

# **An exploration of teaching diverse students in a higher education institution in the UK: a case study of a University in London**

## **Abstract**

This study investigates race equality at The University of Sunderland in London through an analysis of practices and perspectives. Interviews were conducted with BAME students, staff, and affiliated individuals, revealing seven major themes: Curriculum, Covid, Diversity, Personal Sphere, Institution, Belonging, and Technology. These themes offer valuable recommendations for fostering a more diverse and inclusive environment, improving the academic experience in UK Higher Education Institutions.

To promote diversity, it is essential to ensure balanced student representation in classes and incorporate diversity considerations in recruitment and allocation processes. Creating a culture of equality, diversity, and inclusion is crucial for a positive learning environment. Mentorship programs can facilitate inclusivity, pairing BAME students with experienced staff. Policies should be reviewed to ensure inclusivity and non-discrimination. Increasing representation of people of colour in senior management roles enhances staff diversity. Staff training on creating an inclusive environment is important. Transparent and fair recruitment processes are necessary to avoid bias.

Implementing these recommendations can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable higher education landscape, benefiting both students and staff.

## **Introduction**

The benefits of racially diverse universities and classrooms are well-documented (Borg, 2001; Tsuo, 2015). Diversity among students in education has a direct impact on their achievement and performance. Working in a diverse environment enables students to work better and achieve greater outcomes as they concentrate and push themselves further when they work and interact with people of other backgrounds. Diversity in education, particularly on university campuses, has been shown to improve students' academic skills (e.g., critical thinking, problem-solving, and writing), intellectual engagement, citizenship, self-motivation, and cultural engagement for students of all races (Tsuo, 2015). In addition, diversity in education has been indicated to promote students' creativity, as well as better education, as those with differing viewpoints are able to collaboratively create solutions (Borg, 2001). Despite all these well-established benefits, the education system privileges and disadvantages certain racial and ethnic minority groups, i.e., students of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) heritage, in the UK. This is shown in attainment gaps across specific racial and ethnic groups, experiences of racism among students and staff, and disproportionate rates of exclusion (Show Racism the Red Card, 2020; Swiszcowski, 2022).

Schools and universities must have policy frameworks and strategic equality that are reflexive and subject to regular evaluation and review, which is a legal requirement under the Equality Act 2010 (Hancock, 2007). This enables educational institutions to foster educational systems, institutions, and environments that promote race equality. These legal requirements play a significant role in how schools operate and should therefore ensure that race equality is embedded and normalized within them and how they can address the experiences of ethnic minority students. (Alexander, Weekes-Bernard and Arday, 2015). However, racial inequalities are still reported as a significant issue within higher education (Advance HE, 2022; Wong et al., 2021).

UK higher education can only reach its full potential when individuals from all ethnic backgrounds can benefit equally from the opportunities it offers and it can benefit from the talents of the whole population (Advance HE, 2022). Across UK higher education, concerns are reported about differential degree outcomes, also known as attainment gap or the ethnicity awarding, which refers to the difference in the proportion of White and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students awarded a 'good' degree (a first or upper-second class degree classification) (Wong et al., 2021). This degree outcome difference varies significantly within minority ethnic groups (BAME), with the largest gap between White and Black Other students, at 28.3% (Office for Students, 2018). This gap is often attributed to microaggression, unconscious bias, and inadequate attention to access, support, and wellbeing for minority ethnic students (Botticello and West, 2021).

Furthermore, poverty rates among minority ethnic groups remain higher than those of the White British population (Mirza and Warwick, 2022). The Department for Education (DfE) has found that there is a persistent gap between the proportion of disadvantaged students entering higher education compared with non-disadvantaged students (Hubble et al., 2021).

These inequalities demonstrate the need for further action to address race and ethnic disparities in higher education. Universities must take steps to improve access and support for ethnic minority students in order to ensure that everyone has an equal chance of success.

