An Arts-Based Exploration of Belonging and Transformation for Racially Minoritised Students at a UK Business School

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Abstract

In 2018, the UK government set a target for all UK universities to eliminate the 'unexplained' awarding gap between White and Black students by 2025 (OfS, 2018). Despite gains during the Covid 'no detriment' policy era, that has not been achieved. One of the largest ethnicity degree-awarding gaps in the UK prevails in the discipline of business administration (AdvanceHE, 2020: 129), but little is known about how to reduce this race inequity within business higher education contexts specifically.

Academic success has been linked to students having a sense of belonging based on respect, recognition, vulnerability, and connection (Ajjawi *et al.,* 2025: 9). Students with a weaker sense of fitting in socially and academically, due to experiencing racialised exclusion on a regular basis, have lower predicted degree and employment outcomes (Murphy *et al.,* 2020). Seeking a remedy for this situation, I explored the lived experiences of 11 Black, Asian, and minority ethnic undergraduates at Londonshire (pseudonym), a modern business school in the southeast of England, to understand how, where, and when racially minoritised business students experience belonging, and how this impacts on their sense of transformation at university.

Employing a method of critical arts-based inquiry informed by decolonising methodologies, I selected two visual methods – photo-voice and group non-stick collage – to depict a 'truth' which written and purely verbal forms could not have conveyed so richly (Butler-Kisber, 2018: 117; Allen, 2020: 249; Leigh and Brown, 2021: 12). This multimodal approach enabled progressive individual reflection through 1:1 interviews and group discussion, processes that were represented both photographically and metaphorically. Reflexivity was key to the ethical design of this study, giving participants control over their own narrative via 'enhanced' discussions (Kara, 2015: 83) of 'visual reconstructions' (Culshaw, 2019: 271). Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) generated themes which I discuss using concepts from Critical Race Theory, decolonial theory, and relational and emancipatory pedagogies.

This study offers a rich picture of student life at a UK business school, viewed through a racialised lens. The findings build on theories of belonging and mattering in higher education and highlight the links between these and experiences of transforming at university. From the data, I developed a model showing three forms of belonging evidenced in the students' stories: Relational Belonging, achieved via relationships with peers, staff, and others; Structural Belonging, an alignment with organisational values, expectations, and processes; and Contributory Belonging, whereby students added value to the learning community, resulting in their gaining a more consistent sense of mattering to the institution. Race impacted all three domains, causing belonging uncertainty and peripheral engagement at times. However, this was mitigated by strong relationships and campus environments which conveyed the message that the university cared about Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students' experiences, demonstrating that they mattered within the institution (Flett, 2018; Gravett, 2023; Felton, 2023). Transformation was identified where either Relational and/or Structural Belonging had developed, whereas a deeper sense of mattering resulted from Contributory Belonging alone.

The contributions to critical participatory methods resulting from this study include the combination of two visual forms of inquiry in order to access deeper reflections on lived experience and the adaptation of a form of CRiT walking combined with digital collaging to suit the virtual environment, thereby expanding the geographical boundaries of future arts-based research. In addition, I offer seven practical recommendations for universities to increase belonging and race equity for students who are racially 'othered' in White-majority contexts.

Acknowledgements

Studying for this doctorate has felt like raising a fifth child. 'The EdD' has been a constant for me throughout extremely turbulent times, both in the world and in my life. It has required greater self-discipline than I've ever needed to muster and has developed my thinking in ways I could not have imagined. I am glad to have shared both the tears and the laughter with my 5 fellow EdD cohort members, Kate, Ian, Frederica, Charlie and Farah, but above all I am grateful to the 11 participants for their openness and trust, their unpaid time, their personal stories and their support of my aims.

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Doctoral study is training in research, and I do now feel ready to launch myself into the sphere of critical, arts-informed, qualitative research. This has been, in equal measure, enlightening, excruciating and transformational for me as a person. I am not who I was (in many ways) when I started this doctorate during lockdown in September 2020, and I am grateful to all the supervisors, tutors and examiners who have played a part in my development as a researcher over the past 5 years. My four children are most definitely my life's work and purpose, but this doctorate comes a close second!

