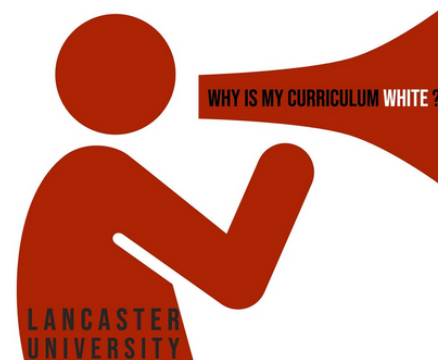


BUILT-IN BARRIERS:

THE ROLE OF RACE IN
SHAPING BME STUDENT
EXPERIENCES AT LANCASTER
UNIVERSITY



REPORT BY AQSA AHMED AND
DARAYUS BHARUCHA



AN INDEPENDENT RESEARCH REPORT
LAUNCHED BY THE "WHY IS MY
CURRICULUM WHITE?" DECOLONISATION
CAMPAIGN AT LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

Front cover Image: Rosemary Bennet, The Times, "Lancaster University Opens German campus to safeguard post-Brexit future", 8 Feb 2019
<<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/lancaster-university-opens-german-campus-to-safeguard-its-post-brexit-future-3dc7hxs3s>>

Built-in Barriers: The Role of Race in Shaping BME Student Experiences at Lancaster University

Aqsa Ahmed and Darayus Bharucha

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AUTHOR FOREWORD

Throughout our collective 6 years at Lancaster University, race equality and decolonisation work has remained an increasing concern. Our collective experiences and observations reflect a widespread problem with racism across the higher education sector. This report began from a need to illuminate the lived experiences of many students within this institution. We began this research driven by a desire to create change in an institution we felt was failing to address racism. The aim was to provide the University and Students' Union with a small insight into the realities of Black and minority ethnic (BME) students' experiences at Lancaster, hoping senior management and the Students' Union would investigate further.

This research, conducted in the final years of our undergraduate degrees, was both an emotional burden and a physical workload. Together, we put countless hours of unpaid, skilled work, whilst contending with uncomfortable environments within the Students' Union and amongst the university's senior management. Despite these barriers, we felt it was necessary to ensure the realities of the institution were presented.

First and foremost we would like to thank Sofia Akel, for being an immeasurable source of support and guidance, without her insight this report would have been an impossible task. Secondly, we are indebted to the BARC collective, not only for their crucial funding but their ethos and empowering spaces which revolutionised our approach to the campaign. Without their support, the first step in our research could not have been taken and we are in awe of their continuous triumphs. Our affection and respect goes to the rest of our campaign team who have endeavoured to support and aid us in this task and to the future co-leads of this campaign Fabiha Askari and Wacera Thande. For the many academics, who have supported our campaign since its founding in 2016, we treasure and value your support and efforts towards racial equality and decolonising this academy.

While the journey to releasing this report has been littered with obstacles, we hope the path is smoother for future students of colour, Decolonisation campaigners and anti-racist staff and students at Lancaster University.

Aqsa Ahmed and Darayus Bharucha
Head and Research co-ordinator of "Why is My Curriculum
White?", Student Decolonisation Campaign at Lancaster University

SOFIA AKEL FOREWORD

Decolonising, awarding gaps and institutional racism, are words that often evoke an extreme sense of defensiveness and deniability among many in higher education institutions and students' unions alike. In the case of Lancaster University, it is certainly one that has been met with opposition and a staunch reluctance to address at both a senior and students' union level.

I became a student at Lancaster University in 2013 to read history. What I learned during this time was to be a critical thinker, but not if said critique regarded racism within the very institution that I sought to graduate. Across the UK and overseas, students were calling for radical pedagogical and epistemic change, or what has commonly become known as decolonising. Inspired greatly by the campaign Why is my Curriculum White? founded by UCL students and Rhodes Must Fall led by students in South Africa, I brought the campaign to Lancaster University. At this time, 2016, it was a relatively new conversation being held in metaphorically old and traditional hallways. As such, much of the opposition came from those who were wedded to upholding the white, Eurocentric status-quo.

The launch was not without its struggles, the title alone was enough for the carefully manufactured image of a diverse and inclusive campus, to quickly erode into what could only be described as an overtly racist 'resistance' from students and staff alike. It is saddening, but unsurprising to see that almost half a decade later, students are facing the same barriers. It is also disappointing as an alumnus to see that the university has remained reluctant to tackle systemic issues such as the awarding gap.

Aqsa and Darayus are two incredibly passionate and exceptional students who have toiled relentlessly in educating, campaigning and creating change on campus. Most recently, they have put together this thorough, detailed and very revealing report that brings to life the experiences of students of colour. The findings detail an experience in which students neither feel represented or reflected in their learning. While, in the case of experiencing racism, many feel unable to rely on their institution for support or indeed to tackle the issues effectively. These findings are analogous of what a number of students and even staff experienced at Lancaster in the decade preceding this report. It would place the university firmly on the wrong side of historical change should they choose to not action with immediate effect, the work required to eliminate institutional racism.

Students of colour should be afforded the luxury of simply being students, who do not have to campaign, lobby and exude emotional labour to have a fair shot at graduating with good outcomes and enjoying their student experience. Students, such as Aqsa and Darayus, have no choice but to risk their studies and even mental health, to see change on campus. Any institutions that accepts this as the norm, have evidently failed their students.

Sofia Akel

Race Equality in Education Specialist, alumnus and author of Insider-Outsider

ALA SIRREYEH FOREWORD

In October 2019 I had the pleasure of attending the first "Why is My Curriculum White?" event of the academic year at Lancaster. I had only recently joined the university, and this was my first classroom experience here. The bar was set high. It was a cold weekday evening, yet the room was packed with students ready and eager to discuss and learn; a significant number of these students were from BAME backgrounds. Under Aqsa's expert facilitation we listened to student presentations, reflected on our experiences of studying history at school and university, and considered what it might mean to engage with a decolonial agenda. Fascinating and lively discussion ensued, and I left the event buzzing. In this urgent and insightful report it is concerning to read that for many BAME students at Lancaster this kind of safe and inclusive learning environment is not the norm, that many feel excluded from academic settings because of their race, that they face pressure to educate others on race, and that many experience overt racism in this University.

In recent years we have witnessed a resurgence of anti-racist activism within universities, mainly student led. In 2015, students in the UK followed South African students in launching and leading campaigns such as 'Rhodes Must Fall' and 'Why is my curriculum white?' as part of a movement to 'decolonise' universities; new student activist cohorts have continued to organise around an anti-racist agenda. This year has been a significant, beginning with the Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action's (GARA) successful 137-day occupation of Deptford Town Hall in the summer of 2019. Now, amidst the global Black Lives Matter protests (following the horrific murder of George Floyd in the US), the systemic racism in universities is once again in the spotlight. As is argued in this report, actions to tackle racism must be framed through an anti-racist agenda (rather than simply diversity and inclusion). Creating and allocating specific race equality posts and workloads is important for recognising the importance of this work and the significant labour involved, often carried out by BAME staff and students. (Indeed, Aqsa and Darayus have spent over 100 hours working on this research report!) However, one of the most pertinent observations in this report is that it is incumbent on all of us who work and study in these spaces to do the work to dismantle racism. Systemic change will not happen if the burden of action rests only on those in these posts and the wider BAME staff and student community.

Dr Ala Sireyyeh

Senior Lecturer and Race Equality Lead in Sociology and Principal Investigator of the British Academy funded Decolonial and Antiracist Student Activism research

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Beyond the people mentioned in our foreword, it is important to understand this work sits amongst over half a decade of Decolonisation campaigning and anti-racist work by current and past students, alongside many academic staff at Lancaster University. Furthermore, we would like to express our deepest gratitude to every Black and minority ethnic student at Lancaster who contributed to this research. Below we have listed people we would like to thank for contributing to our Decolonisation campaign and this report.

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DR. DEBORAH BREWIS
DR. ANGELA MARTINEZ DY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to address and illuminate how Black and minority ethnic (BME) students at Lancaster University experience their institution. It has been conducted with 140 participants, all of whom were surveyed and 2 interviewed. We recognise this is a relatively small sample size as the research was solely conducted by full-time students within our independent student campaign. However, the comprehensive accounts provided by BME students establish an explicit reflection on the environment Lancaster University provides.

The research title, 'The Role of Race in Shaping BME Student Experiences at Lancaster University,' was split into 4 sub-questions:

- **Representation:** What are BME students' opinions and experiences of representation in various academic and social settings at Lancaster University?
- **Experiences of Racism and Microaggressions:** What are BME students' experiences of racism and microaggressions in both academic and social settings at Lancaster University?
- **Experiences of reporting Racism and Microaggressions and BME students' mental health:** What are BME students' experiences of reporting racism and microaggressions to the Students' Union or broader university administration and of seeking mental health support?
- **Race and Attainment:** What role do BME students think race has on their academic attainment?

