

Understanding the 'degree awarding gap' in geography, planning, geology and environmental sciences in UK higher education through peer research

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DOI:

[10.1080/03098265.2021.2007363](https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2021.2007363)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Singh, S, Pykett, J, Kraftl, P, Guisse, A, Hodgson, E, Humelnicu, UE, Keen, N, Kéïta, S, McNaney, N, Menzel, A, N'dri, K, N'goran, KJ, Oldknow, G, Tiéné, R & Weightman, W 2023, 'Understanding the 'degree awarding gap' in geography, planning, geology and environmental sciences in UK higher education through peer research', *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 227-247.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2021.2007363>

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To cite this article: Shivani Singh, Jessica Pykett, Peter Kraftl, Abdourahamane Guisse, Edward Hodgson, Uma Elena Humelnicu, Natasha Keen, Sarah Kéïta, Niamh McNaney, Alice Menzel, Kouadio N'dri, Kouamé Junior N'goran, Grace Oldknow, Raïssa Tiéné & William Weightman (2022): Understanding the 'degree awarding gap' in geography, planning, geology and environmental sciences in UK higher education through peer research, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, DOI: [10.1080/03098265.2021.2007363](https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2021.2007363)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03098265.2021.2007363>



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Published online: 29 Apr 2022.



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RESEARCH PAPER



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School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper draws on critical race theory to analyse testimonies from students that help explain why minoritised ethnic communities studying geography, planning, geology and environmental sciences in the UK, have a lesser chance of being awarded a 'good' degree (i.e. an upper second- or first-class), in comparison to White British people. There are very low levels of ethnic diversity across these subject areas. We conducted peer research, including student-led semi-structured interviews at one British university over a five-month period (involving 38 participants in total). Our analysis explores the processes of minoritisation owing to cultures of Whiteness. These relate to teaching and learning spaces, off-campus encounters, university societies, student representation/committees, social interactions, part-time employment and caring responsibilities. We conclude with a call for action to reframe and disassemble the 'degree awarding gap' through student and staff co-design of policies and actions that will not only confront, but also subvert exclusionary cultures of Whiteness in its various manifestations across university life.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 October 2021
Accepted 13 November 2021

KEYWORDS

Degree awarding gap; ethnicity; international students; minoritisation; student experiences; Whiteness

Introduction

The 'degree awarding gap'¹ is calculated by subtracting the percentage of non-White communities who are awarded an upper second- or first-class degree in the UK, from the percentage of White British people who secure these classifications. Although this phenomenon has been extensively recognised in countless subjects, it is still under-researched in geography, planning, geology and environmental sciences, where there is a lack of ethnic diversity among both students and staff (see Table 1). The gap within these disciplines for 2019–2020 was 7.7% for UK-domiciled undergraduate students, but may be around 18.9% if we include international undergraduate students (EU and non-EU) (see Table 2). In spite of

CONTACT Shivani Singh  SX5530@student.bham.ac.uk  School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK

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Table 1. Ethnic representation of students and staff in all subjects compared to geography, environmental studies, planning and earth sciences (2019–2020)^{2,3}.

Ethnic group ⁴	First degree qualifiers		Postgraduates (taught) ⁵		'Teaching-only' & 'teaching and research' staff	
	All subjects	Geography, environmental studies, planning & earth sciences	All subjects	Geography, environmental studies, planning & earth sciences	All subjects	Geography, environmental studies, planning & earth sciences
White	75.2% (253,830)	89.7% (8,075)	75.9% (236,320)	87% (2,600)	84.3% (132,185)	90.5% (4,015)
Black	7.0% (23,525)	1.7% (150)	8% (24,830)	3.0% (90)	2.4% (3,755)	1.1% (50)
Asian	12.0% (40,670)	4.6% (410)	10.7% (33,225)	4.8% (145)	8.8% (13,770)	5.2% (230)
Mixed	4.2% (14,335)	3.6% (325)	3.5% (11,060)	4.2% (125)	2.3% (3,560)	1.8% (80)
Other	1.6% (5,345)	0.4% (40)	1.9% (6,065)	1.0% (30)	2.2% (3,460)	1.4% (60)
Total	100% (337,705)	100% (9,000)	100% (311,500)	100% (2,990)	100% (156,730)	100% (4,435)

such racialised outcomes, there has been a shortage of solutions and those proposed are accused of 'virtue-signalling' and being ineffective (Ahmed, 2006; Ahmed, 2017; Bhopal, 2020).

We employ the expression 'degree awarding gap' to illustrate how institutions can be complicit in inequalities across higher education. Previous research has identified that a Eurocentric curriculum could dissuade students of colour from imparting their perspectives. There have been concerns about potentially discriminatory styles of assessment and marking and insufficient support from scholars who can be biased (National Union of Students [NUS], 2011). Others have highlighted scant role models (Dhillon et al., 2018) in addition to some students' isolation/lack of belonging (Thomas, 2012). Barriers to financial assistance can result in engagement with term-time employment to offset expenses of the bare necessities (Crockford et al., 2015; Hordósy et al., 2018). Increasing attention is being paid to the burden of high fees for international students (Brooks & Waters, 2021), and inadequate guidance when transitioning to British universities (Bunce et al., 2019; NUS, 2011).

