Imperial College London: Festival of Learning and Teaching (17th May 2022)
Day 2: Challenge and Transformation: To belong or not to belong?

University of **Reading**

The challenge of belonging for minority ethnic students at university

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1

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1

Racial minorities in higher education

- **Social and structural inequalities - racism and racial & sexual microaggression** (Arday & Mirza, 2018; Bhopal, 2018; Ong, 2005; Marlone & Barabino, 2009; Royal Society of Chemistry, 2022; Wong, 2016)

- **Ethnicity degree awarding gap** (Advance HE, 2021; Mountford-Zimdars, 2015; UUK/NUS, 2019; Wong et al., 2021)
  - Disciplinary variations

- **Sense of belonging** (Ahmed, 2012; Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021)

- **Science/STEM identity** (Carlone & Johnson, 2007; Holmegaard, 2015)

2

Project details

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- The **SESTEM** (Student Experiences in STEM) project
    - … aims to better understand the experiences of undergraduate students in STEM degrees, especially those who self-consider as from 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic' background.
- 3 year study (2018-2021)
- Qualitative and longitudinal
- Project team
    - Billy Wong (PI), Meggie Copsey-Blake, Reham ElMorally, Joy Singarayer, Ellie Highwood
- Website: https://research.reading.ac.uk/sestem

3

The SESTEM project data

- In 2018/2019
    - 51 autumn reflections (35 from *Minority Ethnic*, or *ME*, backgrounds); 42 interviews (28 from *ME* backgrounds); 32 summer reflections; 2 workshops (40 students and staff)
    - UROP project – 20 STEM staff interviews
- In 2019/2020
    - 29 autumn reflections (25 from *ME* backgrounds); [The Covid-era] 27 interviews (23 from *ME* backgrounds); 25 summer reflections (23 from *ME* backgrounds); No workshops possible
- In 2020/2021
    - 13 autumn reflections (11 from *ME* backgrounds); 19 interviews (19 from *ME* backgrounds; 5 summer reflections (5 from *ME* backgrounds); No workshops

88 student interviews, 155 student journal reflections, 20 staff interviews, 2 workshops

4

Racism exists

- Minority ethnic students do experience racism, mostly in subtle or implicit forms and likely to be outside of the teaching environment.
- Three discourses of racism as articulated by students:
  - **The naïve**
  - **The bystander**
  - **The victim**
- Missing discourse?
  - **The perpetrator**
  - **The activist/protestor**

Wong, B., ElMorally, R., Copsey-Blake, M., Highwood, E., & Singarayer, J. (2021). Is race still relevant? Student perceptions and experiences of racism in higher education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51(3), 359-375. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2020.1831441

Racism exists

- The **naïve**
  - 'some of my best friends… were Black and they were never treated any differently to me' (Georgia)
  - 'I don't think anybody would like actively treat you differently just because, I mean… everybody tries to be very correct and everything.' (Vanesa)
- The **bystander**
  - 'I don't know if it'd be my place to report it' (Abigail)
  - 'a lot of the time, [people] probably say stuff they don't actually mean because they haven't been told that it's not [OK]' (Melony)

Racism exists

- The **victims**
  - 'none of us speak up about it … because I'm the only Asian … we tend not to take any action' (Shu)
  - 'When people talk to me, I feel like they always used to see my skin colour, or they just assumed things about me before actually knowing me' (Pakiza)

Dealing with racial inequality

- **Emotional detachment and desensitisation**
  - Accepted as part of everyday life
  - Trivialising and play down racial mistreatments.
  - Reporting racism would be a last resort, rather than a first response.
  - Lack of trust and confidence from students in racial reporting, including the university's grievance process.

Wong, B., Copsey-Blake, M., & ElMorally, R. (2022). Silent or silenced? Minority ethnic students and the battle against racism. *Cambridge Journal of Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2022.2047889

Dealing with racial inequality

Emotional detachment

- 'Before, I got quite upset about it, but then the more it happened, the less I got concerned about it. It's like desensitisation to the point where I just don't care anymore… I just learned to ignore it' (Lutah)

- I have to sort of hold my tongue sometimes when people say things… I can't intervene every time someone says something that's slightly racist… I can't fight every battle' (Kelly)

9
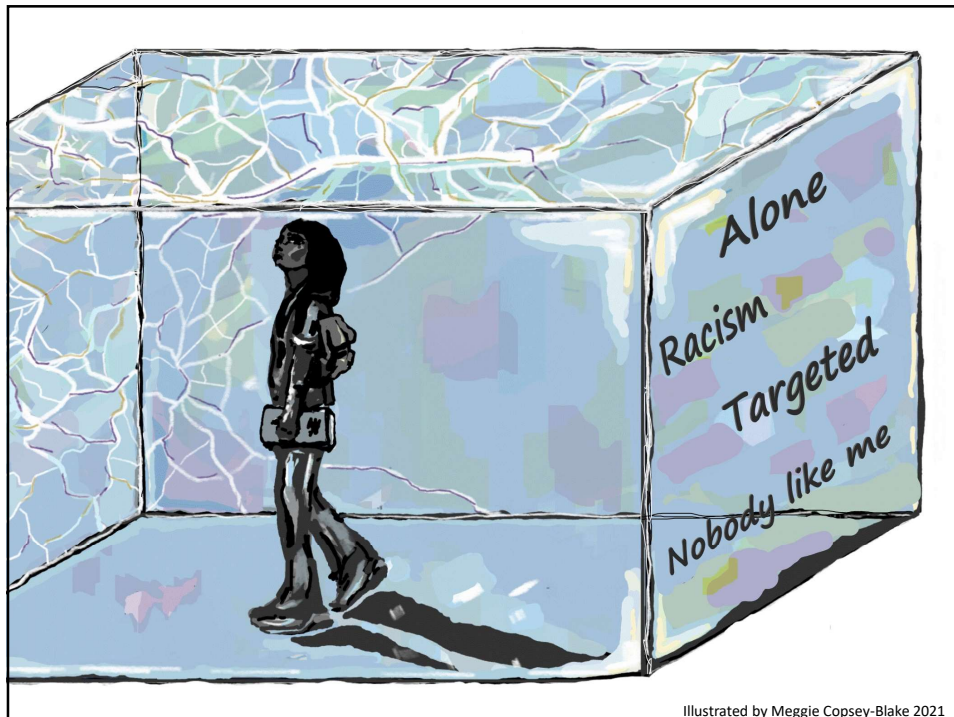
Illustrated by Meggie Copsey-Blake 2021

