# The Experiences of BAME Students Completing a Psychology Undergraduate Dissertation Module

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**Abstract:** In higher education in the United Kingdom (UK), students from ethnic minorities get lower grades than White students. This study focused on the experiences of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students completing an undergraduate psychology dissertation module. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) underpinned this study. A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) methodology was used. Eleven BAME students engaged in individual interviews about their lived experience when completing an undergraduate psychology dissertation module. Participants spoke about the following five themes: module content, tutor, project, other students, and ethnicity. Participants who wanted to research ethnicity-focused topics had tutors with insufficient understanding of the topic. When interacting with tutors and peers, participants stopped to consider whether their ethnicity would negatively impact how they were perceived. They reported challenges in understanding the material and engaging in academic discussions, and they spoke about inconsistency amongst tutors. Students discussed

how locating the relevant information took up time, which was particularly worrying for students with work or family commitments. These findings indicate that universities should diversify their staff and student pool and ensure students have access to supportive and effective tutors. Students should be sufficiently prepared for the dissertation module, and assessment and marking guidance should be communicated clearly to both tutors and students. Furthermore, module materials should capture achievements of minority populations.

**Keywords:** BAME students; awarding gap; undergraduate dissertation

**Résumé:** L'expériences des étudiants NAME qui terminent un module de dissertation de premier cycle en psychologie

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Résumé : Dans l'enseignement supérieur au Royaume-Uni, les étudiants issus de minorités ethniques obtiennent des notes inférieures à celles des étudiants blancs. Cette étude se concentre sur les expériences des étudiants noirs, asiatiques et issus de minorités ethniques (NAME) qui suivent un module de mémoire de psychologie de premier cycle. La théorie de l'autodétermination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) et l'intersectionnalité (Crenshaw, 1989) ont été les fondements de cette étude. Une méthodologie d'analyse thématique et réflexive (Braun & Clark, 2006) a été utilisée. Onze étudiants NAME ont participé à des entretiens individuels sur leur expérience vécue lors de la réalisation d'un module de dissertation en psychologie. Les participants ont abordé les cinq thèmes suivants : le contenu du module, le tuteur, le projet, les autres étudiants et l'ethnicité. Les participants qui voulaient faire des recherches sur des sujets axés sur l'ethnicité ont eu des tuteurs qui ne comprenaient pas suffisamment le sujet. Lors des interactions avec les tuteurs et les pairs, les participants se sont arrêtés pour se demander si leur appartenance ethnique pouvait avoir un impact négatif sur la façon dont ils étaient perçus. Ils ont fait état de difficultés à comprendre la

matière et à s'engager dans des discussions académiques, et ils ont parlé de l'incohérence des tuteurs. Les étudiants ont expliqué que la recherche des informations pertinentes leur prenait du temps, ce qui était particulièrement préoccupant pour les étudiants ayant des obligations professionnelles ou familiales. Ces résultats indiquent que les universités devraient diversifier leur personnel et leur vivier d'étudiants et veiller à ce que les étudiants aient accès à des tuteurs efficaces et compréhensifs. Les étudiants devraient être suffisamment préparés pour le module de mémoire, et les conseils en matière d'évaluation et de notation devraient être communiqués clairement aux tuteurs et aux étudiants. En outre, les supports des modules devraient faire état des accomplissements des populations minoritaires.

**Mots-clés:** Étudiants NAME ; differences de valorisation ; mémoire de premier cycle

## Introduction

It is well documented that Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students are awarded lower university grades than White students. In in 2021/2022, 78.84% of White students at universities in the United Kingdom (UK) obtained a *good degree* (first or second upper-class). In contrast, this percentage was lower for BAME students: 60.41% for Black students, 69.71% for Asian students, and 76.67% for Mixed-race students (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2023). In an online university, BAME students need to spend 6% to 12% more time engaging with the virtual learning environment than White students, in order to get the same grade (Nguyen et al., 2020). This awarding gap remains after the influence of prior qualifications has been accounted for (Jones et al., 2017; Richardson et al., 2015). Richardson et al. (2015) found that different ethnicity groups received similar amounts and types of feedback. Furthermore, when blind marking practices are used, the differences across ethnicities remain (Cousin & Cureton, 2012). Therefore, biased marking is not the sole cause.

