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Article

Exploring the BME Attainment Gap in a Russell Group University: A Mixed Methods Case-Study

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Abstract: Presenting the results from a mixed methods case-study, this paper draws together insight from the fields of ‘BME attainment’ and ‘student transition’ to explore how differential levels of degree attainment might be experienced within the context of a higher tariff university in England. Across a five-year period (2010/11–2014/2015) it compares the levels of degree attainment between UK-domiciled White and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students in relation to prior attainment, qualification type, and socioeconomic group (POLAR 3). A range of qualitative data then outlines a series of dynamic factors that can, when compounded, serve to constrain BME students’ capability to negotiate their way through very particular university landscapes. These include: academic expectation and preparedness; the pedagogic terrain; pastoral engagement and sense of belonging finance; and, the lived experience of diversity and ‘othering’. The paper argues that attainment gaps should not be viewed in terms of an individual deficit that needs to be ‘fixed’ or ‘filled’. Instead, greater attention needs to be directed toward enhancing the capacity of higher tariff universities to respond positively to the needs of a changing demographic.



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Keywords: student transition; differential attainment; ethnicity; higher education

1. Introduction

Research in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector has consistently demonstrated an attainment gap between home-domiciled Black Minority Ethnic (BME) students and their White counterparts. In the context of the UK, BME primarily refers to students labelled as Black, Mixed, Asian, Chinese, who are identified as ‘home’—that is, UK domiciled students. While the term BME cannot be considered cohesive with rates of attainment and retention varying within the category [1], the attainment gap between BME students and White students is persistent over time and still exists when factors such as entry qualifications and socioeconomic status are considered [2–5]. However, whilst some research has explored how applicants from under-represented groups are less likely than their peers to be offered places into more highly selective, higher tariff ‘Russell Group’ universities [4–6], there has been comparatively little exploration of how this might be translated into the experiences of BME students who do enter such institutions—particularly in the post-2012 context of a three-fold increase in tuition fees [7]. Drawing on the results of a mixed methods case-study of a UK Russell Group University (NRGU), this paper explores how students identified as ‘BME’ have performed over a five-year period in a Russell Group Institution, and how BME students understand and experience their transition into, and through, the university.

2. Context

Research across the UK HE sector has repeatedly pointed to the existence of a BME Attainment Gap [1,8–11]. This attainment gap is generally taken to be the difference between the proportion of UK-domiciled White students who gain higher degrees—1:1

or 2:1s—and the proportion of UK-domiciled BME students who are awarded the same degrees. Whilst there is variation between those groups that fall under the BME label the evidence continues to suggest that a significantly smaller proportion of BME students receive these degree classifications compared to their White counterparts [1,3]. The Equality Challenge Unit, for instance, demonstrated that whilst there has been a gradual increase in the overall number of students receiving 1:1/2:1s, there remains a consistent gap between BME and White students. In 2013/14, this gap was 15.2% points nationally, with the largest discrepancy occurring between Black and White students—a gap of 26.1% points [12].

Such gaps can have far reaching consequences. A number of studies have explored disparities in the graduate employment and highlighted that BME graduates are more likely to experience lower rates of progression into highly skilled employment or further study [13,14].

If the existence and consequence of the BME attainment gap are well established, the reasons why it occurs are much less secure. However, the research-base does have two key foci: factors that influence attainment before entering HE; and, factors that influence attainment during study. In respect to the former, a number of interrelated factors have been highlighted as being important, these include: schooling, in terms of both prior attainment and type of institution [15]; cultural differences in participation [16]; institution and subject choice [6]; socio-economic background [17]; and, familial influence [18]. In respect to the latter, however, preparedness [9], curriculum design and styles of learning and teaching in HE [19], unconscious bias [20,21], institutional culture [22,23], and the lack of awareness of BME-related issues [24] have all been highlighted as significant.

While the more qualitatively driven evidence suggests that the experiences of BME students in HEIs are both nuanced and variable [25], the thrust of more measurement-focused research has generally highlighted that such gaps exist even when other demographic and institutional data have been considered [1]. This includes entry qualification, socio-economic group, type of course (FT/PT), discipline, gender, and whether the HEI is research intensive or not [1,26,27]. For instance, Richardson reports evidence to suggest that when controlling for entry qualification only around half of the disparity in attainment is attributable to prior achievement [8,10]. Similarly, whilst characteristics such as entry qualification and socio-economic group can, in themselves, be shown to also have both independent influence over attainment, there is evidence to demonstrate that these factors do not fully account for the BME attainment gap [11].

Elsewhere, more critical accounts of institutional policy and practice have sought to highlight how notions of ‘whiteness’ are embedded within HEIs [18]. These, often deeply implicit, institutional cultures and discourses can serve to constrain both BME engagement and attainment. Several commentators have highlighted how the process of ‘othering’ locates both the gap and the solution within BME groups themselves. This process both individualises and stigmatises the student(s) in question [28,29]. Indeed, there is a well-established literature that has examined how the discursive practices associated with the institutional ‘habitus’ of HEIs works to exclude both working-class and BME groups—particularly in the context of Russell Group institutions. Whilst there is variation both within and between university landscapes, the net result is that these groups find it much more difficult than their white middle class peers to engage with, and develop, the social and cultural capital necessary to perform in such terrains [30–33].

