



*Society for Research
into Higher Education*

Exploring awarding gaps for Black British students at university through participatory visual ethnography

Research Report

September 2024

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Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

Acknowledgements

This research project has been possible thanks to the generous funding from the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), through the 'Award for Newer Researchers' (2022). I am grateful not only for the grant, but for the ongoing support from the SRHE.

Thank you to the SRHE Research and Development (R&D) Committee for their ongoing support. I would particularly like to thank Mr Rob Gresham for guiding me through the award from start to finish, and for the care he showed towards me whilst being granted the Award around my maternity leave. This gave me the time and space to do my best with the project. I am also grateful to the R&D Committee for their warmth and approachability, as well as the academic input and guidance during committee meetings.

I would like to thank Professor Kathleen Quinlan, who was appointed as my critical friend for the project. Her input particularly at the initial stages of the project was invaluable, and gave me confidence in developing my theoretical framework for the project.

I would like to thank all of my colleagues in the Surrey Institute of Education who, as always, champion the work in our team. Thank for your showing genuine interest and excitement about the project and offering invaluable comments. I'd particularly like to thank Dr Anesa Hosein for her guidance and feedback in my initial development of the project. I would also like to thank Dr Janet Ramdeo for signposting me to literature relating to Critical Race Theory and Cultural Community Wealth, and for the chats around positionality.

Most importantly, I would like to share my gratitude to the Student Co-Researchers who collaborated in this project, as well as their peers who took part in interviews. Thank you for your time, effort, and integrity. Not only have you have opened my eyes to my own fragility, discomfort, and ignorance regarding race that has made me realise the personal work that I can and need to do; you have also inspired me to have the courage to start these conversations with others. Thank you.

Executive Summary

There is an awarding gap of 23% in 'good' degrees between Black and white students, showing persistent educational inequalities for Black students (UUK, 2019). Qualitative studies are emerging investigating the awarding gap for racially minoritised students (e.g. Wong, Elmoray and Blake 2021; Green and Ernsting 2022; Singh et al., 2023). This research contributes to these studies by examining UG Black British student's experiences of curriculum content, design, delivery, and assessment from different disciplines to explore how their learning experiences impact their educational outcomes.

What sets this research apart is its methodological and theoretical approaches. This study prioritises the lived experiences and voices of British Black students through participatory visual ethnography under the lens of Critical Race Theory. The study entailed 6 Black British students acting as co-researchers and participants working in partnership with the principle researcher in the collection of ethnographic fieldnotes; engaging in and conducting interviews with peers; and creating visual data to bring student's voices and learning experiences to life.

Key findings explored (1) a backdrop of racism and racial stereotypes following students into and through their degree; (2) mixed feelings towards a diversified curriculum (3) relational dimensions impacting their learning (4) strategies used to navigate learning challenges. The contribution of this research is a student-led study producing rich accounts of the day-to-day experiences of Black British students showing inequalities in their learning experiences that affect their learning outcomes. With these insights, HE institutions and teachers can reflect upon their role in tackling racial inequalities experienced by students.

Background

An initial UUK report “Closing the Gap” (2019) outlined the stark educational inequalities between White and Black Asian and Minority Ethnic students. This showed a 13% difference in the awarding of good degrees (first/2:1) between White and racially minoritised students, which persists after controlling for entry qualifications. Awarding gaps are starker for Black students where the gap is 23%. Hence, the OfS set targets for universities to eliminate this gap by 2024-2025. An updated report “Closing ethnicity degree awarding gaps: three years on” (UUK, 2022) suggested that whilst progress has been made, awarding gaps for Black students still exist.

Reflecting upon the UUK (2022) recommendations for tackling awarding gaps, this research project set out to: investigate how Black British students experience learning, teaching and their curriculum in relation to content, design, delivery and assessment from a range of different disciplinary perspectives, exploring how these experiences might provide insights into degree awarding gaps at a UK university. To achieve this aim, this study adopted a participatory visual ethnographic approach to prioritise the lived experiences and voices of British Black students themselves. In conjunction with these approaches, the study was conducted under the lens of Critical Race Theory which was important given my positionality as a white researcher, prompting me to have greater awareness of unequal racial structures and take responsibility for own complicity in perpetuating them (Chadderton, 2012). It is hoped that the findings of the study could offer rich insights of the Black British student’s perspectives for relevant stakeholders at the institution and help towards the creation of meaningful actions towards tackling awarding gaps and ongoing racial inequality.