This report recognises the challenges of using homogenous terms such as BME. There are two key reasons why we have chosen to use the term in this report. The first, because of data collection and comparison, specifically in regard to the BME Awarding Gap at Lancaster University. The second, is to ensure our report is in line with current literature and research compiled on students' experiences of higher education.

REPRESENTATION

Representation within academic course content

Considering the importance Black and minority ethnic students give representation within this study, a key finding included the vast majority of participants not believing their course content was "representative of lived experiences, works and theories of Black scholars and people". When averaging the percentages, only 15% of BME students believed their course content was reflective of Black, Asian and other Minority ethnic "lived experiences, scholars and peoples". Furthermore, 65% of students defined their course content as Eurocentric.

This insight into BME student opinions of course contents and representation exposes the academic environment Lancaster University offers. It is important to note representation remains a key value of many BME students, yet the majority are unable to define Lancaster University and its course content as representative of their identities.

81% OF BME STUDENTS THINK REPRESENTATION WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY IS IMPORTANT.

**"COURSE CONTENT IS MASSIVELY EUROCENTRIC AND FAILS TO EXPOSE STUDENTS TO IDEAS FROM OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD."
- Aaditya**

Representation within academic and university staff structures

Only 18% of Black and minority ethnic students feel represented by their academic staff. This lack of representation can be linked to students feeling less comfortable and confident in academic settings. 28% of students feel uncomfortable questioning their lecturers and academic tutors on their viewpoints. The impact of feeling represented by academic staff whether in the University or the Students' Union can make a significant difference to the likelihood of BME students engaging and feeling accepted in either environment.

Representation within the Students' Union

76% of Black and minority ethnic students at Lancaster University feel representation within the Students' Union was important to them. Despite this, only 27% feel the Students' Union is ethnically diverse, this included the permanent and elected staff within the Union offices as well as the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Colleges. Linked to this perspective was the use of Black History Month by the Students' Union to selectively commemorate aspects of Black history. When looking at the events the Students' Union put on, only 34% feel they were culturally and racially sensitive.

RACISM AND MICROAGGRESSIONS

Overt experiences of Racism and microaggressions

Black and minority ethnic students were honest and open about their experiences of racism and microaggressions at Lancaster University. 22% of students surveyed said they have experienced racism at Lancaster University. These experiences of racism manifested in a variety of ways, including racial slurs and sexual fetishisation, many of them taking place within student accommodation.

Further, some participants expanded on these experiences, describing how racism had impacted their feelings of belonging, mental health and overall safety within Lancaster University and its Students' Union.

**"THERE WAS A RACIST GUY ON THE
BUS WHO WAS WEARING A
LANCASTER LANYARD. HE WAS
SCREAMING AT AN EAST ASIAN
PERSON ABOUT THE
CORONAVIRUS"
- Nadia**

BME Students feeling unsafe

Direct experiences of racism and hearing about racism from other sources made a significant number of BME students feel unsafe at Lancaster University. Almost 20% of students surveyed feel their race has a negative impact on their safety at Lancaster University. These sentiments were linked to the socio-political climate of England, particularly for international students of Lancaster University. But beyond the socio-political realities of England, many students worried about their safety due to direct and indirect experiences of racism within the University and the Union. Further, some BME students at Lancaster University referenced the lack of safe spaces and resources provided by the University or the Union, particularly when they had experienced racism.

Lack of safe spaces to speak about race

30% of Black and minority ethnic students surveyed in this study feel there are not enough safe spaces to speak about race within Lancaster University. Many students expressed how a lack of safe spaces to speak about race had impacted their ability to report racism when they had either experienced or witnessed it. Further, a significant amount of BME students linked the lack of safe spaces to not knowing how to respond to racism or what support existed for them.

**I HAVE HAD MULTIPLE RACIAL
INCIDENCES AT UNI WITH FLAT
MATES, COURSE MATES THE LIST IS
ENDLESS, BUT I WOULD NEVER
KNOW WHERE TO GO OR WHO TO
TURN TO"
- Ahin**

REPORTING RACISM AND MICROAGGRESSIONS AND BME STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

Experiences of Reporting and unwillingness to report

33% of students surveyed believe the Students' Union does not take issues of racism seriously. This statistic underpins many sentiments BME students had when asked about reporting racism. Furthermore, staff representation and race equality training are related to many students feeling uncomfortable speaking to staff about race and racism. The difficulties BME students encountered both in reporting and experiencing racism is directly linked to their sense of belonging at Lancaster and consequently their mental health.

**33% OF BME STUDENTS FEEL
THE STUDENTS' UNION DID NOT
TAKE ISSUES OF RACISM
SERIOUSLY**

Impact of Racism on BME students' Mental Health

Some Black and minority ethnic students, having had direct experiences of racial abuse within the University, are significantly impacted and unable to access adequate resources for their mental health. One key theme which many BME students detailed was worry or even paranoia, particularly in regard to recurring experiences of racism and how these impacted their safety. Feelings of worry and paranoia are supported across academic literature about racial equality in higher education. It is important to link these experiences to the existing mechanisms the University and Union may have to combat the barriers facing BME students and their mental health.

Lack of BME counsellors and its effects

A significant number of Black and minority ethnic students explicitly mentioned how white counsellors were unable to help them process and overcome experiences of racism. Of those students who have received counselling from the University, 60% would have preferred to see a counsellor with the same ethnicity as them. Overall, any mental health support from the University or the Union is largely inaccessible to BME students who were impacted by racism.

BME AWARDING GAP

Student Opinion on BME Awarding Gap

The BME Awarding Gap in the last five years has fluctuated broadly at Lancaster University, the most recent gaps range from 19.4% to 13.1%. Black and minority ethnic students at Lancaster University have conclusive opinions on how the Awarding Gap should be addressed. Over 90% of participants feel universities across the country should tackle the BME Awarding Gap. Furthermore, over 70% believe anonymous marking is a mechanism in which to overcome unconscious bias. Despite the fluctuation in Lancaster University's data, many students expressed feeling impacted by these disparities.

**"I HAVE TO PARTICIPATE MORE IN
DISCUSSIONS AND RESEARCH
MORE TO GET SIMILAR MARKS"
- CHRISTIAN**

Exclusion from academic settings

Connected to the realities of the BME Awarding Gap at Lancaster University, are experiences of exclusion from academic settings. 20% of BME students surveyed feel excluded from academic settings due to their race. These experiences included lecturers and tutors using inappropriate terminology to refer to minority groups and perpetuating negative stereotypes of non-Western countries. Furthermore, many students feel their opinions and experiences as BME students are seen as disruptive to class discussion. These experiences of exclusion have an impact on students' comfort when engaging with course content and seminar discussions.

Lack of recognition from academic tutors

Some BME students experienced a lack of recognition from their tutors; 30% of participants surveyed reported feeling disproportionately scrutinised in academic settings due to their race. One particularly strong theme for BME students, linked to Akel's 2018 *Decolonising Lancaster University: An Introduction* and broader racial equality work, was the experience of working 'twice as hard' as their white peers for the same recognition. These statistics and accounts, in addition to students feeling excluded from academic settings, raises key questions about the academic environment BME students encounter at Lancaster University.

Recommendations

The recommendations included have been tailored to the most explicit barriers BME students face within Lancaster University and its Students' Union. The intention is to clarify the problems and recommend both short and long-term approaches in creating a better learning environment for BME students within this institution. Furthermore, some recommendations have been inspired by other institutions, such as Kingston University and their successes in tackling various barriers presented to BME students across the higher education sector.

BACKGROUND

This report is an investigation into the BME student experience at Lancaster University and could not be written without acknowledging the environment in which it sits. This report considers itself connected to Sofia Ake's 2019 *Insider-Outsider* Report and the earlier 2018 *Decolonising Lancaster University: An Introduction*.¹ Ake's Goldsmiths 2019 report examined how race impacted BME students' degree attainment, their sense of belonging, and confidence at Goldsmiths College.² As an alumnus of Lancaster, Ake's work in 2018 and Rachel Alake's leadership of the campaign, set the foundations of understanding the decolonisation movement within Lancaster University. As we have inherited their work, we believe it is imperative to understand this report as centred upon the student-led "Why is My Curriculum White?" independent Decolonisation campaign. The aim of this report is to illuminate and understand the position, opinions and experiences of BME students at Lancaster University without the agenda of marketing the university to prospective students or staff.

The "Why is My Curriculum White?" Campaign began as a grassroots movement at University College London (UCL) by their Black and minority ethnic Students' Network in 2015. The aim of their campaign was to address the lack of diversity within university reading lists and course content.³ The campaign sought to highlight how the curriculum placed white, Eurocentric thinkers and writers above their non-white counterparts; thereby omitting important contributions to various disciplines by BME scholars.

The curricula of British Universities are largely linked to their colonial legacy which created power structures and hierarchies based on race. Thus, when referencing the notion of a white curriculum, we invoke not only white authors but those who perpetuate negative stereotypes of non-Western people, their histories and civilisations. British universities are advertised as places of diverse thought, where students can expand their world view and understanding. In order to prepare students for the globalised world we live in, we have to ensure that course curricula are diverse enough to challenge students and their perspectives.