## Literature Review

In self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020), people are seen as inclined towards psychological growth and motivation to succeed, but they require supportive conditions. Intrinsic motivation is the internalisation of the value of the target, such as fully appreciating the value

of higher education. For people to move towards intrinsic motivation, their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness need to be met. Autonomy concerns the sense of capability and drive behind a person's actions; that is, the sense that a person can choose to willingly engage in specific behaviours. Competence comprises feelings of mastery, in which a person believes they can do well and develop. This need is satisfied when students are given good structure in their learning that is not controlling. Relatedness is the sense of belonging that a person feels with others at university, which leaves a person feeling respected and cared for (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Intrinsic motivation enables students to engage with curiosity, be enthusiastic about challenges, and be keen to learn (Deci, 2013). The autonomy of BAME students is regularly challenged when they feel unable to express their ideas in class, perhaps sensing that their ideas will not be well-received (Bunce et al., 2021). BAME students report feeling less comfortable to approach staff with questions (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015), and they organize strategies that avoid asking lecturers for help (Stevenson, 2012).

In terms of competence, Webb et al. (2022) examined the experience of the *hidden curriculum*; that is, the elements of learning that are generally unwritten, such as social norms and routines. BAME students report challenges with navigating complex enrolment processes (Webb et al., 2022). They reported having limited awareness of the value of good writing through use of grammar and other tools (Cousin & Cureton, 2012). They reported not being

fully aware of what is expected of them (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Furthermore, tacit assumptions in assessment briefs are unhelpful (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Being reluctant to seek help further compounds this barrier. Darvin (2019) argues that low competence to fully engage in online learning environments makes education less democratic.

Numerous studies have captured BAME students' experience of relatedness. They feel marginalised by White students (Bunce et al., 2021; Webb et al, 2022), and perceive that staff do not acknowledge their ideas (Bunce et al., 2021). Also, in course materials BAME people are often stereotyped, with White people presented as the norm (Webb et al., 2022). Hence, BAME students may feel isolated, particularly in an online environment, in which there may be less support from other BAME peers. Isolation can increase emotional stress when a person is trying to integrate in the higher education environment, and this can in turn impact academic success (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Crenshaw (1989) developed the term *intersectionality* to capture the fact that people may have multiple oppressive identities, which have a cumulative effect on their life experience. For example, someone might be Black and from a low socioeconomic status. Ethnicity is only one identity of BAME students, and other identities may buffer or compound challenges they may experience. A large proportion of online learners have family and work responsibilities (Zamecnik et al., 2022), and there are many more students in online learning

who have a disability (Kotera et al., 2019). Therefore, intersectionality becomes very important to consider with this population.

Researchers indicate the value of focussing on specific modules when seeking to understand students' experiences, as the requirements of different modules might lead to varying experiences (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). The undergraduate research project or dissertation has substantial impact on degree classification. Furthermore, students are expected to take initiative and work independently, while discussing ideas with their supervisor and possibly with their peers. Important tasks that students need to complete in a research project include finalising a research idea and research design, conducting a literature review, conducting the data analysis, and writing up the research report. Therefore, this study sought to understand the experiences of BAME students on an undergraduate psychology dissertation module in an online university. This was done by interviewing 11 BAME students in relation to autonomy, competence, relatedness, and intersectionality. Participants were asked about their general experience working on the module and how their lived experiences as a person from a minority ethnic group affected their learning experience while completing the module.

## Research Design and Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 students using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The research question was as follows:

> *What are the experiences of BAME students completing an undergraduate research module in an online university, with regard to their psychological needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness?*

The Open University's Student Research Project Panel approved the project, and the researcher engaged with an equality impact assessment. Teaching on the module that was the focus of this study is fully online, with no face-to-face meetings.

### Design

Reflexive thematic analysis is a qualitative research methodology that allows the researcher to identify, organise, and analyse themes within a specific data set (Braun & Clark, 2006). The researcher does not develop a priori codes; instead, codes and themes are fully led by the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis is suitable in a semi-structured interview setting, in which participants are posed open-ended questions they can answer according to their own experiences. In the data analysis part of the process, the researcher familiarises themselves with the data and assigns

codes to the data as they emerge. The codes are assigned by following an inductive process and bracketing preconceived notions the researcher may have either from their personal experiences or the literature review.