These issues can be hidden where the focus is instead on 'degree attainment gaps'. Such thinking follows a deficit model in which non-White communities are targeted through policies centred on mentoring, elevating aspirations and widening participation. This kind of 'rationality' may reproduce stigma and has thus been identified as an obstacle to tackling educational inequalities (Berry & Loke, 2011; Pilkington, 2018; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Universities UK [UUK], 2019).

Despite decades of research, activism and policy, there has been little success in closing the 'degree awarding gap' since the 1990s (Warmington et al., 2018). Between 2013 and 2015, Desai (2017) calculated the gap in human and physical geography degrees for UK-domiciled students to be 11.5% (p. 321). Whilst this has shrunk in recent years, hinting at some positive adjustment, additional measures are still necessary to reduce inequalities in higher education for several reasons. Firstly, causes of annual shifts in degree awarding statistics have not yet been grasped. Secondly, the correlation of quantitative data with

Table 2. Ethnicity of first degree qualifiers achieving a ‘good’ degree in geography, environmental studies, planning and earth sciences (2019–2020)⁶.

Ethnic group	First degree			Percentage of ‘good’ honours	‘Degree awarding gap’
	‘Good’ honours	‘Bad’ honours ⁷	Total		
UK-domiciled White	7,300	780	8,075	90.40%	0.00%
UK-domiciled minority ethnic⁸	765	160	925	82.70%	7.70%
Black British	100	50	150	66.70%	23.70%
Asian British	350	60	410	85.40%	5.0%
Mixed British	285	40	325	87.70%	2.70%
Other British	30	10	40	75.00%	15.40%
Unknown (proxy for non-UK-domiciled)⁹	935	245	1,180	79.20%	11.2%
Total	9,000	1,185	10,185	-	-

the reported realities of students of colour needs to be better understood. For instance, UK-domiciled White students are 5% more likely to acquire a ‘good’ degree relative to Asians, but 23.7% more likely in comparison with those who are Black – almost a fivefold jump (see Table 2). Further inequalities are probable in relation to the educational outcomes of international students. Finally, it is worth reflecting that within a non-discriminatory education system, the ‘degree awarding gap’ should be near to zero. The ambition to eradicate the gap should therefore be allocated greater precedence as a policy goal.

Educational sociologists and cultural theorists have argued for more attention to be paid to the historical and contemporary contours of the “unearned advantages” of being White (Saad, 2020, p. 68), but for Gillborn (2019), colour-blindness has become a serious problem. This is the political imperative to treat people from different ethnic groups as if they begin by occupying an equal social status, which is based on the assumption that there is a ‘level playing field’. Where there exists colour-blindness in education, this carries an assertion “(in effect if not intent) that the experiences of minoritised [ethnic] groups are not important enough to be considered or acted on” (p. 114).

In investigating the potential cultural and institutional drivers of the ‘degree awarding gap’, we share Hall’s (1992) assertion that “we are all . . . *ethnically* located” (p. 258). Ethnicity can be understood as a “multi-faceted phenomenon based on physical appearance, subjective identification, [ancestry,] cultural and religious affiliation . . . and social exclusion”. It is unhelpful to stipulate the core components of any ethnicity in advance, chiefly because these will be contextual (Berthoud et al., 1997, p. 13). For instance, the wording ‘minority ethnic’¹⁰ encapsulates individuals who comprise the majority populations globally but find themselves pigeonholed as ‘minority’ communities in the West (Bhavnani et al., 2005). We therefore favour the term ‘minoritised ethnic’ which illuminates the processes by which specific ethnic groups come to be marginalised.

It must be noted that ethnicity differs from race as the latter has historically been associated with the subjugation of non-White populations by portraying their bodies as inferior in the pursuit of economic exploitation (i.e. racialisation) (Bhavnani et al., 2005). We therefore find it useful to draw on critical race theory to analyse testimonies from students that help explain why minoritised ethnic communities

studying geography, planning, geology and environmental sciences in the UK, have a lesser chance of being awarded a ‘good’ degree (i.e. an upper second- or first-class), in comparison to White British students. Critical race theory underlines the distinction between Whiteness – a socially constructed ethnic category – and White privilege – a form of racial inequality – to foreground structures that shape race relations. This distinction draws attention to a combination of practices of underrepresentation, disadvantage and discrimination, which set in motion the minoritisation of specific ethnic communities in higher education (Arday, 2018). Even ‘inclusive’ institutional initiatives can in this sense be instrumental in mimicking White privilege; they may fall short of undermining asymmetry in power, offer an illusion of action and eclipse the requirement for fundamental behavioural and cultural change (Bhopal & Pitkin, 2020). Following a review of literature about ethnicity in geographical education and a summary of the methodology, our analysis explores the processes of minoritisation owing to cultures of Whiteness. These relate to teaching and learning spaces, off-campus encounters, university societies, student representation/committees, social interactions, part-time employment and caring responsibilities.

Ethnicity in geographical education

To exemplify how geographical education is implicated in the extension of White privilege, one need only look at its colonial histories and presences. Maddrell (2009) and Driver (2000) have documented the Royal Geographical Society’s role in 19th century colonial expansion, and the discipline has been designated as “the most racialised of scholarly pursuits” (Bonnett & Nayak, 2003, p. 300). For several decades there has been scholarship dedicated to anti-racist geographies (Ahmet, 2020; Dwyer & Bressey, 2008; Jackson, 1987; Price, 2015). Geographers have identified Whiteness in the contemporary era as an “ordinary power to enjoy social privilege by controlling dominant values and institutions and, in particular, by *occupying space* within a segregated social landscape” (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000, p. 393). This segregated social landscape is as relevant in the world that geographers research as it is in the spaces in which geographical knowledge is produced.

