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INSIGHT

*Student Voice*
Report

2023

# Introduction

In 2021, we published our Student Voice report to identify issues around inclusivity that **black-heritage students** were experiencing and to give them the opportunity to voice their own solutions. At that time, reeling from the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement, universities were alive to the **need for change**.

Two years on, we hosted two roundtables with students from **various universities** and year groups with the aim of finding out what difference changes implemented over the last two years had made to their daily lives.

Our other objective was to provide a **platform for our students** to advocate for the improvements that they would like universities to adopt to ensure a safe and **inclusive study environment** is provided for them.

What follows are the **10 recommendations** that they would like universities to consider.

# 1. Maintain the spotlight

Whilst it was acknowledged that universities had taken steps to improve the students' environment, **they were disappointed** that the focus on the issues they face seemed to be fading. They noted that there was specific attention for other groups, such as LGBTQIA+ and disability, but **racial discrimination was only covered** under the broader equality and diversity banner.

## Racial discrimination did not have the priority it needed.

This lack of differentiation was seen as contributing to ignorance of the severity of the problem and manifested itself in practices such as the **provision of mental health** with little to no recognition of the differing needs of different diverse cultures.

In a similar vein, they felt that it **lacked insight** to group all individuals of colour together to be dealt with as one group when the reality is that different groups have different race-specific concerns.

The consequence of these ways of working was that students felt that their **voices had been distilled**. They felt overlooked with one student stating that she felt small - a sentiment that her peers agreed with.

For our students, it was important that universities adopt an **equity based approach** of responding to the specific experiences and needs of black-heritage students.

*They felt overlooked with one student stating that they felt small – a sentiment that their peers agreed with.*

# 2. Discrete disrespect

Positively, none of the participants in our roundtables had experienced direct offensive behaviour. Instead, they reported that the behaviour of other students was now **discretely disrespectful**.

For example, **inappropriate jokes** made under the guise of dark humour. Being asked by fellow students if it was okay to say something that they used to say when they were younger because they had not been corrected before is another example.

Our students wanted universities to take responsibility for **educating all students** and staff about treating everyone equally with due respect and ensure a high level of awareness about what is **inappropriate behaviour**. This would unburden black-heritage students from having to sort this problem out themselves.

Our participants stressed that an important element of this education piece was **raising awareness** of the various black ethnicities rather than just grouping everyone under the banner of Afro-Caribbean.

> Students label classmates as "just Black" instead of recognizing them as individuals.

They stressed that this would help prevent black-heritage students from being grouped into just one category, instead **enlightening others** to the diversity within the black community.

# 3.

# Silent Acknowledgement

The students talked about a culture of **Silent Acknowledgement** within their universities. They explained this to be the situation where it was recognised that **racism was an issue** but it was not openly talked about.

By pretending it is not much of a problem people – both students and staff – were able to **feign ignorance** to it which served to blur the lines between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

The students hoped that universities would make specific efforts to spread awareness about the discrimination faced by black-heritage students.

# 4. Dealing with concerns

Students felt that their concerns were not addressed to the same standard as those applied to others, leading to inconsistency in the actions taken.

One explanation shared was that universities responded when they received a **complaint en masse**. However, this was disadvantageous to black-heritage students who simply did not have the numbers on campus to have an equivalent impact.

Even when Black students' concerns were attended to, too frequently they faced **victim blaming** or responses to what they themselves could do to avoid such situations.

This was completely contrary to their need to see action taken against the perpetrator. The result was a feeling of **being sidelined**, ignored and having to deal with issues on their own.

Our contributors noted that universities routinely ask for feedback on the quality of teaching and suggested that universities supplement this with feedback surveys specifically designed to investigate how students felt on a personal level.

## A solution to this could be specifically designed surveys.

They felt that doing this would provide an outlet for students, who at times are unsure of who to turn to, to have their concerns noted.

# 5. Representation in the curriculum

For the students that we spoke to, the need to **see themselves represented** in the curriculum was fundamental to their onward success.

A few students studying for professions in healthcare shared that when being taught about **diagnosing patients,** they were mainly taught how symptoms looked on individuals with **lighter skin**.

## Students would engage more if greater representation is seen in the curriculum.

The **omission** of what to look for on darker-skinned individuals meant that during placements they found it difficult to accurately diagnose particular patients.

Another student who was studying Psychology found many of the cases that they studied were based on White individuals and they questioned why the different experiences and thoughts of **people of colour were not covered**. When they were taught, it was done in a context of the lecture being about race specifically.

To increase their engagement, the students wished to see lecturers setting assignments and/or studying case studies that included people of black-heritage as a **integral part of the curriculum**. They also saw an increased educational benefit for all students knowing more about those of black-heritage.

*I was subject to racial discrimination from a patient during my placement. I had no idea how to handle it. I feel that our lecturers should be proactive in teaching us how to prepare for such instances.*

# 6.
# Lecturer led discourse

The emphasis on lecturers to set the tone was a recurring theme across both round tables.

Instead of a rather 'tokenistic' mention of **racial prejudice**, which the students felt was currently occurring, they wanted lecturers to facilitate discussion of the topic throughout the course. This more genuine approach would reduce the **awkwardness** associated with discussing this topic and serve to remind everyone how to treat others with respect.

