

Exploring the Factors that Impact Ethnic Minority Students' Attainment at a British University

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Abstract: The attainment gap between Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) and Widening Participation students in general and white students has continued to be of interest amongst researchers in their quest for a coherent social justice-based policy and practice in the UK higher education system. This study uses an exploratory and qualitative approach to investigate the lived experience of students and staff with respect to the attainment gap by focusing on the context of post 1992 Universities and the academic, cultural and social aspects of the predicament as units of analysis. This approach offers a departure from the mainly deficit approach which predominantly results in interventions that presuppose fixing or aligning the students to existing lowly prioritised structures of support. The evidence found support an approach that prioritises strategic and deeper pedagogic reforms and support systems that recognise the cultural capital of the BAME students as they are. The analysis also gave us the opportunity to conclude that if the stakes are high enough for higher education institutions, their strategic planning processes and operational systems would naturally pick up and develop effective social justice policies.

Keywords: Widening Participation; BAME attainment gap; higher education; inclusion; psychological needs

Introduction

The origins of widening participation (WP) can be traced back as far as before WWII. Throughout history, there has been several important reports commissioned by the UK government on WP. These include the 1963 Lord Robbins report, the 1997 Lord Dearing report and the 1997 Kennedy Report. They all made very important recommendations that radically changed the course of WP interventions/policy in the UK. Throughout the past few years, the number of BAME students who access higher education in the UK has increased considerably based on all these interventions. However, there is a significant and inequitable attainment gap between UK-domiciled students from BAME groups and white students (Banerjee, 2018). The idea that higher education contributes to more socially just and democratic societies by providing a pathway to knowledge, higher level skills and enhanced social mobility tends to be taken for granted in the policy domain of WP. Indeed, this logic

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can be understood as underpinning current policy on widening participation in higher education where the primary aim is to increase access for social groups currently underrepresented in higher education (Whitty et al. 2015). Groups currently targeted in widening participation policy in the UK include those from black Asian and minority ethnic groups (BAMEs), low income students, those from working class backgrounds, care leavers, disabled and mature students (HEFCE, 2017). Therefore, most studies that delve into the issues of attainment in these groups, tend to assume a certain degree of homogeneity amongst them. This implies that the understanding of their key problems (such as attainment gap) would be limited to the few elements of similarities as units of analysis.

Furthermore, many students from this group tend to study with post-1992 universities rather than other presumed prestigious universities for many reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper, yet still fail to get good degrees. The term 'attainment gap' also known as 'achievement gap' is used to refer to the difference between the number of UK domiciled BAME students and their white peers that obtain a good degree – a first class or a second class upper (2:1). This disparity varies from one institution to another and between disciplines (Richardson, 2015). It also varies significantly in the attainment profile within the BAME groups in the UK as BAME is not homogenous (Miller, 2016,). Richardson (2008) postulates that the BAME attainment gap is consistent and statistically significant irrespective of gender, subject, age, institution or mode of study.

Social justice, equality, inclusion and social change are complex and inter-linked concepts and feature prominently in UK social policy rhetoric. There are inequalities in participation in post-compulsory education and training by socio-economic status, gender and ethnicity, among other characteristics. These surface inequalities are largely reproduced in higher education. Many of these students are confronted with several difficulties which have not been properly investigated. The metaphor of 'barriers' to participation is an attractive one that suggests an explanation for differences in patterns of participation between socio-economic groups and contains its own solutions.

The primary structural focus of this paper is to depart from two layers within the WP group and zoom in on other possible constructs driving the attainment gap. We see the WP group as one layer, the BAME group as the second layer. Furthermore, we unpack the BAME and reenvision them within the framework of those studying in post-1992 Universities. This forms a rather specific analytical category in line with the parameters for understanding the phenomenon. In addition to carving out this group, we then drill down to delving into the academic, social and cultural dimensions that impinge on attainment.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 gives an overview of the literature review on BAME attainment in UK higher education, Section 3 discusses the method and techniques used to collect the data. Section 4 provides a detailed analysis of the findings, a discussion is provided in Section 5, followed by a conclusion and future work in section 6.