The privileging of White Anglo-American or White European consciousness has been disputed by critical geographers (Peake, 2011; Pulido, 2018) and there are now numerous geographers actively working on the decolonisation of geographical knowledge (Esson et al., 2017; Noxolo et al., 2008). This is neither a “philanthropic process of ‘helping’ the at-risk ... [nor a] generic term for struggle against oppressive conditions”, but a means to facilitate the “repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (Esson et al., 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 21). For example, McLean et al. (2019) invited Indigenous people to be guest lecturers and perform welcome ceremonies for non-Indigenous students to rethink resource governance in Australia. Yet it has been observed that an emphasis on decolonising knowledge can at times distract from the institutional and structural inequalities that persist; it fosters awareness but fails to drive transformative action (Daley, 2020; Esson et al., 2017; Johnson, 2020).

Nevertheless, Western-centrism can easily affect the wellbeing of students of colour. In an analysis of earth sciences textbooks in 2008 and 2020, geologists in photographs were depicted as White 15 times more than those from non-White backgrounds (Bush & Mattox, 2020, p. 3) which can hinder feelings of belonging (Huntoon et al., 2015). Hughes (2016) reports on the anxieties associated with attending field courses among first-year British students from minoritised ethnic groups, who are less likely than their White counterparts to be living with other students or to have experienced field courses before. Geographers have also divulged disturbing accounts of microaggressions, or varieties of (occasionally unconscious) discriminatory, derogatory, delegitimising behaviour and negative slights which are targeted at people of colour (Joshi et al., 2015). These are “difficult to identify” and “even more difficult to challenge” (Johnson & Joseph-Salisbury, 2018, p. 146).

Whilst there are clear differences between international and UK-domiciled people of colour (Brooks & Waters, 2011; Madge et al., 2009; Scheyvens et al., 2003), the findings of this research suggest some common struggles. Such convergence is partly due to the fact that both groups are non-White. However, their troubles do manifest in different ways depending on their individual position (for instance, nationality, culture, religion, class and gender), which we try to tease out in order to accurately gauge the cumulative impacts of structural racism. This denotes how singular issues and incidents (regardless of whether these are conspicuous or inconspicuous) conjoin to reproduce a ‘culture of Whiteness’. We build here on emerging literature about racialised curriculum materials, field work customs (Giles et al., 2020), classroom interactions and extra-curricular situations (Byron, 2020), to explore how such practices can make the ‘degree awarding gap’ all too inevitable.

Methods

Three authors (Singh, Pykett and Kraftl) launched the study in 2018–2019 as part of their work to take action on equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) across their university department (as student and staff members of its EDI committee). This project had the purpose of engaging students with the pressing questions highlighted above. The committee had developed an action plan to promote gender equality by means of the Athena SWAN Charter but the representation of both undergraduates and academic staff from minoritised ethnic communities, particularly UK-domiciled was not commensurate with that of our diverse city. Although the university had recently received a Bronze Award through the Race Equality Charter and initiated a handful of mentoring schemes for individuals from under-represented backgrounds, we aimed to develop a strategy (from this research paper) at the everyday level in which we interact as staff, colleagues and students.

Key to our study was forging an equilibrium between local action and senior-level pledges against a backdrop of the increasing marketisation of higher education which has repositioned students as consumers of products (Bunce et al., 2016; Dobozy, 2007). We aimed to develop a student-staff partnership (Healey et al., 2014) which acknowledges that everyone has something they can bring to the table: academics have (situated)

expertise in the modules they teach as well of university systems of decision-making, whilst students have extensive experience of learning and are embedded in the cultures and sub-cultures of university life (Healey & Healey, 2019).

Following approval by the university's ethics committee, we used a peer interviewing method to engage students with the objectives. Peer interviewing, or recruitment of recognised community members as researchers, is pursued where the vision is to reach out to marginalised groups (Warr et al., 2011) so as to yield 'insider' knowledge (Kuebler & Hausser, 1997). Benefits include access to participants through snowballing, shared vocabulary, high levels of trust and rapport, encouraging dialogue in the communities being researched. In order to avoid skewed sampling through friendship groups, student engagement officers and the first author sought minoritised ethnic and White British individuals via emails, posters and announcements in lectures. A limitation of the method of peer interviewing is that testimonies may have been swayed by peer interviewers' normative perspectives (Price & Hawkins, 2002).

The first and second authors reviewed literature on the 'degree awarding gap' in order to assemble a sequence of semi-structured questions. These were refined by 13 peer interviewers who eventually interviewed 1 to 3 students each (there were 29 interviewees in total) (see Table 3). Participants were compensated for their time and emotional labour with a voucher. Peer interviewers received training on positionality, modes of questioning, attentiveness, ethical procedures and data management.