Contents

Abstract 2

Acknowledgements 3

Figures 7

Tables 7

Terms and Acronyms 8

Section 1 - Context, Concepts, Research Design 9

Chapter 1: What Informs This Research? 10

Introduction 10

Why Me? Positionality 10

Inequitable Outcomes 12

Why Focus on a Business School? 12

Why Belonging, Mattering, and Transformation? 13

The Contemporary Situated Experience 14

Problem Statement 17

Chapter Summary 18

Research Questions 19

Chapter 2: What Do We Already Know? A Review of Literature and Concepts 20

Introduction 20

Belonging 20

Unbelonging 23

Mattering 24

Transformation 25

Othering 28

Decolonising/Decoloniality 28

Race and Ethnicity 30

Critical Race Theory 31

Chapter Summary 38

Chapter 3: Methodology 39

Introduction 39

Axiology to Methodology 39

Research Paradigm 39

Critical Participatory Inquiry (CPI) 41

Decolonising Methodologies 43

Critical Race Methodology 46

Participatory Arts-Based Methodologies 46

Research Design 47

Ethics 49
Participants 50
Methods 56
Data Analysis 60
Chapter Summary 62
Section 2: Analysis of Findings 63
Chapter 4: Relational Belonging 64
Introduction 64
Invisible Community 64
Acquaintances 67
Firm Friendships 70
Individual Lives and Loneliness 72
Feeling Stuck 77
Groups and Teams 78
Impermanence 82
Safety in Friendship 83
Staff–Student Relationships 84
Impact of Covid on Relational Belonging 91
Impact of Race on Relational Belonging 93
Chapter Summary 115
Chapter 5: Structural Belonging 116
Introduction 116
Campus 117
Beyond Campus 121
Transport 123
Learning and Teaching Structures 125
Financial Structures 127
Cultural Norms 129
Getting Support/Struggling Alone 131
Institutional Pride 139
Fluctuating Belonging within the Structures 141
Developing a Student Identity 143
Seeing the Point 148
Flexible Structures 152
Impact of Covid 153
Impact of Race on Structural Belonging 154
Chapter Summary 175

Chapter 6: Transformation 176
Introduction 176
Perseverance, Resilience, Confidence 176
Productive Struggle 181
Transforming Professionally 186
'Who Am I?' Transforming Self-Image 192
Becoming Someone New 194
Curiosity and Critical Consciousness 197
Independence 201
New Skills 203
Social Mobility 205
Chapter Summary 207
Chapter 7: Contributory Belonging and Mattering 208
Introduction 208
What Is Contributory Belonging? 208
Forms of Contribution 209
Impact on Others and the World 215
Not Contributing 218
Contributing and Mattering 219
Impact of Race on Belonging and Mattering 221
Chapter Summary 224
Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendations 225
Introduction 225
Research Questions 225
Study Summary 232
Limitations 232
Future Research Considerations 234
Contribution to Method 235
Contribution to Knowledge 235
Contribution to Practice 236
Recommendations 237
Final Reflections 240
References 241
Appendices 281

Figures

Figure 1 AUDIT TRAIL OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OCT 2022-JAN 2024 59
Figure 2 THEMATIC MAP (NVIVO), SHOWING THEMES, SUBTHEMES, CODES, AND SUB-CODES (SEE APPENDIX X FOR MORE DETAILED VIEWS) 61
Figure 3 'LONDONSHIRE FALLING OVER' - PHOTO TAKEN BY PRINCE 86
Figure 4 GAMU'S NON-STICK COLLAGE 105
Figure 5 NATHAN'S COLLAGE SHOWING HIMSELF STUCK WHILST HIS PEERS MOVE FREELY AROUND HIM 149
Figure 6 FLAGS HANGING IN THE ENTRANCE OF LONDONSHIRE 164
Figure 7 IMAGE OF HANDS USED BY PRINCE IN HIS DIGITAL COLLAGE 217
Figure 8 MODEL SHOWING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELATIONAL, STRUCTURAL AND CONTRIBUTORY BELONGING, TRANSFORMATION AND MATTERING 221
Figure 9 MODEL DEMONSTRATING COVID-19 AND RACE AS 'THE WEATHER' 223
Figure 10 MODEL ADAPTED TO SHOW WHICH PHASE OF BELONGING AND TRANSFORMATION EACH PARTICIPANT DEMONSTRATED ... 224