## Materials

The interview schedule included open questions about each of the three elements of self-determination theory and ethnicity. The following are examples of the questions:

- *Competence: How clear were you about what was expected of you for the assignments?*

- *Autonomy: How well do you feel your tutor supported you?*

- *Relatedness: To what extent do you feel your relationship with your tutor impacted your project experience?*

- *Ethnicity: How do you feel your ethnicity has impacted your experience of this module?*

## Procedure

There were 209 students eligible to take part. To be eligible, students had to be registered in the relevant module starting in October 2021, and they had to have registered their ethnicity as BAME. Of the students who were eligible, 84 were unavailable because they had not consented to being approached to take part in research, or they had already been invited for other studies during the academic year. The remaining 125 students were sent an email invitation to take part and two reminders. Each email included brief

information about the study, and a more detailed participant information sheet. Two interviewers with experience teaching at The Open University, without prior relationship with any of the participants, conducted the interviews. Both interviewers were from a minority ethnic background. Interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, audio recorded, and transcribed. Transcriptions were conducted by professional services and checked against the audio recording by the researcher. The interviews were around 1-hour long. Participants were given a £10 voucher from an online retailer.

## Participants

Eleven students engaged in an interview. This may not seem like a large number. However, the focus of qualitative research is to reach saturation, which is the point at which data collection stops because it does not lead to additional meaningful information (Guest et al., 2020). Braun and Clarke (2021) outline guidelines on accounting for diversity of experiences and participants expected in a study. It is argued that, when the sample is homogenous, saturation could occur at six to 12 interviews (Guest et al., 2020). Close engagement with the data indicated that saturation was reached at the tenth interview, although the eleventh interview added confirmation.

Of the 11 participants, 10 were female and one was male. Their ages ranged from 23 to 58, with an average of 33.64 years, and a median of 33

years. Whereas three participants were born outside the UK, eight were born in the UK. At the time of the interview, one was living in mainland Europe, with the rest living in the UK. With regard to ethnicity, four identified as Black British Caribbean, two as British African, one as Black British, two as Indian, one as British Bangladeshi, and one as Asian British with Pakistani.

## Results

Five main themes were identified from the data: module content, tutor, project, other students, and ethnicity. Each theme comprised a number of sub-themes as outlined in Table 1 and discussed in more detail.

**Table 1**

*List of Themes and Sub-themes*

| Module Content | Tutor | Project | Other Students | Ethnicity |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Module materials | Positive relationships | Stress, support, & impact | Collaboration | Terminology |
| Assignments & guidance | Guesswork & inconsistency | Project forum | Use of cluster forum | Impact of ethnicity |
| Motivation | Barriers to asking for help & consequences | Support with data analysis & software | Social media | *BAME project topics* |
| Tutorials | Lack of ethnic diversity in tutors | | Sense of belonging with peers & the university | Intersectionality |
| Comparison to previous years | | | Ethnic diversity in peers | |

## Theme 1: Module Content

Participants were generally positive about the *module materials*. Some found the inclusion of audiovisual material particularly helpful. However, there was not always sufficient information about assignment questions: "We had to critically evaluate research … but it [the module content] didn't necessarily

evaluate the research, so we couldn't really say what was wrong with it in terms of the limitations or the strengths about it" (P4).

Participants offered critique on the ethnic diversity of the module materials, including lack of diversity in the people interviewed, or examples given: "So with the textbook and the online modules, I don't see myself reflected in anything" (P9). Furthermore, when ethnic minorities are mentioned, it is their challenges that are the focus: "The barriers [between White and Black people] always start off with a negative connotation of them from lower class. The, you know, uneducated, and … then it turns around … you've already put into the students' mind the negative stereotype anyway" (P5).

