

# Variation in Black students' conceptions of academic support

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## Abstract

The persistence of degree-awarding gaps and anti-Black racism warrant an exploration of the quality and effectiveness of academic support offered to Black undergraduate students in British higher education, and how such support is perceived by students. Our phenomenographic study found that Black students' conceptions of academic support range from broad expectations of help with their studies to more advanced understandings of their own agency and the context of academic support. Our results highlight that attempts to enhance academic support should revisit three interconnected areas: what type of academic support is provided, where, and by whom. Most importantly, we propose a new inclusive direction that replaces existing deficit models with approaches that will strengthen Black students' agential effectiveness within historically White institutions.

## KEYWORDS

academic support, black students, phenomenography, racial inequities

## INTRODUCTION

Differentials in the educational achievement of minoritised students in higher education (HE) appear in a wide range of national contexts (Richardson, 2018) and are often attributed to structural inequalities. In the UK, research literature and public records alike point to persistent inequities before, during, and after university life for students of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds (Arday et al., 2022). Students' previous education and socio-economic status may have an impact on their performance in HE (Smith, 2017). It is

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## Key insights

### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Black students' experiences of higher education are misrepresented by their homogenisation as 'Black, Asian, and minority ethnic' (BAME). Moreover, deficit-centred approaches reveal little about how they perceive the academic support provided by their institutions.

### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

We propose a new model of academic support which encapsulates agential effectiveness, along with a renewed emphasis on what type of academic support is provided, where and by whom. Based on the findings, we introduce an inclusive definition of academic support.

known that many minoritised students enter HE with lower qualifications and are more likely to associate prestigious selective universities with Whiteness (Reay et al., 2001). However, even when a range of factors such as age and entry qualifications are controlled for, there still exists an attainment/awarding gap (referred to in this article as an 'awarding gap') in student outcomes (Mahmud & Gagnon, 2023) which can be attributed to experiences of the curriculum, teaching or learning (Richardson, 2018; Smith, 2017).

Such inequities have attracted attention in the context of policy efforts to 'widen participation' in HE (Department of Education and Skills, 2003). These efforts have resulted in the increased participation of previously underserved communities and an unprecedented increase in student diversity in British academic institutions. In response, universities have sought to enhance their support mechanisms to promote social and learning inclusion, while at the same time study support has been reconfigured as a form of institutional marketing (Hallett, 2013). In this process, while institutions and policy stakeholders acknowledge the potential remedial impact of student support, less attention has been paid to how students experience such support. This is highly relevant with regard to ethnic/racial outcome disparities, support intended for minoritised students and their perceptions of that support.

Although upon entering university all students can encounter the environmental reconstruction of their family, friends, and wider social support systems while simultaneously facing academic and personal pressures (Peer et al., 2015), qualitative research suggests that minoritised students may experience additional challenges caused by sociocultural differences, discrimination and racism (Hillen & Levy, 2015). Drawing on 43 interviews with minoritised students in England, Bhopal et al. (2020) reported that minoritised students identified and experienced racism and inequality at university, demonstrating their understanding that such practices conformed to institutional norms of behaviour. Indeed, they described these experiences as a continuation of previous experiences, which in turn shaped their future expectations. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2019) stated that about a quarter of participating minoritised students had experienced racial harassment, with Black students reporting the highest rate (29%). Students tended to under-report racial incidents because of personal concerns about negative potential consequences for their education and well-being; lack of information about available support and the belief that staff did not have the necessary skills or understanding to deal with racist incidents were also cited by students as factors that contributed to their feelings of vulnerability and anxiety

(EHRC, 2019). Taken together, these factors shed light on the dominant discourses surrounding Black students' experiences at university, which are often characterised by isolation and the absence of a sense of belonging (Davies & Garrett, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018). Students' sense of belonging—the extent to which they feel involved in their academic environments and connected to the people within those environments (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021)—can be a positive predictor of psychological and academic adjustment (Pittman & Richmond, 2007) as well as academic outcomes (Strayhorn, 2018).

Despite a substantial body of work on Black students in compulsory education (Mirza, 1992; Strand, 2012; Wallace & Joseph-Salisbury, 2022), there is little empirical research referring exclusively to Black students in HE. Earlier studies have typically employed the terms 'Black and minority ethnic' (BME) or 'BAME', both of which reflect the Office for National Statistics' demographic classification of student groups. In these studies, students of African and/or Caribbean descent form a subgroup within the wider group of minoritised students. Their experiences often point to dropouts owing to unmet expectations, financial or family difficulties, institutional factors and feelings of isolation, hostility and lack of belonging (Mirza, 2018).

