

Ethnicity Awarding Gap Project – co-creation and action research; a means of understanding the student experience of underrepresented students

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Abstract

Reducing awarding gaps is an institutional priority and is a key outcome within the access and participation plan and faculty level strategy, both of which aim to build an inclusive learning environment at King's College London. At the time this project was conceptualised, the ethnicity awarding gap in the faculty between students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and their white counterparts was 11.2% at the level of 1st class degrees and 3.4% when 2:1 and 1st class degrees were combined. The Ethnicity Awarding Gap project was developed to understand the student experience of this group of students and investigate structural factors that may be contributing to the awarding gap. Consequently, 10 student researchers were hired to participate in this student-staff action research project to lead 12 focus groups with other students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. These focus groups revealed student opinions on community, belonging, teaching, and learning. Other themes included confidence in accessing support, navigating the hidden curriculum, university preparedness, and capital in its various forms. The researchers analysed this data and produced 6 research project outlines and actionable recommendations. Through the procurement of funding, liaison with key stakeholders, and continued student consultation these projects and recommendations will be established across the faculty in the hope of transforming experiences and graduating awards for students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

Introduction

This project was developed within a King's faculty Student Experience team. The faculty in this paper refers to a specific group of departments at King's that specialise in teaching a group of subjects, the specific faculty will not be named in this paper. The Student Experience team exists to enhance the student journey through the development and delivery of projects and initiatives that maintain an inclusive community environment. As a result, understanding and trying to reduce awarding (also known as attainment) gaps for students across the faculty was a team objective that was explored with this project.

Terminology

Whilst the term 'attainment gap' has been widely used in higher education and at this institution, this term may encourage the view that the gap is due to student underachievement or lack of attainment (the 'deficit model'). According to the report by the National Union of Students and Universities UK (NUS, UUK) titled 'Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: closing the Gap', the literature in this area broadly recognises the importance "of explicitly refuting the deficit model" (NUS, UUK, 2019, p.16). Therefore, in this project, we refute the use of this term and recognise that this is an important step in engaging the students who are the most impacted. The term 'awarding gap' is also increasingly preferred across the higher education sector as this recognises that a multitude of factors impacts students' academic performance and systemic institutional factors also play a role in this (Loke, 2020). Research has indicated that this gap is a "symptom of widespread racial inequities" which can include but are not limited to microaggressions in the classroom, diverse curricula, representation, and levels of an inclusive community (Mahmud & Gagnon, 2020, p.255).

BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) and BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) are terms most used to describe all people who are non-white, although these terms technically include white minority ethnic groups. Both terms have been criticised in that they homogenise a range of experiences, cultures, and backgrounds into one catch-all term, raising issues of exclusion and divisiveness (Aspinall, 2021). The gap is between two sets of categorised peoples, home fee-paying white students (including white minority ethnic groups in the UK) and all other home fee-paying students. The awarding gap does not belong to individuals who identify as BAME and BME, rather it is a gap between students from different ethnicities and is a problem to be tackled by all higher education institutions. Consequently, ethnicity awarding gaps is the terminology used in this project – similar for example to ethnicity pay gaps (Competition and Markets Authority, 2022).

Awarding Gaps in Higher Education

Ethnicity awarding gaps show the difference between the proportion of White undergraduate UK home-fee-paying students receiving a 1st or 2:1 ('top degrees') compared to the proportion of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic undergraduate UK home-fee-paying students receiving the same degree classification (Advance HE, 2021). Unfortunately, awarding gaps are common in UK higher education, with the average gap in 2018/19 being 13.3% (Locke, 2020). As a result, in the Office for Students (2018) report, a new approach to access and participation plans was proposed, these plans are compulsory agreements in which Colleges and Universities outline strategies to improve "equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education" (Office for Students, 2018, p.1). The new approach set sector-wide key performance measures, one of which was to: "eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students by 2024–25 and to eliminate the absolute gap (the gap caused by both structural and unexplained factors) by 2030–31" (Office for Students, 2018, p.4). Sector-wide there have been ongoing improvements to challenge ethnic and racial disparities in UK higher education but there is still a great deal of work to be done (Wong et al., 2021).