It was vital to avoid placing the responsibility for tackling race inequality only in the hands of students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds (Ahmed, 2007), which is a perceived drawback of peer interviewing. The aim of using this method was to position students as experts in their own situated cultures and relationships. The academic authors adopted the role of "always learning", which is needed to rebuild social connections in a way that hinges on more ethical relations (McLean et al., 2019, p. 123). After the interviews were transcribed, Singh, Pykett and Kraftl co-developed a thematic framework based on 'in vivo' coding. Peer interviewers were subsequently given an opportunity to respond to the analysis through email which has enabled them to formalise substantive contributions. They are recognised here as co-authors. Nearly all were in their final year and had departed the university shortly after data collection, so despite their investment in various stages of the project, there is a risk that they may still construe their partnerships with staff as momentary, possibly fracturing collective ownership of the research agenda (Warr et al., 2011). Nevertheless, many could not envisage ways to markedly revise the paper and felt our interpretations were grounded in the evidence they had produced.

Results and discussion

As a whole, the peer interviews generated a complex and sometimes contradictory picture of students' experiences. This is not surprising as minoritised ethnic communities are heterogeneous and other aspects of identity intersect to produce individual experiences (such as nationality, culture, religion, class and gender). Nonetheless, four overarching themes emerged: disillusionment with teaching and learning; racist

Table 3. Research participant backgrounds¹¹.

Self-reported characteristics	Peer interviewers	Peer interviewees
Gender		
Male	38%/5	59%/17
Female	62%/8	41%/12
Permanent address		
UK	54%/7	52%/15
International	46%/6	48%/14 – including 1 exchange student
Level of study		
Undergraduate	85%/11	90%/26
Postgraduate	15%/2	10%/3
Ethnicity		
Asian	0%/0	24%/7 – including 2 Chinese, 4 Indian and 1 Other
Black	46%/6 – African	41%/12 – including 10 African, 1 Caribbean and 1 Other
Mixed	0%/0	4%/1 – White and Indian
White	54%/7 – including 1 Other	31%/9 – including 2 Other
Total	13	29

encounters off campus; little involvement in student societies and structures of representation; and disappointing social interactions, part-time employment and caring responsibilities.

Teaching and learning practices

The interviews enabled a more detailed and nuanced picture of how race-based differences (and racism) unfolded and were sustained through ‘micro-spaces’ of the higher education learning environment: how, for instance, students learned the conventions of teaching and learning, what they could expect in terms of interactions and developing working relationships with other students and staff, and incidents where these relationships were limited or potentially exclusionary. Hence, the conventions of the classroom might reflect conditions of White privilege (Esson et al., 2017; Pilkington, 2018).

The only opinion I heard was from a certain segment of society which was White and middle-class and sometimes working-class but upper working-class mostly ... It was an echo chamber ... Someone would raise their hand and they would just feed back with the same thing and I found it so hard to speak up and say actually ‘I disagree with this’. (Participant 7: South Asian, Muslim, female, 18-21, secondary carer for younger siblings, home UG, Geography BA)

In human geography when we’ve done ... a discussion about ... ethnic minorities ... I do feel a bit, err ... Because I’m so outnumbered ... can I really say what I want to say? Because I don’t know whether anyone will really understand, and most likely they probably won’t. (Participant 8: Mixed – White and South Asian, no religion, male, 18-21, home UG, Geography BSc)

Such hesitancy can be seen as a technique for “fitting into the dominant culture [rather] than ... interrogating that culture for the ways ... it is complicit in the social and cultural reproduction of exclusion” (Burke, 2015, p. 22), and can be even more pronounced for international students whose first language is not English, as several (mostly East Asian) students vocalised struggles with replicating the communicative ‘etiquette’.

People speak like so quick, and then people comes in like so quickly . . . I just don't have that pace to catch up. Or like I can't process what I want to say as quick as others do. (Participant 27: East Asian, no religion, male, 18-21, international UG, Planning BSc)

These unspoken rules can be recognised as habits, defined as “mental and physical patterns of engagement with the world that operate without conscious attention or reflection” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 4). Such habits tend to be formed through constant interactions of bodies and the environment and could thus be reinforced by the relative homogeneity of learners and educators in spaces where minoritised ethnic groups are under-represented. Unconscious habits can shape how exams/assignments are undertaken and marked, often in ways that are invisible. International students, irrespective of their ethnicity or nationality, expressed particular difficulty in familiarising themselves with the “pedagogic languages” of British universities. Meanwhile, most educators based in UK higher education are not expected to have an understanding of the educational systems their international students leave behind. On the contrary, it has been argued that the background of international students is sometimes deemed to be a complication that must be overcome single-handedly (Madge et al., 2015, p. 10).

In my country . . . we know . . . how the teacher thinks . . . [in the UK] you think you produce a good work, and it comes . . . with, sometimes, 60% and you thought that you would have, like, more . . . I don't know if this is related to the background, but I think sometimes, it is, this is the problem . . . what are, teachers . . . expecting from us? (Participant 11: Black African, Muslim, male, 18-21, international UG, Geology BSc)

For a long time, people of colour have been framed as the ‘(un)known’ (Oswin, 2020; Said, 1978) rather than the ‘knower’ (Johnson, 2018), which “does not require an opening of the process of theorising to . . . [their] wisdom” (Dowler & Sharp, 2001, p. 170). After all, it is the academic who determines what story is civilised and what is not (Tuck & Yang, 2014). When there are attempts to break the mould, it is highly probable that hegemony fails to hear (Oswin, 2020; Spivak, 2010).

Teaching and learning practices can additionally be permeated with a culture where everyone must seek what is ‘new’ which suggests that ‘others’ need to forget past injustices in connection with the present and future (Gerrard et al., 2017). Instead, they must “enter the ‘light’ of the Western ‘teaching machine’” which is injurious to their subjectivities (Madge et al., 2015, p. 4).