In this study, we centre on Black students for three reasons. Firstly, Black students' experiences, aspirations, and struggles are often misrepresented by their problematic labelling as 'minorities' and the consequent homogenisation of different sets of student experiences. In particular, the term 'BAME' arbitrarily erases ethnic, cultural, and religious characteristics. Harper (2012) emphasises that students are not born into minority status, nor are they minoritised in every social context; minoritisation only takes place in institutional environments that sustain an over-representation of Whiteness. We therefore propose that more specific empirical work should be developed that acknowledges the historical and sociocultural identities, histories and characteristics of distinct ethnic/racial groups of HE students in historically White institutions.

Secondly, while HE policy has concentrated on the awarding gap between White and minoritised students (Universities UK, 2019), Black students are under-awarded in relation to not only their White peers but also other ethnoracial groups. For the academic year 2020–2021, an awarding gap of 9% was reported between White and BAME students who achieved first (70%+) and upper second (60–70%) degree classifications. These degree classifications are typically associated with more favourable outcomes in employment following graduation (AdvanceHE, 2022). However, the awarding gap between White and Black students was reported as 18.5%, and Black students were also under-awarded first or upper second degrees in relation to Asian students (–12.4%), Chinese students (–18.2%) and students belonging to 'other' BAME ethnic groups (–9.9%) (AdvanceHE, 2022). The 'BAME' categorisation thus conceals even sharper disparities in the outcomes of different racial/ethnic groups of undergraduate students: in fact, it conceals an awarding gap within the awarding gap.

Thirdly, the prevalence and intensity of anti-Black barriers (Campbell, 2022) and anti-Black racism (Gillborn, 2018) on campuses warrant investigation regarding how to tackle these challenges, including how to identify appropriate means of support for Black students. Such barriers and forms of racism are rendered 'acceptable' through discursive practices that sustain and privilege Whiteness (Osbourne et al., 2023), while more overt expressions of racism also persist (e.g. student-on-student or staff-on-student physical assaults and racial slurs) (Busby, 2018).

As demonstrated above, outcome differentials exist between different minoritised groups in British HE institutions. Despite this, minoritised students are treated as a single homogenous group. Not only does this constitute a form of misrecognition, but it also results in the misdirection of support interventions and resources, potentially leaving those who need more targeted interventions unsupported. It is crucial to disaggregate the characteristics and

causes of racial/ethnic inequalities (Whittaker & Broadhead, 2022) as a first step towards implementing interventions that contribute to improvements in student lives (Stevenson et al., 2019). Moreover, relationships exist between the quality of what students learn, how they perceive the academic context (in our study, how they perceive academic support) and the characteristics of the students themselves (Trigwell et al., 1999). Therefore, exploring perceptions of academic support is an important step towards enhanced approaches to improve the academic performance of Black students.

Considering the above, the aim of our research was to investigate the different ways in which Black students experience academic support at university. We chose a phenomenographic approach for this study. Phenomenographic research is interested in variation in how people within the same group experience a given phenomenon, seeking to understand the phenomenon in question from their perspective (Marton & Booth, 1997). In this case, we approached the phenomenon of academic support from the 'second-order perspective' of Black students as research participants (Marton, 1981). Our task was to discern Black students' relationship with academic support, not the phenomenon per se. The object of phenomenographic research is variation in ways of experiencing a particular phenomenon in terms of people's capabilities to experience certain phenomena in the world in certain ways. Identifying variation in participants' (in this case, students') understandings of a phenomenon involves identifying key meanings in their focal awareness: what they discern and focus upon (the referential aspect), how meaning is structured in their awareness (the structural aspect) and how their respective understandings of the phenomenon differ from and relate to one another (Marton & Booth, 1997). Thus, our research aimed to understand the qualitatively different ways in which undergraduate Black students experienced the meaning of academic support. The research questions were specified by three analytical questions:

1. What is the key meaning content of academic support that is focused on in the students' awareness?
2. How is this meaning focused on in the students' awareness in terms of discerning its structural parts and its context?
3. How do the different understandings vary in relation to one another within the participant group?

Below we present how academic support is conceptualised in the literature and what is the existing research on students' perceptions of academic support, with an emphasis on minoritised students.

## **Conceptualising academic support**

Academic support is a contextual and contested concept. In all of its forms, academic support constitutes an important part of academic life, as it can provide students with the tools to effectively navigate the host of challenges they may face during their degree. As such, it contributes to students' sense of belonging to the institution, and it can influence student retention rates (Grillo & Leist, 2013; Hoyt, 2023). Tait (2004) provides an overview of student support models, emphasising that the commodification of HE has given rise to a business model of student support where the student is considered a customer and a recipient of services. Academic support is often understood in different ways depending on the object of the support: it might refer to the learner, the development of skills or processes that integrate learning with pastoral care. Brindley et al. (2004) categorise support into teaching, advising and administrative support. However, such distinctions may be superficial: students' experiences of the academic aspects of their studies often impinge on personal matters and vice