The Office for Students (2020) highlighted a continued need for a sector response to the issue of attainment for Black, Asian and Other Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, ensuring that all students can get the most from their studies. Race equality in higher education is linked to the concept of inclusivity. Inclusivity in academia is an issue that has been debated more and more in the last years and according to Wray et al. (2013), it needs equity reflections being embedded within all the departments of the institution and it must be handled as a continuing practice of quality improvement. To drive a change of such importance there is the need for cultural and systemic change at a strategic and operational level. The aspiration to foster a tolerant, engaged, and caring organization that possesses the capability to defy non-inclusive positions and activities stands at the core of a Higher Education Institution (Cameron, 2018). Higher education institutions are encouraged to carry out research (highlight challenges, what work and areas for improvement), show strong leadership, have conversations about race and racism, race equality to create racially diverse and inclusive environments for students (Office for Students, 2020). Inclusive learning and teaching in higher education are linked to the pedagogical methods utilized in the institution (Hocking, 2010). Moreover, the way curricula and assessment are planned and implemented should include students' active involvement and participation. Therefore, improving race equality, and the curriculum by diversification and inclusiveness necessitates higher education professionals and stakeholders to take time to reflect on and challenge their own academic milieu under a sociocultural and historical perspective and change their standpoint (Darlington, 2008).

This paper aims to seek perceptions of unique population of BAME students at the University of Sunderland in London to explore best practices on how to embed race equality to enhance students' attainment, achievement and inclusivity as well as how to support students to ensure practices are inclusive for all students.

### **The University of Sunderland in London (UoSiL) context**

The University of Sunderland in London campus (UoSiL) is a campus hosting circa 5000 students, located in the busy industrial and financial area of Canary Wharf. The UoSiL campus is fortunate enough to accommodate one of the most diverse community of students in the UK, with BAME students consisting of around 53% of the total number. More specifically, about

23% of the students are Black/African origins, 20% are Asian, and 10% are mixed/any other background.

Given the unique population of BAME students at the UoSIL, the academic programmes at the UoSIL include regular Student Staff/liason Committees (SSLCs) that represent a safe space for students to explore their academic experiences and needs, which will enable the UoSIL community to better support their diverse student population. This paper reports one of the university initiatives that reflects the rationale that calls for a profound and critical challenge of the status quo and the systems of higher educational institutions. It is a compelling need to regenerate the learning structures and systems to give equal opportunities to all students, resetting the barriers that negatively impact the learning experience for BAME students.

## Methodology

In order to explore the perceptions and experiences of BAME students at the University of Sunderland in London regarding race equality in the university and curriculum, this research study carried out semi-structured interviews to obtain qualitative data. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to collect open-ended data, to explore participants' feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about race equality in the curriculum and in the university and to delve deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues (DeJonckheere and Vaughn, 2019). In total, 150 interviews were conducted. Of the participants, 14% were Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, 40% were Asian/Asian British, and 8% were Mixed/multiple ethnic groups, 38% were belonging to the white non-British ethnic group. The research timeline was cross-sectional from end of 2020 till 2021.

Participants were recruited via mail, social media, and direct phone calls. All interviews were conducted via Zoom or telephone as the COVID-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented challenge for in-person interviews. The sampling strategy followed was random sampling, as the subset of participants was randomly chosen by the researcher from the larger population, with each individual in the population having an equal probability of being included. Following each interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim to maintain the purity of data and enhance the truth value of the research (Ruff, Alexander, and McKie, 2005). The data was analysed manually as well as with the help of NVivo software. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Sunderland in London ethics committee and all regulations and confidentiality policies were strictly adhered to.

## Results

The analysis of interview data resulted in seven (7) themes; each theme has relative sub-themes which are listed below in alphabetical order:

<b>1. Belonging</b>
BAME tutors
Student Rep importance
<b>2. Covid</b>
Health and wellbeing
<b>3. Curriculum</b>
Extra-curricular activities
<b>4. Diversity</b>
Age Gap issues

Immigrant students
Language barriers
<b>5. Institution</b>
Assignment Submission difficulties
Career services issues
Long Email response time
Programme Management issues
Physical Spaces
Staff Friendliness, approachability, support, mindset, professionalism
Student Admin issues
Student Agencies
<b>6. Personal sphere</b>
Family commitments, issues, caretakers
Mental health issues
Personal experience, knowledge, confidence
Working students
<b>7. Technology and Innovation</b>
Online learning

The themes can be represented from the inner to the outer sphere following a conceptual mind made of bubbles and connectors, where the central bubbles of the personal sphere and the institution have been adapted from the concept of the social determinants of health:

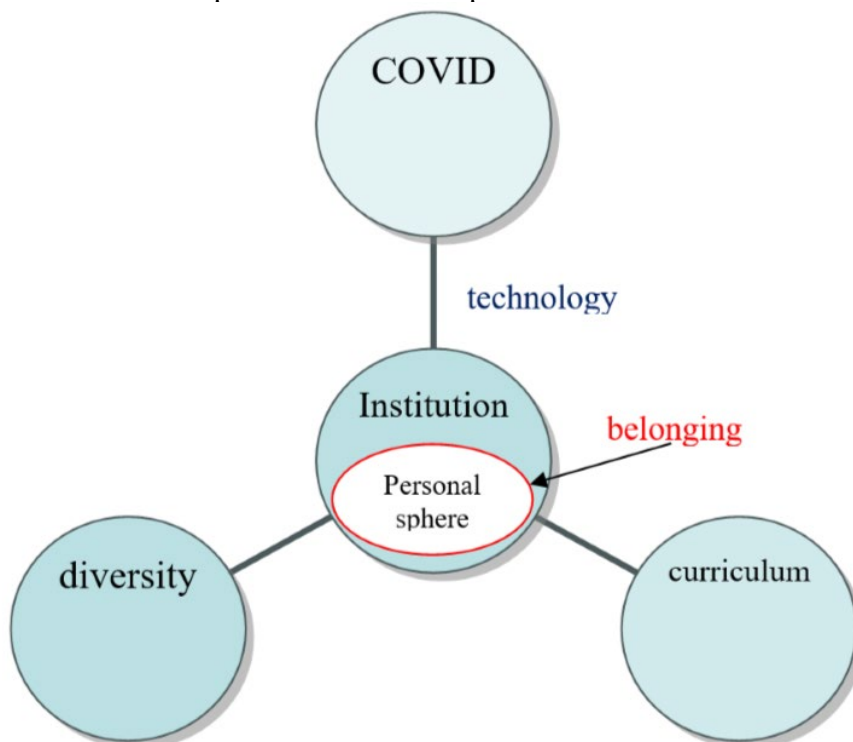


Fig. 1: The seven themes emerged under a conceptual framework (Cantafio and Onyeneke, 2021)

## Word frequency



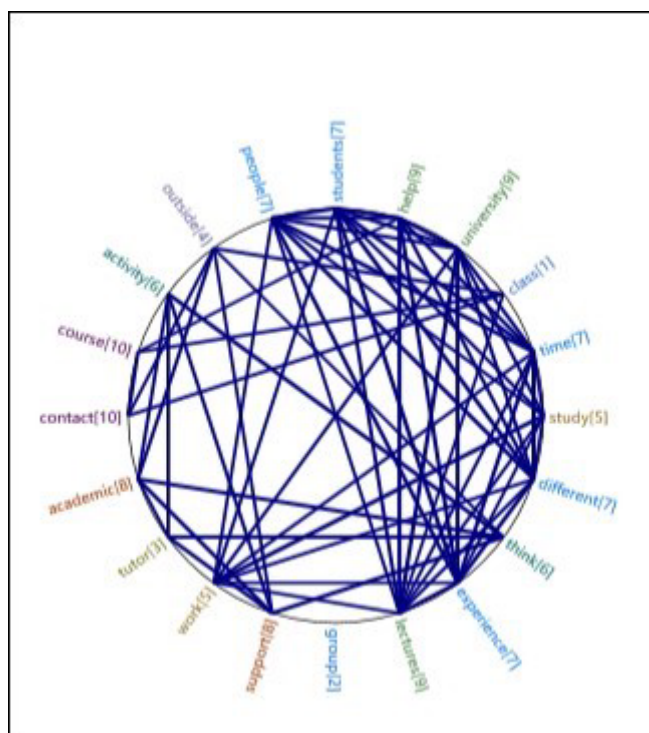


Fig. 3: Cluster analysis created from the 20 most frequent words from the interviews.

## Discussion

### Personal Sphere

During 2020 the pandemic caused by Covid-19 that swept over the world has highlighted an even worse gap in attainment for BAME students than what was already existing. There are various reasons for this, but as per Frings et al. (2020), BAME students could have less “resources or time for instance, a religious identity may require one to be at a certain place at certain times or a cultural identity may require siblings to engage in childcare duties”.