In terms of *assignments and guidance*, students disagreed on whether the guidance was clear enough, with some feeling "like we had to interpret the notes ourselves, and there wasn't always a clear direction on what exactly it was we had to do" (P8), and that they had to go on a "fact-finding mission" (P9) to gain sufficient clarity. Following these efforts, some participants expressed disappointment with the marks they received: "I knew I put a lot of work into it. I followed everything down to the tee … I was sad, man, I remember. I was really sad with that" (P1). This lack of clarity that participants perceived impacted their *motivation* and emotional approach to the work: "I think you can feel a bit demotivated when you don't really know what you're doing from the beginning. You're just waffling or winging it" (P7).

P1 felt that their competence was being questioned: "I felt it was you've been doing this for three years, and you should know." P5 explained how difficulties with navigating module content affected their self-esteem: "[You] feel a little bit stupid ... it doesn't necessarily boost your self-esteem." Participants expressed despondency when feedback did not help them understand their weaknesses and improve: "So then you try and reference slightly different and it's still wrong, and it's like well you can't win" (P10).

Participants expressed mixed views about *tutorials* in the module. While several appreciated the option to type in the chat box, others found their slow typing speed a barrier to engagement. Those who had used the microphone seem to have *realised* that there is a norm to not use the microphone and did not use it again.

Many tutorials had a 7:00 p.m. start. While some participants like this, others found it clashed with the time when they needed to put young children to bed. Participants appreciated that some tutorials were recorded, and would have liked more to be recorded, so they could listen to tutorials by various tutors. This was mentioned in relation to criticism that some tutorials were "very dry" (P1), and tutors "literally just read what's on the slides ... I could have just done that myself" (P7).

Most participants expressed that they found this module much more challenging in *comparison to previous years*. They subsequently questioned their competence to understand the material: "I questioned whether or not it

was about [myself] ... Was I not competent? Did I not understand it?" (P1). While participants agreed that "it wasn't the easiest" (P3), many noted that the module stretched them in a positive way. Specifically, they stretched "in terms of really evaluating other sources" (P2), learning about methodology, and learning about the project topic. Others said, "I think I was just more concerned with getting it done, trying to pass it, rather than taking in what the module and the context was trying to teach me" (P5).

## Theme 2: Tutors

Some participants spoke about *positive relationships* with tutors. Approachability, timeliness, and quality of responses were key factors that marked tutors as *good*. Participants reflected on good support they received while they were going through personal issues. They also identified *positive pushing* as helpful, and the lack of this was found disappointing: "I wasn't pushed ... I feel like they should be really rooting for you" (P7). Tutors who met participants' needs for connectedness were those who balanced warmth and empathy with effectiveness.

Participants commented that *guesswork and inconsistency* negatively impacted their relationship with their tutor and their progress. Students with positive tutor relationships felt clear on what was expected of them: "I think she just expected me to do what the [assignments] instructed me to do ...  she had very fair expectations" (P4). However, tutors sometimes gave mixed

messages: "But when I do what another tutor said [in a tutorial ran by another tutor], I'd get feedback from my tutor who's marked it saying, that's wrong" (P7). Participants also found the inconsistency between the quality of tutorials unhelpful. "I attended another one and this one was so incredibly detailed, it was unbelievable" (P9).

Many participants discussed *barriers to asking for help & consequences* of this. P1 believed that there was "an assumption that I knew what I was doing … whereas I felt I needed more handholding." Several would have liked more one-to-one time with their tutors, such as through phone calls. Some participants disclosed "lack of confidence, that I would always seem stupid" (P10) as a barrier to asking for help.

Participants at times developed a sense that they were not enough of a priority to warrant the tutors' time: "I just felt that he was busy" (P1). One tutor expressed this directly and "would mention every other email that he's busy" (P9). Some participants therefore decided "it made no sense to contact [the tutor] at all" (P5) and so their main route of support, via the tutor, was cut off. Others developed ways to try and get as much support as possible: "I just kept it short and sweet" (P7). Others felt they had to source the answers elsewhere, such as unofficial WhatsApp and Facebook groups for students, or other media: "a lot of what I've done this year had to be through personal research and YouTube, and it was horrendous" (P5). Students did not consistently feel that the tutor *was on their side*. Interestingly, those who did

not feel connected were the same students who reported struggling with their module the most, and who found it the most stressful.