1 Ake. S (2018) 'Decolonising Lancaster University: An Introduction', Department of Sociology at Lancaster University. The first report issued on Decolonising at Lancaster University.

2 Ake. S (2019) 'INSIDER-OUTSIDER: The Role of Race in Shaping the Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Students' (Goldsmiths University).

3 Hussain. M (2015) 'Why is My Curriculum White?', National Union of Students, < <https://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/why-is-my-curriculum-white/>>

WHO ARE WE?

From UCL the Campaign spread to many other UK universities. The “Why is my Curriculum White?” campaign was brought to Lancaster University by Sofia Akel in 2016. We are an independent, student-led campaign which is not affiliated with the University or the Students' Union. Our campaign aims to highlight the impact of a Eurocentric curriculum on students at Lancaster University, whilst educating and leading efforts to decolonise the academy.

This report was a completely voluntary and independent project. We had no help or insight from the Students' Union or the University's senior management.⁴ We believed, as a campaign we needed to begin research in order to examine and determine the barriers and obstacles facing BME students at Lancaster University. This report was researched, edited, written and designed by the current head of our campaign, Aqsa Ahmed and our research co-ordinator, Darayus Bharucha. Both Aqsa and Darayus are final year students at Lancaster and have committed over a hundred hours to conducting research, analysing data and writing this report. Our student campaign committee helped to transcribe interviews and edit this report, it could not have materialised without their support.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The purpose of the report is to explore the relationship between race and BME students' experiences at Lancaster University and the Students' Union. Examining how race impacts BME student experiences at Lancaster University through four main channels:

- BME students' views on representation within Lancaster University and its Students' Union, their teaching and management staff as well as curriculum and course content.
- BME students' experiences of racism and microaggressions.
- BME students' experiences of reporting racism and microaggressions.
- BME students' views on the connection between race and attainment.

With this report we hope to evidence students' experiences as a base for change and improvement. The report seeks to influence the implementation of policies which will transform the University into an anti-racist institution providing inclusion, equality and racial justice for all of its students.

4 The Students' Union only provided partial for a researcher's expertise on survey analysis, the remaining funds had to be subsidised by an academic department within Lancaster University.

PROVIDING CONTEXT TO THIS REPORT

According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, 24% of BME students have experienced racial harassment at UK universities.⁵ Their inquiry found that students experience many types of racism from name-calling and insults, to being ignored or excluded from the conversation or group activities, as well as physical attacks. The EHRC report highlights common themes students face at university in relation to racism. A key theme is students having a lack of confidence in reporting, resulting in less willingness to report racism they experience. Students often feel there is little point in reporting incidents such as racist name-calling or insults because they have no evidence.⁶

To put these statistics into context, there have been a number of high-profile cases of racism at UK universities. Lancaster University has experienced its own high-profile case, when a Students' Union officer publicised images exposing racism at a Snow-sports society social. Students were seen with white t-shirts brandishing images and slogans deemed to be *inter alia* racist, sexist, islamophobic, homophobic, antisemitic, as well as glorifying paedophilia. Even though the images were publicly shared on Facebook by the Students' Union for 48 hours, the officer was removed from her position. The students in question faced various punishments from being suspended for 12 months and/or fined between £200-£500.⁷ It is important to note that incidents such as this are not isolated but rather symptomatic of institutions which do not to seriously discuss and combat racism.

As an institution, Lancaster University markets itself as a diverse community, home to students from many different countries, ethnicities and backgrounds. Despite this, Lancaster University has not released any figures or data regarding their BME Awarding Gap, nor has Lancaster pledged to decolonise their disciplines. In the last week Lancaster University have announced they will sign up to the Race Equality Charter (REC) in 2021. yet this announcement comes years after many other higher education institutions. As of February 2020, 67 universities across the UK had already signed up to the REC, including University of Cambridge, Kings College London and University of Surrey.⁸

5 EHRC, 'Racial harassment inquiry: survey of University students' (October 2019), p.4.

6 EHRC, 'Racial harassment inquiry: survey of University students' (October 2019), p.5.

7 Pinnock. K (2018) 'Thread Shred: I exposed racism at my university and got suspended' (BBC).

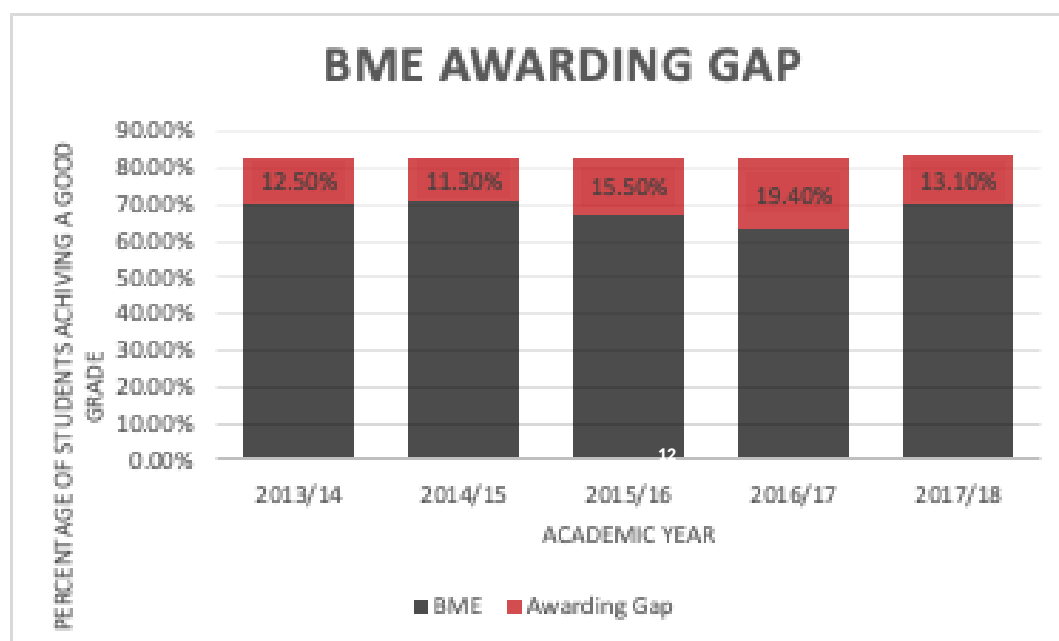
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/stories-46598275/thread-shred-i-exposed-racism-at-my-university-and-got-suspended> >

8 <https://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/members-award-holders/>.

BME AWARDING GAP

According to the government's race disparity audit, several Black and minority ethnic groups outperform their white British counterparts at all stages of education until university.⁹ Furthermore, BME students are more likely to go to university than their white British counterparts. From 2013/14 to 2017/18, the number of UK domiciled BME students starting an undergraduate course has increased by over 15%.¹⁰ However, just as racial disparities exist in society, they also exist in higher education. Overall, BME students are less likely to achieve a First or 2:1 degree classification compared to their white counterparts, with the latest data of 2017/18 showing the national BME Awarding Gap at 13.2%.¹¹

Lancaster University has an increasing BME student population, with Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) data noting a 4% increase in undergraduate students from 2012/13 to 2017/18.¹² Through a Freedom of Information request, this study has found that Lancaster University has a BME Awarding Gap of 13.1% for the year 2017/18. placing Lancaster University in line with the national BME Awarding Gap.



[Figure 1: This chart represents the figures of the BME Awarding Gap at Lancaster University from the academic years 2013/2014 - 2017/2018]

However, as Figure 1 shows, Lancaster University's BME Awarding Gap has fluctuated significantly over the years. The 2016/17 cohort had a significant disparity in the number of BME students obtaining a 'good grade' (First or 2:1) with a large gap of 19.4%. During this period the national BME Awarding Gap was 11%.¹³

9 Cabinet Office (2017), 'Race Disparity Audit: Summary Findings from the Ethnicity Facts and Figures website', p. 9.

10 National Union of Students (2019), 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students Attainment at UK Universities', p. 6.

11 National Union of Students (2019), 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students Attainment at UK Universities', p. 11.

12 Lancaster University (2018), 'Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Summary Annual Report 2017-18', p.11.

13 McDuff. N, Tatam. J, Beacock. O and Ross. F (2018), "Closing the attainment gap for students from black and minority ethnic background through institutional change", *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 20 (1), p. 9.

This report recognises the challenges of using homogenous terms like BME however, we have been unable to disaggregate Lancaster University's BME Awarding Gap data into smaller groups. Analysing the national statistics, shows the BME Awarding Gap differs regionally and ethnically. Out of the four nations, England has the highest BME awarding gap at 13.7%, followed by Scotland at 11.4%, Wales at 9.9% and Northern-Ireland domiciled students at 9.1%.¹⁴ In terms of ethnicity, Black students encounter the most significant awarding gap compared to their white counterparts and within the Black category, Black Africans face the greatest disparity. Within the Asian category, British Pakistanis encounter the most significant awarding gap and Chinese students the least at 4.3%.¹⁵

DEBUNKING THE DEFICIT MODEL

The BME Awarding Gap as experienced by BME students the largest and most prominent attainment gap, surpassing both gender and class differences.¹⁶ This research seeks to not only investigate the causes of this awarding gap but whether BME students at Lancaster have experienced the impact of this disparity.