Methodology

This participatory visual ethnography entailed the principle researcher spending time with 6 student co-researchers in their learning spaces on campus; having informal conversations in these contexts; recording fieldnotes; and conducting formal visual/audio interviews. The co-researchers reciprocated formal interviews with peers and conducted independent visual ethnographic data collection by taking photos of their learning experiences to further bring these to life (Pink, 2021). The aim was to capture their lived experiences and voices of teaching and learning, paying attention to curriculum content, delivery, design and assessment – all in negotiation with one another to prioritise a student staff partnership approach (Bovill 2019). The research design is detailed in Diagram 1 and the participants information in Table 1:

The ethnography was underpinned by a grounded theoretical approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to capture the students contextualised voices and experiences and produce rich/thick description (Holliday, 2007) to form the basis for theoretical explanations derived from the participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). However, the methodological and theoretical approach was also underpinned by Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998), factoring in tenets including (1) that racism is systemic; (2) the approaches were committed to social justice and transformation; (3) the voices and experiences of people of color prioritised; (4) and interdisciplinary approaches were used (Yosso 2005).

Throughout the research I was committed to ongoing reflexivity of my positionality as a white researcher. This has offered invaluable personal transformative insights and shaped this research. The research received favourable ethical opinion from the University of Surrey (CENT 23-24 001 EGA).

Diagram 1: Research Design

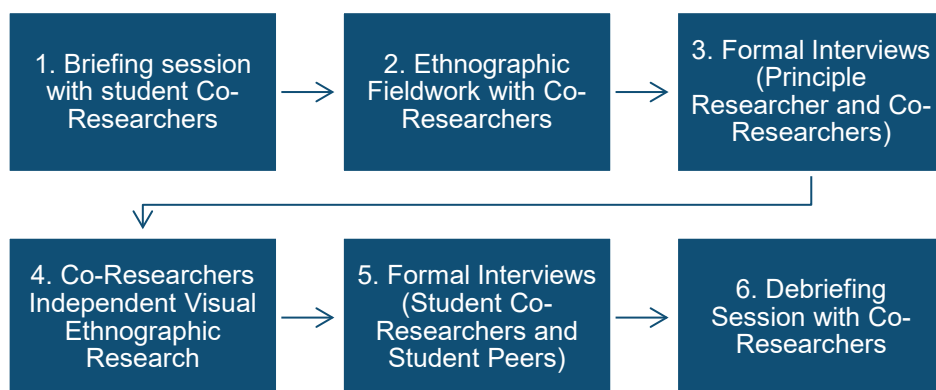


Table 1: Research Participants

Student Co-Researchers				
Student	Programme	Level	Gender	Ethnicity
Student 1	Law	4	Female	Black Ghanaian
Student 2	Law	5	Male	Scottish/English/Nigerian
Student 3	Computer Science	5	Female	British/Nigerian
Student 4	Chemistry	5	Female	Black British
Student 5	Psychology	5	Female	Black African
Student 6	Psychology	4	Male	Black Nigerian
Student Peer Interviewees				
Student 7	Psychology	4	Female	British/Nigerian
Student 8	Law	4	Female	Nigerian
Student 9	Law	5	Female	Jamaican/Indian/Scottish/British
Student 10	Law	5	Male	African

Findings

Experiences of systemic racism and racial stereotypes for Black British students

Students spoke about how experiences of racism and subjection to racial stereotypes affected their learning experiences and educational outcomes at university. For example, one Level 5 male Law Student in talking about racial stereotypes said, “I think it's reflected because of my ethnic background. I feel like, not that it's like apparently like pushed onto us, but there is doubt put upon us based on stereotype, based on like just general expectations that we're only able to get so far.” These experiences were overt and covert. Regardless as to whether they occurred inside or outside of university or happened prior to coming to university or during their studies, students accounts revealed the systemic nature of these attributed by how frequent and ‘normal’ many of these experiences were.

Students discussed a backdrop of covert, ambiguous, and subtle forms of racism, leaving them “gaslighting” themselves about being on the receiving end of racism (Bunce et al. 2021), as well as negative ‘vibes’, and experiencing a racialised gaze. More obvious forms of racism included racial stereotypes of being loud and angry (Motro et al., 2021). For example, one Level 5 female Chemistry student commented, “I've had times where just even expressing certain emotions, people have a tendency to be like you're doing too much, or, you know, you're being the angry black woman. [...] It's not like I'm yelling or I'm shouting or I'm being aggressive, but people take it that way. And so, I feel like I have to kind of be emotionless, not show emotion, because people are going to be like, oh, you're just angry.” Other forms of racism orientated around not being smart (Aronson, Fried and Good, 2002), and being strong or resilient and therefore not in need of support as a consequence (Sims-Schouten and Gilbert, 2022).