versa. Regardless of these distinctions, Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) note that dominant views of support position students from non-traditional backgrounds as lacking the academic and cultural resources necessary to succeed in HE: support practices are applied as a means to address these students' deficiencies. In addition, Jeffery and Johnson (2019, p. 379) contend that conceptualisations of academic support reflect the perspectives of institutions rather than those of students, further highlighting the importance of eliciting student views. They identify four models of academic support: the offer of little support (the 'thin' model), targeted support for a minority of students (the 'targeted' model), support for the majority (the 'totalist' model) and a 'transformative' model that aims to reshape the values and skills offered by an institution. An important aspect of the critique of 'hegemonic' definitions of student deficit (Hallett, 2013, p. 528) questions the *positioning* of students and staff within student support processes. Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) analyse the usage of various terms of academic support referring to activities or staff within HE. They detect a divide in the understanding of such support between the student, who owns the problem(s), and the institutional mechanisms who own the solution(s). This division may manifest itself more clearly in the provision of support for minoritised groups, where there is a history of pathologising and devaluing the presence, struggles and aspirations of students from underrepresented and underserved communities.

## Students' perceptions of academic support

While institutions have their own mechanisms for gathering students' views on academic support services, relatively little empirical work has been undertaken on how students perceive the relevance, appropriateness and effectiveness of academic support. A cluster of studies in British institutions have investigated this area and offered some insights, albeit without differentiating between different ethnic/racial groups. Researching support for academic writing, Hallett (2013, p. 524) distinguishes between students' conceptions that foreground 'student deficit' and those that foreground 'student potential'. Jacklin and Robinson (2007) reveal that for students, available support does not have the same meaning as accessible support, with students valuing the interactional elements of support. Existing studies also identify the notion of student 'help-seeking', which refers to engagement in support that improves academic performance (Bornschlegl et al., 2020). Academic support is therefore an interpersonal and relational matter (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007), with an emphasis not only on how it is offered but also, and equally, on whether and how it is sought.

It is unclear whether academic support is more beneficial for minoritised students than for other students, or whether certain types or formats of academic support have differential impacts on certain groups of students. Minoritised students often feel less supported than their White counterparts in educational settings, and they therefore rely on peer and family support (Ferguson & Scruton, 2015). Bhopal's (2015) study of trainee teachers examined the type of support received by a group of minoritised students. Many trainees stated that racism was an issue and mentioned their expectation that systems should be in place to deal with it. Campbell's (2022) focus groups with South Asian, Black and White undergraduate students highlighted that a lack of pre-assessment support left students with a choice between proceeding by trial and error or sourcing support from their kin and social networks. However, the latter option was more readily available to students from White and affluent families than to those from minoritised and working-class backgrounds.

Nevertheless, programmes and interventions that aim to support Black students have been established in many institutions, especially in the form of personal tutoring and mentoring sessions. Commonalities among interventions in various national contexts include

culturally sensitive mentorship and support from academic staff, peer collaboration and institutional support. Despite the implementation of such programmes and interventions, research on the causes of high dropout rates reveals concerns related to the academic support students receive. In qualitative research featuring interviews with 13 minoritised students who had withdrawn from their studies, Kauser et al. (2021) reported that the available support measures (including personal tutors and mentors) were inadequate, and that students wished to receive additional support services during their studies without feeling targeted. The study highlighted the importance of faster staff responses and university outreach measures, as the lack of timely responses often led students to refrain from seeking help. Moreover, participants expressed the desire for additional support services, including extra seminar classes, additional drop-in sessions, counselling services, mentoring and more classroom activities that would allow students to work on tasks together. Students also reported confusion over how university services could be found and used. Kauser et al.'s (2021) findings demonstrate that minoritised students' withdrawal is a process that involves several interrelated factors, including academic factors, finances, support, integration and family. They also reveal that the coping mechanisms students use can directly affect the student experience and issues related to retention: for example, participants felt supported if they had strong relationships with peers on the same course, which enabled them to ask for academic support if needed. However, Black students express less satisfaction with peer relationships at university than do their White counterparts (Guiffrida, 2006), and they often face obstacles when endeavouring to form relationships with White peers (Singh, 2011), resulting in their socialising primarily with other Black students. Although this might hinder the formation of diverse relationships, other research suggests that participation in student unions (Sims, 2007) or Black student organisations such as African and Caribbean student societies (Foster et al., 2014) fosters engagement and social integration among Black university students, thereby assisting with retention by giving students opportunities to socialise in ways they find comfortable. This is particularly important because close bonds, peer support and contact are associated with well-being and resilience (Mental Health Foundation, 2016). Indeed, Black students with declared mental health conditions have some of the lowest continuation and attainment rates. In 2017–2018, 53% of Black students with reported mental health conditions graduated with first or upper second class degrees, compared with 77% of all students reporting mental health conditions (Office for Students, 2020). This data resonates with Kauser et al. (2021) reported links between mental health, academic support and attainment: according to Kauser et al.'s participants, universities were unable to offer adequate emotional or academic support in the face of the demands of university life. Overall, Kauser et al.'s findings demonstrated a lack of cohesion and sense of belonging, which was manifested in students' reluctance and hesitation to verbalise their needs. The next section of this article draws on the methodological design of the study and the data from phenomenographic interviews to further investigate aspects of academic support presented here.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data for our study was generated during the academic year 2021–2022. We chose purposive sampling so that the interviews would take account of the wide variation in students' experiences (Mimirinis, 2022). We invited undergraduate students who identified with any of the following categories to express an interest in attending an interview: 'Black', 'Black British', 'Black African', 'Black Caribbean', and of 'African' or 'Caribbean' heritage. A cohort of 20 students, from various disciplines within a metropolitan access HE institution, participated in semi-structured interviews that explored their experiences



