Do you Really Belong? Understanding the BaME award gap at Edinburgh University

The University of Edinburgh has a world leading reputation, being ranked the 15th best university in the QS World University Ranking, 4th in the UK for the latest REF and the highest-ranked university in Scotland. To continue to grow in excellence and to improve the student experience the university has developed the Strategy 2030, that aims to "celebrate our students, to be a place of transformation and of self-improvement, and to widen participation so that students from any background can come to study with us".

But there is a problem, and this relates to the striking lack of equity in undergraduate attainment between British domiciled students that self-identify as being from a Black or minority ethnic background (BaME) and students who self-identify as White. For example, the 2020 spotlight report highlighted that, "Asian, Black and Mixed Ethnicity students receive fewer Honours degrees than expected given their overall numbers, and more White students receive Honours degrees than expected given their overall numbers".

School	BME		White		BME - White Difference in 1st/2.1 Outcome 2014/15 - 2018/19
	%	Number	%	Number	% - Points
Moray House School of Education	67.6%	34	67.0%	1315	0.7%
School of Chemistry	72.7%	77	74.6%	389	-1.8%
School of History, Classics and Archaeology	84.8%	92	87.5%	1341	-2.7%
School of Divinity	88.2%	17	91.4%	290	-3.1%
School of Social and Political Science	82.3%	181	85.7%	1091	-3.4%
School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures	86.6%	172	90.4%	1859	-3.8%
School of Health in Social Science	84.6%	13	88.7%	159	-4.1%
School of Informatics	74.8%	103	79.3%	421	-4.6%
School of Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences	84.7%	190	89.5%	1132	-4.8%
School of Law	83.3%	126	89.0%	670	-5.6%
School of Mathematics	75.4%	114	82.3%	356	-6.9%
School of Engineering	71.6%	366	78.9%	889	-7.3%
College of Science and Engineering	4.3%	46	12.3%	284	-8.0%
Business School	81.0%	248	90.9%	726	-9.9%
Deanery of Biomedical Sciences	80.4%	148	90.4%	596	-10.0%
School of Physics and Astronomy	60.0%	60	70.7%	410	-10.7%
Edinburgh College of Art	68.6%	334	80.0%	1835	-11.4%
School of Biological Sciences	68.1%	138	79.9%	548	-11.8%
School of Economics	78.0%	241	92.1%	534	-14.1%
Deanery of Clinical Sciences	66.7%	6	81.1%	37	-14.4%
School of Geosciences	68.9%	103	86.6%	896	-17.7%

Proportion of students achieving a 1st class or 2.1 honours degree, by ethnicity and School, five-year average 2013/14 to 2017/18

The existence of this award gap has been known about for over 25 years. Such gaps have been reported for every university in the UK where on average 81.4% of white students but only 68.0% of black and minority ethnic (BaME) students are awarded 1st or 2.1. This award gap persists when comparing students entering higher education with the same qualifications.

The university can be seen to represent the wider societal norms where significant racial injustices still exist in all areas of public life, including education, employment, housing, and the criminal justice system (Race Disparity Audit). Within universities, 16% of NUS survey respondents have experienced racism in British HEIs. In addition, the average pay for BaME academics at UK's Russell Group Universities is 26% less compared to white colleagues, with female academics additionally experiencing a gender pay gap.

As of 2019-2020 11.4% of UK domiciled students at our university are from a BaME background (EDMARC 2020). Even more international students also self-describe as BaME. Hence this is a significant and unresolved problem and one that must be successfully addressed if we are to meet the targets set out in the 2030 strategy.