Subsequently, a toll on mental health was reported: "I was becoming quite anxious and overwhelmed … definitely felt isolated, very much isolated" (P1). P10 expressed frustration at the lack of direction: "It's like I don't get it, but you're not telling me what it is I'm supposed to be getting. Or what you want me to change … you can see how from the amount of times I've had to do it and redo it that I'm not quite understanding what you're saying to me."

Participants spoke about the *lack of ethnic diversity in tutors*. One participant indicated that more diversity would help students' understanding of material. They spoke about a tutor who had a BAME background: "There was one [tutor], and she came on the tutorial … and I'm telling you … the way how she spoke … my learning was there … she said certain things where I was just like, okay, that's what they mean … when she spoke, I got it" (P1). P5 focused on an ethnic minority topic for the dissertation, and reflected on how a BAME tutor could have been more effective: "They would have been able to have directed me to … more research that would have supported… my ideas and probably would have …  given me a bit more encouragement and support."

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## Theme 3: Project

In terms of *stress, support, and impact*, most participants expressed that it was challenging to complete the project: "I found the project itself to be very, very, very challenging … I felt as though if I failed the project, I failed the whole three years" (P1). On the other hand, P8 found the set-up of the project quite helpful, because "along the way how we were formulating the methods, sharing them, the abstract and all of that."

Participants often identified a clash between the independence expected of them on the project, and the resources or competence they had access to in order to work independently. Many found the module materials lacked detail. Participants found it hard that they "kind of had to do a lot of my own research just to try, just to basically scrape a pass" (P5). Many used the informal WhatsApp and Facebook groups, which had their own challenges as "you have to bear in mind that it's a student replying so it's not 100% guaranteed to be right" (P7).

Tutor support, which has been discussed above, and project stress were very much intertwined: "We're meant to be more independent as learners. Okay, I understand that. But then your research is so dependent on your tutor approving things" (P9). However, some participants found their tutor to be a buffer against the stress of the project. For instance, some tutors

"acted as a good scaffolding ... he went step by step in terms of what sort of is needed" (P9).

Participants discussed the *project forum*, where students could communicate with their tutor in a private way. P3 called it "a one-stop shop and that's where you knew if you had any questions, you just go on there and she'll [the tutor] sort you out ... then you can scroll up if she's said something, you think, I remember her saying this." The forum also helped with the development of ideas: "because I was able to just bounce ideas [off of the tutor] ... and build it from the start to finish" (P1).

Students relied on specific software (such as Qualtrics) to be able to collect and/or analyse data for their project. In terms of *support with data analysis and software*, it was noted that some tutors were very good at helping students. However, one participant noted that her tutor's "knowledge about the software was kinda minimal to none" (P5). With regard to the experience of using the software, some participants reported technology problems, which they struggled to get help with. Others criticised the guidance given: "not very good ... it was just like a two-sheet document of giving you like a how-to guide, but it wasn't very comprehensive, I felt" (P2). Students could access a software forum with specific questions, although the forum was busy: "sometimes you did have to wait quite [a bit] ... So sometimes you can start to maybe panic a little bit."

## Theme 4: Other Students

A few participants engaged in *collaboration* with other students to support each other. P5 would have appreciated "more forums for the students to get together and just share the ideas, check in with each other and maybe have that collaboration, rather than just being isolated." Specific collaborative activities helped increase a sense of connection with peers: "There was questions within the module asking you to go and share your feedback within the forum … I felt a sense of connection … there was some dialogue" (P1).

In this module, students were automatically enrolled in a cluster forum, which is an online forum where students could ask questions, and which was moderated by different tutors across the academic year. Participants spoke about their *use of the cluster forum* and commented that it is more restrained than WhatsApp or Facebook: "I'm telling the whole of the university that I don't know this" (P3). For this reason, P7 found the cluster forum "intimidating." For some participants, their ethnic name held them back from posting on the forum.

Use of the cluster forum was contrasted with use of *social media*. P3 commented "then when they're talking on Facebook, they could be asking exactly the same question, but they say it in a more relaxed way. And they use emojis and it's just as though it makes it seem more chilled out." Overall, participants expressed mixed views about social media. Some found it

supportive: "It was helpful knowing that there's other students who are in the same position as you" (P8). However, a "toxic element" was also identified (P1), and a large number of messages meant it "became a bit fearmongering, rather than uplifting" (P5). Several participants acknowledged both the positives and negatives of these groups.