What you might think is important is not what the lecturer will think . . . is important . . . what you have to do to get the first-class [is] you have to . . . get something new but . . . what new things do you want me to get? (Participant 14: Black African, Christian (other denomination), male, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

Epistemologies that centre minoritised ethnic communities were therefore perceived to be one means of addressing these concerns:

It's hard to keep people of colour motivated when they feel so excluded from a space . . . they want to be part of . . . having that non-Eurocentric view on geography is something that relates to people of colour . . . all the people I know who have taken geography in this uni . . . who are people of colour, the main reason they took it was because they wanted to speak about issues of geography that have affected our identity. (Participant 9: South Asian, Sikh, female, 18-21, home UG, Geography BA)

More emancipatory pedagogies enable both students and staff to interrogate what they know and how they know, including the multiple ways they are affected by or implicated in post-colonial relations and how they may mobilise any new insights in their personal and professional lives (Styres, 2018). There had been numerous occasions where students experienced microaggressions from educators and unsurprisingly felt unable to seek assistance from them:

I said my name and the lecturer couldn't say it, and he was like, 'Huh?' but he didn't bother to say it again . . . remembering someone's name is . . . really important, so that a person feels confident to . . . talk to you outside of the teaching sessions. (Participant 1: Black African, Muslim, female, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

I could feel eyes on me literally in first year . . . [the lecturer] was saying something about British Muslims and looked straight at me and [then] everyone looked at me. (Participant 7: South Asian, Muslim, female, 18-21, secondary carer for younger siblings, home UG, Geography BA)

To argue that habits of bias are unconscious constructs a risky situation in which people feel it is futile to strive to alter them. In contrast, to say that all unconscious habits can be reflected upon obscures the resistance of psychical and bodily habits when there are attempts to change (Sullivan, 2006). Reforming habits of thought can entail bringing shameful practices to consciousness. For instance, many scholars have suggested that the dismantling of White privilege requires deep and sustained interrogation of the benefits that arise from it, and the giving up of those forms that deny people of colour their humanity. This is widely acknowledged to cause discomfort and unease (DiAngelo, 2018; Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Esson & Last, 2020; Saad, 2020). Alternatively, some think the best way to derail a 'bad' habit is through institutional change, in the hope that this will generate a 'good' habit in its place (Sullivan, 2006). We feel a combination of the two would be most effective, which was also recognised by students.

For example, in addition to diversifying the student body, many felt that increasing the intake of minoritised ethnic members of staff would be a positive change. Such staff were perceived to be able to confront race head-on in ways that do not distress students of colour, to have greater empathy and to provide a source of motivation to succeed. These advantages give rise to inherent tensions: on the one hand, such educators are rendered as "one in a million", an exotic token, an institutional symbol, a mentor . . . [a] confidante" (Mirza, 2017, p. 39) and a "good ancestor" who can sow the seeds of hope (Saad, 2020, p.3); but on the other hand, these roles have been identified as a "constant drain of energy" (Lorde, 2017, p. 95).

It would be . . . easier to discuss . . . race . . . if there was people [academics] of colour . . . who would articulate [it] so then even I would feel comfortable talking about it and then White people would feel comfortable talking about it. (Participant 9: South Asian, Sikh, female, 18-21, home UG, Geography BA)

It is always encouraging to see somebody who's the same colour as you, comes from the same background as you, because then it gives you that . . . [someone] who can . . . demonstrate that, yes, it is possible . . . as a young Black man to achieve. (Participant 26: Other Black, spiritual, male, 18-21, home UG, Planning BSc)

If reconstitution of teaching and learning practices does not happen, many minoritised ethnic students will continue to impute the burden of contending with the ‘degree awarding gap’ to themselves, thus overlooking how institutional practices are exacerbating inequalities.

Say we’ve got Black people with low attainment, they should not be targeted to get better. They should do it individually. (Participant 25: Black Caribbean, no religion, male, 25+, disability, home UG, Planning BSc)

This is described by Pyke (2010) as a form of subjugation, whereby minoritised ethnic communities identify with the powerful by subscribing to the myth of meritocracy which pins them down. Gilman (1986) calls this a “classic double bind situation” because people who are oppressed are promised that they can evade their ‘otherness’ by downplaying their differences, which tempts them into endorsing the very rules that demarcate them as the ‘other’ (p. 2).

Racist encounters off campus

Only Black African international students disclosed being subjected to direct racism, which although was uncommon, still occurred fleetingly online and during field courses, hence raising the question of whether it was fully possible to discharge an institutional level response in spaces off campus. Examples were recounted of racist incidents which bore the hallmarks of a colonial mindset. One concerning issue was when a White British student expressed his view that Black African international students were offered places at UK universities as a gesture of Western charity:

Within our school [university department], we have a . . . Facebook group . . . people were complaining about £9,000 . . . [for] tuition fees, and we [international students] were like, ‘Oh, but we pay . . . double’ . . . somebody was like . . . the tuition fees . . . we pay is from donation . . . I think he meant . . . we’re poor people . . . People who give donations . . . are mainly European, or American . . . And we as African[s] are usually taking money from them to help us. So when he meant donation . . . he used the fact this is happening in Africa to maybe insult me, so . . . that’s why I took it . . . badly, and that’s what it meant to me. (Participant 15: Black African, Muslim, female, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

Describing what is a highly competitive scholarship as a European ‘donation’ diminishes the worthiness of the recipient from earning it based on their merit. The word ‘donation’ is used in an ultra-sinister fashion to suggest that poverty is acceptable for Black Africans and indeed, they are only within the walls of the university because of Western benevolence. However, Africa’s under-development has been a consequence of the West’s role in extracting the surplus generated by Black African labour, out of Black African resources for Western development, which makes viable the very act of ‘donating’ (Rodney, 1972).