Review of the Literature

The Department for Education's investigation into the employment outcome and career progress of ethnic minorities after graduation is one of the earliest reports on the BAME attainment gap. Connor et al carried out the investigation and in 1996 reported an attainment gap when their survey revealed that 65% of the White graduates were awarded a first class or upper second-class honours compared to only 39% of ethnic minorities % (Connor et al., 1996). According to Universities UK (UUK) and the National Union of Students (NUS) the BAME

attainment gap is currently 13 percentage point. Considerable research has been undertaken to focus on the causes of the persistent disparity in the academic achievement between ethnic minority students and their White counterpart's minority students and students from Caucasian. The Coleman Report (Equality of Educational Opportunity) of 1966 in America signalled a wakeup call in challenging the inequality in the education sector and put forward strategies to address it. Since the Coleman Report, the achievement or attainment gap has been a popular research topic. The disparity in educational achievement between White and ethnic minority students is a prevalent phenomenon not only in the UK, but has also generated attention in different parts of the world, particularly in some Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED) countries (Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015).

Historically, it is difficult to categorically pinpoint when the discourse on BAME attainment started in the UK. The few studies that have been published suggest that medical schools were the first to identify the BAME attainment gap in 1994. This study uncovered that 10 out of 230 students at the University of Manchester's Medical School failed their clinical examinations. Interestingly, all ten students were Asian with Asian surnames. These students had passed their written examinations but failed their clinical examinations (Dillner, 1995). Since then, BAME attainment gap has been a source of concern for higher education in the UK.

Initial studies examined the problem of access to higher education (opportunity gap) for the ethnic minorities (attributed to structural inequalities in society) which led to the widening participation (WP) campaign. Pilkington (2015) though argues that the major concern of WP was social class and that the BAME opportunity gap was not the main focus. Over the years, the participation rate of BAME entrants into Higher Education has greatly increased (OFFA and HEFCE, 2014). Significantly, the rate of BAME students attending university has reached a record high (Richardson, 2010) resulting in their overrepresentation in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This overrepresentation is however not reflected in their enrolment at prestigious elite institutions in the UK, which have remained in effect ivory towers. In contrast, a greater proportion of BAME students study at post-1992 institutions (Runnymede Trust, 2010). Despite the Higher Education Initial Participation Ratio (HEIPR) for BAME students appearing higher than that of white students, BME students are still less successful than their white peers in the acquisition of 'good' degrees (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Connor et al. 2004). The high participation ratio is therefore not translated into 'good degree' outcomes. From Changing Students to Changing Institutions

In the UK, the 'student deficit' model dominated much research on the subject until recently (Ross et al., 2018). Singh (2011) has postulated that 'many HEIs remain in a state of denial about the ethnicity attainment gap or try to reduce it to a deficit model.' 'Fixing' the student has yielded little or no success so far and if the problem is not with the students, then higher institutions need to look inwards to identify why BAME students are being awarded these degrees. Advance HE (2018) posits that the traditional focus on students being the cause of their underachievement (thereby necessitating a 'fix'), has to be discontinued. Framing and stigmatising students as being intellectually deficient, upholding negative stereotypes, and ignoring systemic and structural issues are no longer acceptable.

The UK higher education system is undergoing changes and greater public investment in HE demands more accountability from HEIs than ever before. This notion of accountability is not congruent with the traditional notion of freedom prevalent within HEIs (Layer, 2016). Now, the expansion of higher education has made education 'a lucrative globally saleable commodity which has changed the shape and content of contemporary

higher education' (Sing and Cowden, 2016). As stakeholders, social justice, legislative imperative, and business care are major drivers for HEIs to address differential outcomes. Actions needed should be focused on tackling institutional barriers – institutional culture, curriculum and pedagogy. Student retention and progression, student experience of higher education, inclusive curricula, teaching and learning, mentoring, and support are some of the areas that are currently being projected in which if HEIs can translate policies into meaningful actions, the reduction of the BAME attainment gap may be better addressed. Indeed, as Miller (2016) rightly observes, 'This work has to occur at all levels of an institution, raising awareness, skills and confidence of all staff, and ensuring that this agenda is included in strategic vision, strategic plans, and the work of various university boards and committees.' Husbands (2019) states that it is not a question of one-size-fits-all and initiatives and strategies need to be adapted to the particular institution. The uniqueness of our approach in this paper lies in the both the deconstruction and recategorization of the WP group as a framework for investigation. We also view the deficit model as a narrative that effectively attributes that phenomenon to the student group thereby prompting a policy remedy focusing on fixing the student. We fundamentally argue that such an approach may be epistemologically flawed. This hypothetically means asking and answering the wrong question. The questions of what their capability and attitude is distinct, would in our view be distinct from what their capabilities would be. The key hypothetical argument here is that the attainment gap may be driven by who they are rather than their capability. This perspective would be better explored from a phenomenological and qualitative approach as indicated above.