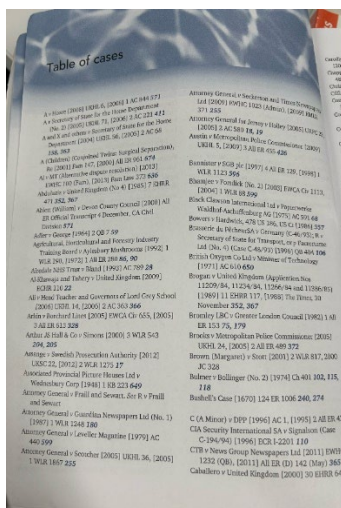
The impact of these forms of racism resulted numerous behavioural changes including ‘code switching’, ‘masking’, self-censorship, downplaying their identities, and downplaying the impact of racist experiences. Students spoke about how these experiences had negative repercussions entangled complexly in expressions of identity (e.g. not being able to fully be or bring themselves to learning environments); their sense of belonging at university and/or in their programmes (e.g. varying degrees of feeling like an outsider); and engagement at university (e.g. not participating in classroom interactions for fear of being judged etc.).

Contradictory views towards a diverse curriculum

A surprising outcome of the research was the mixed views expressed by students about how they felt curriculum diversity influenced their learning experiences and outcomes.

Initially, students appeared to express that a diverse curriculum (e.g. diverse content expressing diverse examples, people etc.) was either not important, or important for 'other' students from racially minoritised backgrounds. This was a surprise given student calls to decolonise curriculums (Muldoon, 2019) and social movements like 'why is my curriculum so white?' (cited in Peters, 2015). Specifically, students in the study said: a diverse curriculum was "nice" for other students; was "irrelevant" to their discipline and their grades (attributed to the discipline being 'objective' or 'scientific' and diversity wasn't recognised/rewarded in assessment grades); diversity was "tokenistic" or undervalued by teachers and students; and too challenging (political) for staff and students to talk about. This was captured in some of the visual ethnographic data, for example, one Level 4 female Law student shared this image:

Image 1:



Caption: I have incorporated photographs from my course books. The majority, if not all, of the cases presented in the book primarily focus on white individuals. The lack of representation creates a sense of marginalization and exclusion and makes me question the extent to which my own experiences and history are valued. Consequently, this absence of representation also has an impact on my sense of identity. I find myself grappling with feelings of invisibility and alienation, as the materials fail to provide a reflection of my own background and cultural heritage. These emotions often undermine my motivation and engagement in the learning, ultimately influencing my overall academic performance.

Whilst students often refuted the value of a diverse curriculum through the suggestion it had little impact on their experiences or outcomes, when interrogating this further they often contradicted themselves saying that 'seeing themselves' in the curriculum is important for their sense of belonging (feeling seen); was important for social justice and enhancing their own cultural competency; and would support their engagement and thus outcomes because they would feel more motivated by a diverse curriculum. This was encapsulated by a Level 5 female Law student who said, "I feel like you learn so much as... you learn so much, you gain these different perspectives as well, which you can utilise... it will help you as well in your work as well when you're doing coursework, exams, you can make reference to them, and it's nice because you can educate others about it as well. Like, you learnt this new thing, you can go and tell someone else about it and they just...like, it kind of helps other people as well, as well as yourself."

The importance of relational dimensions for Black British Students

Another key finding of this study was the importance of the relational dimensions of learning and teaching for Black British students and how this impact their learning and educational outcomes. Whilst students seemed somewhat contradictory about diversity and curriculum content, students in this study were consistent about the importance of racial diversity of the student and staff body at university. It was important for students to have racial 'familiarity' in their learning environments (e.g. being taught and learning with people who "look like you") and having feelings of relatability in terms of experiences (e.g. shared cultural experiences). Together this supported the student's feelings of belonging, inclusion, and safety in relation to their learning. Specifically, students spoke about the positive impact relational dimensions could have on their learning and behaviours (e.g. making friends in their programmes; being able to approach staff, services and peers for support; feeling seen and being taken 'seriously'; sense of belonging; and being their authentic selves etc.). For example, one Level 4 female Psychology student said, "OK. You know like, there's learning from the lecturers, right? But there's learning from someone that looks like you?" Collectively, relational factors could contribute positively towards the educational outcomes for students (Gravett 2023).

Whilst these relational dimensions were important for students learning and outcomes, the students in this study often explained that they did not necessarily encounter the level of diversity that they hoped or expected at university (i.e. the cultural diversity of people in their programmes was limited).