Another incident was recalled which is reminiscent of one of the severest forms of the colonial regime: punishing Black Africans who do not respond to the “tick of the clock” (Mazrui & Mphande, 1994, p. 98):

I think we were mapping in . . . Pembrokeshire? Some of the students really did not understand the instructions, so some came back . . . late. So when seeing . . . a Black student, African student, who came around half past three . . . one of the home students on the bus

just shouted, ‘Fucking Africans’ . . . and then later, at four pm . . . [chuckles] a home student just showed up . . . When the incident got reported . . . the module leader came in [and said] ‘There’s [a] formal way where the university will . . . investigate, and if it’s come out that it’s really happened, then they will take like formal actions’. Or, maybe the student decided to go . . . [the] informal way, which means accepting the apologies from the . . . home students. And I think . . . the international students decided to . . . take the informal way and the home student apologised. (Participant 2: Black African, Christian, male, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

Racism is often conceptualised as a ‘good = not racist and bad = racist’ binary and the perpetrator here felt compulsion to highlight his ‘good = not racist’ intentions: “He explained . . . he didn’t mean it in that way” (Participant 1: Black African, Muslim, female, 22–24, international UG, Geology BSc). Because the perpetrator’s very character is at risk of being tainted, he becomes bent on defending it, for fear of reprisal by an institution that prides itself on equality, diversity and inclusion. If the perpetrator insists that he is not racist, there is a perception that no further action is necessary, demoting the impact of the act on his victims who become silenced: “My friend was very upset” (Participant 13: Black African, Christian, male, 22–24, international UG, Geology BSc) (DiAngelo, 2018).

Spaces beyond the classroom: student societies and student-staff fora

Formal (and less formal) opportunities for belonging within the department come in the shape of student societies. These cater for the main degrees (geography, planning, geology and environmental sciences), so run slightly differently, but all tend to facilitate the formation of friendships which can lead to support when needed. The influence of the student guild and of student engagement officers means that there are various regulations all societies should follow (including those of equality, diversity and inclusion).

Nevertheless, all apart from a handful of minoritised ethnic students were highly critical of a specific version of British culture which seemed to characterise the societies, i.e. consuming alcohol (excessively), which has been stereotypically conflated with a student lifestyle. This ignores the variability of drinking culture (some may do so moderately) and is at odds with the values of an increasing proportion of young people who do not drink (Ng Fat et al., 2018; Thurnell-Read et al., 2018). Nonetheless, it has been noted that non-drinkers are urged to “reject their inferior cultures [and/or religions] and become absorbed as much as possible in the superior culture of . . . British [societies]”, otherwise they face exclusion (Hall, 1995, p. 250).

Last time they did . . . is it bar golf? Where you have to go from bar to bar and just drink . . . We don’t drink like . . . British people. (Participant 12: Black African, Christian, female, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

When we came in the first year, we were introduced to two societies . . . we wanted to join . . . but the problem was . . . the activities that they were doing . . . going into pubs drinking . . . but when you are not used to this . . . culture, it’s quite difficult to accommodate. (Participant 24: Black African, Christian (Roman Catholic), female, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

A few minoritised ethnic students also attributed non-participation in extra-curricular spaces to the inflated cost of membership. In spite of such claims, there was an inclination amongst primarily White students to ‘correct’ the analysis of people of colour by accentuating the inclusivity and greatness of societies:

The society has gotten a lot better at doing sober socials ... I don't think there's any bias within [the society] against ethnic minorities ... The team will always have a student rep on it who sits on the council. Um, it's always very diverse, we've got males and females, all the socials we do include people who want to drink or don't want to drink, people ... who like sports, who don't ... in terms of ... inclusivity, I think it does quite a good job. (Participant 29: White, female, home UG, Geography with year abroad BSc)

I've done [the society] ball and did some events and sports with them [in] first year. I think it's run ... really well. (Participant 4: White, no religion, male, 18-21, home UG, Geography BSc)

The university has a really good provision of ... nights out and things to do. (Participant 5: White, no religion, male, 18-21, home UG, Environmental Sciences BSc)

Whilst such readings were deemed to be sincere by one peer interviewer, scholars have argued that when race is debated with frankness, White fragility can immediately surface. This refers to “defensiveness ... certitude and other forms of pushback”. These are not natural reactions, but “social forces” that inhibit the acquisition of knowledge required to improve relationships and thus alter the racial paradigm (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 8). The dominant group's construction of a reality where they are acting in everyone's best interests may have impelled some people of colour to internalise full responsibility for their dissociation from extra-curricular spaces.

