particularly show an aptitude for or interest in those fields (Connor et al., 2004; Jacobs et al., 2008; Sims, 2007). This is also reflected in the overrepresentation of BAME students in the aforementioned fields (Singh, 2011). When students study courses that they do not find interesting, they may lack intrinsic motivation toward learning and this can result in lower academic success, in line with self-determination theory (Reeve et al., 2004). Thus, it is crucial to recognise both the positive and negative aspects of family influence in order to create a supportive environment that empowers black students to make autonomous decisions while valuing their familial connections.

Another family-related factor that was found to have potential negative consequences on black students’ academic success was pressure from caring responsibilities:

*“I've been the oldest sibling in my family, so it's always been that responsibility that I need to look after my siblings. I need to protect my siblings and stuff like that” (Kofo)*

*“It’s a lot of pressure, especially on my side having kids and studying at the same time” (Timi)*

The students were well aware that the strain of care obligations interfered with their ability to give full attention to their studies; however, they did not perceive this as a problem because they set such a high value on family and would prioritise it above all else- *[family means everything to me (Ivan)*]. According to Meeuwisse et al. (2010), students from minority ethnic groups may find it difficult to advance in their studies because of care responsibilities. Therefore, this study highlights the need for SHU and SHSU to strive to provide supports, resources, counselling, and advisory services that address the specific needs of black students, considering the multifaceted nature of their familial influences.

**GENERAL THEME 2: UNIVERSITY AND ON-CAMPUS EXPERIENCES**

**Black stereotypes**

The narratives provided by the participants indicated a definite awareness and experience with negative stereotypes held by ethnic majority groups towards black people. Specifically, all participants in the focus groups felt prejudged by White staff and peers as unintelligent and lazy, as noted in the quotes below from Stanley and Steve:

*“As a black student, the expectations are a bit, I don't know what to use. It feels like you're not smart enough. You’re expected not to be smart enough. You’re expected not to be quite intelligent. You’re expected to be lazy…” (Stanley)*

*“There’s a way that we are being perceived. We are perceived as not being good enough, we are seen as not having the intellectual capacity needed for certain level or position” (Steve)*

Further exploration revealed that the awareness of these preconceptions influenced and determined the black students’ behaviour and interactions with others. When asked whether their status as a person of colour influenced how they lived their daily lives, a student noted:

*“You have to constantly validate yourself. So there are some certain things that you don't necessarily have to do, but being black, you just have this need to constantly validate yourself to show that you are enough, to show your relevance, and I don't think it applies to other ethnic group, so it puts you at a place that you have to do more than is required, and that affects every phase, except of course you are within your own black community then I don't think there's that pressure” (Betty)*

Here, Betty's remark demonstrated the pressure that black students may feel to display counter-stereotypic behaviours or engage in anti-stereotypical activities. This was echoed by other students who believed that making mistakes was not an option for them and that they needed to work extra hard to establish their worth before they can be satisfied.

*“You as a black person, you can't afford to make mistakes like any other white person. You can't take things for granted. You can’t come in late. That's African. And you can't make ordinary mistakes because you're not the same as, you know, everyone else” (Timi)*

*“You know, you want to have the extra mark, you want to have the extra excellent kind of results before you can be able to feel okay. Well, I don't know whose fault that is but I think that’s some of the struggles some of us have, and that's why you see we don't sleep, you see us in the library. We just don't want to take chances because we know somehow, I don't know how true that is, we are disadvantaged” (Idara)*

*“I had to literally sleep on my books doing physics anatomy, biology and stuff to get like an A and stuff. I think that because I knew that would actually set me, you know, get me to define who I am and to become normal or be considered like a normal student like other people” (Timi)*

*“So, one of the things I've told myself is to be the different black guy out there. So, whatever I find myself to do, I do with some honesty, do it with truth so that they know that, OK, not every black man is XYZ, there are still some good ones. So it has actually also shaped my approach to the way I do things with some very good amount of integrity and all of those things so that way, maybe if some of us can start behaving well and start doing things, getting things right, maybe we can erase off some of those mindset” (Idara)*