Tables

Table 1 NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY 52
Table 2 ETHNICITY DECLARATIONS, AGE CLASSIFICATION UPON ENTRY AND FEE STATUS OF PARTICIPANTS 52
Table 3 PARTICIPANTS' VIGNETTES 55
Table 4 BALANCE OF CODED ITEMS ACROSS GENDER AND BROAD ETHNICITY GROUPINGS (TO DEMONSTRATE WHICH INTERSECTIONS ARE NOT COVERED IN THE DATASET) 61

Terms and Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
A-level	Advanced Level qualification taken in school at age 18 in the UK
BAME	Black, Asian, and minority ethnic
BTEC	Diploma qualification at Level 3 in the UK, vocational subjects
Covid/Covid-19	SARS virus pandemic globally occurring December 2019 – mid 2022, with lockdowns imposed by governments across the world at various points in time
CPI	Critical Participatory Inquiry
CRT	Critical Race Theory
Drop-out	Attrition rate
EDI	Equality, Diversity, Inclusion
EU	European Union
Ethnoracial	A term combining aspects of race and ethnicity e.g.: African American
GEM	Global Ethnic Majority (used in reference to non-White people)
GM	Global Majority
HBCU	Historically Black College or University (in the US)
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute (Independent think-tank in Oxford, UK)
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Authority
Home	Home-domiciled (settled resident of the UK three years prior to university)
Home-fee	Fee rate for domestic students with permanent residence in the UK
ID	Identity Document
LBS	Londonshire Business School
LRC	Library Resource Centre
MSTeams	Microsoft Virtual Meeting Software
Non-traditional	Students who come from Widening Access and Participation category backgrounds in the UK
NUS	National Union of Students in the UK
OfS	Office for Students (UK government department)
PoC	Person/People of Colour
Post-92	A modern university established after 1992 in the UK
Racially Minoritised	People who are not responded to as White, and who experience being an ethnic minority in the UK
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SCOPUS	A collection of peer-reviewed literature, including journals, books, and conference proceedings from various publishers worldwide
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes – an independent hub for higher education professionals to access research, toolkits, and evaluation guidance to eliminate equality gaps
UG	Undergraduate
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America
WP	Widening Participation – UK term referring to social justice in access and student success
Zoom	Virtual meeting software

Section 1 - Context, Concepts, Research Design

Chapter 1: What Informs This Research?

Introduction

There is compelling evidence, accumulated from a range of government and scholarly sources over the past 20 years since the Schwartz Report (Admissions to Higher Education Review, 2004), showing that Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students studying in UK higher education, on average, experience proportionately higher drop-out rates from university (with the exception of Asian students – Equality Hub, 2024), lower rates of entry to highly skilled graduate jobs (Kernohan, 2021; TASO, 2024), and lower degree-classification awards (HESA, 2014–2022, cited in Samaranayake, 2024: 4; Boero *et al.,* 2024). This is accentuated within business degree subjects, and for those who enter the UK higher education system with non-A-level qualifications (Codiroli-McMaster, 2021) and whilst the gap size fluctuates, the pattern of awarding stays fairly consistent (Dickinson, 2024). As this is the context within which I work, I have endeavoured to research the experiences of students in a UK business school who identify as Black, Asian, or minority ethnic, to explore aspects of their lived experience which have not yet been thought through, and potentially identify the possible sites of racism driving these differential outcomes.

Why Me? Positionality

I work as an academic member of staff within a UK post-92 university business school. My role focuses on devising initiatives to reduce the degree-awarding gap between White students and Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students. During my six years in the role, I have seen the gap change little either nationally or institutionally, fluctuating at around 10% in the UK since the first AdvanceHE monitoring report in 2005 (Sappor and Franks, 2025), and around 20% at the Londonshire Business School (LBS) where this study took place. When this data is disaggregated by ethnicity, the gap between Black and White students is consistently the largest.