Method

The researchers, accordingly, used qualitative research methods for this investigation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 academics from different faculties (BAME & Caucasian), 3 support staff from the library. Focus groups were conducted with students belonging to the university alumni network and current BAME students. The participants described themselves as Black African (3) Black Caribbean (3) White and Black Caribbean (1) Asian (1). Interviews were opinion-based, therefore subjective in nature. Most interviews were video, and/or audio recorded; some staff chose to complete an electronic document with open-ended questions.

After gaining ethical approval for the study, posters were designed for students interested in the study and another set of posters created for staff willing to share their views on the topic. Posters were distributed to staff members at the university and to students in various classes. At the same time, email invitations were sent to students who identify as BAME on the university campus. Two focus groups were subsequently arranged on campus at convenient times for students. All focus group and interviews were led by two members of staff who identified as BAME and who were independent of the courses those students were enrolled on or had been enrolled on. Questions for discussion in the interviews with academics were developed around their perception of BAME students in relation to White students. The main differences and similarities. Examples of questions include: what is your experience of teaching BAME students (in terms of challenges, engagement, achievement, retention, interaction, classroom participation, intellectual capabilities, attendance, attitude, receptiveness to your teaching, background. What preconceived opinion/ideas did you have about BAME students in the past and was this confirmed? The focus groups lasted approximately 60–120 min and was focus around students' experiences as BAME at the university, exploring the challenges they faced with regards to their performance in classes.

Findings and Analysis

“The numbers do not lie”, and the attainment gap at the university highlighted significant racial disparities that simply cannot be ignored. The study also gave the research team an opportunity, as educators, to better understand the challenges faced by the university ‘BAME’ student communities and how these challenges impact negatively upon attainment providing a platform for some meaningful and uncomfortable conversations on race and attainment.

“It goes back to the figures again? I mean, how accurate are the figures? How much truth is in it? You know what is? How has that data been collected? and I think to myself again and again it's the same thing again every year. When does it actually change? Which is slightly frustrating” (British Asian Male Academic support staff)

Although interviews with university academic and support staff gave us some ideas of what they felt were some of the factors influencing the performance of ‘BAME’ students, the interviews with the students themselves gave a much clearer outline of the factors that negatively influenced them and those that impacted on their attainment based on their experiences. It was good to hear the stories behind the statistics, giving some context to the disparity. Our interviews with all participants, including staff and students, identified barriers for students ranging from lack or little to non-engagement in some programme and/or module activity, students not being able to relate to course content; access to additional academic support; to the impact of social and private lives, and personal circumstances on learning.

By interviewing and talking to a range of support staff, both academic and pastoral, academics and students, we were able to better understand some of the gaps in communication with BAME students, which demonstrates the need for better communication strategies of the support services provided by the university. We were also able to elucidate how these services could make BAME students more comfortable in accessing them.

Here are some of the key observations and findings that came from the research:

‘BAME’ students are not a homogenous group and it was clear that the BAME students all faced different challenges depending on the cultural group they represent. (Black British, Indian, Chinese, black African). The attainment gap is different amongst various cultural and social groups within BAME.