I did not sign up for it [the society] during the open day ... Well, maybe it's ... poor from me ... like this is a poor judgment from me. (Participant 2: Black African, Christian, male, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

People of colour stated that their voices were barely acknowledged within the department. Interestingly, scarcely any conceived of tools for improving representation on their courses (i.e. beyond extra-curricular spaces). This is meaningful in itself, both a by-product of the very small number of minoritised ethnic students enrolled on geography and allied disciplines, and a collective sentiment that they would not feel at ease in such forums. Ahmed (2017) suggests that people of colour can feel frustrated by the emotional labour of pursuing institutional change because they face a ‘brick wall’; the object thrown at the brick wall may splinter, but the brick wall rests intact through its hardness.

I don't think ... we have that much voice because we are from the minority and ... things don't change even though we voiced them. (Participant 1: Black African, Muslim, female, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

Disappointing social interactions, part-time employment and caring responsibilities

For some minoritised ethnic students, their social lives at university were not as vibrant as they had anticipated. This is problematic if strong and large social networks facilitate the interchange of skills, insights and attitudes (Field, 2005), all of which have been suggested as important factors in academic progress (Stuart et al., 2009).

There was a consensus that the White British cohort responded to minoritised ethnic (especially international) students' attempts to initiate conversations with apathy. Typically, migrants are encumbered with the task of integrating but such a narrative reverses the real direction of existing discrimination:

They [White British students] don't even talk with us ... I might say 'Hi', they'll just say 'Hi' ... and then if I say, 'How are you doing today?' they will say, 'Fine.' and that's it. It stops there ... So, that's how I see it ... I don't want to bother them, so I don't insist. (Participant 15: Black African, Muslim, female, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

In her critical philosophy of race, Sullivan (2006) asserts that in a racist society, people of colour are prevented from “direct[ing] their transactions with the world in significant ways” (p. 146); instead, they are obliged to acquiesce to the transactions that are thrust upon them. Such everyday encounters may have made them interpret their own views, interests, skills, experiences and backgrounds as inferior: “I don't have anything to talk about” (Participant 23: East Asian, no religion, female, 18–21, exchange UG, Geology BSc)/“I don't have that much to share” (Participant 27: East Asian, no religion, male, 18–21, international UG, Planning BSc). This compelled some minoritised ethnic students to retreat to their homes, so the space of the campus (which was at their White counterparts' disposal), became less accessible. Sullivan's account describes a restricted sense of being in space. We found that this was heightened for international students, whose pillars of support are located in faraway locations. To modify this type of bodily schema, one must attend to the relationship between “environments, psyches, and bodies” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 108).

We don't do the same activities ... the boys in my class ... they play soccer, and I don't ... The way they talk, the way I talk, isn't the same, they can use expression[s] I don't understand and when I finish lectures I just come home. (Participant 22: Black African, Muslim, male, 18-21, international UG, Geology BSc)

When you're like in this type of country, alone ... far from your parents ... especially if you don't have any friends ... the main barrier would be the ... emotional ... state of your mind ... most international ... students ... I know have ... experienced some depression, some stress ... when you're ... not happy, you won't [be] able to ... achieve your goal. (Participant 15: Black African, Muslim, female, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

Some minoritised ethnic students simply did not have time to socialise owing to other pressures in life, such as part-time employment and caring commitments. Students living with their parents and those from non-White and lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to undertake paid labour during term-time; this matters as working in excess of 15 hours per week means that the chances of attaining an upper second-class degree or above are reduced by one third, relative to students who do not partake in waged work (Callender, 2008, p. 373). Yet life without a job was simply not feasible for some

individuals in this project, as their relatives could not subsidise personal outgoings including degree fees. Some struggling parents even relied on their offspring to contribute to household expenditures.

I would say the free time that I have in . . . a week, I used it mostly to work . . . like having a part-time job . . . to be honest, I don't have . . . an active social life . . . I need the money . . . because my master[']s degree is not for funding so I needed to start saving quite early. (Participant 14: Black African, Christian (other denomination), male, 22-24, international UG, Geology BSc)

In terms of domestic responsibilities, carers from minoritised ethnic communities (57%) are more likely than those from White backgrounds (47%) to provide support for at least 20 hours per week (NHS Information Centre for Health and Social Care, 2010, p. 40). Among young people of working age, high rates of care are found in Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups. It is also known that women spend more time on unpaid labour than men (Buckner & Yeandle, 2006; Kan & Laurie, 2018).

Our kinship care is a lot, so for us . . . you kind of stay within the family home until you get married . . . I cook, I clean, I take care of general things in the house . . . My parents work a number of jobs, I have younger siblings. I have a one-year-old brother I help look after, so . . . the night before my exam last week, I was bathing my brother. It takes me half an hour to bathe him, another half an hour to put him to sleep. Now I had to do that because my mum is exhausted. And my other sisters had work, so they were exhausted, and I had an exam the next day. Well there's little understanding of that. (Participant 7: South Asian, Muslim, female, 18-21, secondary carer for younger siblings, home UG, Geography BA)

Across the UK population, low-income households spend more hours on domestic duties (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2016) and in monetary terms, people of colour are much poorer than those who are White (ONS, 2014; ONS, 2020). However, many traditional South Asian households also value collectivism, which is perceived to promote resilience but requires everyone to play a part (Chadda & Deb, 2013). Indeed, in their cultures and religions, parents are often revered by their children, who are reminded early on that without their mother and father, they would not have entered this world, been raised and educated in preparation for a good life. Out of love and duty, children repay this debt to them through selfless service which constitutes the preferred model of care for such communities (Brijnath, 2012). This debt is augmented for those whose (grand)parents migrated from Asia and Africa to the West due to the political turmoil linked to decolonisation, which entailed leaving behind family and possessions to rebuild another life from scratch, often in hostile circumstances. These intersections of class, culture, gender, religion, race and history, which exert a strong influence on the lives of young people of colour, need to be considered more deeply in higher education policies and practices.