Students from BAME backgrounds have been affected disproportionately from the virus ([Institute of Fiscal Studies, 2020](#)). Possible root causes for this could be the over-representation of BAME individuals in lower socio-economic fringes, living conditions in intergenerational or highly dense multi-family households, and the relatively higher employment of BAME individuals in frontline or key-worker roles ([Razaq et al. 2020](#)).

Some students interviewed have admitted having faced mental health issues especially during COVID, such as anxiety, depression, loneliness to name a few.

This is confirmed by the literature, as per McManus et al. (2016) the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (APMS) established that Black men were more likely than their White counterparts to experience a psychotic disorder, moreover, Forte et al. (2018) found out that non-European immigrant women, comprising young South Asian women, were a high-risk group for suicide attempts.

More recently, a study conducted by Mind (2020) has found out that increasing inequalities for BAME people worsened their mental health during the pandemic, affecting more BAME than white people, more specifically regarding various issues such as employment risk, housing, finances.

## **Institution**

This theme emerged as one of the most discussed during the interviews, both in positive and negative aspects. The staff preparation and friendliness has turned out to be important for students.

One student stated “my overall impression was fantastic as I feel like we had the appropriate support given the COVID-19 circumstances. The lectures were very professional and very supportive”.

Another student admitted that “I didn’t encounter any barriers while trying to access academics outside of the classes and I admired their dedication and willingness to help and to go above and beyond the expectation. They were excellent and brilliant, making a positive impact on student journey by helping them to succeed.”

From the results appears that for many students the first point of contact are the lecturers and according to most of the students “were very supportive, empathetic and cooperant. They provided advice and guidance during that time, and I was amazed by their level of involvement, professionalism and proactive attitude.”

For many students, the first point of contact for academic and social support are their lecturers (Hassel and Ridout, 2018). Lectures can be a way to model attitudes and behaviours that the instructor values, such as careful weighing of evidence and presentation of argument. Educators also play a critical role in the emotional well-being of their students and are often the first point of contact for students. Additionally, teachers can help their students with homework by creating a supportive environment, providing guidance on how to complete assignments, and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning.

Also, the feedback regarding student admin has been mostly positive, “everyone from the administration staff is very knowledgeable and supportive. From being a single letter or helping in issue with the student canvas (VLE) or what so every they always sorted it out for all the students without delaying it even for a second”.

On the other hand, some issues were raised by students, regarding submission, career services, email response, programme management, the use of physical spaces, student admin issues and the presence of student agencies, which are a well-known issue in the UK education sector.

Students at universities have a number of priorities related to the use of physical spaces, such as access for minority groups, the physical environment of schools, and disability inclusion on campus.

Access for minority groups can be an important issue in academic institutions, with students advocating for improved access as campuses face restrictions on movement and physical space usage. The physical environment of schools is affected by school funding and local policy in the surrounding neighbourhoods in which the schools are located.

The Academic Development Centre of the University of Sunderland in London is working toward improving all these aspects by considering the precious feedback furnished by the students and implementing the right actions for solving some issues raised for an improved ultimate student experience. Students’ feedback is crucial in the formulation of more informed policies and regulations that are more student-centred and can improve academic life.

## **Belonging**

The sense of belonging is one of the most important themes for embedding race in academia.

The sense of belonging is an important theme for embedding race in academia. Sense of belonging is associated with academic achievement, retention, and persistence in college (Rainey et al., 2018). Women and people of colour often struggle to feel a sense of belonging in STEM fields due to negative cross-racial interactions and the "inclusion tax" they are expected to pay. Factors contributing to a sense of belonging include representation within one's STEM sub-discipline, as well as students' perceptions of the educational environment. Therefore, it is important for educators to create an inclusive environment where all students can feel accepted and valued.

One of the students brought light to this theme by saying that "if I had had a Latino tutor, my experience would be more positive, because it is easier to have contact with someone of the same nationality, because of the language, the charisma, the relationship is better". This was confirmed by another interviewee who stated, "having a tutor which matches some of the individual characteristics can have a positive impact on student experience by shaping their identity". Another interviewee helped establish the idea that having a tutor from the same student's background could ensure that "the student can find familiarity and help him to surpass any academic challenge they have".

An important contribution in this sense has been one of a former student rep that said that "being an ambassador for my class, I tried together with the academics to make everyone feel welcomed and to create that sense of belonging to that group of students."