“there's lots of cultural issues there, definitely. When I talk about BAME I mean they predominantly, for us, it probably falls into two groups. We've got the black African students who are from London, and when I talk about them seeking our support, those are primarily students I talk about. There's also students who are from an Asian background, so that might be people whose families are, they're probably second generation Pakistani or Indian; they also I think they're attendance in class is probably better. I see more of them in class. They also do seek our support, not as much as the black students. The international students, I haven't mentioned them. If you want me to talk about them, I can, but they are completely; they are a massive. Complex issue on their own, so their language is a massive problem with those students because bound up with that is culture as well and there were lots and lots of issues around expectation about what it means to be in a British University for those students” (Female Academic Support staff (A))

“That is not me” - Students from some ‘BAME’ cultural groups were reluctant to participate in the project because they felt that the attainment gap does not relate to, reflect, affect or impact them. Most of the students from the ‘BAME’ communities did not know of or even identify with the word ‘BAME’.

There are many influencing factors about attainment, so the past research results are not reliable – it does not mean BAMEs' performance are lower than the rest. When we ask students themselves, do they perceive themselves as BAMEs, some of them got confused – they said: “I am British...my parents are British as well...what should I put down here?...” (Arabic Female Senior Lecturer)

While there is an attainment gap for all ethnic groups, it is consistently worst for Black (Black African/Black Caribbean/Other Black Background) students across the university.

"for me personally, my personal situation is more my home situation. I didn't have the support at home in order to succeed. My mom wasn't sitting down with me and saying, what did you learn in school today? Let's do your homework because she was suffering with depression, she was in bed; so as my step dad; and then I've got 2 Little Sisters and it's more important for me to be funny and jokey and make our situation at home much better than to focus on my studies" (Mixed race British Female student)

There are differences in attitudes to learning between various groups within the 'BAME' student population. This was varied between subject areas.

"Education was considered to be core in my family. Definitely my father and mother had to work hard a lot, like they had to start working at early ages support their families because there was no one else to support them. And so by that as well, I know the value of money, the value of hard earned money, the things that I had to go through to come here and finish my degree", (Asian Male International BAME student)

"education was really important for my parents. They both did the University and everything and they're working as well. So they made sure that we go to classes, attend on time and have good grades, even though it wasn't really same thing for me and my brothers. But, coming here was really a struggle because I know how I came here and I know how they had to work hard from like to have the money to pay for the tuition, fees and living cost" (African Male International BAME student)

There is a very negative impact/effect of commuting on attainment as a relatively large number of our students live outside the town and must travel regularly to attend classes.

"we've got a huge number of commuting students, and I think that really impacts." (Female Academic Support staff (A))

"lots and lots of change from London as you know, students come from Birmingham. So they're already got that on the plate, they'll have family commitments, so some students will say I've gotta get back to London cause I got to look after my family, you know my children, my young brother or sister, or you know they've got their own children. There are many, many students you have jobs, so I think it's those complex lives that all impact on that ability to achieve those grades. (Female Academic Support staff (C))

There was talk about moving towards Decolonisation, Colonisation and Internationalisation of the curriculum.

"about Decolonizing the reading list, for example, and I think it's a really important step. I think we have to acknowledge. That There are different points of view and there are different. Approaches things, and that actually everybody's. Everybody just have an equal opportunity to have that that input. (Female Academic Support staff (C))

"I think yeah, the BAME attainment gap I think is so much more complicated than my reading list. The content of my module, or those things, but those are things that I can at least focus on and concentrate on for me" (British White Male Senior Lecturer (A))

Students cited examples of what they felt was evidence of 'microaggressions' targeted towards them prior to coming to and during their time at the university.

"[...]there's this whole notion of the angry black girl, like if we stand up and say that something's not right. I'm just being difficult" (Black British Female Alumni student)

There is a clear lack of BAME staff representation in most departments, making difficult for BAME students

to identify with potential role models and staff to turn to.

"There's no one who look like me, When I was at uni I started to identify more with my actual background, I can't really say anything to some of these people because they don't really know anyone like me", (Black British Female Alumni student).

"I think if we had more diversity within the lecture based you'd have people to go to when it comes to the stuff that you want to write about as well. And I don't find I could go to any of my lectures. At that time of my degree [...] I did not see a black lecturer in the two years I was there; (Black British Male Alumni student)

Non-engagement in programme and/or module activity – All past (alumni) and present BAME students interviewed, said that they found/find it difficult to relate to the majority of course and module content. In some cases, students highlighted that they passively engaged with some course content just to get through the module.