The deficit model regarding the BME Awarding Gap in higher education institutions implies that BME students are a significant reason as to why this inequality exists. As the deficit model is based upon a meritocratic model for academic achievement, it creates a false reality of how students experience higher education. This model shifts the blame of structural inequalities onto the students themselves and not upon the institution. Thereby shirking the duty the institution has to create a more equal environment for their BME students.

Research conducted by Kingston University London has debunked this model and consequently the idea that BME students are in some part responsible for their lower levels of attainment. In fact, over the last six years Kingston University have introduced a variety of measures to close the Awarding Gap from 29.5% to 11%.¹⁷ Kingston University were able to close this awarding gap through three specific areas: improving institutional processes, enhancing the knowledge and skills of staff and students and better supporting BME students.¹⁸ These objectives when fleshed out can be summarised in their prioritisation of radical change when addressing the BME Awarding Gap. Kingston prioritised the building of better relationships with BME students and staff within their institution and paid attention to the perceptions of race within their learning environment. It is important to understand the multi-faceted approach Kingston applied to tackle the BME awarding gap, and their success in decreasing the percentage by taking accountability as an institution.

14 National Union of Students (2019), 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students Attainment at UK Universities', p. 13.

15 National Union of Students (2019), 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students Attainment at UK Universities', p. 12.

16 <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/student-recruitment-retention-and-attainment/degree-attainment-gaps>.

17 <https://www.kingston.ac.uk/news/article/2293/27-jan-2020-kingston-university-shares-expertise-in-closing-bme-attainment-gap/>.

18 McDuff, N, Tatam, J, Beacock, O and Ross, F (2018), "Closing the attainment gap for students from black and minority ethnic background through institutional change", *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 20 (1), p. 89.

METHODOLOGY

This report seeks to answer the following question: What is the role of race in shaping Black and minority ethnic (BME) students' experiences at Lancaster University? The research question was split into four key subsections:

- **What are BME students' opinions and experiences of representation in various academic and social environments?** This question seeks to understand BME students' experiences of representation, in relation to academic environments and staff structures. Furthermore, this question explores how representation shapes BME students' engagement and relatability with their studies, in addition to shaping their willingness to participate in the social aspect of university.
- **What are BME students' experiences of racism and microaggressions in both academic and social settings at Lancaster University?** This question seeks to explore the manifestation of racism towards BME students. Further, this section seeks to examine how these experiences affected feelings of safety and comfort for BME students at Lancaster University. Finally, whether students were deterred from engaging in certain academic and social settings within the university.
- **What are BME students' experiences of reporting racism and microaggressions to the Students' Union or broader university administration and of seeking mental health support?** This question explores what mechanisms Lancaster University and its Students' Union have for BME students who have experienced racism and microaggressions. Researching how informed BME students are about reporting racism and hate crimes, in addition to analysing the resources available to BME students seeking mental health support.
- **What role do BME students think race has on their academic attainment?** This question seeks to explore BME students' understanding of the BME Awarding Gap both at Lancaster University and within the wider context of higher education. Additionally, it looks to understand what factor race plays in BME students' attainment, the expectations they feel when producing work and their willingness to engage with course content.

In order to produce this report, evidence was gathered from a wide range of sources to sufficiently capture the experiences of BME students at Lancaster University. The University was asked to provide information on grade attainment through a Freedom of Information Request. This report wanted to analyse the data which shows the percentage of “good grades” (First or 2:1) awarded to undergraduate students broken down by ethnicity. The data analysed in this report is for UK domiciled students only. We requested the above data for the past 10 years. However, the University provided the campaign with data from 2013/14 due to apparent monetary limitations. The data provided was categorised under broad ethnic groups and noted that certain ethnic groups were very small or have no population.

RESEARCH METHODS

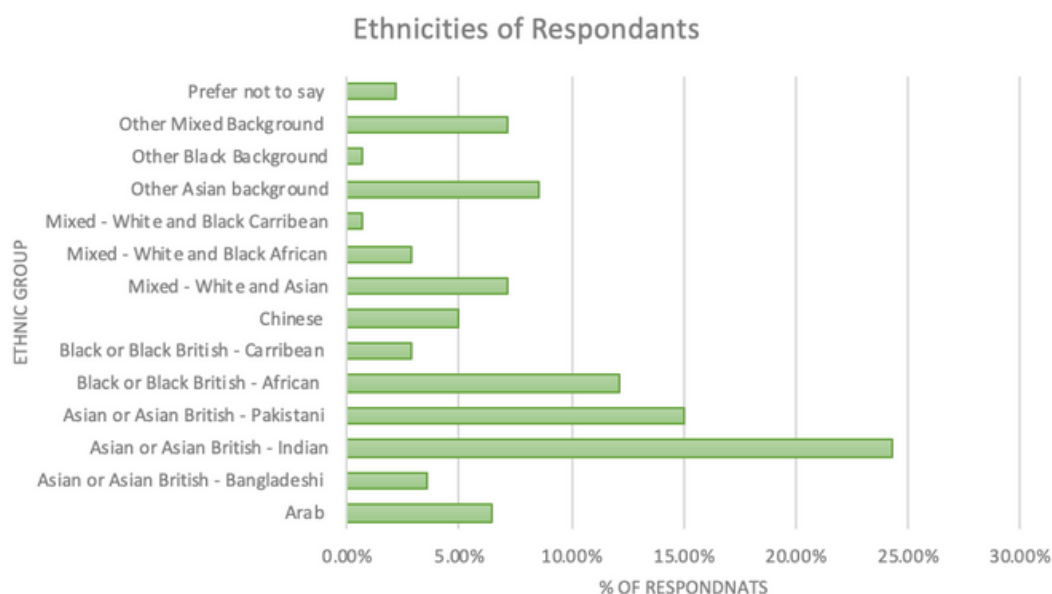
Additionally, this study conducted an online survey of undergraduate and postgraduate BME students across Lancaster University. The survey was comprised of open and closed questions and collected 140 student responses overall. Following the survey, we carried out a further 2 interviews (see Figure 2). This research has been conducted by a small, independent, student-led campaign and is a relatively small-scale study. However, it is the first known report at Lancaster University which explores the experiences of BME students. Including the voices of 140 BME students who provide key insights into the environment at Lancaster University.

	Total Number of BME student participants
Survey	140
Interviews	2

[Figure 2: Total Number of BME student participants involved in the research.]

The demographics of the overall sample group were diverse in terms of BME identities (see figure 3), i.e. domiciles, religions, sexes and sexual orientation. Women were overrepresented in the group making up 66.4%, compared to 30.7% of men and 1.4% other. Furthermore, UK domiciled students made up the majority of the group with 65%, compared to 30.7% of International and 4.3% of EU domiciled students. With regards to religious identity, Muslims, Christians and those with no religion or belief represented 39.6%, 18.1% and 20.1% respectively. While Hindus, Buddhists, those with Spiritual beliefs; or other religions or beliefs were underrepresented. Heterosexual participants were predominantly represented in the research, making up 83.6%, compared to 7.9% LGBTQ+ and 2.9% other.

Participants with Black and South-Asian ethnicities made-up a large proportion of the total demographics.¹⁹ Figure 3 is a complete breakdown of the ethnic categories that students identified as, these categories were adapted from the list of ethnic groups of the British government's website.²⁰



[Figure 3: Ethnic Breakdown of Participants]

Students from all four faculties took part in the research which allowed the study to cover a variety of perspectives from students across a range of subjects. 2.9% of the participants were in their foundation year, compared to 84.3% who were in Undergraduate studies, 5% in Postgraduate Taught and 7.9% in Postgraduate research.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection took place between January and February in the 2019-20 academic year. The survey was advertised through informal student networks on platforms like Facebook as well as through faculty-wide emails. As this study sought to understand BME students' experiences at Lancaster University, it was clear that potential participants should be from a BME background. The study recognises that the term BME is controversial and is used to homogenise diverse groups of people into one, erasing the unique experiences only certain groups have. However, in line with Advance HE, the study chose to use the term to ensure the report is comparable with sector wide research.

19 The term 'Black' In this report refers to people of African heritage and the diaspora, including the Caribbean.

20 <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups>.

ETHICS AND CONFIDENTIALITY

All participants were asked to disclose their university email address to ensure they were current Lancaster University students. Throughout the research for this report, including the survey and the interviews, protecting BME students has been a major priority. The survey was completely anonymised and the details from the survey have been kept confidential. The interviews were only scheduled with participants who volunteered to explore their student experience further and participants were free to choose a safe space either on or off-campus. Each interview was completely transcribed, with the participants' names being replaced by pseudonyms. In some cases, the study has used multiple pseudonyms for participants who gave detailed, personal accounts to ensure their identity was not compromised.