Conclusion

The 'degree awarding gap' is a growing concern across UK universities as elsewhere, but there is a danger that institutions attempt to explain them away without responding to how Whiteness reproduces racial inequality. Benchmarking of universities against

national performance standards through scrutiny of statistics and the Race Equality Charter, can be an important step in acknowledging the problem, raising awareness and planning action. However, the implementation of targeted interventions (such as peer-to-peer support) may lock minoritised ethnic students into a deficit model. Through a more detailed picture of the experiences of a diverse student body, we can begin to see how minoritisation takes place in a multitude of ways in higher education settings, and how the implicit and explicit politics of transformation need to be recognised. This paper has begun to address the need for much stronger evidence on mechanisms operating behind the 'degree awarding gap'. In particular, there is a need to further inspect assignment and marking processes. It would also be worthwhile to disaggregate the data to explore why the 'degree awarding gap' is substantial for certain minoritised ethnic communities.

In this study, interviewers and interviewees from a variety of ethnic backgrounds shared a multiplicity of everyday practices, identity factors and expectations that have moulded their journeys at university. By applying critical race theory to their testimonies, and in extending previous scholarship in this area, attention is refocused on the cultures and politics of minoritisation which delineate the university as a majority White space. Despite heterogeneity within our sample of students, minoritisation hurts many or all of them.

Decision-makers within higher education, and students and staff interacting on a daily basis have an important function when getting to grips with the negative consequences of minoritisation within Western universities. The onus is on those in more privileged positions to honestly reflect on what facets of their social and cultural capital have aided them, and to make difficult choices to forego discriminatory forms of advantage. Saad (2020) argues for a need to de-centre White people, White values, White standards and White sentiments, in order to challenge established racial hierarchies.

A first step towards this process of recognition and reconciliation, is welcoming students and staff from minoritised ethnic communities in shaping institutional initiatives whilst compensating them for their input. In this case, we credited peer interviewers as co-authors. Prior to the project, we involved students and staff in externally delivered training which was aimed at creating an open space for difficult conversations about equality, diversity and inclusion. The findings from this research have been used to develop a series of actions that are being implemented by the department but could be usefully applied across other universities. These are related to placing students and staff at the heart of endeavours to decolonise the department – its pedagogy, curriculum, societies and student-staff fora (Esson & Last, 2020) – all of which will involve amplifying the voices of minoritised ethnic students. Actions also include stimulating White students and staff to consider how their worldviews might be implicitly racialised, and to challenge ingrained habits of thought. Yet more radical thinking on student and staff recruitment strategies will be needed if those teaching geography, planning, geology and environmental sciences are to build better connections with minoritised ethnic communities. Addressing discrimination in the career progression of academics will require senior leaders to be held accountable. Finally, we would suggest collaborating with non-governmental anti-racist organisations to devise support structures for those who are involved in kinship care and part-time employment.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper, the ‘degree awarding gap’ applies to undergraduates only as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) does not collect information about the attainment of students enrolled on postgraduate (taught) courses.
2. Statistics on geography, environmental studies, planning and earth sciences have been acquired through a freedom of information request and those of all subjects have been extracted from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA 2021) website. See table 4 – HE academic staff by ethnicity and academic employment function (2019–2020): <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/staff/working-in-he/characteristics>. See figure 5 – HE student enrolments by personal characteristics (2019–2020): <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/sb258/figure-5#notes>. See table 26 – UK-domiciled first degree qualifiers by classification, religious belief, sex, age group, disability marker and ethnicity marker (2019–2020): <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-26>. All figures are based on a count of ‘full-person equivalent’ (FPE), for example, a student enrolled on 2 courses would be represented as 0.5 in each.
3. Information about ethnicity has been collected from staff of any nationality (who are working in the UK) but only students who are categorised as UK-domiciled.
4. The table omits ‘unknown’ ethnic group.
5. Data on all subjects is related to postgraduate (taught) enrolments, whereas statistics on geography and allied subjects refer to postgraduate (taught) qualifiers.
6. All figures have been supplied by HESA through a freedom of information request and are based on a count of FPE.
7. Includes lower second-class, third-class/pass and unclassified.
8. Minority ethnic consists of Black, Asian, Mixed and Other; ‘unknown’ is excluded.
9. It is not mandatory for HESA to collect data on the ethnicity of international students (EU and non-EU), so there is a high probability that they are included in the ‘unknown’ category. However, the figures should be used with caution as there are likely to be people who identify as (Other) White in this group.
10. We also use the noun phrase ‘people of colour’ to displace the acronym BAME, which some feel homogenises diverse experiences and neglects the historical contexts of those experiences (Sandhu, 2018).
11. 4 participants acted as both interviewers and interviewees.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, this project would not have been possible without the students, so we are extremely grateful for their hard work and courage. We would also like to sincerely thank Dr Patricia Noxolo, Dr Surindar Dhesei, Dr Sarah Greene, Wai Tung Ng and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Alumni Impact Fund and Guild of Students.

ORCID

Jessica Pykett  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0036-9639>

Peter Krafl  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7915-4808>

Alice Menzel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9360-7869>

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