In undertaking this project, I am mindful of being a White[1] woman in a position of authority as compared to students in the same environment. Whilst generating 'data' from students' stories of lived experiences, I have tried to remain vigilant about my aim to serve the community and not to mine trauma, whilst acknowledging that I stand to gain from this research in terms of acquiring a higher qualification. I hope I have achieved a balance between the two aims of

[1] I have chosen to capitalise the word 'White' throughout this text when referring to people racialised as White. Until recently, the common practice was only to capitalise Black, as a marker of respect to the history of the Black diaspora. However, recent thought has moved towards capitalising both descriptors. This recognises that White people often think race does not apply to them and also highlights that White refers to a racial category and not just a skin colour and is purely a social construction (Mirza and Warwick, 2024: 365). See page 17 for further discussion on this.

personal development and social justice, whilst acknowledging that 'whites often conceive of race talks as intellectually stimulating – as in a discovery or another topic in which they can excel – rather than a lived experience that students of color in good faith share with their white colleagues' (Leonardo and Porter, 2010: 150). In keeping with the call for White researchers to 'be self-conscious in their inquiries' (Helms, 1993: 240) into the lived experiences of People of Colour, throughout this study I have highlighted moments which have kept my reflexivity prominent rather than making a statement on positionality at the start and ignoring my subjectivity thereafter. I captured these moments in reflexivity boxes in the margins as I wrote (see Appendix G for examples), in recognition of the 'urgent political call to challenge the structures that reproduce normative whiteness [or coloniality] within academia' (Moosavi, 2022: 14).

As a White woman, raised in an all-White family and schooled alongside majority White students, I accept that I am blinkered. I do not know what I do not know in terms of the personal and emotional experience of racism in society, which creates a veil for me; things which are known to others are inexperienceable for me (Luft and Ingham, 1955). When my white lens on the world is challenged by someone who sees through a lens 'racialised as Other', I am discomfited. My sense of the world is revealed as an upside-down epistemology (Leonardo, 2002: 40). I experience guilt, shame, and embarrassment as I confront my own ignorance and complicity in the 'Racial Contract' (Mills, 1997: 19). Instinctively, this is a stress response which typically leads to reactions of fight, flight, or freeze. But discomfort is an insufficient reason to avoid seeking those alternative lenses, for although 'antiracist work is emotionally, physically and mentally tough', still there is something we each can do towards fulfilling its aims (Gillborn, 2019:8), whilst accepting this always involves 'going against the grain' (Lykes *et al.,* 2018: 409). Remaining in a protected worldview risks assuming others are similarly protected, which they are not. So, discomfort is a reasonable price to pay if it results in change for the wider good, however incremental.

In researching racialised lived experiences, as a White woman, I am conscious that 'same-race' pairings between researcher and participant can produce enhanced levels of trust, but equally, other intersections of gender and socio-economic status can create barriers to achieving commonality; thus, all positionalities produce different dynamics of trust (Preston, 2019).

Inequitable Outcomes

The UK government's 'Lammy Review' (Lammy, 2017) placed the onus on all public sector departments to 'explain or change' their policies and practices if they are not increasing racial equality of opportunity and outcomes (Stevenson *et al.,* 2019: 9). Whilst university safety-net policies in the Covid era offered some remediation of the differential degree-awarding outcomes, this improvement has since reversed. This is most marked by the gap between Black and White home-fee students, which stood nationally at between 6 and 28 percentage points (pp), even when controlling for entry qualifications (Stevenson *et al.,* 2019: 10), and within the context of LBS has fluctuated greatly, falling from over 40 pp in 2023 (Londonshire, 2024) to 16 pp in 2024 (Londonshire, 2025a).

Given these data, and the dedicated and determined efforts of those who have engaged in staff–student partnerships to reduce these differential racialised outcomes, I decided to research the experiences of Londonshire students to understand what other methods could be trialled to counter the problem. This professional Doctorate in Education is the result of my endeavour to understand a national problem within a situated context, and to influence my own practice and that of colleagues locally, nationally, and internationally in directly improving the experiences of Black, Asian, and minority-ethnic undergraduates at business schools in White-majority contexts. As one of the participants in this study said in her interview,

> *The reason we are doing this research now with me, a final year student, is because you want to make life a little bit easier for the new students, right? [Uma] [I].*

As Tate and Bagguley (2017: 292) emphasise, it is vital to spotlight race and racism in research which seeks to transform global higher education, and most particularly that which seeks to improve life experiences and outcomes from a university education. I hope I have honoured the participants' contributions throughout this study, and that my conclusion and recommendations form the impetus for action which will make a difference to the lives of racially minoritised students at Londonshire and, in turn, positively impact their degree outcomes, employment outcomes, and – most importantly – their well-being and life outcomes.