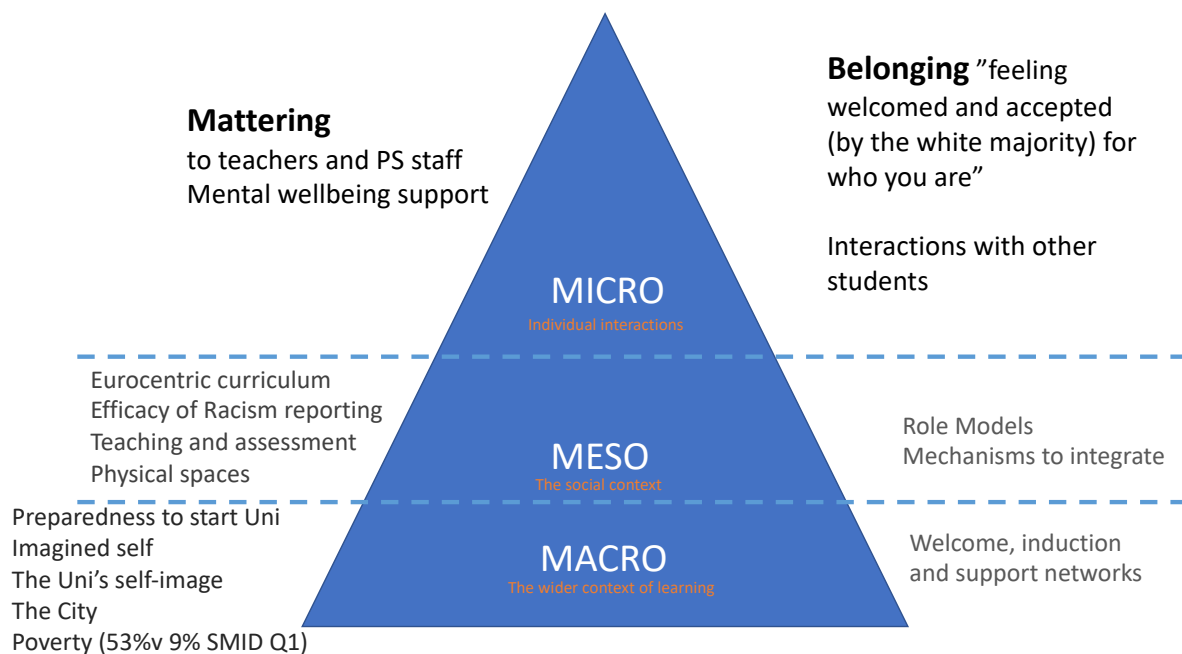My team undertook this research to:
- understand our students' perspective on the cause of the BaME award gap
- understand BaME students' lived experience and how they feel this may contribute to motivation and success
- develop an understanding of their experiences of racism, how safe they have felt reporting it and the outcomes
- develop recommendations to enable change within our university

Methodology

We have had 2 interns on this project. Kamya Choudhary was in post from November 2020 until April 2021. She undertook a detailed literature review and relevant themes and questions were developed from this for a semi-structured, 1-hour interview. A focus group of BaME undergraduate students was invited to comment on the interview questions and they were modified to consider their opinions. Permission to recruit students and to ask these questions was sought and granted from the local ethics committee. Unfortunately, the lockdown made it impossible to recruit students and when Kamya was offered a position at LSE and left the university, there was a hiatus of 6 months during which the project was effectively stalled. In November 2021 Sarah Shemery was recruited to replace Kamya and she has undertaken 21 interviews to date, all via zoom. Participants have mostly been recruited using a combination of social media platforms and student email listings. 9/21 interviews have been transcribed and Sarah and I have coded them using thematic content analysis.

Results

There are clear themes emerging that are shown below as a "hierarchy of needs" model.

Mattering
to teachers and PS staff
Mental wellbeing support

Belonging "feeling welcomed and accepted (by the white majority) for who you are"

Interactions with other students

MICRO
Individual interactions

Eurocentric curriculum
Efficacy of Racism reporting
Teaching and assessment
Physical spaces

MESO
The social context

Role Models
Mechanisms to integrate

Preparedness to start Uni
Imagined self
The Uni's self-image
The City
Poverty (53%v 9% SMID Q1)

MACRO
The wider context of learning

Welcome, induction and support networks

The most important themes revolve around mattering and belonging, both to other students and to staff. When these fail, students feel "othered" and this in turn leads to feelings of isolation, alienation, and reduced motivation. Another clear issue is the lack of BaME staff (both academics and professional services) to act as role models. The experience of racial microaggressions was common; though many examples may have been unintentional, stemming from ignorance. Like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, mattering and belonging require that other levels of support are in place, but these levels are dynamic and interchangeable. I will include in the appendix 1 some quotes from students relating to belonging, mattering and racism.