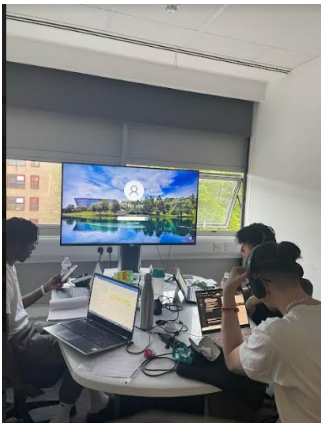
Navigating learning challenges through the lens of Community Cultural Wealth

A key paper that informed the Critical Race Theory lens to this study and how the data was examined was through Tara Yosso's (2005) work on Community Cultural Wealth. Through this lens, the research observed forms of capital expressed by the Black British students in this study including (1) aspirational; (2) navigation; (3) social; (4) linguistic; (5) familial; (6) and resistance.

Despite the backdrop of challenges faced by students in this study, when looking at their experiences and behaviours through the lens of Community Cultural Wealth, students demonstrate forms of capital helping them to navigate challenging learning experiences. For example, students in the study expressed confidently their capability and self-determination to achieve a good degree despite systemic challenges they face. Oftentimes this was interlinked with accounts of familial and social capital whereby students stated they were surrounded by or surrounded themselves by family, friends and acquaintances who champion and support them through a variety of means. For example, one Level female Law student said, "I have a mentor outside of the university,

which is quite good. My personal tutor in university is good as well. He is pretty amazing on giving advice, because the other day I was feeling quite overwhelmed because they gave us five assessments to complete over the Easter break, but he helped me break it down, told me not to feel overwhelmed, gave me very helpful advice. I feel like also my family and friends as well, they help encourage me.” Similarly, these sentiments were captured by a Level 4 male Psychology student in his visual ethnographic research:

Image 2:



Caption: Studying with my friends in the library, collaborating with them on assignments makes the job easier. Also, an added bonus is the time spent together strengthening our bond and our minds at the time. I chose this because it reflects what being a university is about: work and friends

Students also spoke about strategies of navigation and resistance incorporated in their learning experiences to lead to successful educational outcomes (e.g. resistance of deficit racist stereotypes; proving people/judgements wrong; directly challenging inequalities faced). Whilst these accounts do not take away the injustices faced by Black British students, it's important to recognise the agentic critical thought and action expressed by students that may be overlooked.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A disheartening conclusion of this study is the realisation that many findings presented in this report resonate with past studies exploring awarding gaps for racially minoritised students. For example, the systemic nature of racism is prevalent, and efforts towards diversifying the curriculum aren't quite impactful enough, certainly for the students in this study. Whilst meaningful social change is slow and complex, this research highlights the ongoing inequalities that Black British students in this study face, not just in their learning and educational outcomes, but more broadly. This highlights that not enough progression is being made to address awarding gaps for these students.

Using participatory visual ethnographic approaches, this research has brought to life the micro-level experiences of Black British students and the inequalities they face on a day-to-day basis that impact their learning experiences and outcomes. For me, as a white researcher and HE teacher, undertaking this research has been eye-opening and transformational. Doing this research has reinforced my own beliefs that stronger collective efforts are required by us all (institutional behaviours and policies; people who engage in and support teaching and learning; and the entire student body) for meaningful change to occur in addressing awarding gaps. There is a wealth of actions that could be taken forward to tackle the key challenges faced by students in this study. Some recommendations for practice and policy might include:

- tailored EDI and academic development training for staff and students contextualised to the university on issues (e.g. unconscious bias; pedagogical training relating to relational pedagogies, belonging; inclusion, social justice etc.)
- institutions to think about how they attract students and staff from diverse cultural backgrounds and support their success and progression;
- more student-staff partnership work around areas such as diversifying the curriculum; supporting belonging and inclusion; how to recognise and reward diversity in assessment and feedback practices etc.
- the creation of network and safe spaces within institutions for collective and meaningful conversations to occur regarding issues like awarding gaps.

Project Outcomes and Future Research Activities

This project has led to the following outcomes and dissemination activities:

- Delivery of a research presentation to staff and PGRs at the University of Surrey (September 2024).
- Acceptance for research presentation at the 2024 SRHE International Research Conference (December 2024).

Future plans based upon the research for the academic year 2024-25 include:

- Producing outputs (e.g. journal articles) of the research findings showcasing the visual ethnographic dimensions of the project.
- Presentation of the research at the SRHE International Conference and an SRHE Network event.
- Preparing a post for the SRHE blog.
- The production and publication of a short ethnographic video regarding positionality and conducting race research as a white researcher.
- Hosting a hybrid research event consisting of expert panel members and students regarding awarding gaps.
- Continued commitment to working with staff and students to address awarding gaps at the University of Surrey.

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