FINDINGS

REPRESENTATION

This section analyses the findings in relation to the sub-question: What are BME students' opinions and experiences of representation in various academic and social environments? This question sought to understand BME students' views on representation within academic environments and university staff structures. Further exploring how representation shapes BME students' engagement and relatability with their studies, as well as how representation shapes their willingness to participate in university life. Before investigating BME students' opinions on representation within this study, it is vital to reference their perspective on the significance of representation. 82% of participants stated that BME representation within the university was important to them. Within this section three key themes emerged:

- Representation within academic course content
- Representation within academic and University staff structures
- Representation within the Students' Union

REPRESENTATION WITHIN ACADEMIC COURSE CONTENT

When asked about whether BME students feel their course content is “representative of lived experiences, works and theories of Black scholars and people”, only 15% of participants agreed. Furthermore, only 19% of participants feel that their course content is “representative of lived experiences, works and theories of Asian scholars and people”, and only 12% of participants feel that their course content is “representative of lived experiences, works and theories of other minority ethnic scholars and people”. In contrast, when BME students were asked if their course content was “representative of lived experiences, works and theories of white scholars and people”, over 80% of all participants agreed. The stark contrast in the opinions BME students have of their course content and its representation highlights specific areas where representation should be improved.

These statistics are upheld by accounts given by participants, one student Aaditya explained how his “course content is massively Eurocentric and fails to expose students to ideas from other parts of the world.”. In this comment, Aaditya is highlighting how inaccessible other histories and perspectives are compared to the Eurocentric narrative. This sentiment was repeated by Layla, who said, “I feel my course does not explore aspects of medicine relevant

to ethnic minorities groups.”. The lack of representation within the medical curriculum has been central to recent discussions around coronavirus, as a number of British doctors and trainees call on medical schools to be more inclusive.²¹

Francis highlights that whilst BME voices can be found in his course, they are dependent on the modules chosen. This experience highlights how representation is not central to the curriculum and rather a peripheral discourse which students are required to opt into, thereby propagating Eurocentric perspectives as the main framework for knowledge.

“I feel as though I have come across content on my course that highlights the lived experiences, works and theories of minority ethnic people. However, that is dependent on which module one chooses. Furthermore, though whilst there is mention of minority ethnic people and their contributions, there is not enough mention to claim that the course is ‘representative’.”

If universities define themselves as institutions of diverse thought, then the curriculum should reflect this aim. Greater representation within the curriculum can manifest in a variety of ways, with the aim to centre new perspectives, allowing for students to understand narratives and works which both do and do not reflect their own lived experiences. However, at Lancaster, over 65% of participants feel their course content is Eurocentric. These statistics, in combination with student accounts, construct a picture of Lancaster’s academic environments as being spaces which do not represent diverse perspectives or BME students.

REPRESENTATION WITHIN ACADEMIC AND UNIVERSITY STAFF STRUCTURES

The survey also looked into BME students’ views on representation within academic staff as well as within other university staff structures. When asked whether they feel represented by their academic staff only 18% of participants said yes.

A lack of representation within academic staff is connected to the comfort of students when bringing new perspectives and challenging their lecturers’ views. 48% of participants said they felt comfortable questioning their lecturers and seminar tutors on their viewpoints, compared to 28% who said they did not. Whilst some students feel comfortable challenging certain viewpoints and bringing in new perspectives, Maya described how this is not always welcome. “I’ve been the only POC in the majority of my seminars for two years running now, and it’s weird being seen as controversial when talking about power dynamics in course content and bringing up race”.

21 Lynch. C, (2020), Rapid Response: Diversifying Medical school education to represent BAME Backgrounds, *BMJ*.

This sentiment was reiterated by Aliyah:

“There is a lack of ethnic minority students and lecturers. Although I remember one lecture, a lecturer stated that Watson (DNA structure discoverer) made some ‘controversial’ comments when it was just pure racism. It’s like she couldn’t call it what it is because [the lecturer] was in awe of his scientific importance.”

In terms of university professional staff, of those surveyed only 13% of participants said they feel represented. This figure is unsurprising when you take into account that approximately 16% of professional staff at Lancaster University are BME.²² One student Nova highlighted that the lack of representation within her own college would make her apprehensive of reporting racism:

“I think – I haven’t seen one person of colour as a Dean or on board in first year. I didn’t see one person of colour. Though I honestly don’t know how they would go about it if I were to say ‘Hey, my flatmate’s being racist’.”

Representation of BME academics across UK higher education institutions is gradually increasing. According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 17% of academic staff across UK universities were BME in 2018/19; up 1% from last year.²³ An analysis of HESA data by the University and College Union (UCU) also shows that BME academics face a 9% pay gap with Black academics suffering the biggest pay gap of 14%.²⁴ Furthermore, the UCU found that BME academics are underrepresented in top roles, as only 3% of Black academics and 7% of Asian academics are professors. In terms of the wider university structure, the UCU analysis also shows that BME staff are underrepresented in senior positions and overrepresented in junior positions.²⁵ Lancaster University does not have public comprehensive data on their BME academic or professional services staff. However, after analysing BME students’ views on representation, it is clear their viewpoints echo sector-wide data.

REPRESENTATION WITHIN THE STUDENTS’ UNION

Over 76% of participants said that BME representation within the Students’ Union was important to them. However, only 27% feel that the Students’ Union was ethnically diverse. When asked about their opinion on whether the Students’ Union prioritises race equality, over 38% of participants said it fails to prioritise issues of race. Additionally, over 25% of participants believe that the Union’s full time officers (FTOs) fail to support issues of race in the same way they do other causes. A common theme reiterated by a number of participants was the role of Black History Month.

22 Lancaster University (2018), ‘Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Summary Annual Report 2017-18’, p.16.

23 <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/23-01-2020/sb256-higher-education-staff-statistics>

24 <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10360/Black-academic-staff-face-double-whammy-in-promotion-and-pay-stakes>.

25 <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/10360/Black-academic-staff-face-double-whammy-in-promotion-and-pay-stakes>

"Aside from Black History Month in the beginning of the year, there doesn't seem to be many proactive and heavily endorsed BME representation events/actions."

- Ebony

"[The Students' Union] should cover [race] in theory but I've never heard of anything that they've done."

- Angel

When asked about whether the events the Union organised throughout the year were inclusive or racially sensitive over 33% of participants said yes compared to 20% of participants who said no. These three sections evidence how BME students care about representation within various facets of the University and Union, yet their experiences reveal Lancaster's institution is not representative of their identities as BME students.

RACISM AND MICROAGGRESSIONS

This section of the report explores the findings in line with the sub-question: What are BME students' experiences of racism and microaggressions in both academic and social settings at Lancaster University? Statistics and accounts of racism and microaggressions within Lancaster University, as experienced by BME students, reveal the reality of how race impacts their time at University. Within our survey and interviews, experiences of racism and microaggressions were quantifiably impactful on BME students at Lancaster University. Experiencing a variety of racially motivated behaviour, from microaggressions to overt racism, was evident in the accounts of BME students.

In this section of the survey, participants were asked about their experiences of racism within social settings and the University campus more broadly. The survey revealed three key themes in experiences of racism at Lancaster University.

- Overt experiences of racism and microaggressions
- The impact of race on BME students safety
- The lack of safe spaces to speak about race

OVERT EXPERIENCES OF RACISM AND MICROAGGRESSIONS

Beyond the classroom and lecture halls and into the broader social settings within university life, BME students reported an alarming number of racist incidences committed against them. Only 60% of BME students said they had not experienced racism within the

University. Over 22% said they had experienced racism and a further 15% preferred not to say. Throughout the survey, there was an alarming number of students who described incidences of racism and microaggressions. The number of incidences displays the commonplace occurrence of racially motivated abuse targeted at BME students by their white peers, which is characteristic of universities across the UK.²⁶ Furthermore, many of these incidences occurred in student accommodation which raises concerns about the environment Lancaster University provides for its BME students.

"A house mate called me f***** P*ki. This is one of many experiences I had"

- Ahin

"I was called "dirty looking". My flatmates in 1st yr would use a lot of anti-black vocab"

- Tariq

Beyond the racial slurs targeted at BME students, there was a spectrum of experiences of racially motivated behaviour, including the fetishization of BME students' ethnicities. "In first year, guys used to bring up my race a lot in a sexual context - in a fetish kind of way and it would make me feel really uncomfortable". Fetishising BME people is a known phenomenon which can have damaging impacts. These impacts were apparent in an interview conducted with Nova, who explained her experiences of racism had created a "distrust" of the University and its community.

THE IMPACT OF RACE ON BME STUDENTS SAFETY

As a result of these racist incidences, many BME students reported feeling unsafe on the University campus and within Lancaster city centre. 19% of students surveyed feel their race had a negative impact on their safety. This lack of safety manifested on both a physical and emotional level in which some BME students were wary of the impact their race would have on their safety.