Some of my BAME students do not actively participate in class/group work as a result of reduced sense of belonging, difficulty in engaging with class work; financial commitments. So most of them are working part time jobs and caring responsibilities for their parents. (Chinese Female Senior Lecturer)

There is/was also the impact of negative prior learning experience on learning that students highlighted.

"I was actually expelled from school and was from a deprived background...There were some teachers that just had, you get one or two chances with them. It's like they think they're giving charity. [...]well keep giving you chances. I will keep giving you opportunities. And I do feel like it was the older white male that would give me a couple of chances and then just write me off. And it was women who especially an older woman as well [...]" (Mixed race British Female student)

"I was in like top set for English top set for loads of things and then my interest completely wavered and because of that it wasn't seen as oh, you know like, why is this happening? is just, she's being lazy, like she doesn't care about her education. I think as well because at that crucial point. There was no sort of support from them. I was just sort of, had the idea of it is what it is" (Black British Female Alumni student)

"I went to a private school, I was never academically gifted and didn't do well on my A levels, I got into university through clearing", (Black British Male Alumni student)

Academic support services not diverse in staff

"What I find really interesting actually, is that older BAME males, like maybe a lot of the older nurses, they will come and see us quite happily, but it's maybe the younger, sort of under 21s where we (pause) and from their perspective I can, we're a bunch of middle-aged white women" (White Female Academic Support staff (C))

Through interviews and conversations with staff, the realisation of the value of 'white privilege' was mentioned on a few occasions.

"this might sound a bit cliché, but I don't think I'm as aware of my white privilege as I could be, you know; and so therefore, I'm used to going into the classroom, a lecture theatre, or whatever, as a historian and being in the majority when it comes to my race and I've had some experiences where I've been, you know, because of studying women's history, where I've been in the minority. I've been like one of only two men in the room where and say twenty women, and I think has given me some insights of what it maybe like to be a black British student, and you're the only one in the class of, and the other 19 students are all white, and I think that's a challenge for me and for may of my by colleagues" (British White Male Senior Lecturer (A))

From our research activities, we were able to identify some activities taking place in some departments and/or programmes that demonstrated a real impact in reducing the attainment gap. However, it is clear that a lot

of work still needs to be done in order to effectively and positively impact the attainment gap across the university. However, the project team has presented findings to various groups including the student union, members of the university leadership team, The University BAME Network, and both university academic and academic support staff at the annual learning and teaching conference.

The research team was encouraged by the honest responses from all our participants, who also highlighted the importance of such open conversations and dialogue, and the way it was conducted. From our research activities, we were able to bring about a deeper awareness of the factors influencing the BAME attainment gap hopefully helping the university to define its present and future

"[...] We are also going to have to adjust our pedagogy, [...]" (Black Caribbean Female Senior Lecturer)

"[...] it's examining every single thing that you do, and thinking, why you might be doing it this way, you know; what's the point of this? Could we do it better? How can we make those small changes that all adds up to a big change? [...]" (British White Female Academic Support staff (A))

"[...] There should be, I think, special attention being given to these people from different backgrounds to make sure that they for example. For this attainment gap to be narrowed, one of the things that should go in again is their attendance in classes and lectures [...]." (Indian Male Senior Lecturer (B))

"I suppose, it's the content of my teaching. What am I doing with the content of my teaching and those things that I can control and make more inclusive to all" (British White Male Senior Lecturer (C))

Discussion

Within the Higher Education sector, there is a growing awareness of issues surrounding the BAME attainment gap. There have been protests for the decolonisation and diversification of the Higher Education curriculum, campaigns for inclusive teaching practices, and a push towards actioning equality, diversity, and inclusion initiatives as a way of tackling structural racism, inequality, and exclusion. The persistence of a BAME attainment gap in UK universities is no longer an issue that the Government and universities can ignore. It is vital to address the factors causing the attainment gap between White and BAME students to achieve equity in Higher Education achievement, and to improve the graduate outcomes for students from BAME backgrounds. However, there is a lack of theory-driven research that makes intelligible the experiences of academic and support staff in devising strategies for tackling the BAME attainment gap. There are also few studies that present the challenges faced by BAME student communities within their university city centre environment and the impact this has on integration and obtaining a 'good degree' (Cotton, et al., 2016).