Why Focus on a Business School?

More degrees are awarded to UK-domiciled students in business and management subjects than in any other subjects in the UK (HESA, 2025). Business administration subjects in the UK recruit

the second highest proportion (33.2%) of home-domiciled Black, Asian, and minority-ethnic students of all degree-subject areas, coming a close second after law (35%) (AdvanceHE, 2020: 127). Whilst those figures may sound high for a country with only 18% (ONS, 2021) of its population hailing from these backgrounds, its proximity to London means that LBS draws 62% of its undergraduates from ethnic-minority backgrounds (Londonshire, 2023a), over double the national proportion (UK Government, 2022b). In addition, the number of Black and Asian international students studying at Londonshire has steadily increased over the post-Covid years and is set to grow further, as the market expands in India, Nigeria, Ghana, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and other countries outside the EU, meaning the Business School, with its 10,000 students, has a Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) predominant population overall.

The largest ethnic minority home-domiciled group in LBS is that of Asian students (31% in 2024), running a close second in size to the group made up of their White home student (36%) counterparts. There were over 260 Black African, Black Caribbean, and mixed-heritage home Black British students studying at LBS in 2024 (20%). Data shows Black students' A-level outcomes are on average lower than those of their White peers (Bhopal, 2023: 112), which translates into fewer university offers for Black students (Londonshire, 2025a). Ethnicity degree-awarding gaps in the UK HE sector are most pronounced for Black students. Although the gap between Black and White students at LBS (2025) has now reduced to match the national Black awarding gap (UUK, 2022), the gap for Black male students is twice the national Black (male and female combined) awarding gap at LBS.

It is widely reported that lack of belonging plays a key role in creating ethnicity awarding gaps (UUK and NUS, 2019; Boero *et al*. 2024: 11), leading to less materially transformational outcomes (salary, status, profession) from a university education for those identifying as other than White. This study seeks to understand how racially minoritised business school students make meaning of belonging and transforming at university, in a bid to surface some of the 'unknowns' contributing to this "unexplained awarding gap" (Codiroli-Mcmaster, 2021) that stem from structural racism (Ugiagbe and Ernsting, 2022), and which quantitative data has so far been unable to identify.

Why Belonging, Mattering, and Transformation?

The emotional impact of exclusion from social groups is known to cause harm to well-being (Apostolou *et al.,* 2024) and to a psychological sense of safety. Belonging is a human need, the lack of which leads to social anxiety, depression, and withdrawal. Universities are resourcing

projects to increase sense of belonging for their students as a route to decreasing drop-out rates and increasing attendance, progression, and degree outcomes. More recently, higher education has turned its focus towards increasing 'mattering' (Flett, 2018; Gravett *et al*, 2021; Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, 2021) as a vehicle for engaging university students more fully in their studies. Mattering aids retention, particularly where (non-traditional) students have 'a history of being treated as if they do not matter' (Flett and Nepon, 2020: 672). Race impacts perceived social *fit*; this has been shown to decrease feelings of belonging in achievement settings, causing students from marginalised groups to question whether they belong in those settings, and even whether their whole group belongs in them (Walton and Cohen, 2007).

Universities often state that they aim to provide transformative education. Examples include Durham University's (2017) statement that it seeks to provide 'Education that is challenging, enabling, research-led and transformative'; Sheffield Hallam's (Sheffield Hallam University, 2017) 'Transforming Lives' strategy; University of Lincoln's (2024) declaration that its 'purpose is to transform lives'; and Londonshire University's (Londonshire, 2020a) own education strategy, which also states 'Our vision is to transform lives.'; However, the meaning such terms hold for students is not well researched, nor understood. If fulfilling potential and having better financial, career, well-being and other outcomes from gaining a degree are all part of this vision of transformation, then belonging and mattering will necessarily impact these. As belonging and mattering are known to increase resilience and striving (Flett and Nepon, 2020) and yet are also known to be adversely affected in people with a history of misrecognition and harmful stereotyping, educators need to understand the extent to which race and racism impact the inclusion of racially minoritised students in this vision of transformation through higher education.