It is evident in the above comments that the awareness and experience of negative stereotypes contributed to a sense of personal responsibility to address and correct these misconceptions. The students felt compelled to act as positive representatives of black people. This was a frequent response and supports research showing that black and other ethnic minority students experience increased pressure to act positively and in a way that defies stereotypes when interacting with people of different races (Fries-Britt and Griffin, 2007; Hunter et al., 2019; Osbourne et al., 2022). With this weight of responsibility and pressure, black students may experience additional stress and burnout that can negatively impact their academic experience. In line with the concept of “stereotype threat” (Steele and Aronson, 1995), when black students experience stereotypes of lowered intelligence in the university environment where intelligence is valued, they are at risk of confirming this stereotype as a self-characterization. As explained by Steele (2010), the greater the efforts black students put toward improving their performance, the more likely it is that stereotype threat will negatively impact that performance. Even though there are some black students who may be genuinely inspired by these preconceptions to work harder and perform well academically (Griffin and Allen, 2006), stereotyping is frequently reported to have negative psychological, emotional, and academic consequences on black students (Cornell and Kessi, 2017; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Osbourne et al., 2022; Solórzano et al., 2002). This finding, therefore, highlights the complex experiences of black students in feeling responsible for correcting negative stereotypes held by individuals of White ethnicity. This study emphasises the need for an inclusive and supportive university environment that addresses these concerns and fosters a sense of belonging for black students and may inform interventions aimed at reducing stereotype threat, creating a more inclusive educational experience for all students, promoting equity, and ultimately closing the degree awarding gap.

**Black representation**

While all the students acknowledged the efforts made by SHU and SHSU towards improving black representation and celebrating black culture at a student level, a few students express concern about the lack of black representation among senior staff who can serve as role models to them.

*“They [referring to SHU] are trying when it comes to like the recruitment process because I see every time they mention that, you know, they accept minorities. But that's not enough in my opinion, because even though that’s written, whenever you go to the university, cause I've been to, you know, like the top, I've been to the offices where like, you know, the top positions are there, but they're all like White, and I'm like, why? like it doesn't really make sense” (Amber)*

Amber went further to explain how the lack of black people in top positions affected her life ambitions and aspirations.

*“So basically, another thing when it comes to like guest speakers, they are only white people, only white. You could never see like black guest speakers and so that actually demotivates me. I'm like, oh, you know, I want to have like, good things in life and I only see white people have this” (Amber)*

Amber’s comments indicate that having a good representation of black senior staff can provide inspiration and motivation for students from underrepresented groups. When black students see individuals who share similar skin colour as them in positions of authority or success, it can help them build confidence and belief in their capabilities. Conversely, the absence of diverse role models such as black academics and senior leaders may reinforce a sense of exclusion among black students. In addition, some of the participants as seen in the quote below felt that black academic staff may offer more comprehensive and culturally aware support, mentoring, and instruction to them.

*“If you have someone that you can actually relate to in school and like, oh, this is really what I'm facing, I don't know what my referencing is all about. I'm actually trying to explain to my lecturer or my advisor and this is what she said, but I'm trying it and it's not working and this person can say, oh, this is what you did in [previous] school, just try and do the same thing but do it this way. It's similar and it's going to work better for you since this is what you did in [previous] school. So I think with that we’ll actually be able to, you know, work better and then it'll really be great as students in Hallam” (Vicky)*

Here, Vicky who is an international student pointed out that having support from someone with similar experience and background is essential to successfully navigating and adjusting to a new learning system and environment. This finding resonates with a prior study by Guiffrida (2005) which found that black (African American) students felt that they received more thorough academic, personal, and social support from black academic staff than from White staff. In line with this, a lack of role models and ethnic diversity in senior leadership have been reported as significant contributory factors to the degree awarding gap (UUK and NUS, 2019). This suggests the importance of increasing the representation of black staff across different levels at SHU to ensure equal opportunities for all students.