As an adjunct to the literature on the BME attainment gap, there is also a growing interest in the field of ‘student transition’ within the context of HE. Broadly speaking, this refers to students’ capability to navigate change. Whilst this field is still considered to be both ‘under conceptualised’ and ‘under-theorised’ [34], initial uses of the term primarily saw transition in terms of a relatively linear process of induction and/or development over time. Some formulations of the term have, however, understood transition as a process of ‘becoming’. For instance, Gale and Parker highlight how transitions are dialectically structured through the administrative apparatus of institutions and the reflexive experiences of both staff and students [35]. Moving away from an understanding of transition

that constructs progress as a linear and temporal movement from ‘there to here’, they argue student transitions in HE are more than a process of change over time. They are: often non-linear, and sometimes unresolved; both horizontal and vertical in that they have multiple dimensions that intersect and go beyond the first year experience; reflexively experienced, hence they are open to both interpretation and change; and, far from universal. As a result, discourses that might normalise or unify experience by mapping points of transition across the student life cycle, or simply identifying ‘deficits’ or ‘stress points’ in experience are problematic. This is because these approaches have a marked tendency to construct the need for enhancement within the individual. Instead, and much like Stevenson [29], Gale and Parker argue for an emphasis on how individuals make sense of the changes they experience within HEIs and through the course of their degree. This necessitates examining how those experiences are shaped by the institution in question.

The key thread that ties both the BME attainment and transition literature together is the need to build research base that has an emphasis on student engagement across a range of institutional types and programmes. To this end, little specific attention has currently been given within the literature to the BME attainment gap and the transitions that BME students make within ‘Russell Group’ universities specifically. The Russell Group is a term that refers to an association of twenty-four universities based in the UK that are typically non-collegiate and civic in origin. They are widely perceived to have a research-intensive focus and are selective, attracting some of the highest achieving students in the country. However, while recent research has demonstrated that applicants from traditionally underrepresented groups are less likely to be offered places than their peers [4,5,36], there has been comparatively little exploration of how this might be translated into the experiences of BME students who *do* enter such institutions.

To this end, this paper is directed toward first examining the nature of the BME attainment gap in such an institution, and secondly, how BME groups transition into, and through the university. Using a ‘northern Russell Group University’ (NRGU) as a case-study, and drawing on primary and secondary data within the context of a mixed-methods research design, it describes the levels of attainment of White and BME students in relation to a range of characteristics across a five-year period, before reconciling that data with a qualitative account of how BME students understand their experience of transitioning into and through the University.

3. Methodology

Using an embedded mixed-methods research strategy [37], this project sought to explore how and why differential attainment exists and persists within the context of a UK-based ‘northern Russell Group University’ (NRGU). Findings are drawn from secondary quantitative data in the form of the NRGU’s student record, and primary qualitative data. Together, the data offers a comprehensive overview of the attainment gap, as well as illuminating how it is experienced by BME students at university.

The quantitative element of the study was based on the student record of all full-time, UK-domiciled undergraduate students who completed their studies between 2010/11 and 2014/15. Data was extracted from the University’s student database and refined by removing: duplicate records; degree outcomes associated with intercalated programmes; students who received non-honours degrees (for example, diplomas); students who were awarded a degree by aegrotat; and, students whose registration status did not indicate successful completion of studies. Unfortunately, the student record does not contain any self-reported data such as family income or parental capacity for financial support.

Independent variables were created to reflect national data—in particular the Equality Challenge Unit analyses [11]. This included generalised ethnicity categories, simplified prior attainment grade banding based on A-Level equivalences, and simplified prior attainment types. Given the vast majority of students were under 21, it was not possible to determine any interaction between BME status/attainment and age. The categories of analysis are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories of Analysis.

Ethnicity	Prior Attainment	Prior Attainment Type	SEG (POLAR3)
White	AAA* and above	A-Level	Quintile 1
Black	AAA	BTEC	Quintile 2
Asian	AAB	Access	Quintile 3
Chinese	ABB	Combined A-Level and Other Qualifications	Quintile 4
Mixed	BBB	International Baccalaureate	Quintile 5
Other	BBC or Below	Other	
Unknown/Undeclared	Other		

The dependent measurement of ‘degree attainment’ also followed the standard procedure adopted by the ECU. This involved collapsing 1:1 and 2:1 degree classifications into a single category, and 2:2, 3:1 and Pass into another. Any attainment gap can thus be calculated as the difference between BME groups with respect to the proportion of 1:1/2:1 and other awards. Any differences can then be cross-referenced with respect to the independent variables described above. Descriptive analyses of the resultant data are presented in Section 4.

Running alongside this analysis, the qualitative strand of the study aimed to identify and understand the specific institutional context of NRGU and place this alongside how students experience their transition(s) through university. Adopting a case-study approach, the qualitative element of the project focused on ‘Faculty A’ because they had proportionally more BME students, and an attainment gap had already been identified within earlier institutional research. Given the emerging importance of BME recruitment, retention, and attainment, it was felt that such a case-study—where the gap has been broadly recognised, and an initial response made—would offer something of a ‘typical-case’ for investigation that could be instructive for those who were beginning to approach the issue elsewhere [38]. Beyond the case level, the study employed a sampling strategy of maximum variation at unit level. This approach sees participants selected based on a range of pre-identified characters to maximise the diversity of respondents.

Semi-structured interviews (n = 18) were conducted with BME students both past and present. Interviewees were selected with respect to socio-economic background (POLAR 3) and parental education. Although interviewees came from a range of BME backgrounds, we do not distinguish within the BME category. Not only would this reduce some categories to some very small numbers, it would also challenge the anonymity of participants. Similarly, we did not analyse the data to discern any possible intersecting factors such as gender, age, etc. Given that the numbers of BME students were so low we chose to keep the ‘empirical primacy’ of race intact as much as possible [39]. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. In addition, ethnographic data based on observations of learning and teaching and conversations with key stakeholders across individual departments based in the Faculty A were also collected. Triangulating and contextualising emergent findings, informal discussions with existing students took place during the ethnographic element, as did further conversations with graduates and academic and support staff across the Faculty over a six-month period. Using a thematic approach initial themes were identified and coded within the data, with emerging relationships between the themes mapped [40]. Both elements of the research received separate ethics approval from the University’s Student Services Ethics Committee.