of academic support. The interviews took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, which thus formed part of the spatio-temporal real-life context in which the meanings of academic support were discerned. Each interview focused on a particular instance or event where the student had received academic support, with probing questions that sought to reveal the structure of their conceptions: what they considered academic support to be and what meaning they assigned to it. Students were asked about their gender: 14 identified as female and six as male. Participants were also asked about their racial/ethnic backgrounds. Eight students referred to their background as 'Black African', four as 'Black Caribbean' and three as 'Black British'. Two identified as 'mixed' and one as 'mixed African'; one student identified as 'African Caribbean' and another as 'Black British African Caribbean'. All the interviewees received a voucher in recognition of their contribution. Two Black students advised us on the development of the study (the proposal, ethics approval, recruitment of participants) as paid project advisors.

Phenomenographic research is informed by the variation theory of learning, according to which meanings are discerned through the experience of simultaneous variation or difference in contrast with another meaning (Marton, 2015; Marton & Booth, 1997). The unit of analysis is a conception—a way of experiencing, perceiving or understanding the phenomenon in question (Marton & Pong, 2005). A conception has two dialectically intertwined aspects: the meaning or referential aspect, and the meaning structure or structural aspect (Marton & Pong, 2005, p. 345). The structural aspect refers to the part–whole relationships of the meaning overall (its 'internal horizon') and the meaning's whole-context relationships (its 'external horizon') (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 87). When we talk about the structure of meaning in awareness, we refer to how the meaning as a whole is structured from its parts in relation to its context. When we talk about structural relationships between categories, we focus on variation between different ways of understanding within the group of students.

This approach enabled us to identify a wide breadth of voices within our group. It also enabled us to explore collective meanings in the experiences of Black students. The analysis was an iterative process of reading and rereading the interview transcripts. The first and third author read the transcripts several times and independently marked 'meaningful utterances', thereby potentially revealing aspects of the structure of students' conceptions. This meant focusing on and highlighting the sections of data where students referred to how they related to academic support. Everything we included and marked formed a 'pool of meanings' (Åkerlind, 2005). The extracts in the pool of meanings were then reread by both authors to explore similarities and differences *between* and *within* relevant sections of the interviews (Mimirinis, 2019). This explorative, data-based process revealed the key meanings upon which students focused in terms of meaning content and structure, making it possible for us to identify different ways of understanding academic support in the data. The authors agreed on four categories of description. Iterative readings were continued, and extracts were moved across categories of description where this was essential to consolidate the categories. Further comparison of relevant extracts made it possible to form 'an outcome space' that described the relationships between different understandings of academic support presented as 'categories of description' (Marton & Booth, 1997). The names of the categories expressed the key meanings in the students' focal awareness. The categories of description, which depicted qualitatively different ways of understanding, were found to be logically related to one another in terms of complexity and inclusiveness. Aspects of meanings found in prior categories were included in further, more nuanced and complex categories (Marton, 2015, p. 99; Mimirinis & Ahlberg, 2021). We have selected illustrative quotes from the data to exemplify the key meaning in focus in each category.

Structural relationships between categories are marked by 'dimensions of variation'. This concept refers to aspects or dimensions where variation is experienced: discernment is possible via simultaneously experienced variation in awareness (Marton & Booth, 1997, pp. 100–101). When we notice change in an aspect of a phenomenon, the variation is explicit; when we notice that '*something is the case*' (100, emphasis in the original), the variation is implicit. In this case, a dimension of variation allowed us to make distinctions between different aspects of academic support, and to discern how the meaning of each aspect varied along the same dimension from one category to another.

## RESULTS

The analysis of the transcripts produced four qualitatively different categories of description, describing variation in the ways Black students experience academic support.

### Category A: Helping university students

In the first category, at minimum the academic support is identified as help or guidance for a student at university: 'helping out' with what they need. This focus was included in all students' interviews. Support is understood as responding to students' needs: 'coming to my needs', 'help out when I am lacking', 'where I am falling short' and 'getting the help I need'.

In my head support means that you have—if you have any issues or if you are worried about things, support is just there to help, guide you back to the path you need to go to.