The importance of the figure of the student representatives has been confirmed by other students, who usually interface with student rep on a daily basis and contacted student rep to address many issues faced in class or in the wider institution.

More specifically, The ADT crafted a series of targeted strategies to improve the sense of belonging for academically at-risk students, including BAME students.

The UoSIL is working towards improving the sense of belonging by enlarging the boards with students and student reps and tackling the belonging issue with a program that includes the figures of Personal Academic Tutors (PATs). This program will help increase the sense of belonging, with the help of one tutor per programme, everyone will enhance the diversity of the staff by bridging the gap between BAME students and the institution.

## **Curriculum**

In general, the curriculum is accepted well by the students, "the courses offered by the university are of great help to my future study and work. At the same time, it also helps me to fully understand myself and find my advantages and shortcomings."

On this note, the university with the implementation of a new strategy, is working towards decolonizing the curriculum, implementing initiatives that aim at broadening the perspectives that form the curriculum at UoSIL, and inviting more BAME guest speakers to classes, that enrich the student's experience, next to an already diverse BAME staff representation, one of the highest in the UK HEI.

To better reflect the unique needs of the BAME student groups, the ADT has included in the strategy the development of further SSLCs, a revamped Student Union, a mentoring scheme that intends to help students through the several stages of the academic path, and a wide range of LED Talks (Learn, Engage, Dialogue Talks), as well as tutoring and leading staff in the process of decolonizing the curriculum.

## **Diversity**



Some students highlighted age gap issues; this could be due to the high average age of our campus (around 37 years).

More specifically one student experienced that being "the youngest student in my class, and I felt strange with so many classmates who were much older than me, or who were more experienced than me, at the beginning. But our teachers had tried to mix the people when it came to group work".

This was confirmed also by another more mature interviewee, they said that "I had a sense of belonging since I am mature student and most of the students were mature. Actually, younger students could feel a bit of awkwardness."

This emerged also according to another student who said "It was very difficult for me as I was probably among the youngest in a class full of mature students. I'd have probably work best in an environment with students like me and my age range."

Given these considerations on age gap issues, it is important to create the right mix in class, and it is important at institutional level to take this into consideration in the recruiting stage and allocating students in classes. It is good to have a right mix so that there is a dynamic learning process involved in class, with sense of process that is channelled into the cultural exchange between one age grouping and another (Brooks, 2005).

Diversity within a group can be beneficial for certain tasks, and teachers may need to assign students to groups themselves before class. Creating the conditions that foster student success in college has never been more important, as up to four-fifths of high school graduates enrol in postsecondary education. School, family, and community partnerships are also essential for student success.

Teachers should consider professional development opportunities such as examining their beliefs, attitudes and practices; teacher appraisal and feedback; and school environment when creating effective teaching and learning environments. This will help ensure that students are placed in the best possible learning environment.

On the other side, it would be beneficial thinking about how a possible reason for interactions between younger and older students could be stemming from the dynamic between younger and older people in many ethnic minorities, which doesn't typically allow young and older people to interact with each other the way they would in their more natural circumstances. I.e., calling elders by their first name, showing assertiveness in group settings or even taking on a leadership role among people who may be older.

Many of the BAME students are 1<sup>st</sup> generation immigrants, and this has been reflected in our research. As stated by a student "immigrant are people with less opportunities as most of them might have to struggle with immigration matters and spend lots of money to get settled. Also, with less opportunities due to language barrier and status situation."

Language is one of the barriers for immigrants, as per an immigrant student said that "because I'm an immigrant, I wasn't used with English language that much, and I did ask for help".

Another student confirmed that "If there were someone for me to explain me in my language, for example, at the beginning, in my first year, how to write an essay or an assignment according to the standards from here, I could have better grades and avoid putting myself down that I was good enough for an abroad university."

Some problems encountered by immigrants regard the academic system in the UK, more specifically “The most challenging part here was the assignments as being an Asian student I never had the experience of writing assignments and all of a sudden, I had to work on assignments worth post-graduation level.”

In general, this is in line with the fact that immigrants in the UK face a variety of challenges when it comes to the academic system. One of the main issues is integrating newly arriving refugees and immigrants into mainstream education. Schools with a sizeable migrant students’ intake can experience difficulties in providing adequate support for these students, as they may be unfamiliar with some aspects of the UK education system. Immigrant students may also struggle to settle into their new environment, which can lead to difficulties in adapting to the educational system.