The NUS, UUK report (2019) also outlines that there are five steps that universities must consider accelerating progress in reducing awarding gaps. These steps are 1) providing strong leadership; 2) having conversations about race and changing the culture; 3) developing racially diverse and inclusive environments; 4) getting the evidence and analysing the data; and 5) understanding what works. The report also urges that universities provide more insight into the belonging and broader perceptions of students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. This project aligns with many of the suggestions of this report and explicitly addresses steps two, three, and four through its project aims and use of methodology.

Similarly, Wong et al. (2021) argue that despite a growing understanding of the institutional and structural inequalities faced by these students the university experiences of minority students are under-researched. Therefore, it is crucial that our understanding of awarding gaps goes beyond merely looking at statistical evidence. A recent paper, which explores this student experience found that students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds encountered a myriad of obstacles that impeded their university experience and initial desire to achieve their full potential whilst at university (Bunce et al., 2021). Bunce et al. (2021) also highlights that as universities better support this group of students to achieve their full potential, they also address this ethnicity awarding gap. Therefore, as we seek to reduce these awarding gaps, we must better understand student insights and perspectives.

Faculty Awarding Gap Data

At the time this project was conceptualised (the academic year 2020/21), ethnicity awarding gaps in the faculty were found to be 11.2% at the level of 1st class degrees

and 3.4% at combined 1st and 2:1 degree classification. In comparison, the institution average for awarding gaps in this same academic year was 4.2% at the level of 1st class degrees and 4.8% when 1st and 2:1 degrees are combined. In the following academic year, 2021/2022 undergraduate awards data reveal that the rate of 1st class degrees was 19.3% points lower for students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds than for white students and 3.4% points lower for combined 1st and 2:1 degree classification. This indicates an 8.1% growth in this gap. The most significant figures are seen in the comparison between black and white students with the gap at the level of 1st class degrees being 31.65% lower than for white students and 12.5% points lower for the combined 1st and 2:1 degree classifications. Again, to draw a comparison with the institution average for the academic year 2021/2022, for 1st class degrees this gap was 11.1% and was 6.5% for combined 1st and 2:1 degrees, also reflecting a growth institution-wide in the awarding gap. In some departments within the faculty, due to small numbers of home students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, the data on awarding gaps is very limited and cannot be seen at a level of statistical significance. However, this also highlights an issue of the need for increased access and widening participation initiatives to increase the number of students from these backgrounds for these departments.

Ethnicity Awarding Gap Project

Project summary

As a result of faculty-wide data, this project sought to begin an action research project that involved student-staff co-creation. The aims were the following:

- To better understand the student experience of UK-domiciled Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic undergraduate students in this faculty.
- To actively work with students from these backgrounds to uncover contributing factors to the ethnicity awarding gap.

To deliver this project, ten student researchers were hired from across the faculty to work with the Student Experience team and other stakeholders to identify and understand student perspectives of any structural or systemic barriers that may contribute to ethnicity awarding gaps. Additionally, in being the first faculty-wide project of this kind, it also sought to develop an evidence base that directs and initiates practical steps for progress in this area in the faculty. This project ran from October to December 2022.

Methodology

Conceptual Framework - Action Research

Action research is an appropriate approach to studying the ethnicity awarding gap in collaboration with student researchers as this method endeavours to amplify participants' voices as it actively involves them in transforming education. This inclusive approach also helps research to go beyond merely understanding inequalities as it considers the lived experiences of those affected (Walker & Loots, 2018). Action research empowers individuals who act as researchers as they can use a critical lens to evaluate structural norms, that might in the case of the current project be hindering academic progress. This method also enabled this project to develop student-focused solutions (Baum et al., 2006).

This method typically follows a pattern that involves planning, action, evaluation, and reflection before refining the project's outcomes (Lewin, 1946). This is why projects using this method are typically cyclical, which is also true for this project. This specific project followed the steps outlined by Arnold and Norton's Action Research: Practice Guide (2018), see the figure below:

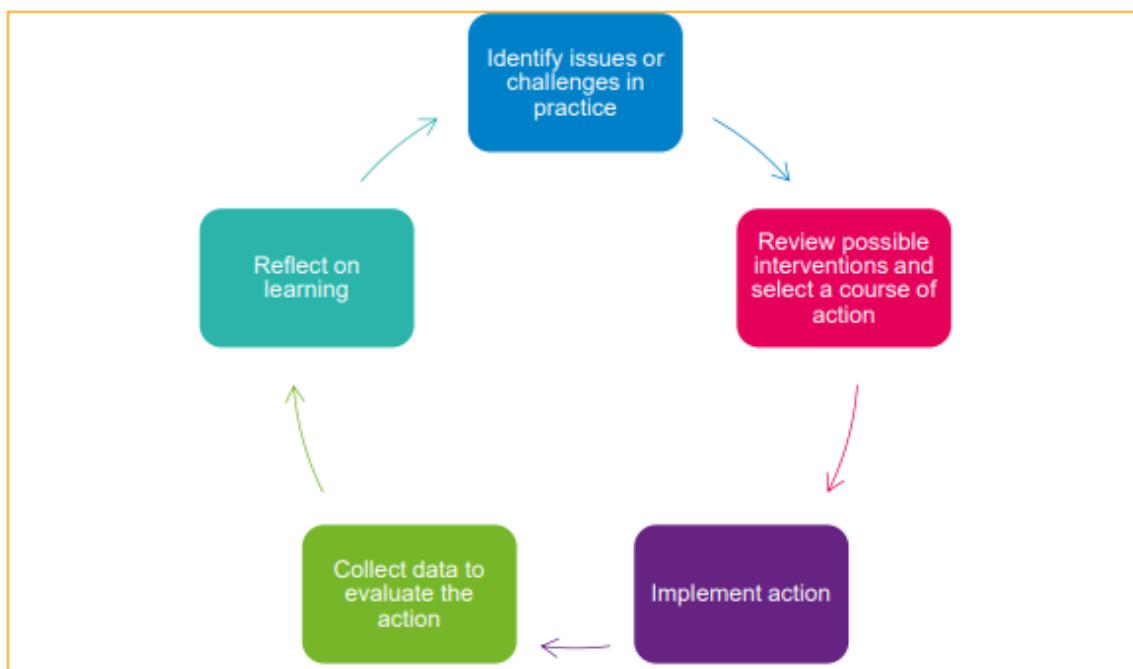


Figure 1. Typical steps involved in action research (Arnold & Norton, 2018, p.12).

The involvement of student researchers was vital as it ensured that the student voice was not lost in this project. This is an idea that has been supported by research literature as the voices of students “are still largely absent on their views on the ethnicity degree awarding gap” (Wong et al. 2021, p.1151). This methodology was also used in a project at the University of Cambridge Centre for Teaching & Learning to explore specific issues that impacted the attainment and continuation rates of the two groups of undergraduates experiencing the most significant awarding gaps (Laing, 2021).

Arday et al. (2021) also argue that universities must further efforts to centralise the voices of these marginalised students and that the transformation of belonging, engagement, and inclusivity of these students is achieved through this “collective endeavour” (p.308). In examining the creation of safe spaces for students of colour in STEM education Ong et al. (2018) found that these spaces “function as havens from isolation and microaggressions” (p.1) and can counteract some inequalities and systemic barriers.

Ethics

This project was approved by the King’s College London Research Ethics Office (MRA-21/22-28553).

Recruitment

Student researchers and focus group participants were recruited through a variety of methods including departmental newsletter features, social media promotion, emails from the Student Experience team, and department Equality Diversity and Inclusion leads. All students were paid for their time. Recruitment for the student researcher positions was only open to students from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic undergraduate UK home-fee-paying students. We also broadened the terminology here to be open to home students who identified as any of the following: BME, BAME, BIPOC, People of Colour, Black, Afro-Caribbean, Arab, South Asian, East Asian, Southeast Asian, Latinx, Latin American, South American, Indigenous or another ethnic background associated with communities which have been historically or currently are marginalised in the UK. The focus groups were open to the same demographic as previously mentioned as well as to international students.