(P06)

Support to me means somebody coming to my needs, to help out where I am lacking. Yes, in simple terms I think that is how I can refine it, literally somebody coming to help me out where I am falling short, where I am lacking, I think that is how I can define it.

(P19)

The object of academic support is described in vague terms. When the lecturer is mentioned, their role remains unspecified too; it is rather that they are expected to signpost support in general or 'provide you with everything' (P12). Consistent with this category are student accounts of feeling 'lost' (P11), 'alone' (P12) or 'not aware' (P15) of university support functions and processes.

### Category B: Ensuring student understanding of the object of learning

Academic support is conceptualised as a teacher helping students understand the content of an academic task and guiding them in what they need to know. It is considered a teacher's task to explain the topic, to address student questions, and to respond to their difficulties in understanding by explaining the topic and ensuring student understanding of the object of learning. Explaining the topic in depth is seen as an expression of care for ensuring student understanding.



I think during the lectures, it is not one on one but it is everyone is there and you can see other people thinking and whether it is right or wrong it will then—literally it will explain to you that parts of it is right but other—it is either right or wrong but she will not say it is right or wrong, but she will explain why it is what it is.

(P01)

The fact that he actually took the time to explain on what he was saying in depth, even though considering it was a lecture he did not have to go into depth he could have said well if you look on Blackboard this is a[n online] site that has all the information and you will see what I was talking about because in the past some teachers have done that but he actually went into depth he really cares—he really wanted to make sure that I understood what he was saying.

(P10)

The need for support arises from not understanding a topic or a concept, hence the need for 'giving a hand' (P16) in reaching a better understanding. Difficulties in learning are expected to be addressed by the teacher and there are signs of situating learning within a wider institutional context.

### **Category C: Organising measures to improve student understanding and personal development**

The previous focus on ensuring student understanding is expanded here with intentionally organising measures to improve student understanding and personal development. This is perceived to require 'going the extra mile' to understand students 'perspective: to address students' questions and concerns, and to identify if they need help and what kind, so they can be directed to the right source of support to achieve their goals. It is also seen to involve responding to, and providing feedback on, what they need to know in the process of understanding:

As I said before, support means making sure that, depends on the environment as well, in an academic way it means making sure that the person understands what they are being taught or what is going on in the classroom and if they do need help, that they are helped in any way possible. If they can't be helped, they can direct them to other types of support, in terms of a mentor I have been supported in ways, such as, being directed to different places I can go to and what I can do to achieve my goals.

(P03)

Academic support is seen as overall improvement for the student, which involves a teacher who is 'interested in what they are teaching' and 'care about their students'. Communication is considered necessary for such an improvement:

Ok, for me academic support is showing basic communication for me. I feel like when there is no communication not much can be done to improve the students' performance. So, when the teacher or when the lecturer is not communicating properly, there is a lot of confusion, the students do not know what to do. I feel like their performance is going to be very limited, if that makes sense. And not very straight forward. I feel like academic support also has a lot to do with the

lecturer actually being interested in what they are teaching, if that makes sense? Because if they are not interested then they do not care about their students and they will not be willing to go that extra mile for them, just to ensure that they have nice performance. Yes, those are the main two things for me. Just the ability of the lecturer going the extra mile and communicating a lot, because I've noticed those two pegged together, the lecturers who have those two qualities pegged together are the ones that I see are doing their best.

(P02)

Students emphasised the importance of changing as a person, as a result of these measures, not just of improving their understanding and academic performance. The lecturer is seen as a mentor who is expected to understand them as 'whole person' (P18). The position of the student within wider contexts is becoming clearer and presupposes an understanding of what the student needs, 'not only physically, academically, but also within their culture' (P18).

### **Category D: Promoting well-being, equality and inclusion in the academic community**

Here academic support is understood in terms of organisation of mechanisms for enhancing personal and social well-being, equality, inclusion and respect for every student as part of the university. Discernment of racial/ethnic, psychological and socio-cultural aspects of students' life-worlds was focused upon and seen as important in relation to academic progress and requirements for support. For example, the following quotation demonstrates an awareness of the wider institutional and social context, and focuses on three types of (expected) academic support:

So, there are a couple of things with me, my mental health is really bad, I have got a daughter and also, I am—I am Black minority—well ethnic minority. So, in those three categories it would be really good to get support. I would need the mental health support because sometimes I cannot handle that. Child support is really helpful because sometimes—even if it is someone to just talk to because children go through loads of stages [...] But also support for ethnic minority as well. Just because I feel like we get left out quite a bit and it is nice to have like—I know there is groups in the university that support—that are very supportive, I think it is the Afro Caribbean and African group that we have, but to have more of those would be great. Because it is just—yes, I feel like we get left out quite a bit.

