

Enhancing student engagement, 'sense of belonging' and inclusivity in closing the BME Attainment Gap

NEON Addressing Differential Outcomes for BME Learners Working Group

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Paper outline

- An introduction to the role of student engagement and 'sense of belonging' in addressing the BME 'attainment gap'
- **Consider...**
 - misconceptions of black (or BME) student engagement
 - the notion of an 'invisible tax'
 - whether BME student engagement is seen as a necessity or burden
- **Explore...**
 - how universities are actively engaging BME students
- **Reflect...**
 - on whether institutions are ready to challenge their own concepts of inclusivity and student engagement to address the attainment gap



FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF UK-DOMICILED QUALIFIERS AT UK HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS WHO RECEIVED A FIRST- OR UPPER-SECOND-CLASS DEGREE BY ETHNICITY, 2017–18

TOTAL WHITE	80.9%
TOTAL BAME	67.7%
TOTAL BLACK	57.5%
Black or Black British – Caribbean	59.2%
Black or Black British – African	57.0%
Other Black background	56.3%
TOTAL ASIAN	70.5%
Asian or Asian British – Indian	75.7%
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani	66.6%
Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi	67.5%
Chinese	76.6%
Other Asian background	67.3%
TOTAL MIXED	77.2%
TOTAL OTHER	67.8%

Source: HESA Student record, 2017–18

The BME ‘Attainment’ Gap

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.

OfS, 2018b, p.4

#closingthegap (UUK and NUS, 2019)



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Student engagement

“the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” Kuh (2009, p. 683).

- Student engagement has been inextricable linked to student success outcome in the UK and overseas (Mountfort, et al., 2015).
- Student engagement measurable outcomes includes the accrual of social capital, racial identity formation and positive images of self (Harper and Quaye, 2008)



Is sense of belonging the missing link?