The Contemporary Situated Experience

This study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic era. I commenced my Doctorate in September 2020, during the first lockdown. This era was like no other, either in my life or in those of the participants, so greater flexibility and short-notice adaptations were required in response to a number of factors. These included the following: fear of contagion; a ban on movement; the grounding of all flights and a ban on international travel; the isolation of living in halls alone when many other students had returned home to their families; the need to work and study from home 100% of the time, and to share work space with children whilst also home-schooling them (Smith and Watchorn, 2020), or to live in multigenerational houses as part of 'bubbles' (Dept. of Health and Social Care, 2020); the rapid adjustment to using new digital technology like MS

Teams and Zoom for all communication and interactions; a 'rising distrust' in others (Allen *et al.,* 2021: 89), and other fast-moving changes to normal life. Covid accentuated all the forms of racism which already pervaded society, particularly anti-Black racism; this combined with the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the reignition of the Black Lives Matter movement to cause 'collective (re)trauma' within Black communities (Arday and Jones, 2022).

Additionally, the spread of Covid-19 saw a period of increased Sinophobia in the UK, following media reports that the virus had originated in China. With implications that poor hygiene had been the cause, covert references to race such as 'the communist virus' (Gao, 2023: 269) and US President Trump's references to the 'Chinese virus' (Zhang *et al.,* 2020: 1150) led to a change in the geopolitical climate. Chinese culture had been highly scrutinised across the globe in the preceding year, with people of Chinese heritage experiencing overt racist attacks in nations within and beyond Europe, the US, and Australia (Gover *et al.,* 2020; Zhou, 2020). The global pandemic first saw Chinese people othered as disease creators, then Black and Asian people othered as carriers of the disease due to their visibility in frontline employment (Reny and Barreto, 2020). The heightened racialised threats and fear at this particular time of our collective history constituted 'the weather' (Sharpe, 2016), or the backdrop, to the participants' lived experience in this study.

In a survey of 2000 students in higher education during the years 2020–2022 (UPP Foundation, 2022), 73% reported that the pandemic had had a negative impact on their mental health and 52% felt they were below the level they would otherwise have expected to reach in their learning. Therefore, the isolation and loneliness portrayed in the participants' stories was accentuated, and more extreme than that which other generations may experience going forward. The students' self-doubt, and their low motivation and confidence in their academic abilities, may have been more prominent in their reflections than might have been the case had they studied pre- or post-pandemic.

Concurrently, the UK government's report into Covid-19 disparities (CRED, 2021) recommended public sector organisations cease to use the terms 'BAME' and 'race' and instead refer to ethnicities individually. Their research found that people from ethnic-minority backgrounds in the UK were three times more likely to say that the term BAME was unhelpful than helpful. The use of the term 'non-White' was also ruled out, in favour of 'other than White'. Whilst being *something other than* is preferable to simply '*not being*' the norm, this term is still imperfect when considering 'the other' as conceptualised by Edward Said (2003) and the verb 'othering', which has resulted from his work (see next chapter).

The report also advocated not capitalising the names of ethnic identities unless they are also nationalities. I have capitalised the word Black throughout this study, following the *Diversity Style Guide*'s (Kanigel, 2024) capitalisation of ethnic groups not linked to geographical nations, including 'Latin', 'Hispanic', 'African American', and 'Native American'. Whilst the practice of capitalising the word 'Black' but not white was originally introduced in the 1970s to respect the broken history of the African diaspora, it fell back out of fashion in the 1980s and 1990s. Its use was taken up again by many news corporations following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests. However, some scholars see this practice as absolving White people of accountability in racism, and the collective circulation of Whiteness. Having been in the habit of not capitalising 'white' for this reason, it feels awkward now to do so, but I feel that capitalising 'White' calls on the 16% of the world's population who identify as White to recognise that the concept of race includes all races as social categories and extends beyond skin colour alone.