The project began by first ‘Identifying issues or challenges’ which involved understanding and analysing awarding gap data at the faculty and institution level. This was followed by strategic planning of the project in the ‘Review’ phase, which comprised the project proposal, funding acquisition, ethics approval, and planning for student training, tasks, and outputs. Student involvement in the first phase of this project began in the ‘Implement Action’ phase (outlined below), this enabled us to gather a broader perspective on the university experience of students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

Forums

All ten student researchers attended three 2-hour forums during the project, in this space they shared their insights, experiences, and challenges within the faculty as students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Forum sessions generally had a conversational-style discussion following a semi-structured pattern, allowing for flexible and focused two-way communication (de Sousa et al., 2021). During the forums, students were informed of current awarding gap data which helped to contextualise the discussions that followed. The student researchers agreed on a range of potential issues and identified key areas to explore that might contribute to

the awarding gap. With support from staff, student researchers worked collaboratively to define and design the scope of the hypotheses and research questions we would ask in the focus groups. The forum space was also beneficial for student researchers after delivering the focus groups as they were able to share their experiences and begin to think about the themes that arose with the larger group (Arnold & Norton, 2018).

Focus Groups

Ahead of the focus groups, all focus group participants were sent an information sheet about the project purpose, participant expectations, and plans for data collection during focus groups (recording of focus groups) and how data would be stored. They also signed a consent form and were reminded of the research aims before each focus group took place. Student researchers worked in pairs and carried out 12 focus groups over 2 weeks with twenty-six students from across the faculty. Focus group participant demographics are summarised in Table 1. These participants studied degrees in nine of the eleven departments in the faculty.

Table 1: Focus Group Participant Information

Characteristic	N	%
Ethnicity		
Asian	19	73
Black	3	12
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	2	7.7
Other	2	7.7
Student Status		
Home students	18	69.2
International students	8	30.8
Total	26 Students	

Through the forum discussion, the student researchers devised a set of open-ended questions. These allowed for in-depth group discussions, which revealed a richness of experiences and student perspectives (Carey & Asbury, 2016). The themes of this student discourse are outlined below.

Results and discussion

Focus Groups

The focus group questions are in the appendix. The findings from these focus groups address our aims of developing our understanding of the student experience of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic undergraduate students in this faculty and these themes reflect factors contributing to the ethnicity awarding gap. The focus groups revealed student opinions on community, belonging, teaching, and learning. Other themes included comfortability accessing support, university preparedness, capital in its various forms, and navigating the hidden curriculum. The hidden curriculum is a sociological term that refers to the unintended learning of unwritten rules, values, and assumptions both within the classroom and the broader university environment (Koutsouris et al., 2021). These norms typically reinforce social norms and impact how students navigate their transition into university. This implicit knowledge is typically held by students from the most represented backgrounds in higher education and therefore can contribute to differences in belonging and adjustment to the university environment (Koutsouris et al., 2021). These themes will be discussed below.

Theme 1: Community & Belonging.

Across all focus groups, students expressed the challenge of developing a sense of belonging or feeling part of the university community. This theme was evidenced by the subthemes highlighted below:

Table 2: Community & Belonging thematic examples

Subthemes	Example quotes
Impact of religion and culture	<p>“It makes me angry that this type of intersectionality [identified as Black as Christian] is not ... accepted not just in rugby but in King’s sport I would say. Part of the reason people aren’t joining is because of the culture we present. And me because of my own intersectionality I try to change this [perception] and it is just a struggle.” (P3, FG 4)</p> <p>“I am a Christian too and the drinking culture of [university] is a problem to me, it is so not very tolerant of people ... what kind of social activity can you do outside of this... [but also] it costs money.” (P2, FG 4)</p>
Impact of social class	<p>“I am working class and Chinese and I sometimes just feel left out of the conversation...I definitely experience imposter syndrome.” (P1, FG 11)</p>

Experiences of racism

“...people ask where from and I'm from China, and then the first question we face is that oh do you think the virus made in lab? This keeps happening to me, many many times...Sometimes just blatant racism too, about your name. It's quite shocking people still act like that, but they do. Sometimes you just feel like it's like you are...not part of them and you're being examined. You are an outsider and then you just have to go through the check.” (P2, FG 2)

“Certain students may make microaggressions about topics and would be great if professors actually learnt to speak up about it.” (P2, FG 4)

*P = Participant and FG = Focus Group

In exploring intersectionality within these focus groups, students noted that there were many instances where their religious beliefs and or cultural values conflicted with the social drinking culture at university. Similar experiences were reported in a study by Rana et al. (2022), which found that social events typically involved the consumption of alcohol and were usually organised by white staff who were culturally unaware of how this could be challenging to the religious beliefs of students and therefore isolated them from integrating into departmental communities. The interplay between social class and race played an important role in how students felt about belonging at university, particularly in social interactions. This is because students may experience prejudicial biases from other students or may struggle more to form relationships with other students. This is supported by research which shows that students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds often face barriers when attempting to form relationships with their white peers (Guiffrida et al., 2018). Equally, Kauser et al. (2021) outline that integration into university for students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds is dependent on prior education, and can be more challenging if students attended low-achieving or disadvantaged schools.