The current study explored the academic, social, and cultural aspects of the BAME attainment gap from staff and students' perspectives at a post-1992 University in England. It contributes towards an understanding of the potential causes of the BAME attainment gap and develops solutions to tackle the disparity in degree attainment between White and BAME students. Applying the Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale (Deci et al. 1991), the study examined BAME students' understanding and perception of the teaching and learning setting within the University around the themes of relatedness, competence, and autonomy (Deci et al. 1991). This allowed for a thorough examination of whether students' psychological needs were fulfilled during their study at the University.

(1) Psychological needs unmet

According to the findings of this study, almost all of the BAME students studied felt that their psychological

needs had not been met during their studies at the University. Consistent with other studies (e.g. Universities UK and National Union of Students, 2019; Panesar, 2017; Morrison, Machado & Blackburn, 2019), many of the students who participated in the focus group discussions and interviews identified barriers that they believed impacted upon their ability to engage fully with the rigours of university study. Three key factors were frequently mentioned by BAME students as affecting their academic studies: first, experiencing dissatisfaction with the module and course content, second, having caring responsibilities, and third, engaging in part-time employment. All three barriers or factors can be explained through relatedness and autonomy.

(2) Module and course content

Students described how they failed to relate to the course and module content. This lack of connectedness and relatedness to curricula that were taught, for some students, resulted in surface learning practices and limited absorption (Biggs, 1999) as opposed to deep learning (Marton & Säljö 1997). It also culminated in a strategic approach to learning whereby students simply wanted to pass the module and course rather than aspire for a 'good' module grade. This is in line with Ridley (2007) who posits that black students had a higher propensity to use a surface learning approach to studying compared to their white counterparts.

(3) Caring responsibilities

Some students mentioned that caring responsibilities impacted upon their studies as they needed to combine full-time study with home and caring commitments. This resulted in conflicting demands and tension that revealed time related difficulties in navigating parenting and caring responsibilities with academic work. This finding is consistent with a number of studies (e.g. Guastella, 2009, Brooks, 2012, Moreau & Kerner, 2015) that have uncovered the conflicting role obligations of university students with parental and caring responsibilities.

(4) Paid employment while studying at university

The current findings support studies that have explored the cultural, attitudinal, organisational, financial, and structural reasons for non-engagement of BAME students (e.g. Ross, et al., 2018; Smith, 2017; Eboka, 2019). A number of BAME students in this study mentioned balancing academic study with paid employment which placed pressure upon their time and academic studies. This is consistent with studies that note that BAME students are more likely to experience financial hardship during their university studies (e.g. Office for Students, 2019, Unite Students, 2017, Singh, 2020) and are more likely to engage in part time employment (Dhanda, 2009). These constraints can be seen as 'practical incompatibilities' (Frings, Gleibs & Ridley, 2020) which have direct practical implications on students' ability to engage fully in their academic studies.

(5) Sense of belonging

Some students went further to relate the commitments they had outside of their university studies as impacting upon their overall sense of belonging within the university. This is consistent with findings from a number of studies, including Freeman, Anderman and Jensen (2007) who posit that belonging is central and vital to academic success and a students' understanding of the value of academic work.

A number of students reported that not living within a close proximity to the university campus had a direct impact upon their sense of belonging and levels of engagement within their course. Consistent with the current study, Thomas and Jones (2017) assert that commuter students appear to be predominantly from BAME and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. BAME students tend to experience a number of commitments which campus-based students may not face; such as part-time work and having caring responsibilities (Miah, 2019).

Students also felt a heightened sense of isolation whilst studying at the University of Northampton where

some mentioned that they experienced racism, microaggressions and feelings of exclusion before and during their time at the university. There was also some indication that students' feelings of isolation and exclusion had a further impact upon their levels of belonging and integration within their course thus increasing feelings of non-acceptance within the social setting of the university (Thomas, 2012).