(P07)

Well-being is holistically focused on in relation to the need for mental health support, child support and social support for students of Afro-Caribbean and African heritage in the preceding extract. In this respect, academic support is focused upon in the light of feeling 'being left out', in need to be included in the university life. Despite being aware of support provided by the university, some students highlighted the difficulties of asking for support, owing to their background and upbringing, as there is an expectation of independence. The need for a reciprocal relationship between the students and lecturers and inclusion in the academic community was addressed as necessary aspects of academic support. Help-seeking is focused upon as a key aspect of academic support and the absence of interaction and communication conversely resulting in struggling alone with pressure of expectations and not progressing due to the lack of support.

I feel like students should be able to say I am very stressed right now, is it possible for me to have an extension, for example. Is it possible for me to do this, or that. Lecturers need to be able to ask students what do you need, tell us what you need—tell us what we can do to help you. You know, they need to just go out and straight out and say it. I feel like lecturers just need to ask and students need to be able to, as Black student we need to be able to go and ask. I feel like we do not ask for help, we might be going through situations, but we do not ask for help. Maybe because that is the way we are brought up, maybe not just Black people, but just people in general as well ... We do not want to ask for help. I feel like we just struggle in silence. We need to be able to ask for help, we never ask for help. We always keep it to ourselves, we always think oh I can keep it to myself. But at the end of the day things just start piling up.

(P05)

Academic support is understood within an environment where everyone can be listened to and has an opportunity to grow. In such a context, racism is acknowledged and dealt with, although students were less clear on what is the optimal way of doing this; as one student wondered: 'how does one deal with racism?' (P19).

### **The structural relationships between categories of description marked by dimensions of variation**

Table 1 presents the structural relationship between the categories of description of how Black students experience and understand academic support. The structural aspect of the awareness (the meaning foregrounded) is marked by dimensions of variation. These interweave all the categories, yet the value is different across each category. The first dimension of variation refers to the object of academic support. This ranges from a vague, unspecified understanding of academic support to a more nuanced and advanced one where academic support is conducive to equality and inclusion in learning and the community. The second dimension of variation refers to the role of the lecturer; they are seen as a 'helper' and someone who provides generic guidance (category A), to a facilitator of learning (category B) and someone who acts as a mentor (category C) and highlights opportunities beyond the university (category D). The third dimension encompasses agency and context in academic support. We used the concepts 'agency' and 'context' as interpretative tools to describe the meaning brought up by the students when they talk about their own role or input in relation to aspects of university life with respect to academic support. While 'agency' and 'context' are distinct concepts, students' accounts pointed to a relational understanding of both. The less advanced value of this dimension of variation of Black students' conceptions of academic support, denotes absence of agency as well as an implied or explicit understanding that academic support is externally imposed by other agents or conditions of the environment. In category B, there is limited indication of agency, and this is only in relation to learning or overcoming learning difficulties whilst in the following category C, there is an increased level of agency along with an increased level of determining what academic support is, how it might be acquired and for what it might be useful. Finally, in the fourth category, agency and context gain a more complex assigned meaning: not only is academic support mostly self-determined, but it is also perceived as socially interactive, often involving several parties (peers, lecturers, support services, communities within or outside the university). Hence, it foregrounds a more sophisticated awareness of agency–social structure relationships. The student is perceived to be active in seeking and repurposing academic support; such a level and form of agency may entail questioning one's position within a structure which can be

TABLE 1 Outcome space of Black students' conceptions of academic support.

Structural aspect of awareness marked by dimensions of variation				
Category	Referential aspect of awareness: meaning content in focus	Object of academic support	The role of the lecturer	Agency and context in academic support
A	Helping university students	Unspecified	Provides guidance, 'helper'	Absence of agency in awareness of externally determined academic support Recipient of support
B	As A, and ensuring understanding of the object of learning	Understanding of subject matter, resolving learning difficulties	Communicator and facilitator of learning. Provides feedback	Presence of agency in relation to externally determined academic support. Learner often in isolation or passive
C	As B, and organising measures to improve student understanding and personal development	Measures to enhance understanding and personal development	Extends academic support for learning to become a mentor	Active agency in mostly self-determined academic support
D	As C, and expanding to promoting well-being, equality, and inclusion	Well-being, equality and inclusion in learning and the academic community	Extends academic support for learning and mentorship to highlight personal potential beyond the university	Mostly self-determined, socially interactive academic support, complex awareness of agency–social structure relationships. Potentially active and questioning position within (White) structure

seen as exclusionary or impeding the full expression and fulfilment of minoritised students. The agency-context dimension of variation describes the continuum between categories, which reflects widening of collective awareness of personal agency in relation to social structure within the studied group of students. The more explicit the focal awareness of one's own role in academic support is, the more active and dynamic is the relationship with larger structural factors of university described in this dimension.