10

Challenges to a sense of belonging

1. **The environment**: In and out of university, minority ethnic students have experienced different levels of 'incompatibility' with mainstream culture.

2. **Social exclusions**: many minority ethnic students struggled to establish diverse peer groups outside of their own ethnicities.

3. **Lack of diversities**: minority ethnic students have raised concerns that teaching and learning in STEM are rather homogenous in terms of staff and student composition, as well as the breadth of the curriculum.

Wong, B., Copsey-Blake, M., & ElMorally, R. (Under preparation). Barriers to belonging for minority ethnic students in STEM higher education.

11

Challenges to a sense of belonging

The environment

- 'Most of them, they like to go clubbing… [but] the way we have our amusement time can be go to cinema, watch a movie, shopping, travel and karaoke' (Ying)

- 'They established their own little social group… they didn't really want someone new coming… sometimes I felt like they were a bit passive aggressive and a bit cold' (Carol)

12

Challenges to a sense of belonging

Social exclusions

- 'Sometimes, in terms of communication, there comes a clash in understanding how people communicate. People from my background are considered loud, harsh and rude. For us, we don't see that as being loud, we're just very expressive so we express things as it comes' (Tamu)

13

Challenges to a sense of belonging

Lack of diversities

- 'Anytime I walk in a room, I sort of try and not make direct contact with anyone. I don't know if they automatically just look at me because I look different, or whether you would automatically sort of look at anyone who would walk in a room.' (Sachini)

- 'I barely see any Black staff… you sort of identify with people who look more like you, because like, oh, they've made it, so you can make it [too]' (Chetachi)

14

To belong or not to belong?

- Is belonging a conscious choice?
  - The cost to belong for minority ethnic students
    - Degree outcomes and the awarding gap (UUK/NUS, 2019)
- Belonging *only* with 'people like me'
  - Belonging as selective or pragmatic
  - 'Bonding' over 'bridging' social capital (Putnam, 2000)
- Belonging as marginal(ised) groups

15

Image: https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/big-skivvy-gm455460881-16586117

16

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the final report of the Student Experiences in STEM (SESTEM) project, we make the following 12 recommendations to decrease the ethnicity degree awarding gap in STEM higher education:

Illustrated by UROP student – Tori Parr 2021
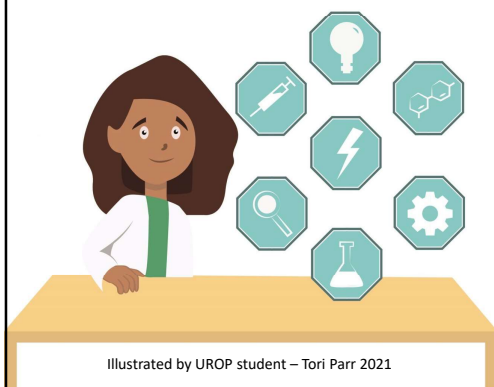
Top-level commitment from universities across departments and disciplines to tackle racial inequality

Eradicate racism through a **zero-tolerance policy** which is actively enforced and revisited

Break the culture of silence with a proactive strategy that promotes verbal resistance against racist behaviours

Encourage **open discussion** about race and racism to develop meaningful change

Increase numbers of minority ethnic role models

Promote more **opportunities** for social mixing on campus

Diversify the STEM curriculum

Offer greater economic provision for minority ethnic students

Provide a structured programme for diversity and **inclusion training** for staff that is underpinned by the aim to tackle racism

Use time and space reflecting on own **privileges and biases**

Calls for a student committee or working group that focuses on race and ethnicity issues

Empower minority ethnic students and support them to capitalise on the range of opportunities afforded by higher education

Wong, B., Copsey-Blake, M., & ElMorally, R. (2021). The Student Experiences in STEM report: Minority ethnic students in higher education. Reading: University of Reading. https://research.reading.ac.uk/sestem/publication/

17

What can you do?

1. Lead by example & call out unacceptable behaviours
2. Proactive rather than reactive communications (i.e. avoid complete reliance on students to 'report' issues).
3. Empower students to utilise their available support system (through regular reminders and inductions/introduction to these support).
4. Recognise your own biases and presumptions. Reduce assumptions around 'common sense' knowledge, and reflect on own practices, including the overuse of jargons and avoid insensitive languages ('people like you...').

18

What can you do?

5. Acknowledge the history of your teaching content, and broaden examples and materials, including student-driven resources (& student partners).

6. Self-learn and professional development: consider a varied pedagogy. Read about inclusive learning and teaching (e.g., Imperial's website) curriculum (e.g., Ambrose et al., 2010; UCL, 2020) and try/test different things in your context.

19