Also, another student admitted that “The Romanian educational system is different than here, so I had to adapt to the submission and report system here in the UK. For some things is easier, on the other hand is more difficult. Also doing a report is quite difficult when you are immigrant.”

Another interpretation could be that a possible reason for the stemming from the dynamic between younger and older people in many ethnic minorities, which doesn't typically allow young and older people to interact with each other the way they would in their more natural circumstances. I.e., calling elders by their first name, showing assertiveness in group settings or even taking on a leadership role among people who may be older.

The University is working toward improving students support and on the implementation of a channel for immigrant students with foreign languages taught modules.

### **Covid**

The pandemic of 2020 has been the most important event that has impacted everyone’s life on many different levels. As this has emerged also from our research, several students stated that due to Covid-19 unfortunately were not available to participate actively in university projects.

Also, other students declared that when there was face-to-face teaching it was quite interesting and afterwards in pandemic it just become difficult for them.

### **Technology and Innovation**

Technology can serve as a tool for connecting the themes, in fact in fig. 1 it is represented by the connectors that link the different bubbles representing institution, COVID, diversity and the curriculum.

The importance of technology has been highlighted even more in the last months as a response to the pandemic, since all the Education sector has innovated itself because of the pandemics, considering a global health crisis, higher institutions had to adapt to the situation by coming with interesting and innovative technology-based solutions. This has been embraced positively by some students, especially working students, who have admitted that “we can schedule better our commitments thanks to the online studies. You can be anywhere and study at the same time. Online delivery is more efficient under so many aspects.”

Technology can aid diversity, in the sense that many students coming from minority backgrounds can overcome many barriers e.g., the language, thanks to technology. The higher the technological literacy the student has, the more likely will overcome issues such as

problems that can emerge from isolation, some factors that could hinder their student experience. Therefore, the better the use of technology, the more the students can feel empowered, and the higher will be the inclusivity. Technology can serve as an aid to access support services as well since nowadays most of services are provided online.

Technology can play an important role in promoting diversity and inclusion in education settings. Technology can help to bridge cultures together by providing more personalized learning experiences for students of all backgrounds. It can also provide alternatives for learning, such as mobile phones and digital books, which can be used to support learners with disabilities. Additionally, technology can enable the development of an inclusive environment by providing access to digital literacy training and affordable Internet service. Teacher training is also key to successful inclusion, as it helps teachers understand how to use technology effectively in order to promote diversity and inclusion in their classrooms.

Currently, some adult students still rely on help from support services even for completing some basic tasks such as online submissions. The technological literacy and confidence for these students could help them to have a better academic experience and have more chances to succeed.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

To conclude, seven main themes have emerged in the present research by means of semi-structured interviews with BAME Alumni, Staff, and other BAME people involved at any stage with the University of Sunderland in London.

Considering these seven themes, some recommendations could be drawn for Higher Education Institution in the UK. It is important to create the right mix in class, and it is important at institutional level to take this into consideration in the recruiting stage and allocating students in classes. To promote diversity in higher education institutions in the UK, there are several steps that can be taken. It is important to create a culture of equality, diversity and inclusion to be embedded in the school culture and become a core part of creating a positive learning environment. This could include initiatives such as Mentors for BAME students which pair junior scholars from minority groups with senior staff. Moreover, universities should review their existing policies to ensure they are inclusive and non-discriminatory (Koutsouris et al., 2022). An important suggestion to increase the diversity of BAME staff could be the inclusion of more people of colour in the senior management of Higher Education Institutions. Furthermore, universities should provide training for staff on how to create an inclusive learning environment. Finally, universities should ensure that their recruitment processes are fair and transparent and do not discriminate against any group.

Limitations of the study comprise the fact that during the pandemic was not possible to do in-person interviews therefore it could have affected the answers since we know that personal interactions could have led to different responses. Also, the limitation of one institution and this has impacted the generalizability of the results and it should be considered also the limitation of the transferability of the model to other institutions located in different geographical areas, with different demographics, and different dynamics.

Future studies could focus on quantitative methods using regression analysis, finding correlations between the themes that emerged in this study linked to students' attainment indicators, such as BAME attainment and attainment gaps.

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