Furthermore, it was expressed that lecturers who were racially literate and encourage students to talk openly about **racial discrimination** clearly signal that they are alive to the issue, which in turn raises the awareness of other students.

# 7. Staff representation

It was clear from the discussions that having a culturally diverse lecturing body has significant potential to improve a student's engagement with their course.

**More representation** amongst teaching staff would empower students to feel seen and heard and **encourage** them to participate more vociferously without the fear of being belittled in any way.

In addition, the students stated that they would be much **more comfortable** talking about racial challenges to someone who has had similar experiences and can empathise with them.

However, with **few to no lecturers** being of black-heritage, many of the students struggled to build a rapport with academics which made it difficult to get the same opportunities as their white peers.

The students reported **instances of bias** where lecturers unfairly gave more guidance to other students and evidently showed favouritism when assessing work.

To prevent this discrimination, the students felt that their university should put more effort into their responsibility to **train lecturers,** ensuring that they are self-aware and know how to treat black-heritage students. Considering that a few lecturers still show **passive aggression** and disfavour to students of colour, the students were keen to see this training implemented immediately.

The students also suggested inviting black-heritage people from industry to contribute to lectures and attend network events. They felt that this would be inspirational and help them **access guidance** on how to excel as a person from an ethnic minority group.

*Because we don't have black faculty members, we've formed a group of black students to support each other.*

# 8. Peer support

The students talked about feeling 'small, unseen and belittled.' They found it **difficult to express** racial concerns and wanted to see universities implement a number of solutions.

- Introducing **peer groups** or mentee-mentor groups with older black-heritage students to provide a safe space for them to communicate the challenges they face.

- Our postgraduate students found that few of the **resources** provided by their universities were targeted towards them. Incorporating them into services provided for black-heritage undergraduate students would serve to provide post grads with a bigger social network and increase their feeling of inclusion. Linking the two student groups would also benefit undergraduate students

as they would have access to a **wider network** to share their worries with and gain advice from.

> University facilitated support networks were sought.

Lastly, in recognition that students sometimes do not feel comfortable talking to staff members about issues, our contributors suggested:

- Establishing **black welfare representatives** who can relay information to university staff thereby ensuring that the voices of black-heritage students are heard.

*Just having that connection, knowing that there's somebody else that's in a similar situation that you can talk to will help you feel seen.*

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# 9. Showcase cultures

In our 2021 report, contributors asked universities not to be colour blind. They expressed how **inhibiting colour-blind policies** were, often leading to feelings of isolation and harm amongst the very groups that the approach was designed to protect.

Some of the 2023 students happily stated that this was no longer the case. They praised the use of specifically **targeted initiatives** to ensure that black-heritage students had access to opportunities.

Looking at how universities can provide a **culturally inclusive environment**, students applauded those that had implemented multicultural catering menus as it made them feel more at home.

Another student mentioned an event called Go Global, an occasion where all the societies present their culture on stage with dances, plays and various performances whilst different cultural food was shared during the performances.

## Culturally inclusive environments were applauded by students.

The students hoped that these types of entertaining events would be **embraced** by universities as they provide a better understanding of **diverse backgrounds,** help to achieve greater mutual respect and assist integration.

*I felt really homesick and really regretted coming to this university because there were literally no non-alcoholic events for me to attend in the evenings and I was in lectures throughout the day.*

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# 10. Social events

Social events are commonly understood to be an important part of **supporting and encouraging** activities and behaviours that foster a sense of community among students as well as a sense of belonging.

Our students were therefore frustrated that most of the events spreading **cultural awareness** about black heritage are initiated by students rather than staff and they are not promoted as widely through the standard university channels.

More generally, when mainstream events were organised by staff, the students did not enjoy them as thoroughly because **insufficient consideration** had been given to the music, food choices and the event's suitability for non-drinkers.

This is a missed opportunity as not only does this limit black-heritage students from gaining access to events that cater to them, but it also reduces the number of students that have the **opportunity to learn** about black culture and traditions.

## Mainstream events often sidelined black-heritage students.

Going forward, the students would like the universities to cultivate a more considered, **inclusive approach** to designing events.

# Conclusions

The last two years have seen a noticeable change in the student experience. It is evident that universities have made a **tangible effort to increase inclusion** and none of our contributors reported the type of blatantly racist behaviour that our 2021 cohort endured.

Instead, they experienced more subtle slights such as other students' disrespect, lecturers showing partiality to others, the **unequal distribution of opportunities** and a lack of representation amongst the academic staff.

The students were positive about the advances that had been made but, ultimately, they craved a **deeper sense of belonging** at their universities to enable them to feel authentically welcomed.

In summary, they wanted:

- Universities to recognsie their distinct needs and to provide structures that facilitate their **voices being heard**.

- The creation of a teaching and learning environment with an **inclusive curriculum** and increased representation amongst the teaching staff, both of which would affirm their place as part of the student body.

- Universities to nurture an ethos where **acts** of discreet disrespect were robustly **challenged** and dealt with transparently.

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# Breaking barriers, unleashing potential.

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