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Results

Taken between 2011 and 2015, the institutional data consisted of a total of 17,384 student records. Most of the full-time, UK-domiciled students who graduated from the university between these years were White (90.4%), with BME students collectively making up 9.6% of the population (1812 students). This is roughly half the size of the national proportion of BME students enrolled in UG programmes, but not untypical of Russell Group institutions [1,4,5]. Descriptive analyses of the data similarly reveal that there has been a persistent attainment gap between White and BME groups at NRGU across this time frame, with BME groups under-performing against White counterparts. White students received an average of 85.8% higher degrees across the time frame, compared to 72.988.7–73.9% of BME students. The average gap across the institution in the five-year period was 12.8%. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of the trend.

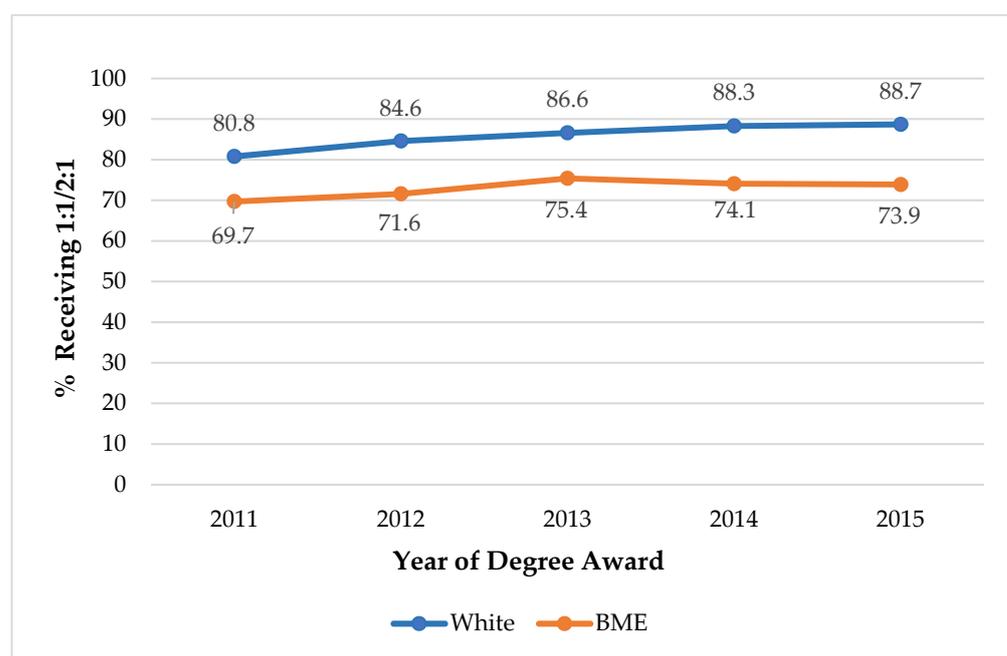


Figure 1. BME Attainment Gap at NRGU between 2011 and 2015.

While the gap was 3.7% points higher in 2015 than it was in 2011, attainment is considerably higher than the national average with respect to both groups. Indeed, the gap itself was also lower than the national average, which was 18.4% points in 2011, and 15.2% points in 2013/14 [11].

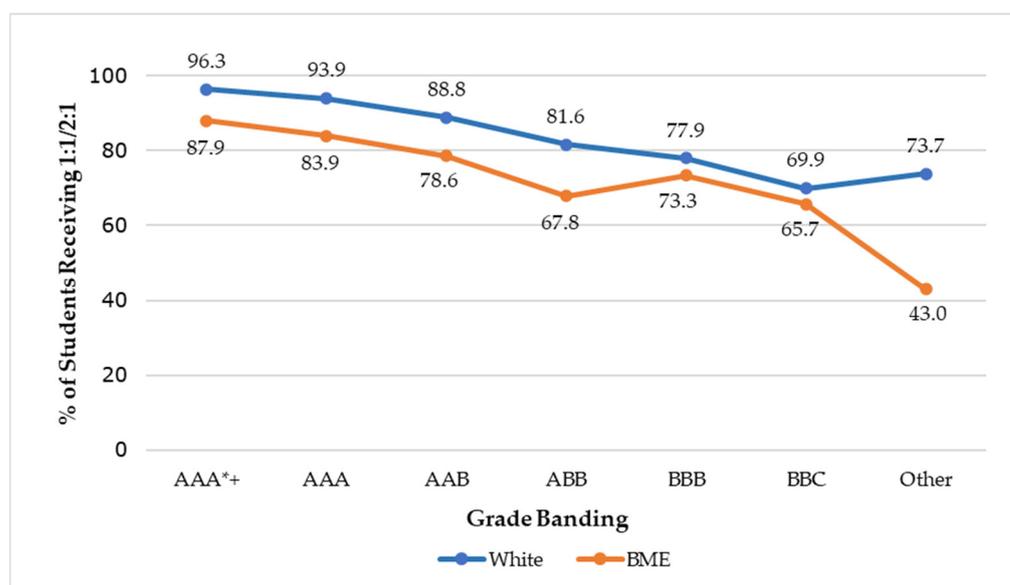
Further, while Table 2 demonstrates a clear and consistent attainment gap for all BME students when compared against White students, there is also variation within the BME category.