**Experience with general support**

The participants in the focus groups reported mixed experiences regarding their general support from the university. When asked about their university experience, some participants expressed that:

*“From day one, I had to mention to my course lead that I'm a carer of three little babies. Everyone under 5. They were very considerate and they gave me first preference to choose where I wanted my placements to be and to be honest, they've been supportive” (Timi)*

*“On placement, I've had like the older patients, they have said or called me- that black lady. I've had like instances where, like a dementia patient, she's been confused and said like, a racial slur and I'd tell someone, but they just say she's just old, it doesn't really matter. I feel like if the university provided better support, I feel like, I don’t know, that would have been way better” (Chioma)*

Timi expressed gratitude for the support he received as a black student with caring responsibilities. He noted that the university was considerate and accommodating, granting him the liberty to choose his placement location. This positive experience demonstrates the responsiveness of the university to the specific needs of mature students. However, regarding racism-related support, Chioma as seen above shared a troubling incident during her placement where she encountered racial slurs from an older patient. She expressed dissatisfaction with the support received from the university, stating that when she reported the incident, the response she received was dismissive. This response left Chioma feeling that the university could have provided better support in dealing with such instances of racial discrimination. This was also echoed by another participant who believed that students from other liberation groups receive better support from the university when they encounter discrimination than when black students do.

*“…but if you go there and say I'm black and this guy has done ABCD [referring to racial discrimination], they're like oh, okay, right…so did you want us to do anything? Yeah, that's the reason I'm coming to you. That's why I've come, so why ask me if I want you to do anything” (Timi)*

Timi’s comment suggests staff’s apparent lack of understanding or readiness to take action, and this may leave black students feeling frustrated and unsupported. Overall, these findings indicate that while some black students may receive considerate and supportive treatment from the university, others may encounter difficulties when trying to address concerns of racism or discrimination. This implies that there may be potential for improvement in the university's handling of reports related to racism and prejudice. It is crucial to put in place strong support structures to deal with this issue so that all students, regardless of ethnicity can feel heard and supported. Moreso, the existing support systems at Hallam needs to be promoted among the student population.

**GENERAL THEME 3: LEARNING AND TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

**Relationships with peers and lecturers**

Important factorsin students’ retention and success include a strong relationship with peers (Goyer et al., 2017) as well as a supportive relationship with academic staff (Guiffrida et al., 2018a). Several participants in this study acknowledged that they had difficulty forging close friendships with White peers.

*“I just feel like they don't always take the move and I'm not the kind of person to always take the move too so it's not really easy” (Betty)*

*“So, making friends for me has not really been very easy” (Vicky)*

*“…during my undergraduate, it was a bit hard for me to like understand, you know, local people cause they're quite reserved, so you can't really read their body language. And even if you try to speak with them, OK, they might seem kind and smiling and everything, but you don't know what they think inside. Maybe they think, oh, she's black or, you know, oh like, I shouldn't be opening up a lot to black people. Maybe that's just my, you know, my assumption” (Amber)*

When explored further, these students provided deeper insights into the elements influencing their interaction with White peers and their decision to socialise primarily with other black peers:

*“So it's easier for me to make friends with a Black person because you can be on your own and a black person walks up to you and are like, Hey, Hi! How are you doing? what's going on? you know, and then a conversation. But a white person will not do that, So, I think that has an influence with me, making more white friends” (Betty)*

*“I mean, in my class, there's mostly international students and I think I kind of feel better when it comes to that because, you know, during the activities during the session in class, I tried to speak with like the local [White] people, but it's just not working. So I'm like, you know what? I'm just gonna stay with my own people, but not out of like, you know, racism but it's more because I feel like they don't really understand me” (Amber)*

*“You can meet people and oh yeah, let's share, let's exchange contact and they’re like, oh, are you on Instagram, are you on Twitter, are you on social media? So, I think majorly the close contact of going as far as having someone's phone number and making them that close is different from the way it’s done here. So, you are more like, you see yourself on social media and you act oh this picture is nice. But having that very close friendship, It's not like that. And for me, that is what I call friendship- having like to call the person” (Vicky)*

*“I think another thing might be because of our cultural differences. If you understand what culture is like, we have different ideology of what we see as life. So, what I want to discuss might be different from what you're discussing and the kind of outings you go for are different from what I call outing. So, you always want to go to the pub, or you want to go have a cup of tea. So those sorts of activities are not things I’m really, really interested in. So, I might not be seen as a good friend to a British person because I don't go to pubs, I don't go to night clubs. I don't do coffees and teas in the afternoon or stuff like that, so I've not really been able to make like close, British friends since I came to the UK” (Vicky)*