Developing a sense of belonging was also hindered by experiences of racism and was discussed in all focus groups. In classroom contexts, staff were either unaware of these realities or struggled to address them appropriately, whilst in social settings students felt they had to accept these discriminatory acts as part of their university experience. As a result, it is unsurprising that Goyer et al (2017) found that despite the sense of belonging being the same for white students and those from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds at the start of university, this significantly declined for this group and rose for white students during their time at university. These experiences play a crucial role in the ease at which students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds can develop a sense of belonging and community in a university context and contribute to ethnicity awarding gaps.

Theme 2: Capital.

Table 3: Capital thematic examples

Subthemes	Example quotes
University Preparedness and social networks	<p>“... I definitely [did] not feel ready for uni.. where I’m from, my friends ... [were] not looking at big universities or going through things in a strong academic way.” (P2, FG 5)</p> <p>“I come from a neighbourhood in London with high crime and gangs...I probably have to try a bit harder than those have to not, not just in the classroom but in every other sense, like finding an internship or trying to find some work experience. It is hard to get your foot on the ladder when you are from a disadvantaged background.” (P1, FG 11)</p>
Financial capital	<p>“[I was] unable to ask family for [financial] help” [I had to “get ready independently by working part-time jobs to help cover financial costs.” (P2, FG 4)</p>
Social Capital	<p>“.. I felt very well-prepared but was privately educated ... my school were paid a lot of money to prepare us”. (P1, FG 6)</p> <p>“[my] family “definitely did not help [me] prepare for uni but my mother isn’t English and doesn’t know anything about the university system... This was so different to my friends’ experience.” (P2, FG 6)</p>

*P = Participant and FG = Focus Group

Capital in various forms was presented as a theme consistently within the focus groups. A lack of capital in this context was reflected by students discussing the challenges of navigating and flourishing within the university context due to a lack of financial capital, university preparedness, social networks, and social capital. In many cases, these subthemes impacted students simultaneously during their university experience. Social capital as defined by Bourdieu (1968) is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 248).

Concerning university preparedness or social networks, many students shared that they did not feel equipped to begin university. This was particularly the case if they came from low-income, first-generation, or low higher education participation backgrounds. This is because those around them could not impart knowledge and personal experience of how to successfully navigate the university context. For example, how to study effectively at degree level, how to seek support, and prepare for employment after studies. Additionally, studies also reveal that parental education is more crucial than income in affecting children's academic outcomes. This is because parental higher education achievements translate into high information-related social

capital, from which their children benefit from parental knowledge and personal experiences of higher education (Mishra, 2020).

Equally, many students also expressed the additional but necessary burden of working at the expense of their study time, to cover the financial costs of university study. This is evidenced as this student group tends to hold various commitments that campus-based students may not face; such as part-time work and having caring responsibilities (Miah, 2018). Similarly, several students in a study by Seuou et al. (2023) mentioned that navigating academic study alongside paid employment leads to conflicting demands and tension in their time and academic work. This is consistent with research that documents that financial hardship is more likely to be experienced during university studies by this group of students (e.g. Singh, 2020; Stevenson et al., 2019). The interaction between these themes is important in considering the student experience and how these factors contribute to ethnicity awarding gaps.

Theme 3: Challenges in Accessing Support.

Table 4: Challenges in Accessing Support thematic examples

Subthemes	Example quotes
Racial stereotypes	... “[everyone assumes I am a] strong black woman”, “[I have been] doing everything independently since secondary school”. “no-one expected me to ask for help ... [I] didn’t get any support, even paying for uni[versity]”, “[I have been] working since I was in sixth form”, “no one felt that I needed support.” (P2, FG 4)
Caring responsibilities	“I had to get a part time job and sometimes sacrifice so study time, so that I can help my family as my mum is really ill... so there is less income in the household and I kind of just need to cover it and take on that role. So that makes it difficult for me to concentrate and get work done... and get the grades I could get because I have been busy [trying to balance it all].” (P2, FG 11)

*P = Participant and FG = Focus Group

Findings illustrated that many students experienced challenges accessing various forms of support whilst at university. These examples include difficulties around their responsibilities and experiences of stereotyping. Concerning academic study, students shared that this was hindered by fulfilling caring responsibilities. Research such as that by Seuou et al. (2023) explored the factors that impact the attainment of ethnic minority students at the University of Northampton and also highlighted that caring commitments place pressure on student time as they try to balance this with their academic studies.