The smallest attainment gap existed between Mixed students and White students (5% overall), with the difference between White and Chinese students demonstrating the most variance across time. The largest and most consistent attainment gap was between White and Black students (22.2% overall), a finding which is reflective of previous national research [11].

Table 2. Proportion of 1:1/2:1 degrees and above by ethnicity.

Year of Award	Ethnicity						
	White	Black	Asian	Chinese	Mixed	Other	Unknown/Undeclared
2011	80.8%	61.2%	66.3%	64.7%	78.9%	72.7%	77.3%
2012	84.6%	60.8%	71.6%	76%	77.3%	66.7%	75%
2013	86.6%	62.9%	74.8%	62.5%	81.6%	100%	93.9%
2014	88.3%	63.8%	73.2%	66.7%	81.7%	73.3%	93.1%
2015	88.7%	68.4%	66.3%	75%	84%	78.6%	81.3%
Overall	85.8%	63.6%	70.6%	68.6%	80.8%	77.2%	83.5%

Figure 2 similarly demonstrates that the attainment gap between White and BME students is persistent across the level of entry qualification.

**Figure 2.** Attainment by BME status and level of entry qualification.

Generally, as the level of entry qualification decreases, the proportion of students receiving 1:1/2:1s also decreased. However, there is a relatively consistent gap between White and BME students. While the 30.7%-point gap between White and BME students who entered with 'other' level of qualifications is striking, this does reflect national trends [11].

Figure 3 also demonstrates that the attainment gap does appear to be persistent across type of entry qualification.

Although some of the disparities in Figure 3 appear to be large, it is important to note that just over 95% of students entered NRGU with A-Levels (16,539 students). In comparison, 1.1% (196 students) entered with Access to HE qualifications, and 1% entered with BTEC qualifications (168 students). The 'other' category was an assemblage of national qualification, foundation programmes, and diplomas, with most in low single figures. It is likely that very specific circumstances account for the differences here, rather than BME status more generally (for example, transnational students). Indeed, a relatively small number of students are represented by qualifications other than A-Levels, which is likely to account for the large variations observed.

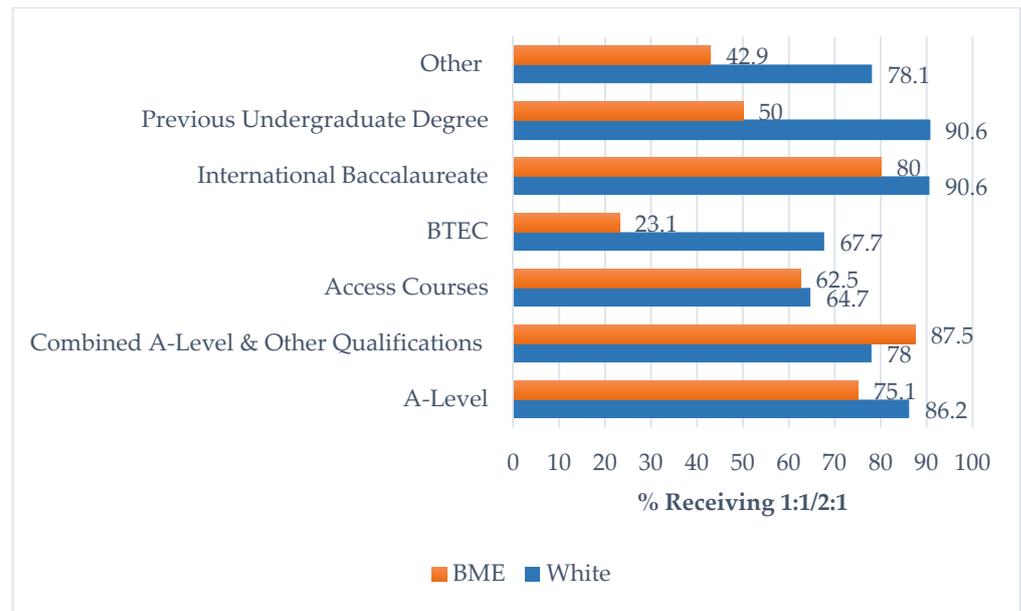


Figure 3. Attainment by BME Status and Entry Attainment Type.

The attainment gap was similarly persistent with respect to socio-economic status, as Figure 4 demonstrates.