Social media groups helped with a *sense of belonging with peers and the university*: "It felt like you weren't alone" (P8). Having peers take part in each other's studies also helped: "They're getting involved in mine and I'm getting involved with theirs" (P3). P5 commented that "everybody kinda like bonded with the stress of the assignments rather than who people are as themselves," suggesting that students did not really get to know each other, but there was an emotional connection. However, some of the students go to university to complete their degree, and they were not interested in "socialising" (P4).

With regard to *ethnic diversity in peers*, some participants said that there was a lot of diversity. For example, they noticed other student's names in the chat boxes on forums or tutorials. However, others commented that there was not a lot of diversity. P3 noted that more diversity would not have mattered because "it was about me getting my degree and not whether somebody that I'm never going to meet isn't Black too." P5 indicated that, because of the limited ethnic diversity on the social media groups, they compromised on how much they spoke about their project focused on ethnic

minority issues, for fear that students who are not from a BAME background would perceive the comments as "whiny."

## Theme 5: Ethnicity

While *ethnicity* featured in participants' responses throughout the interviews, they were also asked specific questions about it. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction around *terminology* related to ethnicity, such as being required to use *BAME* as a term, as it does not acknowledge that "We're not all the same ... my culture's different to your culture" (P3).

When asked directly about the *impact of their ethnicity*, participants tended to start by saying that they did not think there was an impact, particularly because the module was taught fully online. However, they had also wondered whether it *may* have had an impact. P7 shared: "I was always very mindful ... once they see my name, am I going to get marks deducted? ... I just feel like I have to work so much harder than a White person."

Most participants spoke about subtle ways where there could have been an impact: "often people have preconceived misconceptions and stereotypes regarding what I might be like, such as, that Black women are aggressive. Because of this, I have always felt like I have to think twice about how I am coming across in everyday situations to ensure I am not fulfilling stereotypes even if my response is justified" (P7). Some participants did not put up a profile picture "in case people judge. Because I'm a Muslim as well ...

that idea and stereotypes" (P8), indicating that their appearance was a factor in deciding whether to put up a profile picture.

Many spoke about a different language, in terms of cultural references or academic language: "If a tutor is doing a tutorial … some students laugh. I don't even know what it means … It's not intentional, but you feel excluded" (P11). Or, "I might not be able to talk my tutor's language academically … because I may not have known the nuances, or how to articulate, or to say what needs to be expressed because … I'm the first [to go to university], so I don't know if I was … saying the right things" (P1). Participants also noted barriers to understanding or expression because their background is not *academic*. P6 stated: "I had to read it again and again and again …  just to get it in my head."

The impact of ethnicity was also discussed in relation to questioning their tutors. P9, for whom English is a first language, said: "I feel like, you know, they're the White professors, and they're accomplished in their fields, and they know better … I should be grateful for the grade that I received … appreciative of what you're given, rather than challenge it." This suggests a view that they are being *sympathetically handed* something, rather than *deservedly earning* it.

Students could choose their own topic for their project. Some participants reported problems specifically related to *BAME project topics*. Because students could only collect data from other students who were

completing the module, some participants changed their ideas to fit the student profile. P9, who needed a profile of participants that were not White British, said it "was actually really, really, really difficult to recruit participants." P5 felt that, because their project was focused on people from minority backgrounds, their tutor had a "lack of knowledge in that respect … there was no challenge. There was no real discussion on it rather than me trying to explain."

Some students talked about *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989); that is, when multiple oppressive identities exacerbate inequality. Specifically, participants spoke about mental health issues, being the main carer of children, and financial need. As a result, they had less time to go on "fact-finding missions" to help them decipher what was required of them, and were unable to attend tutorials that ran during their children's bedtime. P10 shared their situation: "You're trying to understand and build a survey. That and contact your tutor and to try and get further clarity whilst trying to do the job that is supposed to pay your bills and keep your head above water to keep my car running, to keep food in my fridge, electric in my house. Yeah, it does get stressful … I've gotta make it work."