The aforementioned comments demonstrate how factors like shared cultural background, perceived understanding, communication preferences, and cultural variations in social activities can affect the dynamics of friendship formation for black students. Betty mentioned that it is easier for her to make friends with black students because of the immediate connection they share. The common racial background provides a sense of familiarity and ease in initiating conversations, leading to the formation of friendships. Similarly, Amber stated that she prefers interacting with international students rather than local students because she feels that the latter group may not genuinely understand her. This perception or fear of being misunderstood can hinder the formation of strong friendships. Furthermore, Vicky emphasised how friendships are formed differently in black culture than they are in British culture. She mentioned that in her experience, social media connections can be superficial, whereas she appreciates phone conversations and other direct forms of communication that lead to deeper friendships. Vicky also points out that cultural differences, such as varying ideologies and preferences for social activities, can impact relationship building. This suggests that different cultural norms and preferences for socializing can limit the potential for close friendships between black students and their White peers.

These findings align with previous studies which demonstrated that black students often face challenges when attempting to develop relationships with white peers (Singh, 2012), leading them to predominantly socialise with other black students and this limits the opportunity for all students to build relationships with a diverse range of peers (Goyer et al., 2017; Guiffrida et al., 2018a; Stevenson, 2012). The present study, however, delves deeper into the complex interplay of various factors in shaping the development of peer relationships among black students. While positive feedback from one participant who expressed satisfaction with White-peer-relationship highlighted the University's commitment to enhancing student integration [*During the inductions, I really love the way the school brings down the inductions programme because you get to interact with each other, you get to know each other from there, you get to start up a friendship from there. I can say also the group assessment also makes us, like it brings us together” (Dora)*], strengthening these initiatives further will enable more black students to have positive interactions with peers regardless of race or ethnicity.

Regarding relationship with lecturers, the participants generally reported positive experiences with the support they received from lecturers and academic advisers:

*“My academic adviser was also my personal adviser. She actually does check on you a lot. I had to go back to Nigeria last year for a personal reason and she was like oh send me pictures, I want to see them, oh all the best. And when I came back, she actually asked me how did it go? And you know, it's really nice to have someone that checks up on you, the academic adviser was really nice” (Vicky)*

However, the relationship between black students and lecturers was found to be impacted by previous educational experience and expectations. When asked about their learning experience, a student noted:

*“…in my school, the school I went, we have relationship with lectures but we do not have this very cordial relationship with lecturers. It's more like a lecturer-student relationship where you have like the employer-employee kind of relationship. You don't, you don't relate with them freely, but here you have academic advisors. They want you to come to them when you have problems. I know that's very good because coming to a country like this where you have such organisation, you have such arrangement. It's very beautiful. But we don't have it, so sometimes you're not fast coming with your problems. It's not like you do not appreciate those things. It’s just not familiar. It's not something you're used to from where you're coming from” (Betty)*

Here, Betty described her previous educational institution as having a more distant and formal relationship between lecturers and students, resembling an employer-employee dynamic. She acknowledged that the academic staff at Hallam are prepared to assist; however, she also mentioned that her previous experiences have made her hesitant to seek support when needed. This study, therefore, highlights the impact of cultural and academic backgrounds on lecturer-student relationships, similar to other studies (Muthoni, 2016). When background prevents students from discussing their issues with a lecturer who is willing to offer support, it may be difficult for them to establish a strong, supportive bond with that lecturer. Research has shown that supportive relationship with lecturers is essential to black students’ success considering their unique academic and psychosocial barriers (Singh, 2011;Torgerson et al., 2008). Therefore, implementing strategies to foster more open and trusting relationships between black students and lecturers would be valuable in narrowing the degree awarding gap.