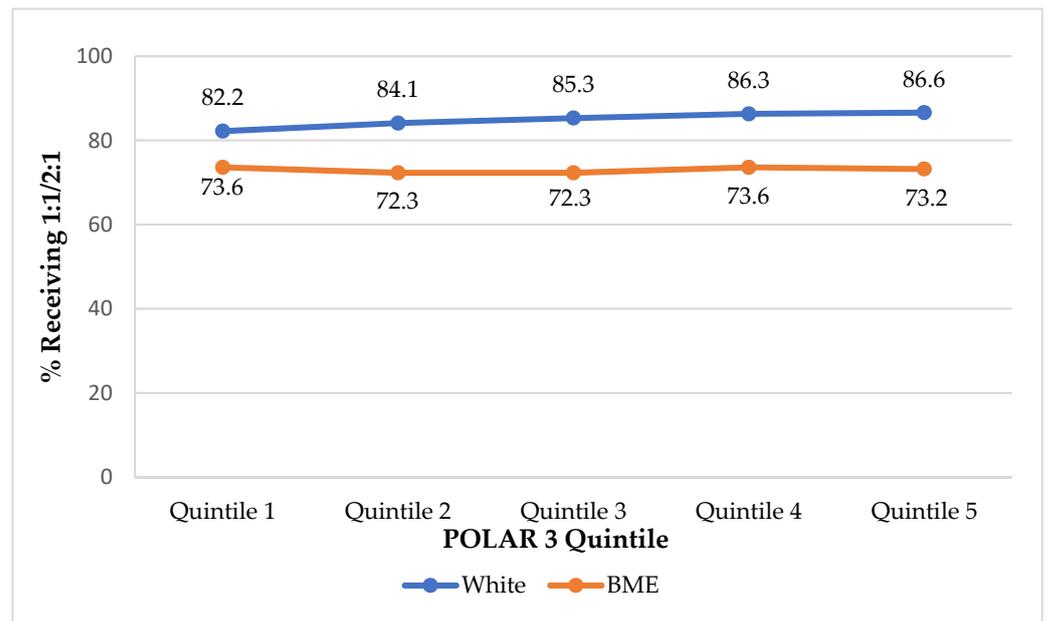


Figure 4. Overall 1:1/2:1 Attainment by BME Status and POLAR 3 Quintiles.

While there remains some discussion about the validity of the measure [12], the participation of local areas classification (POLAR) is based on the proportion of young people who participate in higher education and how this varies by geographical area. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups—or quintiles—based on the proportion of young people who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old. Quintile 1 shows the lowest rate of participation while Quintile 5 shows the highest rate of participation [3]. The data demonstrates that the proportion of 1:1/2:1s gradually increases with each POLAR 3 quintile for White students. This means that those students who enter NRGU from the most advantaged areas are also more likely to leave with a higher degree—if the student

self classifies as 'White'. For BME students however, attainment remains relatively stable, with slight decreases in Q2, Q3 and again at Q5.

4.2. Qualitative Results

Having established that an attainment gap exists at NRGU, and does not appear to be accounted for by a variety of intersecting factors, the qualitative element of the study sought to explore how BME students experienced their transition into, and through their chosen degree programme. The following discussion outlines the key themes that emerged during data analysis. A number of key points of transition are highlighted which include: academic preparedness; navigating the pedagogical terrain; pastoral engagement and sense of belonging; finance; and the lived experience of 'diversity'. Each is dealt with in turn.

4.2.1. Academic Expectations and Preparedness: Moving into, through and beyond Higher Education

While questions of academic expectation and preparedness are usually directed toward those entering university, the relationship between expectation and experience—and the resonance between the two—was the key defining feature of the qualitative data see [40]. Indeed, interviewees stressed that their transitions into, through, and in some cases beyond HE were replete with the attempt to reconcile their expectations of their degree programme with their lived experience of academic standards and institutional practices associated with the university. All students, for example, stressed a lack of prior appreciation for the 'work ethic' required in undertaking successful degree level study. One student highlighted that:

'... [subject] is a very tough course and I kind of just resumed the level of work that I would have been doing at A-level. I did okay in my A-levels but in my first year I didn't do so well, but after that experience I sort of reflected and realised that I had to pick up my work ethic, so then it [academic progress] improved gradually ...' (5th year student)

Some students were also unsure of the level of independent research required to support their learning, whilst others were less familiar with more baseline tasks such as finding and reviewing appropriate academic journals. Issues of time-management, and information processing in the form of 'email overload' from central and departmental communications were similarly described as challenging.

However, explanations that located the reason for differences in expectation and experience in individual terms were shaped by structural factors.

'... in the first year everyone said it was really easy and it's the same as A-Level. People were saying there's not really a big jump, but when I did my first year it was completely different to what people said; so that was a big change from my expectation. And the second year was a big jump from the first year as well: there were more exams and assignments and it was much harder as well. You had to remember everything you learnt from the first year to be able to know the stuff in second year ...' (3rd year student)

Indeed, the key dimension by which the relationship between expectation and experience was articulated revolved around students' ability to negotiate programmes of study. For instance, many pointed out that initial their A-Level experiences were predicated on 'moving-on' once an exam was completed. The nature of a degree programme, on the other hand, was much more nuanced as it was both modular and incremental, but often lacked adequate narration at either level. The different levels of the programme were often reported to be mismatched, with students not given sufficient articulation of both aims and structure for each year of study, and the types of knowledge that were required to be taken forward and built upon in subsequent years.

Differences in expectation and experience with respect to the substantive content of the course were also highlighted as a concern. Many interviewees had assumed that the

courses would be, to one degree or another, 'applied'; but frequently they found themselves having to contend with theory-heavy, research-based study:

'The course has been very theoretical and not very applied. So I've done [subject] as I want to learn about [topic], but you haven't mentioned [topic] for like the past five months! . . . I think that sort of transferrable knowledge, showing how it is applied is very important because otherwise, you start to lose interest.' (2nd year student)

This left some students struggling to keep themselves motivated and engaged as they had specifically applied to courses that had appeared to be more 'practical'.

More generally, many interviewees felt that assumptions had also been made by staff about the academic context that they had transitioned from, with expectations not being made explicit from the outset:

'I think there were communication gaps in terms of expectation management to say 'hey, you are in a different setting from where you were before and this isn't the way we do things here . . . "' (Graduate from 2013)

It is also of note that some students explained that it was only when they were 'up-to-date' with their workloads that they could really take advantage and benefit from the wider academic support available across the University. However, many students felt as if they were either 'playing catch-up' or left struggling to put all the pieces of the programme together themselves.