## Discussion

Eleven BAME students discussed their experiences when completing a psychology undergraduate project module. The findings centred around

participants' experiences with the module content, their tutor, the project, and other students. Participants also spoke at length about how they experienced their ethnicity as they completed the module.

In relation to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the findings indicate that BAME students' autonomy on selection of a dissertation topic was compromised because they felt compelled to avoid topics that required ethnic minority participants. Furthermore, arguably because of limited diversity amongst university tutors or insufficient expertise on ethnic minority issues, students who did choose ethnic minority-focused topics felt they had insufficient tutor guidance and that also caused them stress. Previous studies (such as Akel, 2019) identified the value of staff diversity in relation to student belonging and satisfaction at university. The current study adds that lack of staff diversity potentially impacts BAME students' grades.

Participants reported reduced autonomy in their interactions on tutorials or in the cluster forum. As in Bunce et al. (2021), BAME students in this study worried about how their ideas would be received. Some were hesitant about publicising their ethnicity by posting a profile picture. BAME students stopped to consider the potential impact of their ethnicity on *normal* interactions, and at times chose to hold back out of fear they could come across negatively. Thus, the code-switching documented in traditional universities that shows minority students adjust to try and fit in within White-dominated spaces (Akel, 2019) may also be present in online teaching. Furthermore, considering how

paramount academic discussion is, this behaviour possibly limits success for BAME students.

Participants reported a tension between the fact that they were expected to work independently, and their perception that they were not sufficiently skilled. This is possibly an imbalance between the autonomy of students expected by universities and what students actually experience. More structure or scaffolding may be needed, rather than presuming that students understand requirements (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Indeed, when structure was offered, participants reported satisfaction and a sense of purpose about their work. Otherwise, students experienced excessive stress.

BAME students are often unclear about academic requirements (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). The current participants often felt unsure of the expectations they needed to meet in order to succeed, and felt they had to dedicate considerable time to try and find out. This may relate to the *hidden curriculum* as discussed by Webb et al. (2022), in which the students' idea of *clear enough* may differ from the staff's, leaving students confused. In relation to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), participants spoke about mental health issues, being the main carer of children, and financial need. Hence, they had less time to go on "fact-finding missions" to help them decipher what was required of them. This may serve as a further barrier to success.

In relation to cultural background, despite English being a first language for most, students struggled with easily understanding academic content and

with articulating academic points. Possibly this concern was more an anxiety than an actual deficiency in ability. Nevertheless, this perception holds participants back from engaging in discussions that could develop their competence. This is worrying because there are indications that academic self-efficacy, which is a person's belief that they are able to do well academically, influences academic performance (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016).

Stevenson (2012) identified that BAME students develop strategies to avoid asking tutors for help. This was replicated in this study, particularly with students who found their tutors unsupportive. Furthermore, inconsistent responses from tutors compromised students' confidence that the information they received from tutors would lead to a good grade. Hence, similarly to the findings in Bunce et al. (2021), the participants in this study felt demotivated. They felt that their efforts did not correlate with the results they got, and they were unsure of how to improve their grades. Therefore, this lack of support to develop competence may have negatively impacted their motivation, as per the self-determination theory.

As for relatedness, the third dimension of self-determination theory, there was criticism from participants that, within the content, people from ethnic minorities were under-represented or referred to negatively. Students observed that the challenges of ethnic minorities were discussed, but not their achievements. This is something that has been noted elsewhere (such as

Akel, 2019; Webb et al., 2022). Students would have liked to see more people from BAME backgrounds interviewed or represented in the materials.

In relation to tutors, participants discussed how more diversity could possibly help them connect better. Nevertheless, the challenges with connecting to tutors seemed largely unrelated to ethnicity, and hinged more on poor service, such as tutors suggesting to students that they were being a nuisance. Students did not consistently feel that the tutor *was on their side*. Interestingly, those who did not feel connected were the same students who reported that they struggled the most with the module, and found the module the most stressful, as has been reported in previous studies (such as Nguyen et al., 2020).

Tutors who met participants' needs for connectedness were those who balanced warmth and empathy with effectiveness, such as giving sufficient and timely responses. Similar to the concept of an *interlocuto*r described in Cousin and Cureton (2012), teaching staff in our study instilled in students a belief that they can achieve a good degree. These tutors instilled self-efficacy in students, supporting them as needed.