On an emotional level, students reported how experiences or understandings of racism happening on campus created an environment lacking in safety. Tiffany remarked how:

"Even if you haven't had it happen to you, you hear about it and it makes you scared and worried that it might happen to you, and it doesn't make you feel safe on your own campus".

26 Mirza S.H, "Racism in Higher Education: 'What then can be done?'" in eds. Arday. J and Mirza. S.H, *Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy* (Springer, 2018).

In this comment, Tiffany explains how racism within the University community compromised her sense of comfort and safety at Lancaster. Another student, Ebony, expressed a similar sentiment:

“Having had negative, discriminatory language used against me in first year, it makes you aware of the threatening mentality that some people possess, and you can't help but slightly fear that one day someone will act on these thoughts”.

In Ebony's account, it is apparent how her experiences of racism have stayed with her throughout her time as a student at Lancaster University.

BME students feeling unsafe because of their race extended to Lancaster University's town centre. Arya explained, “I sometimes feel unsafe around older adults in town as I feel subtle racism towards me and discomfort”. A similar sentiment was reiterated by Angelika, “Especially after Brexit, with all the tension in the air, I do feel unsafe walking alone as a Brown person”. Angelika's experience highlights how the socio-political climate in Britain has an impact on BME students and their ability to feel safe within the Lancaster area.

Through an analysis of both the statistics and students' experiences, it is important to note the emotional impact first-hand experiences of racism and microaggressions can have on students. But beyond this, BME students and their sense of safety at Lancaster University is compromised by witnessing or hearing about racism on campus.

THE LACK OF SAFE SPACES TO SPEAK ABOUT RACE

A key mechanism in addressing worries over racism and safety is for universities to provide safe spaces in which BME students can speak freely about their worries and experiences.²⁷ The importance of curating safe spaces for BME students has been recognised across the higher education sector. Thus, this report sought to examine whether BME students at Lancaster University feel there are safe spaces to speak about how their race has impacted their time at Lancaster. When asked whether there were enough, if any, safe spaces at Lancaster University, only 30% of students agreed.

Many BME students have comprehensive opinions on safe spaces at Lancaster and whether a lack of safe spaces had an impact on their sense of belonging. Faith recalled an experience of racism within her first year:

“I believe this lack of safe spaces makes us less likely to report injustices.... I felt as though I would not be listened to, and/or would be told that it was not a serious issue, and/or their comments would be taken as fact and I would get in trouble”.

Here, Faith linked the lack of safe spaces in Lancaster to speak about race to a decreased confidence she had in staff members to believe her. Not having safe spaces to speak

27 National Union of Students (2019), “Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: Case Studies”, p.14.

about race and a decreased confidence in staff to take racism seriously, contributes to BME students being unwilling to report racism. Hawwa, echoed this perspective in our survey mentioning that a lack of safe spaces at Lancaster University

“Causes myself and other BME [students] to potentially feel uncomfortable or unsure as to who to turn to in situations concerning racism or discrimination of any kind. If students were to turn to a trusted individual, for example, a member of staff at the University, they cannot be assured as to whether they will be able to handle such a situation effectively whilst ensuring the student feels safe and comfortable given that there are (I find) no staff members that are qualified or experienced in the context of race and racial discrimination in higher education by either staff members or students.”

In this comment, Hawwa highlights how her experience of staff members at Lancaster University and the Students' Union, exposes them as unable to deal with racism within the institution. Furthermore, Ahin expanded upon the lack of safe spaces and its impact on BME students reporting racist incidences. Ahin recalled having “multiple racist incidences at uni with flat mates, course mates the list is endless, but I would never know where to go or who to turn to”. It is clear from Ahin's testimony that she was not aware of any safe spaces or even how to access basic support for racism she witnessed and experienced. These experiences of racism highlight serious questions about the condition and environment in which many BME students are placed in while at Lancaster University.

REPORTING RACISM AND MICROAGGRESSIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON BME STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

This section of the report examines the experiences of BME students in relation to the research question: What are BME students' experiences of reporting racism and microaggressions to the Students' Union or broader university administration and of seeking mental health support? When referring to the Students' Union within our research, this body included the Union office and its permanent staff, along with its full and part-time officers in addition to the JCRs. The University can be defined as senior management, EDI committees and departmental staff amongst additional staff structures. A key finding included many students being unaware of how to report racism, 78% of BME students do not know how to report a racist incident to either the Students' Union or the University. Building on these statistics, there was a distinct lack of confidence in the ability of both the

Union and University to tackle racism, this was demonstrated by 33% of BME students who feel as though the Students' Union (including the office, its officers and the JCR) does not take issues of racism seriously. The data gathered in this area can be summarised in three main themes:

- Experiences of reporting and unwillingness to report
- The impact of Racism on BME students' wellbeing and mental health
- The lack of BME counsellors and its effects

EXPERIENCES OF REPORTING AND UNWILLINGNESS TO REPORT

Upon experiencing racism or microaggressions, BME students were reluctant to report their experience due to a lack of faith in the Students' Union and University management. 50% of BME students did not feel comfortable reporting racism to the University and over 60% were not comfortable reporting to the Students' Union. Furthermore, for those who had experienced racism and microaggressions, less than 5% claimed they had reported it to either the Union or the University. The reasons behind this lack of reporting were shown in student opinion of the University's systems. 33% of BME students at Lancaster University do not believe the Students' Union takes issues of racism seriously. Furthermore, over 25% of BME students surveyed do not feel FTOs supported issues of race in the same way they supported other causes. From these statistics, it is clear a significant amount of BME students at Lancaster University do not have faith in their Union to understand or prioritise their comfort regarding race. This perspective is apparent university wide as more than six in ten students believe the Students' Union does not represent them.²⁸

This sentiment links strongly to whether students feel represented and understood by either the University or the Union. Tariq explained why he does not report incidences of racism, stating, "I can't talk to a white staff member about issues regarding race". As a BME student, Tariq felt uncomfortable speaking to white members of staff about racism, a phenomenon which is evident across race relations in many learning and work environments.²⁹ Furthermore, another participant, Ebony, explained why she felt discomfort reporting racism on campus to either the Union or the University.

"I feel as though I am put at a disadvantage because if I ever wanted to report something my concerns would be dismissed as not that serious or I would be classified as being a 'dramatic, angry black girl.'"

In both cases, a worrying amount of BME students at Lancaster University do not have faith in the systems to report racism. Additionally, a lack of representation and race equality awareness within the University and Union perpetuates feelings amongst BME students that staff members do not understand the reality of racism and therefore do not take their experiences seriously.

²⁸ Spineless staff, "LUSU is UK's second worst Students' Union survey reveals", 18 July 2020.

²⁹ Amos, V., "Foreword", in eds. Dale-Rivas, H, *The white elephant in the room: ideas for reducing racial inequalities in higher education*, (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2019), p. 3.

IMPACT OF RACISM ON BME STUDENTS' WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

22% of BME students across the University report having had direct experiences of racism at Lancaster University. These students and those who had heard about such experiences were significantly impacted by the lack of support offered from the University and the lack of spaces to fully process their experiences.

Throughout the survey many participants explained how racism, microaggressions and exclusion from academic and social settings impacted their mental health. These impacts ranged from decreased confidence and self-esteem in both social and academic settings, to experiencing paranoia about their safety on Lancaster's campus. In fact, experiencing worry about recurring experiences of racism – within an institution where you have been a victim of racism – is a well-documented phenomenon within academic discourse of racial equality.³⁰

Many reported how these experiences had an impact on their confidence in academic and social settings. Amal reported that her “self-esteem has been bruised, I had to rethink how I interacted with people as I felt I was doing something wrong”. Amal's account embodies other perspectives within the survey as 47% of the participants feel they have to modify their ethnic and cultural identity to ‘fit in’ with western norms in academic settings.

Angel described this burden stating that “It had a big emotional and mental toll in my first year”. After she and her boyfriend had “kinda stuck together whilst our flatmates let slurs fly around us”. Unable to know where or how to seek help, experiences of racism naturally became a burden on Angel's life. When asked about these experiences, she reported that “you're about the third person I've ever told about racism at uni”. This reality of racist incidents not being spoken about in this institution creates an additional mental burden on BME students.³¹

Another key theme in the mental toll these experiences had on BME students was justified paranoia that they would experience more racism. One participant, Ahmet, mentioned “It made me more paranoid that I will experience it again”. Whilst Faith detailed how “such incidents make people feel unsafe and make them paranoid about even being remotely involved in conflicts because there seems to be a bias response based on who files a complaint”. Here, Faith made the link between BME students not reporting racism because they had no faith in the ability of the Union and University to respond competently.

30 Ahmed. S, (2009) “Embodying diversity: problems and paradoxes for Black Feminists”, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, vol 12. No.1, p. 47.

31 Marsh. S and Maishman. E (2018), ‘Universities brushing racism under the carpet, students say’ (The Guardian) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/02/universities-brushing-racism-under-the-carpet-students-say>> .