4.2.2. Learning and Teaching: Navigating the Pedagogical Terrain

Elsewhere, all interviewees within the sample also described their experiences of teaching as 'patchy' or 'inconsistent'. Collectively, they identified a range of issues that modified the course of their transition through their degree programme. These included: a lack of diversity in both the methods and style of teaching; an over-reliance on talking over PowerPoint slides; a general lack of opportunities for meaningful interaction; poor visualisation; and, in the form of abstract research, a lack of applicability. Although some students expressed concerns around the ability to note-take effectively because the pace of some lecturing was 'too quick', others also felt there were issues around general communication in lectures. This included linguistic competence of the lecturers, audibility, and meaningful opportunities for the consolidation and practical application of ideas. Many interviewees also made the perceptive point that there was an obvious discrepancy between how they were advised to deliver presentations and how they experienced them as an audience.

The issue of feedback was also highlighted as a particular point of contention:

' . . . I haven't received any feedback on my course so far [6 months] so I'm not sure how I'm progressing . . . it's actually been one of the few downfalls of [NRGU].' (1st year student)

Both the lack of individualised or formative feedback and lengthy turnaround times did not facilitate an ability to reflect on assessments or sense check their academic performance. Whilst feedback for exams was often described as perfunctory—and frequently non-existent—coursework-based feedback was often reported to be little more than generic. This meant comments were rarely descriptive enough to be taken forward towards future assignments, thereby limiting opportunities for reflection and progression.

Similarly, interviewees suggested that existing feedback loops between staff and students appeared to be something of a departmental 'formality'. One interviewee commented on the general distance between students and academics:

'It's not that we're being shy or something, even now we're making a lot more of an effort, but it's hard to get academics to really support you . . . the lack of support is very tough because, especially in first year, because through A-levels you have a teacher who is really trying to help you get into university and get the

right grades . . . whereas in university there's absolutely no connection between academics and the students; it's very, very distant. Even if there's a departmental event, academics are separate and there's never an overlap—which I find really weird.' (5th year student)

By contrast, lecturers who were cited as being 'engaging' and 'good' were those who had solicited ongoing feedback and had been responsive to students, by implementing direct changes:

' . . . we had one lecturer this year, he was really good . . . the students gave him some feedback saying that we didn't really see the benefit in a certain type of assignment so he completely changed the module and responded to the feedback immediately which was really good.' (5th year student)

Other students who had undertaken a year in industry also sought to emphasise the transformative impact that it had in terms of academic and personal progression—mainly in terms of an increased confidence in negotiating the pedagogical terrain by experiencing a workplace culture.

' . . . before I did that year out [in industry] I was quite shy, quite timid. Whereas, doing that year out you get a lot more confidence; so at the time in third year I probably would never have gone and approached another lecturer unless it was desperate times. Whereas, now I'd quite happily email and say, "Hi, I need help with this . . ." ' (5th year student)

However, other interviewees who were not achieving their initial aspirations clearly felt more disheartened and/or disappointed with their current academic progress. Such students often felt isolated, having to rely on their own skills to negotiate any difficulties faced:

'In first year I barely sort of passed, second year I just about got a 2:1, very closely, third year it's getting better. So it's been a gradual improvement but I would say that it's largely been through self-reflection and my own appreciation' (5th year student)

Again, this was often experienced as an imbalance between expectation and experience and led to one describing themselves as 'lazy', despite spending an average of 25 h per week in part-time work to sustain a living. Another had resigned themselves to the belief that pushing for a first-class degree would compromise their mental health and general wellbeing, despite entering NRUB with high qualifications.

4.2.3. Pastoral Engagement and Sense of Belonging

This nexus of enabling and constraining factors within the environments of learning and teaching continued with respect to their wider experiences of university networks. Indeed, students achieving 1:1/2.1s typically had a broader network of peer relationships across the University. This was facilitated particularly through their involvement in societies and departmental or social sports teams—suggesting a sense of social belonging bears a positive relationship towards academic progression. In fact, all students felt there was great importance in establishing good peer relationships for both course progression and general wellbeing.

However, some also commented on the difficulties in developing or maintaining relationships with different course peers over time, with others highlighting the dominance of alcohol as the defining feature of social events and societies. The negative social stigma attached to working 'hard' in the first year—which 'doesn't even count'—was also perceived to be a problem:

'In first year there's a stigma if you do work, if that makes sense? So if you do work they're like, "Why are you doing work? It's first year!" Then you don't really appreciate tutorial sessions. And then the further through uni you go, you stick with that mind-set almost.' (3rd year student)

Some students also commented on unhelpful assumptions made by non-BME students about aspects of their identity, which frequently appeared to be ignorant and insensitive. This included being conflated with, or mistaken for, international students; the use of inappropriate/offensive language or behaviour; and, stereotyping:

‘It’s ridiculous . . . I mean some students will say “coloured” and when you’re like, “you can’t say that,” they just make it into a joke and make out that the issue is with you and you’re being overly sensitive.’ (1st year student)

Interviewees described these assumptions as being difficult to challenge. This was largely because they appeared to stem from a lack of exposure to cultural and ethnic diversity, with non-BME students often maintaining that the choice of language made by their white peers was somehow unproblematic when challenged. Indeed, many interviewees suggested that prior assumptions regarding home students from BME backgrounds meant they were perceived to come from poorer neighbourhoods, were international students, had issues around language, and, had generally poorer schooling—none of which is reflective of the actual diversity of BME students at NRGU.

Of course, there are systems in place to support students through their academic and pastoral life whilst at university. However, the reliance on a personal tutoring system that was largely seen to be ineffective meant that interviewees felt that they were, again, left to their own devices:

‘. . . there’s definitely a divide there between what a tutor should do and what a tutor actually does do. And whether it’s because the tutor doesn’t know what they’re supposed to do? I don’t know . . . ’ (2nd year student)

Whilst some felt ‘lucky enough’ to find an engaging tutor, the lack of clarity in the personal tutor role and a general lack of opportunities for connection meant that many students regarded the system as not particularly helpful, leading to lower motivation and confidence to engage with NRGU and a poorer sense of belonging.