Students also highlighted that they had been impacted by assumed racial stereotypes which affected their ability to ask for help when needed. Evidence indicates that one reason students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds feel unsupported by university academic staff is due to racial stereotyping. Singh, (2011) carried out a thorough literature review that explored this student group’s experiences in UK universities and identified several ways in which academic staff display racial stereotyping e.g., stereotypical comments and heightened surveillance of these students.

Theme 4: Navigating the Hidden Curriculum.

Concerning the hidden curriculum, students discussed how coming from different socio-economic backgrounds influenced their writing style and ability to embody professionalism, high diction, and the grades they received. Evidence illustrates that the unaccustomedness of higher education practices upon starting university is a barrier to academic progress and student success because of variations in style of academic writing, assessment methods, and expertise of subject-related equipment (such as scientific lab apparatus) (Stevenson, 2012). The quality and quantity of academic skills training and support received were also broached by students who felt unprepared by teaching staff to write essays and exams in the expected format and style.

Additionally, students expressed that academic skills resources were vague and did not feel confident approaching teaching staff and instead sought help from other students or family members. The hidden curriculum impacts teaching and learning practices in higher education and tends to have the most consequences for students from non-traditional university backgrounds (Wong & Chiu, 2021). However, it has been found that whilst minority students may lack forms of social capital, there are academically successful minority students. According to Yosso (2005), these students have access to other types of capital that are unique to them - the concept of Community Cultural Wealth which highlights the roles of social and familial support amongst others in the academic success and persistence of this group of students.

Table 5: Navigating the Hidden Curriculum thematic examples

Subthemes	Example quotes
Writing Style	“Between me and two other friends we literally all had the same argument [in our essays] ... and since our entire arguments were the same, it came down to writing style and obviously who the marker is. We could tell it was the differences in writing style, which you’re either taught or you pick up on.” (P1, FG 8)

Academic Skills Training & Support “The teachers didn’t teach us how to really write essays, do references, footnotes, or essay systems” “it is just trial and error in my classes” “a lot of my friends also didn’t know this too.” (P1, FG 7)

*P = Participant and FG = Focus Group

Theme 5: Teaching & Learning.

Students shared both positive and negative experiences of teaching and learning at King’s. Regarding these negative experiences, these examples are related to occurrences in the classroom or student opinions on the curriculum. For instance, students discussed incidents of racism in the classroom and gave examples of this occurring during seminars that ironically explored the topic of race or discrimination in some way. They spoke of the complexities and challenges in navigating these implicit or explicit biases from other students in the classroom. In remediating such experiences Webb et al. (2022) assert that staff should endeavour to establish feelings of cultural and social comfort in the classroom, and facilitate this communication between students of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, participants reported a lack of diversity in teaching resources, which they explained tended to reflect a white Western perspective. Students discussed the desire for more breadth and diversity in in scholars studied, whilst others reported that they felt this bias silenced student opinions, making them less willing to share their perspectives. Some participants voiced the desire for teaching staff from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to deliver these ethnically diverse modules. Additionally, participants discussed a preference for diverse resources to be used in teaching in a meaningful way, rather than resources curated by academics from underrepresented backgrounds being left until the end of seminars.

There were positive examples of where the incorporation of inclusive teaching practices had improved the student experience, and this came from staff using a range of methods and incorporating the student voice. Collaborative approaches that engage students as partners in pedagogical approaches and curriculum design are beneficial (Healey et al., 2014). Understanding both positive and negative teaching and learning experiences of students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds helps to shed further light on how these factors contribute to these ethnicity awarding gaps.