**Racialised classroom**

Some participants in one of the focus groups cited their experience with racialised classroom environment characterised by segregation and unconscious racial bias:

*‘‘… in one of my lectures, actually all my lectures, you can see the segregation between white people and black people. You see all the white folks in one side and all the black folks in the other side, and that pains me because, you know, we are people as well. And the fact that every time when the lecturer tries to, like, pronounce our name, he gives us like, you know, English names. And I'm like, no, that's not right because that’s our name, that's our identity’’ (Amber)*

*“For example, in my class most of the time when we are given assessment or when we are grouped in different sections, you will see that it’s only blacks that are in this section and there is only White in that section” (Dora)*

The participants described how they observed a clear divide between white and black students in their lectures, with white students sitting together on one side while black students gathered on the other side. This physical separation can be undesirable and distressing as it perpetuates a sense of exclusion and reinforces racial divisions. When students from diverse ethnic backgrounds sit together in the classroom, it can foster cross-racial interactions which can positively influence a sense of belonging (Strayhorn and Johnson, 2014). These experiences have negative consequences beyond the classroom. For example, Dora, who is studying journalism, explained how this racial segregation impacted news gathering:

*“As a journalist student that I am, sometimes we have to go out to gather news. But when they see that you are black, that’s the big limitation, they will be like oh I don't want to talk to you. But if they see that you are white, they will be free to talk to you. But if we are mixed up in that aspect, OK, for example, I have a white person with me that we are going to carry out the assignment together. I think even if they don't want to talk just because of me, but because of the white person with me, I think they will be able to talk. But our lecturers, they don't give as in they don't balance that way…” (Dora)*

Dora highlighted that people were more reluctant to engage with her compared to white students. She then suggested that if there were more ethnically diverse groups, including both black and white students, it might potentially mitigate racial bias and enhance her learning experience.

Furthermore, Amber’s comment showed that when some lecturers attempt to pronounce black students’ names, they often use English names instead of their given names, which erases their cultural and personal identities. This practice of substituting black students’ names undermines their sense of belonging and reinforces a cultural bias that favours a particular racial group. According to Kohlia and Solórzano (2012), incorrect pronunciation of students’ names can negatively impact their worldview as well as social-emotional well-being, which is linked to learning. Thus, this research reveals unconscious racial bias and reduced opportunities for cross-cultural interaction within classroom settings, underscoring a need for the university to actively address these issues and promote inclusive classroom environment.

**Accessing academic support**

The students expressed overall satisfaction with the academic support they received from the university. Two participants from two different focus groups particularly made reference to the services provided by the skills centre:

*“Those sessions that I attended with the skills centre were very helpful. And those resources that were available were very helpful” (Steve)*

*“So they have like the skills centre as well, so if you're having issues, you can actually go learn a skill through the skills centre” (Betty)*

Both Steve and Betty noted the usefulness of the academic support provided by the skills centre to their academic success. These positive experiences provide insights into the overall satisfaction of black students with the academic support they receive from SHU. Their feedback suggests that the university's efforts in establishing and maintaining the skills centre have been effective in meeting the academic needs of black students.

**CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the lived experiences of black students at SHU. The results shed light on a number of crucial factors that affect Black students' educational experiences and outcomes. Firstly, the research highlighted the significance of Black identity to Black students. Their racial identity played a crucial role in shaping their experiences and perceptions within the academic environment. Secondly, the role of family emerged as a complex factor in the experiences of Black students. While families provided emotional support in the face of racism and other unpleasant encounters, it was found that some black students could feel pressured by family to pursue courses they are not passionate about; thereby, hindering their academic excellence.

The research also revealed Black students’ personal responsibility towards challenging and correcting negative stereotypes about their race. This pressure to defy stereotypes can lead to additional stress and burnout, potentially impacting their academic experience. Another important finding was the lack of representation of black senior staff, and guest speakers within Hallam. This absence of representation can limit the aspirations and opportunities available to Black students. Efforts should be made to increase diversity in staff and invite diverse guest speakers to foster a more inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, the research identified inadequate support when reports about racism were made. Hallam must prioritize addressing incidents of racism promptly and effectively, providing a safe and supportive environment for all students.

Lastly, this research demonstrated both positive and negative learning and teaching experience. The racialized classroom dynamics, such as white students sitting separately and the mispronunciation of Black students' names, further highlight the need for cultural sensitivity and inclusivity within educational spaces at Hallam. While Black students generally expressed satisfaction with the academic support provided by the university's skills centre, barriers to forming relationships with peers and lecturers were evident. Building stronger connections between black students and staff can enhance their overall educational experience and create a sense of belonging.