The outcome space of Black students' understandings of academic support describes how the meaning of academic support varied from category A to D in terms of growing complexity of the way in which the meaning of academic support is understood by the students. It resembles an expansion of collective awareness of academic support from undiscerned to more discerned understanding of complex relationships between meaning and content, its structural parts and context, in which the meaning is discerned. The qualitative differences between categories were marked by dimensions of variation, which vary from one category to another in terms of the object of academic support, the role of the lecturer as a primary supporter or agency of the student in relation to the context of support.

These dimensions of variation are related to each other (horizontally in [Table 1](#)), despite different value in focus in each category, in the epistemic person–phenomenon relationship, here not only between the students and the phenomenon of academic support, but also with lecturers whose role is discerned and focused upon as main supporters. For example, in category A, there is no clear object to the academic support, although the nature of academic support is defined as 'help' when you need it, the agency of the student in this relationship is largely absent and the student is seen rather as a recipient of help rather than an active agent, whereas the lecturer is seen as the 'helper'. However, in category B, the object of academic support is defined as understanding of subject matter, the role of the lecturer is as the facilitator of learning and the student has a more active role as a learner, even if vaguely discerned. Furthermore, in category C, the object of academic support is enhancing understanding and personal development, the lecturer is seen as a mentor in this and the students see their own role as active self-determined agents in academic support. Finally, in category D, the object of academic support is discerned as well-being, equality and inclusion in learning and the academic community, the lecturer's role as mentor highlights person's potential beyond the university and students' own agency is seen as active and self-determined yet interactive in relationship with social structure relationships, including awareness of absence or limitations of one's agency in relation to social structures.

## DISCUSSION

We preface the discussion of the results by clarifying two important aspects of this study. Firstly, 'race' can be a proxy for several identity characteristics and as a result this poses limitations on the interpretive strength of this research. Gilroy (2013) observes that recent movements in African countries dislodged the centrality of the Caribbean identity within Black communities in Britain. This serves as a reminder of the fluidity and historical relativity of 'race' and racialisation and, furthermore, how these might be reflected in educational participation and outcomes. Additionally, it is not enough to disaggregate racial/ethnic characteristics (Stevenson et al., 2019) and the inequalities arising from them; it is equally important to take an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 2017) including other identity characteristics, something which was beyond the aims of the current study. Secondly, some of these findings may have implications for student populations beyond Black students, and in fact may be relevant to diverse student populations across a range of national contexts beyond British universities. This therefore presents as an opportunity for further research on students' ways of experiencing academic support.

Student accounts revealed a breadth of conceptions of what they consider as academic support. These accounts do not necessarily match with how academic support was organised and provided by the institution where the study was conducted. On the contrary, they draw our attention to two types of critical disjunctures in current offerings: a disjuncture between academic and pastoral/personal support, and another one between support internal and external to academic frameworks. We therefore extend on previous work on contexts of support and the nature of interaction within them (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007) to propose a new, inclusive definition of academic support as a formal (structured) or informal (unstructured) activity that may be provided inside or outside regular teaching and is intended to sustain successful progression and achievement during a student's chosen study pathway. Formal (structured) support might be provided in the form of (personal) tutoring, peer support groups or academic office hours, and it is often offered through centralised or departmental student services, directly from academics or specialist advisers (e.g. language, literacy, and numeracy specialists). Informal (unstructured) support might be provided by peers, family or community networks and organisations.

Furthermore, this phenomenographic study identified aspects of academic support that need to be focused upon for Black university student voices to be heard and to widen collective awareness of and transform academic support practices at undergraduate level. Overall, we emphasise the significance of the task to identify aspects of student support in the university context from Black students' perspective, rather than in the university context per se, that are relevant and meaningful to the students' relationship with the university. The study makes a novel contribution to our existing understanding on academic support by highlighting the importance of agentially effective academic support. While the deficit-centred approach has been widely criticised, evidence and practice recommendations rarely suggest more concrete directions of overcoming such deficit-centred approaches in relation to minoritised students. Drawing on the categories of description and the dimensions of variation reported in this article, our contribution centres on four areas: a new model of academic support which encapsulates agential effectiveness; a renewed emphasis on what type of academic support is provided; where; and by whom.

The agency-context dimension of variation, especially as it manifests itself in category D, links to Archer's (2000) description of the dynamic relationship between 'structure and agency': persons have causal powers, which although conditioned by universal human powers—such as an individual's sense of personal agency, are dependent on the realisation of self-consciousness—which 'ultimately enable them to reflect upon their social context, and act reflexively towards it, either individually or collectively' (Archer, 2000, p. 308). This highlights the importance of providing academic support that enables students to become 'agentially effective', which according to Archer (2000, p. 308) means 'evaluating their social context, creatively envisaging alternatives, and collaborating with others to bring about transformation'. Case (2013, p. 61) comments on the two types of agency identified in the development of social identity: primary agency results from the circumstances of one's birth; each person involuntarily obtains a place in the distribution of society's resources while corporate agency stems from collective efforts of agents to change society. Both effect change; in the case of Black students, primary agency is exemplified in diversifying HE, but also needing support or failing to 'attain' with limited, if any, discussion about their corporate agency. Proposing a new model that enables agential effectiveness requires a new understanding of student support, allocation of resources and intentional design and purpose for activities and interactions taking place within and outside universities. The study contributes initial insights towards such a new approach: the most advanced conception (category D) highlights that academic support is intertwined with issues of equality, personal and social well-being, and respect for every student as part of the university community. Participants in our study also identified peers as an external source of academic support, in line with past