THE LACK OF BME COUNSELLORS AND ITS EFFECTS

Upon discovering the impact racist abuse and microaggressions had on BME students at Lancaster University, it was important to investigate the mechanisms the University had to accommodate the needs of BME students' mental health. Within this section of the survey, BME students' opinions on the need for BME counsellors and their experiences with white counsellors were examined. The majority of students do not feel that it is important to have counsellors matching their ethnicity. However, some students did report an inability to speak to their white counsellors about racism. Angel, the student who had suffered racism from her flatmates explained that she had not "ever brought up BME issues in counselling".

Furthermore, Nabeela mentioned:

"They were white so although they said they understand what was going etc. I don't think they can ever fully empathise with what BME people experience and our issues."

The experiences of Lancaster BME students being treated by counsellors who were unable to relate to issues of race was echoed by other participants. Khalil mentioned how his counsellor "seemed pretty unmoved by my issues and [I] couldn't sense that he related to any of it". Of those students who had received counselling from the Students' Union or the University, 60% would have preferred to see a counsellor of the same ethnicity as them. Furthermore, 40% felt the counsellors they did have were not able to understand BME issues including cultural sensitivity and racial discrimination.

The idea of white counsellors being unable to understand BME students' experiences of racism is not unique to Lancaster University. The need for BME students at university to have access to counsellors and therapists who understand issues of race is being highlighted across academic fields, as representation and training for service users becomes more vital.³²

RACE AND ATTAINMENT

The final section of the findings analyses the data stemming from the sub-question: What role do BME students think race has on their academic attainment? The BME Awarding Gap remains the most prevalent awarding gap in higher education, surpassing both gender and class as a mechanism in which students are less likely to obtain a First or 2:1.³³ In the final part of our data collection, students were asked about their knowledge of the BME Awarding Gap, their opinion on how it manifests and whether they felt impacted by it at Lancaster University.

32 Arday, J. (2018) "Understanding Mental Health: What are the Issues for Black and Minority Ethnic Students at University?", *Social Sciences*. 7, No. 10, p. 196.

33 <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/equality-diversity-and-inclusion/student-recruitment-retention-and-attainment/degree-attainment-gaps>.

Furthermore, students were asked about their experiences of racism and microaggressions within academic settings. From our data, there were three key themes:

- Student opinion and awareness of the BME Awarding Gap
- Exclusion from academic settings
- Lack of recognition from academic tutors

STUDENT OPINION AND AWARENESS OF THE BME AWARDING GAP

In the most recent academic year of 2017/2018, the BME Awarding Gap was 13.1%, making Lancaster the average amongst other UK Universities affected by this disparity, interestingly for the years 2016/2017, it was 19.4%.³⁴ Despite this fluctuation, the impact of this inequality is felt by many students within Lancaster University. Before examining how students may have been impacted, it is important to understand the opinions of students. Over 90% of our participants feel UK universities need to combat the BME Awarding Gap. This statistic clearly exposes how BME students think this gap should be tackled by universities across the country. Furthermore, in regard to reducing biases, over 70% of students surveyed think anonymous marking is an effective method in reducing unconscious bias. This opinion raises questions about the nature of anonymous marking across the university and the need for academic departments to cater their assessment to student opinion.

EXCLUSION FROM ACADEMIC SETTINGS

BME students at Lancaster University highlighted various experiences in which they feel excluded from academic settings. 20% of BME students at Lancaster University feel excluded from formal academic setting because of their race. This feeling of exclusion has been echoed throughout institutions across the UK.³⁵ This statistic is upheld by accounts given by Lancaster BME students. One student Shanice said, “I’ve had lecturers use uncomfortable terms to discuss minorities, it feels a little isolating”. In this comment Shanice highlights the feeling of unbelonging some BME students of Lancaster University experience. But more importantly, there is a link to the limited understanding academic staff at Lancaster have of how their terminology impacts BME students. This same sentiment was explored by Almasi:

“I felt as if it further propagated the eurocentric stereotypes that people have of Africa, rather than educate on a realistic view. In that lecture, my lecturer subconsciously called Africa a country, and proceeded like nothing was wrong”.

³⁴ See methodology for information on these figures.

³⁵ Bunce. L, King. N, Saran. S, Talib. N, (2019) “Experiences of black and minority ethnic Students in higher education: applying self-determination theory to understand the BME attainment gap”, *Studies in Higher Education*, p. 5.

By using inappropriate terminology in a blasé fashion, academic staff at Lancaster University are not providing an educational environment which is accessible to all within this institution. In addition to this experience, some BME students at Lancaster also feel excluded from academic settings due to being seen as a nuisance or burden upon the comfort of their white peers. Dharma detailed how her “‘yellow’ voice” was “annoying and disturbing the progress of the class”. Her opinions and perspectives as a BME student were not welcomed within her seminars. Furthermore, Maya experienced a similar feeling when being the only BME person in her seminars, she said “it’s weird being seen as controversial when talking about power dynamics in course content and bringing up race”. This reality of being seen as an inconvenience by their academic tutors or their white peers, is accounted for in existing literature around BME students’ experiences.³⁶ Furthermore, these feelings, detailed by both Dharma and Maya are explicit as over 60% of BME students feel pressured to educate others on issues of race.

Feelings excluded from academic settings due to their race has multiple impacts on BME students. When speaking to Maya, she described how her experiences of exclusion had impacted her comfort and consequently attendance: “I was really reluctant to speak... I don’t wanna be that angry woman of colour... I don’t want to feed into that”. These incidences not only affected Maya’s comfort but had a significant impact on her engagement with her course. The uncomfortable environment which existed within her academic course is one which is echoed by a significant proportion of BME students at Lancaster University, as 47% of the participants feel the need to modify their ethnic and cultural identity to ‘fit in’ with western norms in academic settings.

LACK OF RECOGNITION FROM ACADEMIC TUTORS

A key theme throughout the survey findings was BME students being unrecognised as equal to their white counterparts by their academic tutors. 32% of students feel their intellect is disproportionately scrutinised in academic settings due to their race. The collective feeling of being disproportionately scrutinised is well documented in regard to BME students in higher education institutions across the country.³⁷ Some BME students often felt their work or opinions within academic settings were not taken as seriously by their tutors. One student, Angelika explained how “it always feels like you have to work a little harder to prove that you deserve to be there, especially as an international student”. This feeling of not being good enough or having to work harder was echoed by Blessing who stated, “It sometimes feels [like] we need to prove ourselves worthy of working at a particular place or getting a particular result by working twice as hard.”.

36 Bunce. L, King. N, Saran. S, Talib. N, (2019) “Experiences of black and minority ethnic Students in higher education: applying self-determination theory to understand the BME attainment gap”, *Studies in Higher Education*, p. 6.

37 Tedam. P, (2014) “Enhancing the practice learning experiences of BME students: Strategies for practice education”, *The Journal of Practice and Learning*, Vol 13, No. 2-3, p. 133.

This notion of 'working twice as hard' was repeated by many participants throughout the survey. In a variety of cases it was clear that BME students feel their work was being scrutinised unjustly in comparison to their white peers. Christian detailed: "I have to participate more in discussions and research more to get similar marks". Devi alluded to the same double standard BME students face, that her work "has to be twice the standard of white counterparts in order to gain the same recognition." These sentiments, both in reference to unbelonging and attainment, were included in Akel's 2018 report on *Decolonising at Lancaster University: An Introduction*, where BME students experienced 'working twice as hard' to obtain the same grades as their white counterparts.³⁸ Despite these instances being highlighted by Akel two years ago, there still remains a strong consensus of BME students having to work twice as hard to gain the same recognition as their white peers.

38 Akel, S, (2018) "Decolonising at Lancaster University: An Introduction", Department of Sociology at Lancaster University, p. 1.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the question “What is the Role of Race in Shaping Black and minority ethnic (BME) Students’ Experiences at Lancaster University?”. This study was investigated through four main sub-questions, each addressing a specific topic and exploring the relationship between race and BME students’ experiences at Lancaster University and within the Students Union. These sub-questions were:

- **Representation:** What are BME students’ opinions and experiences of representation in various academic and social environments at the University?
- **Racism and Microaggressions:** What are BME students’ experiences of racism and microaggressions in both academic and social settings at Lancaster University?
- **Reporting Racism and Microaggressions and BME students’ Mental Health:** What are BME students’ experiences of reporting racism and microaggressions to the Students’ Union or broader university administration and of seeking mental health support?
- **Race and Attainment:** What role do BME students think race has on their academic attainment?

The participants shared comprehensive and frank accounts of their experiences at Lancaster University and with the Students’ Union. The accounts given in this study, were both traumatic and distressing, revealing the detrimental effect race can have on BME students’ university experiences.

The report highlights the key role race has in many aspects of BME students’ lives at Lancaster University. Many were left feeling unrecognised, isolated, and excluded from their course content and academic discussions. Additionally, overt experiences of racism left BME students feeling uncomfortable, unsafe, and unwelcome in many University settings. The findings detail how these experiences have a negative effect on BME students’ faith, trust and confidence in the institution, particularly when reporting racism and seeking mental health support. Moreover, the report highlights Lancaster University’s BME Awarding Gap and how many students feel unrecognised in their academic contributions.