Therefore, this study highlights the multifaceted nature of the experiences of Black students within higher education. The findings reveal the need for institutional reforms such as greater representation, better support networks, and a dedication to building an inclusive and equitable university environment. By addressing the concerns raised in this research, Sheffield Hallam University and Sheffield Hallam Students’ Union can work towards closing the degree awarding gap and providing a truly inclusive educational experience for all students, regardless of ethnic or racial background.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Increase the representation of black (and BAME) academics and guest speakers across all disciplines to provide diverse perspectives and role models for black (and BAME) students.
2. Raise awareness and educate all staff and students about the unconscious biases and the harmful impact of stereotyping of black students.
3. Establish More Support Networks:
4. Encourage black students to report incidents of overt racism, microaggressions, or stereotyping and ensure sufficient support is provided to those who do so.
5. Enhance information, guidance, counselling, advisory, and academic support services to include culturally sensitive support tailored to the specific needs of black students.
6. Intensify efforts to tackle racial segregation in classrooms:
   1. Promote cultural competency and sensitivity towards black identity among lecturers and academic staff.
   2. Empower and educate teaching staff on how to recognise and address biases that may contribute to unintentional segregation within classrooms.
   3. Develop and enforce classroom seating arrangements that actively discourage racial segregation and promote diverse interactions among students.
7. Proactively consider the role of family and black identity in black students’ academic success:
   1. Implement systemic initiatives that acknowledge and support relationships with family members who can provide black students with emotional support, coping mechanisms for oppression, and motivation to succeed at the university.
   2. Promote the recognition and accommodation of the unique responsibilities and commitments that black students may have towards caring for younger siblings or parents, by providing flexible academic policies, such as adjusted deadlines or alternative learning options.
   3. Investigate further the intersection of family influences, black culture, and academic success among black students.
   4. Provide ongoing support for student-led societies that focus on promoting black culture, identity, and activism.
8. Continue work on decolonising the curriculum and promote this among BAME students.
9. THINK INTERSECTIONALITY:
10. Ensure that initiatives and measures aimed at closing the degree awarding gap consider the heterogeneity of the experiences of the different subgroups embedded in the term ‘BAME’.
11. Explore the lived experiences and educational stories of other subgroups of BAME.
12. Raise awareness of the degree awarding gap throughout the students’ body - utilise diverse channels to disseminate information on the statistics, narratives, and contributory factors to the gap as well as actions taken by the university to tackle this inequality.

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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A- Focus group schedule outline**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| FOCUS AREA | EXAMPLE OF QUESTIONS |
| IDENTITY WITH RELATION  TO BEING ‘BLACK’. | 1)What are your lived experiences of being ‘Black’?  PROMPTS:  • Family/caring responsibilities  • Practices/ values/shared language/religion/traditions  2) Is it important for you that the university recognises your Black identity?  PROMPTS:  • In what way does the university do this?  • In what way does the university not do this? |
| EDUCATIONAL STORY | 1)Did you have any particular issues (in or outside of school/college) which affected your school  and or college experiences?  2) What factors influenced your decision to come to Sheffield Hallam University specifically? |
| UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE | 1. Can you talk us through your initial experiences when you first began university?  2. What has your learning and teaching experience been like so far?  PROMPTS:  • lecturers,  • peers,  • experience of assignments,  • taking part in extracurricular activities,  • being in a predominantly White institution  3. Do you feel a sense of belonging to the university?  4. Is there anything the university can do to support your academic experience?  5. Is there anything the university can do to support your social experience? |

**Appendix B- Characteristics of Participants**

**TABLE 1:** *Description of participants.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Characteristics** | **Frequency (percentage)** |
| **Ethnicity** |  |
| Black or back British- African | 11 (84.62%) |
| Black or back British- Caribbean | 1 (7.69%) |
| Black or back British- others | 1 (7.69%) |
| **Fee Status** |  |
| Home | 3 (23.08%) |
| EU | 1 (7.69%) |
| International | 9 (69.23%) |
| **Level of study** |  |
| Undergraduate | 3 (23.08%) |
| Postgraduate taught | 10 (76.92%) |