Table 6: Teaching & Learning thematic examples

Subthemes	Example quotes
Diverse teaching resources	She was amazing at what she was doing. We watched videos, we listened to recordings, we did debates, we

	pretended to be sort of like historical figures. She made it really interactive, and it felt like as if I was in like secondary school doing some, like group work. So yeah, big props to her...seeing something move instead of just a bunch of words on a screen helps a lot (P2, FG 3)
Student co-creation	“X taught me philosophy my first year. I really like her. And she [asked if we had] any sort of advice? [She asked] who's your favourite philosopher? We really want to hear from you, [tell us who] your favourite philosophers from your own country, your own culture [are]. And that's very different from what the curriculum is”. (P1, FG 7)
Ineffective approaches to decolonising curriculum	“lecture me personally on Nigerian culture and why things are there... but there lots of things that due to being from that culture I inherently know”, felt uncomfortable experience (P2, FG 4)
	The work to decolonise curriculum “can feel tokenistic at times”. (P1, FG 4)

*P = Participant and FG = Focus Group

Data Analysis and Project Ideas

Following these focus groups the student researchers worked in pairs to transcribe and anonymise data before developing the above list of themes (coding framework) based on topics discussed during forum 1 (Saldana, 2021). They used this pre-defined coding framework to work through the transcripts, identify key themes and collate them into groups. Focus group analysis allows researchers to integrate the narratives that are explored not only by individual data points but also by group experiences and group interactions (Cyr, 2016). As a result, focus group methodologies enable the analysis of complex social concepts such as the higher education experience of students from underrepresented backgrounds. This analysis of student experience and factors contributing to awarding gaps then allowed students to develop recommended actions for future research and actions to address awarding gaps at a faculty and departmental level which are below.

By Ajfar & Fatima

Reducing Ethnicity Awarding Gaps by improving student transition into university through workshops

- This project would aim to explore whether providing summer workshops before university begins would improve the university transition for students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Data from focus groups indicated that many students did not feel adequately prepared for university life in multiple ways, for example, financially, career planning, academically, and

socially. Workshops and events targeted to specifically address these issues may improve the student experience for those who attend.

- Other areas to explore would be better promotion of the following: student funding opportunities available, the Faculty Wellbeing Adviser service, Widening Participation opportunities (to share experiences with other students from similar backgrounds), continued curriculum reform and safe spaces for students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

By Deneka & Helena

Reducing Ethnicity Awarding Gaps by improving academic support pre-arrival and during studies at King's

- Our research project suggestion is an analysis of the current use of the King's Academic Skills for Learning online module, in-person workshops, and one-to-one sessions. The aim would be to learn how much the modules and workshops are being engaged with and investigate whether there are trends in use. This data would be used to raise awareness about the availability of the modules and teaching staff would highlight and use this material during key periods of the module e.g., assign specific classes as homework to help with academic skills development. This would ensure students know that the resources are available to be used when needed.
- Improve the provision of a range of pre-course resources available to offer holders, to enhance academic support and bridge gaps in academic preparedness for students.

By Amanda & Mariam

Reducing Ethnicity Awarding Gaps by improving the inclusivity of seminars to allow students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to feel more included and confident.

- We want this to improve the teaching and learning experience not just for students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds but the whole student body. By gaining feedback from students, we hope that long-term strategic action would allow underrepresented students to feel more included in seminars, engage more in them and be assessed on materials related to their backgrounds. It will allow students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds to become more integrated into seminars, drawing on their own experiences and knowledge and therefore allow them to engage more in seminars. This could also increase their confidence, familiarity, and academic performance.
- Other areas we think are important to consider are the continuation of diversifying curriculums, improving the visibility of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives in faculty, enhancements on mandatory staff training concerning EDI and learning from sector best practices such as the UCL 'Inclusive Curriculum Health check'(UCL, 2018).

By Maryam and Zainab

Reducing Ethnicity Awarding Gaps by investigating student experiences on their personal tutor relationship and how to improve these relationships.

- Our suggested research idea is to use focus groups to investigate ways to improve relationships between students and their personal tutors. This entails investigating the difficulties students may have when forming relationships with their personal tutors and ways these difficulties can be resolved, to ensure that students have close and healthy relationships with their personal tutors. Forming strong relationships between students and their personal tutors involves an academic bond, but also a personal one. We argue that to ensure these relationships are secure, students must feel comfortable sharing personal concerns, as well as academic ones, with their personal tutors. We argue this is important as personal tutors are meant to provide wellbeing support to their students, which is not limited to only academics. This research will help King's to better support students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds in the faculty, by focusing on how to improve one specific but valuable part of their life at university.
- We also propose that the student support provided by Faculty Wellbeing Advisors needs to be better promoted and that we further investigate barriers for students accessing support at the university.