Students reported a strong sense of connectedness with peers on social media. There seemed to be a sense of general belongingness, encouraged by a desire to support each other and by module-related stress. Contrary to studies in traditional universities (such as Bunce et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2022), current participants did not report that they felt their ethnicity was

their most salient identity. Nevertheless, participants did watch what they said. If their project was a study about difficult experiences of ethnic minorities, participants wondered whether talking about their project topic might come across as "whiny," and they censored themselves at times. Therefore, while students said they felt they could engage on par with others, they monitored what they said and how: they limited their freedoms in order to develop connectedness.

## Limitations

This was a relatively small sample of eleven students, although saturation was reached. Male students were under-represented. Furthermore, because of the small sample size and to protect participants' confidentiality, data were not analysed by ethnic group. Previous research (such as Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2023) indicates that ethnic groups may experience higher education differently. Finally, this was a self-selecting sample, and therefore it is unclear to what extent these experiences transfer to other BAME students completing the module.

## Implications

A stark finding was the layer of consideration that BAME students feel they need to exercise in day-to-day decisions, that White students may not need to consider. Actively seeking to recruit a more ethnically diverse student and tutor group may help BAME students feel more comfortable to be

themselves. Providing training to staff and students could make them more aware of their unconscious bias towards people who are *not like them*. Training could help remind everyone to question their attitudes and behaviours and challenge themselves as needed to avoid bias in the learning environment. Furthermore, universities should reflect on how module materials facilitate negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities, and seek to include descriptions of achievements, while also ensuring that the work of researchers from BAME backgrounds are given proper space.

The current participants experienced barriers to selecting minority-focused dissertation topics. Students who selected these topics are less well-supported by tutors. A more diverse workforce and student group could help address these problems. It is paramount that BAME students can secure dissertation supervisors who understand minority topics well, so they can supportively challenge students to achieve a higher mark. Furthermore, wider options for data collection that do not limit BAME students to the student group as participants are necessary.

The current study indicates a failing in how the university scaffolds students' learning and develops expectations of them, and also a failing in how tutors serve students. Students reported distressing experiences of being told tutors are too busy or having to struggle to find clear answers to their questions about how to use the data collection and analysis software. Universities should develop modules in a way that students are prepared for

the project module. Providing additional support structures for students who are struggling should also be considered. Furthermore, assessment guidance and marking guidelines should be communicated clearly, leaving no room for interpretation or guesswork. Staff should be made aware of assessment guidance and reminded to adhere to the guidelines.

Universities should also reflect on the services offered by tutors. They should consider whether tutors' expectations of students are realistic. They should consider whether tutors allocate sufficient time to their students, as well as whether the university allocates tutors sufficient time to support students. University departments that set workloads for tutors should perhaps be more realistic in terms of the type and intensity of support students need, and how student support can be integrated into the workloads of tutors. Universities should ensure that their staff are managing their workload with integrity and are responding to students appropriately.

## Recommendations for Further Research

Further research into why tutors do not support students at a high standard should be conducted. In an online environment, some tutors might do this role outside of their main job. Other tutors might find it hard to connect to students they never see in person. Further research could inform universities' recruitment, onboarding, and support processes for tutors.

As already indicated, ideally the experiences of distinct student ethnicities should be investigated because we cannot presume that the experience is identical across various ethnic backgrounds. In addition, participants spoke about experiences, such as with tutors, that were not necessarily related to their ethnicity, and may be common across the student group. Hence the experiences that White students have with their tutors should also be understood further. Also, this was a largely female sample, and the experiences of male BAME students need to be explored further. Future studies should collect data from sufficiently large populations as to enable a more detailed ethnicity and gender breakdown.

Current participants spoke about a layer of self-monitoring in their communications and indicated that they sometimes evaluate whether their ethnicity might impact how they come across before deciding whether to engage and how. This was mentioned in relation to all types of communication and behaviour involved in completing this module. It is important to explore with BAME students what they think staff, peers, and the institution overall could do to help them feel more at ease, and less compelled to self-monitor.

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