Research by Arday (2015) found that a university environment with very few BAME academics risks isolating BAME students. Dhanda (2009) found that increased diversity within academic and support staff might encourage BAME students to engage in academic and pastoral support. As was found in a number of studies relating to the BAME attainment gap (e.g. Stevenson et al., 2019, Smith, 2017), BAME students' sense of belonging is positively correlated with the visibility of academic and support staff that resemble them. BAME role models in relation to lecturers, library staff and guest speakers were viewed as important in terms of generating a sense of identification and trust. Students commented upon the lack of BAME role models in relation to their visibility within the university, the teaching and support team and within the curriculum.

(6) Lack of autonomy

In addition to students feeling unfulfilled in terms of relatedness and also autonomy in relation to teaching and learning practices, students noted that they felt a lack of autonomy in relation to their self-identity and the continued use of 'BAME' by the university. In this respect, many of the activities and initiatives the university holds in order to address the attainment gap refer to ethnic minority students under the rubric of 'BAME'. Many of the students in this study failed to identify with the term 'BAME' which poses a number of implications in terms of student engagement and self-recognition. Most studies examining the BAME attainment gap fail to explore students' understanding and perception of the term 'BAME'. There is, however, a growing body of work within policy (e.g. Bunglawala, 2019) and health (e.g. Matheson, Patterson & Neilson, 2020, Milner & Jumbe, 2000) that questions the usage of the BAME label.

(7) Feelings of competence

Students' feelings of competence were deeply affected by a range of inside and outside university factors, such as prior negative learning experiences, an inability to interact effectively with academic and support staff and the constraints students experienced around time as a result of outside university commitments. Fulfilment of autonomy and competence are vital to maintaining students' intrinsic motivation, and according to many of the accounts of students in this study, both needs were unfulfilled.

Feelings of competence are informed by and conversely informs the quality of the teacher-student relationship (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). In line with other studies (e.g. Housee, 2011, Hobson & Whigham, 2018), students reported a disconnection between themselves and academic and support staff – mainly all of whom were white. This disconnection had a tremendous effect upon students' ability to form good working relationships with staff members which in turn can have long-reaching impacts in terms of educational outcomes (e.g. Pike et al., 2010, Delaney, 2008, Braxton et al. 2008).

(8) Academic and support staff

A positive outcome from the current study was that it created a space for academic and support staff to reflect upon their teaching and support professional practice and pivot between identifying with BAME students' challenges and their own engagement with these students. Research has shown that teachers and lecturers can contribute towards narrowing the BAME attainment gap (e.g. Dhanda 2009, Singh, 2009). The moments of reflection and reflexivity in practice proved insightful to staff in this study and presented some revealing accounts

in terms of current practices.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The fundamental themes that have emerged from the psychological needs as part of the exploration of the academic, social and cultural constructs is embedded in the findings above. The main pointer is the notion that the phenomenon is a function of who students are rather than what they could do. Therefore, a departure from a deficit theoretical approach which results in a student fixing remedy to a cultural capital approach in the analysis implies a rather different remedy at the level prioritisation for learning and teaching would address the problem.

The deficit approach results in the development of student support work packages such as basic IT skills, language support skills programmes that do not pay attention to implied cultural baggage of the students. This also means structures and rules that assume that they have been sufficiently supported and means any further persistence, objections and probing seen as negative attitudes (e.g. Just 'another angry black girl' p.12). The evidence from staff and students indicate that the persistent unchanging statistical outcomes means the problem has not been effectively tackled. Our interpretation of the empirical evidence in the light of the cultural capital approach is that priority in intervention would need to be more in-depth and strategic pedagogic reinvention in areas such as assessment, monitoring and development and delivery of the curriculum (Radulović, et al 2020). This is opposed to the existing light touch support measures offering low level workshops to students.

Furthermore, senior managers and higher education management analysts in UK have acknowledged that 'equality of opportunities' have not been broadly seen as a priority in the system (McCaffery 2010, p. 236). The Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) stated in 2002 that in order to claim a share of the £330 million under the initiative 'Rewarding and Developing staff' higher education institutions needed to show evidence of a human resource develop (HR) strategy that considered equality of opportunities. This is when institutions began to make slight adjustments in their planning in order the garner evidence to submit and claim a share of these funds. What this implies is that if the stakes are high enough policies would be developed to address not only the attainment gap but other social justice predicaments in higher education.

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