4.2.4. Finance: Information, Employment, and Money-Related Stress

‘I know I’m missing out on some things but I just can’t afford to go on this trip . . . or can’t afford to buy this kit to play sports.’ (1st year student)

A key modifier in the transition of BME students through NRGU coalesced around the issue of finance. Three topics of concern emerged: timely access to financial information; the necessity for part-time work to sustain a living; and, finance-related stress. In response, a number of students also indicated the positive impact of a financial bursary scheme for eligible widening participation students.

In the first instance, some students highlighted that they experienced difficulties in completing Student Finance England (SFE) forms—which facilitates access to loans and grant funds. This was particularly the case where household circumstances were seen as more ‘complex’ or ‘non-traditional,’ for example, due to ongoing divorce settlements. This led to some students receiving neither the finance they may have been entitled to, nor the financial support offered by the University:

‘My student finance isn’t sorted out properly because they [Student Finance England] need more evidence . . . I don’t have the evidence so it doesn’t cover my rent, so I have to work a lot . . . I’ve just given up now on getting it sorted . . . I’m contracted 16 h, but I do roughly maybe 25 to 30 h a week . . . and because they don’t have enough information, neither does the University so I end up missing out in two places.’ (2nd year student)

In many cases, interviewees constructed issues of student finance as being distinct from the University, and therefore did not seek direct help. Financial concerns were articulated as an internalised struggle, with many considering ‘cash-flow’ to be a private issue that was simply part and parcel of working towards better prospects for themselves and also their families.

‘... I just want to do well, just for myself really, because my parents are always like having money struggles and stuff so it’d be nice to get a good degree and get a job so it’s less pressure for them ... ’ (2nd year student)

This heightened sense of individual responsibility with respect to financial information had two related outcomes in both the ‘here-and-now’ and the ‘future’, particularly for those students from lower income backgrounds. Firstly, whilst interviewees fully understood the negative implications of working over the University recommended 16 h per week, they could envisage little alternative. Acquiring income was essential to daily living—and many were regularly working over 20 h per week, in addition to studying full-time.

‘... the loan doesn’t really cover rent ... I had quite a bit last year with the grant but due to some sort of change etc., now it doesn’t even cover rent.’ (2nd year student)

These concerns were to have a further impact. The stress that stemmed from financial concerns appeared to have a significant impact on the academic progression of students, greatly reducing the ability of students in managing their time effectively. One quarter of students participating in the interviews were experiencing challenging financial situations. Moreover, those students working more than 16 h a week—the recommended limit during term time—had not approached any staff in Professional Services regarding finance, nor departmental staff, but some had been warned by the latter that they were at risk of academic failure. Unsurprisingly, this caused much worry.

However, such stress was negated if the interviewee had received additional monies from elsewhere, either through a family contribution or a bursary/fee waiver from the University. If they had, they felt more able to participate in various aspects of university life in addition to covering essential living costs:

‘Having that bursary ... it’s just ensuring that I’ve got something steady ... ’ (1st year student)

Students in receipt of the bursary appeared to experience less day-to-day anxiety around financial concerns compared to those who did not receive any financial support. Indeed, students, who also received ‘top-up’ money from their families every week or month, were also noticeably more confident in articulating their student experiences and were positive about their university journey ahead. Those who were in receipt of a bursary or fee waiver from the university similarly highlighted how the additional income helped them negotiate the financial landscape of university expenses. ‘Middle-income’ students, as dictated by SFE income boundaries, on the other hand, appeared to experience general anxieties around finance due to the inherent assumption that families both can and will contribute to university study costs—this was not always the case. Equally, those who saw a reduction in the amount of money after the annual SFE reassessment also experienced difficulties in trying to adjust to the shortfall of incoming money, without relying on parental contributions.

4.2.5. The Lived Experience of ‘Diversity’

The relationship between expectation and experience was again imbued within interviewees’ experience of diversity, with previous educational environments seen as being considerably more diverse than the sociocultural environment at NRGU. Indeed, beyond the surface of an international student body, NRGU was perceived to be a white, middle-class university.

That said, all of the BME students interviewed maintained they would not be happy in being ‘singled out’ based on their ethnicity. They were conscious of non-BME students or organisations having negative perceptions that might serve to homogenise minority ethnicities and that this could lead to tokenistic attitudes and propagate ignorant practices:

‘I didn’t want to put down any more details than I needed to. You don’t need to know that information [ethnicity] so I wouldn’t give it because I don’t feel it’s

important . . . I've not experienced any direct racism, but from what I've been told of what goes on . . . I'm just pre-empting that from happening, basically.' (1st year student)

Students who were vocal about racist experiences also talked about the lack of challenge that occurs in educational environments. In their experiences, incidents of racism were often downplayed, as opposed to having the potential to play out across different areas and through a variety of attitudes and perceptions. Diversity might be nominally recognised within such environments, but it was often not understood by others in their interactions with participants. Interviewees indicated that many people were ignorant about the nature and effects of racism, particularly when challenged with the reality of the consequences of that ignorance.

Elsewhere, interviewees also felt that the lack of exposure to BME role models at a younger age could potentially manifest in BME students thinking they were incapable of progressing towards university, or that HE study was fundamentally not for 'people like them':

' . . . I do think it's actually quite important for young kids to be able to see oh, there is someone like me, doing [subject] and therefore "I can do [subject] . . . "' (5th year student)

Having worked towards getting into university, interviewees identified positive role models as those people who were 'down-to-earth' individuals with industry experience, had good communication skills and student engagement/rapport—regardless of BME status:

'I don't think it's important to have 'diverse' role models, you just need people who know their stuff, that are competent, approachable and respectful . . . somebody with industry experience would be more of a role model to me . . . ' (1st year student)

Role models were thought to be particularly important where social factors in the form of a lack of professional exposure at home, an absence of meaningful relationships with teaching staff, and social pressures from peers, could constrain their development.