By Hannah & Vanessa

Reducing Ethnicity Awarding Gaps by improving student community, social experiences, and student communications.

- We propose the development of a faculty-based student society for all students. Given that across focus groups, all participants mentioned the absence of a wider sense of community within King's, we thought it would be important to create this society so that students across the faculty can get to know each other. This society would organise mixers, social events, parties, and host collaborations with other societies from other departments to also build a wider sense of community within King's as a whole.
- We also suggest improving student communications through the creation of paid student media officers to work with the communications team - increasing the growth and visibility of the faculty's social media pages.

Practical Implications

This project is the first of its kind to explore issues around awarding gaps at a faculty level. Through supporting student researchers from across the faculty, we were able to develop and deliver focus groups with students from similar backgrounds. This project amplifies the voices of students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds as actively involved them in developing actionable recommendations for faculty-wide structural and cultural change. Locally, this work has contributed to faculty EDI strategy and further funding has been acquired to develop a range of these student project ideas. This project has also been shared and presented institutionally as an example of good practice of effective student co-creation in working to understand and close awarding gaps at King's.

Future Research

In future, work in this area could also seek to disaggregate the unique experiences of students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. As mentioned previously, students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds do not form a homogeneous group and consist of individuals with varied experiences, knowledge and needs (National Union of Students & Universities UK, 2019). This broad term can conceal specific challenges that are faced by specific groups of students as is shown when awarding gap data is separated and reveals stronger gaps for black students both in the faculty and at King's more broadly (Meredith, 2022). This has been successfully demonstrated by a project which explored the student experiences of Asian students and the corresponding awarding gaps for this group of students (Islam, 2021). Therefore, carrying out work that seeks to distinguish within and between these groups may be useful in further understanding student experiences with the faculty and would be in line with the emerging project on the Black Student Experience at King's that has been carried out at an institution level.

Conclusion

Findings reflect the student experience of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic students in a King's faculty. They revealed that there are a variety of challenges that students from these backgrounds experienced both before and during their studies at King's that contribute to these awarding gaps. These difficulties include prerequisite challenges around capital, developing a sense of community and belonging, navigating the hidden curriculum, accessing support, and having mixed experiences with teaching and learning. This work is reflective of projects into the student experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and factors contributing to awarding gaps across a range of disciplines at other UK universities such as that by Seuou et al. (2023) at the University of Nottingham, Laing (2021) at the University of Cambridge and Islam (2021) at the University of Winchester, highlighting similar themes in the student experience. They also point to the importance of the student voice in directing steps for actionable change that will improve the student experience and help higher education institutions work to close their awarding gaps.

The effectiveness of this project is shown in part by the range of tangible actions that have been produced by the student researchers involved in this first phase of the project. What is most important for progress in this area of awarding gaps is the subsequent educational and experiential transformation that takes place. By ensuring that these recommendations and projects are considered by key stakeholders and actioned at departmental and faculty levels, we are optimistic about seeing improvements in awarding gaps for students from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. As a result, through the procurement of funding, liaison with key stakeholders and continued student consultation we plan to establish these projects and recommendations across the faculty as part of an action plan.

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Appendix

Focus Group Questions

1. How would you describe your relationship with your personal tutor?
2. How comfortable do you feel accessing support at King's?
3. What motivated you to choose King's and choose your course?
4. Is there anyone in your department that you feel you can connect with?
5. What did you expect from studying at King's and how have your expectations been met or not?
6. Has your experience been impacted by your ethnicity, if so in what way?
7. Do you feel your immediate and extended social network (friends, family, schoolteachers, mentors, extracurricular etc.) prepared you for life at university?
8. How did the pandemic affect your studies and experience at King's?
9. What does intersectionality mean to you, and do you feel this has any affect in the classroom?
10. Can you name any positive examples of teaching & learning, and would you like to see more of this?
11. How confident do you feel in the classroom? Do you feel you are perceived any particular way?

12. Can you name any negative examples of teaching & learning and what changes would you like to see?