Dissemination

Once all the interviews have been analysed, I will provide recommendations to the university senior management team. In the meantime, I have given an oral presentation of the interim results at the 2022 Edinburgh University Learning and Teaching conference. Nevertheless, the current unconscious bias training is not working and may even be unhelpful. To change the culture within the university, both staff and students need to adopt shared values and shared behaviours. This cannot be a top-

down approach, though the senior management team will have to enthusiastically endorse it. To quote Rene Carayol, I believe a culture in which both staff and students, "look out for each other and look after each other" along with addressing the lack of role models and BaME staff will lead to profound and lasting change in Edinburgh university.

Future work
I am in regular contact with Lisa Dawson and her office have provided £5000 in further funding, that has enabled Sarah's contract to be extended from May 1st to the end of September, as well as paying for further interviews and transcripts to be generated.

Benefits for all the University
The recommendations that will emerge from this research will inform on best practice for all the university.

On belonging

I think there needs to be more lecturers of colour, like BAME lecturers.

one lecture in particular we were learning about diasporic African music, and the lecturer just asking me to talk about it, clearly because I'm the only black person in the class, it's just really uncomfortable

On belonging... the feeling of being wanted as well, not just your own sense of belonging, but other people's sense of inclusion.

I'd say if the student doesn't feel like they belong and they're not able to socially mix in the same way as other students, then that's going to affect their mental state and how lonely they feel.

I just keep thinking, I'm the only black girl in all of my classes, in fact I'm the only black person in all my classes

On Racism

a black woman, so they're the only other person on the course. Constantly the teachers get our names mixed up and call me her name

Racism:I don't really know what the university is doing in terms of that, to be honest.

I'd experience microaggressions and just even direct racism and that will have an effect on how comfortable I feel around other people

Microaggressions: in the hospital as well the same thing happens, other doctors will just ask me where I'm from and patients as well. I think even though it is quite common it's quite hard to get used to and I still feel a little bit anxious when people do things like that

I experience a lot of microaggressions, definitely, just like people asking me where I'm from and where I'm really from

I remember how sharing a flat, this was quite recently, with a girl, and she was telling me that she'd never really seen many Asians and black people in one place

On Mattering to other students

But I try not to be bothered by my skin tone and everything and my culture. But obviously when it's, when you're made out to be different to everyone else, it's just like, you don't need to do that to me.

a lot of people realise they have a complex identity when they come here and they realise they don't fit into whatever bubble it is

I noticed that a lot of people would eat by themselves and they looked quite lonely and a lot of the times they would be from a BAME background

I've always felt like I've not exactly belonged anywhere

I think it just really helps for me, when I'm away from my family, to have people who I identify with, and who are like anchors for certain parts of my identity...

most of the white students stick together and then I think BAME students end up sticking together because of that

"the make up of your class and cohort: It is definitely quite mostly white, middle class students, I would say. Most of the students are from private school backgrounds and they're mostly white."

if there's a BAME member among, for example, a group of white people they might feel able to relate less when communicating with them. And that, kind of, subtle feeling of exclusion they feel, might influence them mentally and emotionally, which could further influence how well they're able to do their work and engage with their course.

On Mattering to Staff

it would be nice to have someone to touch base with and feel supported by

when I was at the hospital and the consultant mistook me for another Asian person and called me by their name.

"And even my personal mentor doesn't really respond to my emails"

I sometimes reach out for help, but I've not really had much success with it

I think it makes a big difference when tutors learn your names..... last year a tutor kept mixing me up with someone else, and it happened throughout the whole term, and it didn't really happen to anyone else.