5. Conclusions

This paper presents the results from a case-study of a Russell Group University with respect to the BME attainment gap. Using a mixed-methods research strategy, it reveals the presence of a BME attainment gap at NRGU. It also shows that when considering level and type of prior attainment, and socio-economic background, the differences between the proportion of White and BME students receiving 1:1/2:1s remains persistent. The qualitative data suggests a series of factors that act as key modifiers in the transition experiences of BME students and attempts to sketch the complex interplay of social, structural and institutional factors that can disproportionately impact on those experiences. Significant themes within these transitions include: academic preparedness; the pedagogical terrain; pastoral engagement; access to finance; and, the lived experience of diversity.

There are, of course, several limitations to the study. The first is to acknowledge the diversity of BME experience. Whilst using the five-fold BME classification system can help reveal general trends, there will be much variation within each BME category. Homogenizing a diverse group of student voices and experiences, based on an umbrella identity of 'BME', is highly problematic [41,42]. Neither should we attempt to look for the general in the particular: BME students can, and frequently do, receive the very highest marks at NRGU. While the study design in this instance was limited by the relatively low number of BME students, further research may seek to capture some of this difference by taking more intersectional approaches where it is possible. Secondly, the case-study design means that attempts to generalize to other contexts may be problematic. However, the aim of study was to ensure that a range of meanings and experiences were explored. Indeed, the case-study approach adopted here is intensive rather than exhaustive. That

said, and whilst the results are necessarily descriptive of the sample—and the quantitative component is, perhaps, not as recent as we might wish—moderate generalizations can be made and there is reason to suspect that many of the findings would resonate and transfer across faculties and other similar universities [1,21,36]. We also recognize that issues relating to class and socio-economic circumstance are likely to feature heavily in the experiences of some BME groups. However, the nature of our sample—where there were few BME students generally, and even less who would identify as ‘low income’—prevented us from being able to offer any conclusive insight regarding this intersection. Evidently, the findings do highlight issues of finance and how low incomes can easily become difficult to negotiate. However, there is more to class than finance alone and further empirical investigation of such intersections will help to elucidate the relationship between class, ethnicity, and alienation in HEIs [43].

Despite these limitations, the present study does offer a revealing insight into the nature of the BME attainment gap and how it is experienced within a particular Russell Group institution. A recent review of developments in relation to BME students’ participation in UK HEIs has once again drawn attention to the fact almost all of England’s higher tariff providers continue to report large attainment gaps associated with ethnicity [1]. These gaps are also reflected in graduate outcomes, with BME students recording consistently lower rates of highly skilled employment or graduate study [8,13]. Therefore, it remains imperative to understand those micro and macro processes that continue to alienate students, and BME students in particular, from HEIs [1]. Indeed, as suggested by Mann, this process of alienation goes further than a pedagogical concern with surface and deep learning, and/or simplistic statements of equality and diversity [44]. Instead, it is the whole ecosystem through which students experience HEIs that contribute to feelings of estrangement. To these ends, models of student transition that emphasize the multi-dimensional nature of student needs, experiences, and capabilities appear more suitable in developing supportive environments for students.

What is particularly striking about some of the results reported here is that some of what our interviewees commented upon does not only apply to BME students. Experiences of academic preparedness are related to structural misalignments between further education qualifications and degree-level curricula. Ineffective models of learning and teaching that are designed to be efficient rather than effective are similarly beyond the influence students, although those who are less isolated are probably better equipped to negotiate such inefficiencies. Similarly, the financial requirements of study necessarily require additions from elsewhere. While this will always be more forcefully felt by those with the least economic power, all student budgets need augmentation [43]. The impersonal nature of pastoral care is also felt by all student groups, although again, this is likely to be more difficult to navigate for those with less experience of bureaucratic structures.

None of this is to deny that BME students experience HEIs in ways that are different to their white counterparts. However, in contexts that can be experienced as ‘sink or swim’, further experiences of racism and notable constraints in diversity can only compound feelings of alienation yet further. Indeed, in line with Gale and Parker [35] the evidence presented here suggests that all student transitions need to be seen as a process of ongoing interactions between institutional structures and individual experience. To this end, the paper demonstrates that the attainment gap should not be viewed in terms of an individual deficit that needs to be ‘fixed’ or ‘filled’. It supports those, such as Crozier et al. [28] and Stevenson [29], who are critical of interventions based around notions of ‘student resilience’ that serve to both stigmatize and emphasize the role of the individual. Instead, greater attention needs to be placed upon universities and how they can enhance their capacity for equality at organizational, departmental, and inter-personal levels so they are less likely to facilitate exclusory practices [23]. Of course, how this might be achieved is the key question. While there is little reason to suspect that talking to those on the receiving end of such pressures should provide the solution, much of the literature already suggests that the answer is unlikely to lie within those methods that seek to ‘uplift’ aspects of their

identity [18]. Instead, more effective methods for inclusion will be predicated on sustaining accessible, relevant, and engaging HEIs. Evidently, issues of (in)equality relating to BME students need to be consistently recognised, particularly where they feature issues of racism and surface-level claims of diversity. However, while the intersecting social characteristics of BME students make them particularly vulnerable to the tacit exclusory practices of HEIs, all students are likely to benefit from genuinely more responsive HE environments.

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