Thomas (2012) UK

- Social and academic engagement
- Linked to success and retention

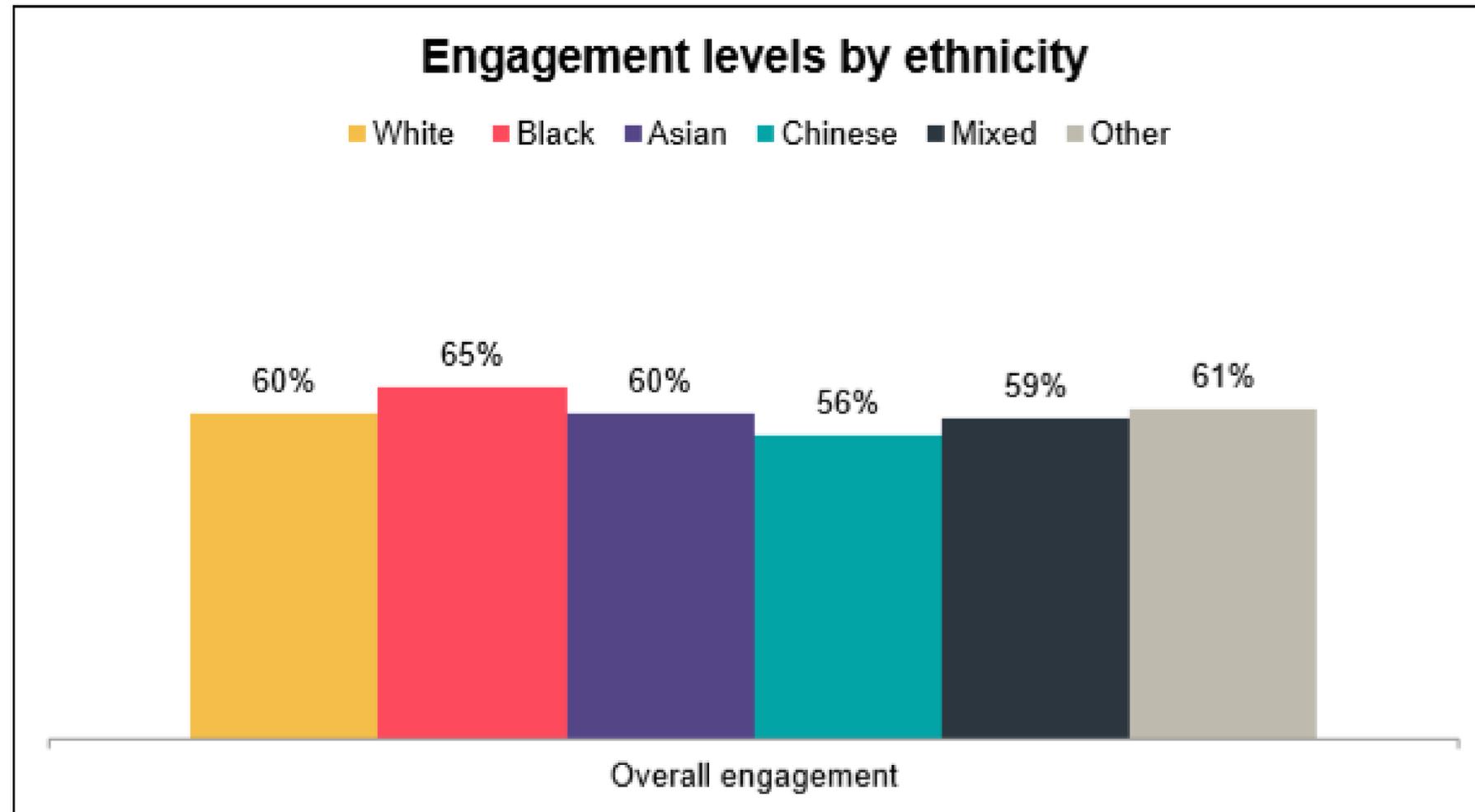


Policy makers advocating for HEIs to become more inclusive and foster a sense of belonging to address BME attainment gaps

Limited research on ethnic-based differential outcomes of belonging (Cureton and Gravestock, 2019)



Misconceptions of BME student engagement



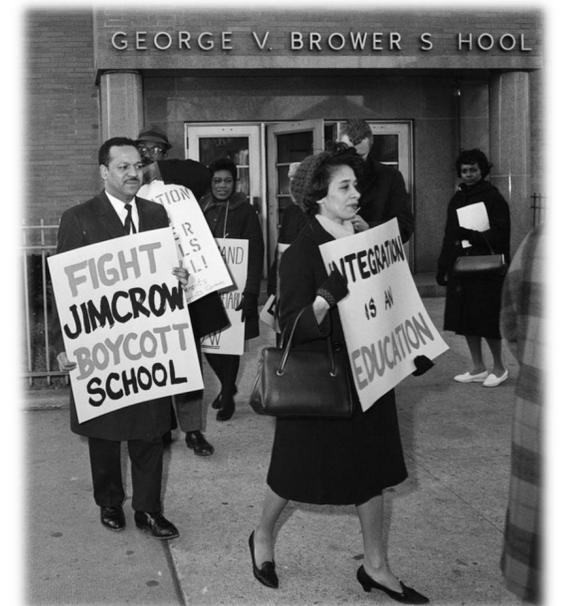
Base: UK domiciled students³ identifying as White (19,488); Black (2,129); Asian (2,464); Chinese (165); Mixed (984); Other (465)

- ‘less engaged’ or ‘hard to reach’ (Dunne, et al., 2017).
- ‘yet to be reached’ students (Goddard, 2017).
- *‘the untapped potential’* (Neeves, 2019)
- *BUT concerns over measures of student engagement (e.g. Buckley, nd; Naik and Warzynski, 2018)*



Belonging, engagement and the invisible tax

- Current debate on inclusivity, engagement and belonging neglects implications of race (Currants, 2015).
- USA (Johnson et al., 2007; Stephenson and Whelan, 2013)
 - black students at predominantly white HEIs have less sense of community
 - struggle to adapt and navigate institutional norms
- An 'invisible tax' and 'survival' (Givens, 2016)
 - coping mechanisms inc. creating counter-spaces and sub-cultures
 - 1960s black students started holding institutions to account



BME student engagement as a necessity or burden...

- ‘transactionally engaged learners’ (Kelly et al., 2017)
where ‘good’ students are expected to act as both ‘partners’ and ‘agents of change’
- Amatey Doku:
‘burden’ and ‘unrecognised labour’
- Examples in the UK:
 - ‘Why is my curriculum white?’ (UCL) and ‘Rhodes must fall’ (Goldsmiths)
- Student engagement not in-keeping with “desired outcomes of the college” (Kuh, 2009)



The UK Black Student Experience...

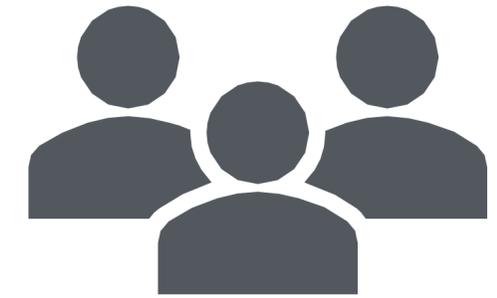
- Alterline Research (unpublished) – Black Student Experience Project
University of East Anglia, Leeds Beckett University and University of Winchester

Many black students often...