Lancaster University prides itself on being the International University of the Year, offering “a global learning experience within degree programmes” in order to “enrich students’ experience”.³⁹ However, the results of this study indicate that these values cannot be found in the experiences of Lancaster’s BME students. If Lancaster is to truly be an international University, offering its students a place for diverse thought and

³⁹ <https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/news/lancaster-named-international-university-of-the-year>

education, it needs to pledge itself to decolonisation and into being an anti-racist institution.

This report has been written with the hope that the highlighted student experiences and the recommendations made below will be used by Lancaster University and its Students' Union as a foundation for change and improvement. We hope Lancaster University and its Students' Union consider these findings and the recommendations to ensure inclusion, equality, and racial justice for all of its students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are in line with the research we conducted and have surfaced from student opinion within the survey and interview processes. Furthermore, the recommendations proposed are tailored to the significant barriers BME students face and inspired by successful policies across the higher education sector.

FOR LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

REPRESENTATION

Making Decolonising a priority for curriculum audits – the term ‘decolonising’ should be one academic staff are not only familiar with but able to implement in their practices. While conducting audits of their current courses and modules, academic staff should look to implement and understand representation for BME students.

EDI Committees and essential BME representation – EDI committees cannot be expected to implement action regarding racial justice when they continue to operate without BME staff or students. Therefore, it is incumbent on EDI committees to ensure a significant proportion of their roles are taken up by BME individuals, whether they be students or staff.

The Race Equality Charter (REC) – Over the past half-a-decade staff, students and campaign groups have called upon the University to commit to the REC. The university has recently committed to joining the REC in April 2021. We call upon the university to ensure this commitment is centred upon the experiences of BME students and staff across the institution.

Module Feedback – From our findings, it is clear many students have warranted concerns about course content and representation. Yet the topic of representation is not a feature within module evaluation surveys. Therefore, we recommend that departments introduce this element and explore students’ views on representation.

RACISM AND RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Creating anti-racist environments - Academic spaces should be explicitly anti-racist. Talking about racism and race is profound in unearthing and addressing biases amongst staff and students. Staff should be establishing learning environments in which BME students are safe from racism, including addressing the language they use in educational spaces.

Race equality training - Academic staff across Lancaster University need to be well equipped in dealing with racism and microaggression which may occur in academic settings. Creating an anti-racist learning environment in combination with race equality training will help to create an institution where racism is taken seriously.

REPORTING RACISM AND MICROAGGRESSIONS AND BME STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

Employ BME counsellors - For students whose mental health has suffered from their experiences of racism, the University has a responsibility to create a more representative support network in their employment of healthcare professionals. The University should seek to establish spaces and environments in which BME students can be open about their race and feel understood.

Race equality training for existing counsellors - All existing counsellors and healthcare professionals should be trained in race equality and cultural understanding. This measure will ensure BME students who do not have access to BME counsellors will feel comfortable speaking about racism and their race.

Reporting Racism - All panels or individuals where reports of racism are referred to should be trained in race equality.

Real consequences for racism - Departments have a responsibility to ensure racism against both students and staff is taken seriously. A key element to adequate consequences would be better representation on disciplinary boards. If an adequate consequence is not delivered, BME students and staff will not feel safe or valued in these departments.

BME AWARDING GAP

Educating staff on BME Awarding Gap – All teaching and academic staff at Lancaster University should be aware of and informed on the BME Awarding Gap. Understanding this gap is imperative for staff to then address how it may manifest in their classrooms and departments.

Gathering research and data on BME Awarding Gap – Thus far, Lancaster University has failed to release any figures regarding the BME Awarding Gap. It is primarily the responsibility of the University - before the Union - to address this disparity. In order to create change, the University needs to be transparent and honest about the BME Awarding Gap figures within its own institution.

Anonymous Marking – The majority of BME students have expressed that anonymous marking would be a solution for unconscious bias. For this reason, we encourage departments to examine the nature of anonymous marking in their assessment and seriously consider how to implement it further.

FOR LANCASTER UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' UNION

REPRESENTATION

The Students' Union should take more responsibility – The Students' Union has a responsibility to examine the experiences of its students across the University. This report should have been launched and funded solely by the Students' Union on behalf of its BME students, instead of being instigated and delivered by unpaid students. Moving forward the Students' Union should seek to appoint a race equality expert to examine the state of its institution and undertake a review of the institution's infrastructure and processes.

RACISM AND RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Adopt an anti-racist attitude – The Union's own offices should be an anti-racist space in which BME students and staff are not victim to racially motivated abuse. The Union should seek to investigate incidents in which BME staff and students experience microaggressions and racism within the Students' Union offices and in the University community. An anti-racist attitude should not be upheld solely by the unpaid BME part time officer (PTO) in the Students' Union; it should instead be upheld by all members within the establishment, particularly permanent and senior members of the Union.

The Students' Union being supportive of anti-racist work – The Students' Union should seek to support campaigns, societies and initiatives launched by students who wish to tackle racism on campus. This support should not manifest in the form of co-opting, but rather through a genuine and honest attempt to tackle inequalities on our campus.

Educate students in freshers' week – The Students' Union should inform students on how racism can manifest and how to tackle racism at the beginning of freshers' week through a dedicated presentation or talk. This information would work to educate new students entering the establishment and deter students from engaging in racially-motivated abuse and racial slurs. Secondly, this education would instil confidence amongst BME students that the Students' Union represents them, increasing the likelihood of reporting racism.

REPORTING RACISM AND MICROAGGRESSIONS AND BME STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH

Establish a sub-committee to investigate and prioritise racial hate crimes – This committee should include predominantly BME staff and students from Lancaster University. This committee should operate to support victims of racism, furthermore, the sole responsibility of establishing this committee should not be placed on the BME PTO; permanent staff within the Union should take responsibility.

Disseminate information on how to report racism – Many students do not know how to report racial hate crimes. This information should be readily available to BME students in order to create a transparent and reliable process of reporting racism.

Create and support spaces for BME students to feel empowered – The Students' Union should revise the mechanisms it has to support and empower BME students within Lancaster University. This support should include societies, campaigns and events.

BME AWARDING GAP

Gather data on and research the Awarding Gap – Thus far, Lancaster University has failed to release any figures regarding the BME Awarding Gap. It is the job of the Students' Union to urge the University to combat the Awarding Gap. Further, this burden should not be placed solely on the BME PTO, rather it should be a collaborative project, funded and supported by the Students' Union and the University, in which researchers are paid for their labour.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ACRONYMS

ANTISEMITISM

The Government defines antisemitism as "a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals, their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

BLACK

The National Union of Students' Black Students' Campaign uses the term 'Black' to denote those of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean heritage. Otherwise known as 'politically Black.' However, within the context of this report the term 'Black' is used to denote those of African and Caribbean heritage.

BLACK AND MINORITY ETHNIC (BME)

We have recognised the limitations with the term BME however, this study used the term BME in line with Advance HE to ensure our data is relevant and the report produced is comparable with sector wide research. The term BME includes non-white individuals only.

BME AWARDING GAP

Also known as the BME Attainment Gap, the BME awarding gap is the difference between white students and Black and minority ethnic (BME) students who have been awarded a 1st or 2:1 degree classification.

EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION (EDI)

A committee at Lancaster University responsible for developing and recommending equality, diversity and inclusion policies in accordance with the University's strategic plan. The EDI committee also monitors the progress of the University's strategy.

EUROCENTRIC

This study uses the term 'Eurocentric' to describe institutions/systems/curricula which focuses on European culture or history to the exclusion of a wider view of the world. The term is also used to define an implicit regard for European culture as pre-eminent.

HIGHER EDUCATION STATISTICS AGENCY (HESA):

The official agency for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about higher education in the United Kingdom.

HOMOPHOBIA

The irrational fear of and aversion to homosexuality and to lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people based on prejudice (European Union FRA).

ISLAMOPHOBIA

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims gave the following definition; "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness."

RACE EQUALITY CHARTER (REC)

The REC aims to improve the representation, progression and success of minority ethnic staff and students within higher education. It provides a framework through which institutions work to identify and self-reflect on institutional and cultural barriers standing in the way of BME staff and students. Member institutions develop initiatives and solutions for action and can apply for a Bronze or Silver REC award, depending on their level of progress.

MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward BME people. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities. (Sue et al. definition 2007)

UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE UNION (UCU)

The University and College Union is a British trade union in further and higher education. The UCU represents over 120,000 academics, lecturers, trainers, instructors, researchers, managers, administrators, computer staff, librarians and postgraduates in universities, colleges, prisons, adult education and training organisations across the UK.

Back cover Image: Lancaster University, (2020) "Happy Last Day of Term, everyone! It's been challenging, and yes, it's been weird. But we made it. We're wishing.." [Twitter] 26 June Available from <<https://twitter.com/LancasterUni/status/1276544425414574080/photo/1> > Date accessed 24/07/2020