research (e.g. Ferguson & Scruton, 2015; Kauser et al., 2021). Peer mentoring, as a form of support, has also been associated with increased student retention in HE institutions for Black students in the US (Simmons & Smith, 2020); it is also related to increases in the overall college satisfaction, retention and persistence of Black students (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011). These can inform inclusive ways of getting involved in community-related organisations within the university and in activities that support the development of identity (as already evident in categories C and D) and enhance agentially effective ways of belonging to the institution.

While considering such agentially effective systems of support, it is important to acknowledge that higher education institutions offer their academic support and allocate resources based on an organisational division which is already reflected in models presented earlier in this article (Brindley et al., 2004; Tait, 2004). These divisions are not always easily understood by all students, nor are they perceived as effective. Yet we acknowledge an opportunity within the wider, avowed aim of decolonising the academy: to imagine educational responses to the static aspects of structural and cultural realities in universities, and in the case of our study, to decolonise academic support. It is possible to create conditions conducive to engaging with students who have been 'othered' from and underserved in historically White institutions by taking seriously the quality of academic support with which they are engaged. If agential effectiveness is to be supported, the existence of clear procedures to report and address racist incidents must be given its rightful attention. Besides existing empirical evidence attesting the importance of this (Bhopal, 2015), it will signal to students, and Black students in particular, the willingness of the institution to honour its commitment to unobstructed academic support and subsequently successful learning for all and a defence of each student's pedagogic right to be included and the right to participate (Bernstein, 1996).

Critiques of existing academic support structures and processes centre on how the student and institutional support are *positioned* in relation to each other. Drawing on students' accounts, we argue that such positioning should also refer to how academic support is positioned in relation to academic frameworks of teaching, learning and assessment. Existing organisational divisions (academic vs. pastoral/personal, formal vs. informal support) may hinder an inclusive type of support. Students in our study raised complaints about the relevance and effectiveness of academic support which was often perceived as provided in isolation to formal teaching (e.g. support specialists lacking disciplinary knowledge of students area of study). In response to these challenges, students foregrounded the role of the lecturer in providing academic support, a phenomenon already evident in previous reports (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007). Over the years, concerns related to staff, especially lecturers, were raised by minoritised students, as quite often teachers were portrayed as underestimating their students' abilities and having low expectations of them (Stuart et al., 2011); this resulted in students experiencing fears of not fitting in and being reluctant to ask for help. In our study, Black students highlighted the importance of having positive relationships with their lecturers in keeping them motivated and feeling supported, both academically and emotionally. Academic failure is manageable if helpful and constructive feedback is provided by the lecturer along with goal-setting strategies. Also, students linked 'belongingness' with the relationships they had with the lecturers. For example, the need for reciprocal relationships between the students and lecturers, and inclusion in the academic community, were addressed as necessary aspects of academic support. Therefore, one of the direct implications of this study is related to how the structure—historically White universities—can provide academics with the support they need, not only in their daily tasks, but also in terms of understanding of their students' alternative worldviews and embracing strategies for epistemic access and justice; this will allow them to meet students' individual needs and provide clarity to understand particularities related to mentoring and guiding them. Moreover, research has found that minoritised students demonstrate increased levels of achievement

when they are taught by teachers of similar racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds to themselves or those who have a greater understanding of these issues (Milner, 2012). The well-known underrepresentation of academic and university executive staff in British universities becomes relevant in relation to the findings of our study too.

## CONCLUSION

Effective academic support is a necessary but not sufficient condition for academic achievement at university. While students from more privileged class and ethnoracial backgrounds may seek support from a wider and more powerful range of sources and networks, those who have experienced systemic injustices may rely more heavily on institutional formal and informal structures and interactions. We demonstrated in this article that awareness of one's agency in relation to social structures or context is important for academia to support and empower students to act as social agents and agents in their own learning and academic development, as well as for universities in transforming society towards social justice (Wright & Osman, 2018). Both the lack of students' awareness or discernment of agency in experiencing academic support (category A) and explicit expression of awareness of absence or limitations of agency are significant for academic support to be able to enhance students' active role in their learning and academic development as learners and as members of university and the society as a whole.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest has arisen in this work.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data cannot be shared due to ethical restrictions.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The research was conducted in line with BERA (2018) ethical guidelines. Ethical approval was granted from the University of West London (REC/PSW-01102).

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