- heavily-relied on counter-spaces (e.g. ACAS)
 - felt responsible to act as a representative (e.g. class discussions)
 - expressed a sense of ‘imposters syndrome’
- ‘Sense of belonging’ not a constant state across the lifecycle (Humphrey and Lowe, 2017; and Cureton and Gravestock, 2019).
- Value of mapping out the student journey (McDuff, et al., 2018).



Challenging institutions to be more inclusive



- **#closing the gap** (UUK & NUS, 2019) recommendations inc.
 - inviting students to engage in conversations about race
 - develop racially diverse and inclusive environments to foster a ‘sense of belonging’
 - enhance ethnic-diversity in academia and take steps to review curricula
- Case studies...
 - ‘intercultural awareness workshops’ (Glasgow Caledonian)
 - BAME Alumni guest speakers (UWE)
 - BAME/BME Ambassadors (University of Birmingham, Manchester Metropolitan and University of Manchester)
 - Micro-aggressions video (University of Wolverhampton)



Challenging institutions to be more inclusive (cont.)



Inclusive curriculum...

- Inclusive curriculum health check (UCL), Inclusive Curriculum Framework (Kingston) and 'decolonising the curriculum' toolkit (SOAS)

BUT... is it a tokenistic gesture.

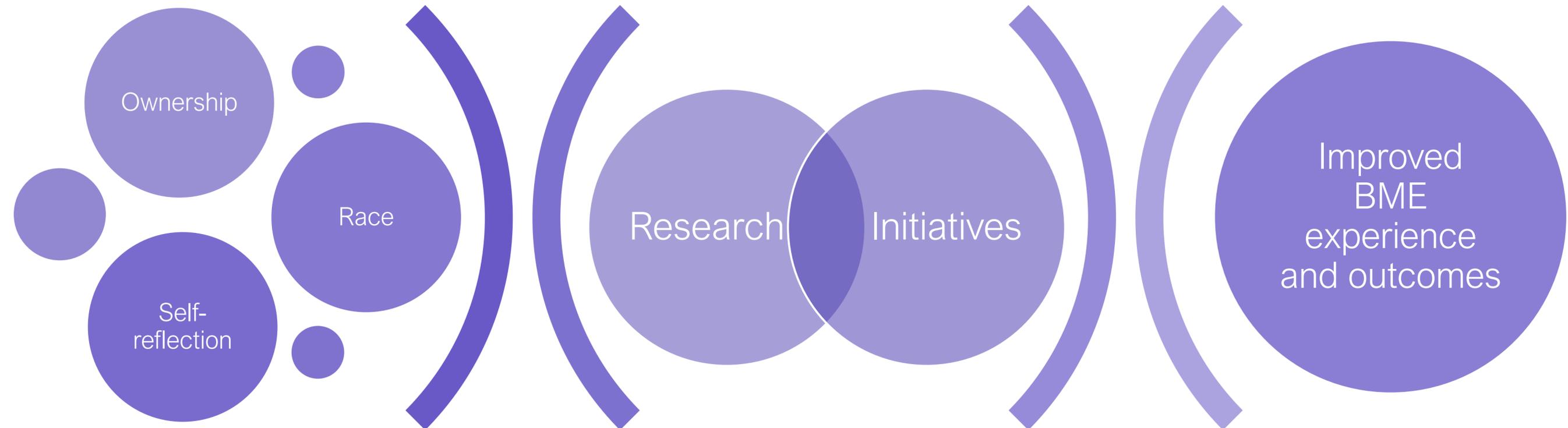
- a new 'type' of deficit model or even stirring up racial stereotypes (Williams, 2019)
e.g. Kingston University criticised for its revised geography course

OR... are institutions 'just' not institutionally ready

- e.g. Sheffield Hallam REACT project (Austin et al., 2017)



Reflections...



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Our vision: **Flourishing Students**

We recognise that there are large gaps in student outcomes for students from backgrounds traditionally under-represented in higher education, *particularly those from areas of deprivation; Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students; students with mental health difficulties*. We have a collective responsibility to address this social (in)justice issue for our own students and for the benefit of wider society.

Our Commitments:

Take a student-centred approach to enable all our students to flourish and celebrate their achievements

Ensure we have an inclusive learning environment where all students have a sense of 'belonging'

Develop our knowledge and understanding of 'explained' and 'unexplained' gaps in student outcomes



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Thank you for listening

A blackboard with white chalk writing that says "ANY QUESTIONS?". The text is written in a casual, hand-drawn style. The word "ANY" is on the top line, "QUESTIONS" is on the second line, and a question mark is on the third line. There is a small dot below the question mark.



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