'White' is a social category, whereas 'white' is a colour description and, as I detail below, people who are not white can assume a perspective of Whiteness. By not capitalising White as a racial category, I would be normalising White as the standard (Mack and Palfrey, 2020; NABJ, 2020). Capitalising White challenges the freedom of a White person to see themselves as unraced, even if that race does not mean they are marginalised or minoritised (DiAngelo, 2019; Ewing, 2020; Sirleaf, 2023). Both Black and White are historically constructed racial identities, and whatever rule holds for one category should also hold for the other. I have therefore made the move to capitalise 'White' and 'Black' but have not used any other colour terms as ethnicity or cultural identifiers, as this is received as pejorative coming from a White person.

At the time of writing, page 1 of Londonshire's five-year strategic plan states:

> *Whatever your background, wherever you are from, higher education can be a transformational experience … We are committed to having a positive transformational impact on every member of our University community.*

The University's vision statement explains,

> *We transform lives by finding and powering potential, giving people the opportunity to succeed with us whatever their background.* (Londonshire, 2020a)

Based, as it is, on rankings and government monitoring of universities' retention, continuation, awarding, and progression rates, the vision of transformation evoked above is one related to outcomes regarding a high degree score and highly skilled employment. Perhaps such a vision is one of liberation and empowerment, as it enables students to make choices about entrepreneurship, professional accreditation, and internship. This study explores whether students align with this vision and are persuaded of its value in their lives, or whether they instead hold a distinct perspective on transformation unattached to neoliberal markers of status such as income and titles. I seek to understand the extent to which ethnicity and lived experience as a student of colour affects students' potential alignment with this vision of transformation and, by association, their desire and ability to feel a sense of belonging in that context.

Problem Statement

As first identified in 2008 (Broecke and Nichols, 2008) Black, Asian, and minority-ethnic undergraduate students are awarded fewer 'good degree' classifications (2:1 or 1st) in the UK (and at Londonshire) than White students, and this picture has remained entrenched over the subsequent 17 years of monitoring. The UK government set a target for all universities to eliminate the unexplained gap between White and Black students by 2025 (OfS, 2018). Whilst the problem is particularly acute for Black students, it is further accentuated by being male, being of Caribbean heritage, having non-A-Level qualifications, and studying a business or law degree (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017: 114). Data across the education stages shows variation by ethnicity and gender, with higher socio-economic class playing a significant, though not entirely mitigating role (Strand, 2021).

When accounting for gender and socio-economic class, the racialised degree outcome differential prevails (TASO, 2023). Value-added metrics which account for entry tariff points and exit award classifications from a degree subject nationally over a five-year period have shown the awarding gap to be a complex and wicked problem that is rooted in systemic racism (Ugiagbe and Ernsting, 2022). The NUS (UUK, 2022a: 2) laid down a challenge to staff in universities to 'be both more transparent and more proactive in the hard, critical work that needs to be done', and to additionally understand the problem in terms of the intersection of race and overseas-fee status, as well as that of race and home-fee status (UUK, 2022a: 8).

The marketisation of HE has compounded the likelihood of racially marginalised students accumulating at 'lower prestige' (Madriaga and McCaig, 2022: 86) institutions and thereby having

a less transformative experience. Furthermore, the largest BAME[2] awarding gaps nationally are noted in the disciplines of education and business administration (AdvanceHE, 2020: 129). Given that LBS has a cohort of Black, Asian, and minority-ethnic students that is double the national average, offers subjects which nationally experience the second-highest racialised awarding gaps, and attracts a growing number of students from African- and Asian-heritage backgrounds, it is imperative that the racialised differential outcomes in degree awarding and entry to graduate employment are eliminated for reasons of both social justice and students' return on investment. A mismatch between childhood background and HE institution increases the risk of drop-out (Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt, 2022: 398), so my study seeks to understand whether lack of belonging is what lies behind the poorer outcomes for racially minoritised students, causing the 'unexplained award gap' (Cramer, 2021).

This study contributes to the field of race-conscious scholarship (Warmington, 2012: 5) as a 'racial project', which is defined as 'simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines' (Omi and Winant, 1994: 56). The term 'racial project', usually applied to situations which oppress and limit resource and opportunity along racial lines, can also apply to anti-racist projects (Tikly, 2022: 864) that seek to undo and replace structures causing unfair outcomes and increase race equity. This exploration of lived experience anchors race as a central influence upon the participants' lives, whilst acknowledging the 'permanence of racism' (Bell, 1992) with overlapping intersections of other oppressions within society such as gender, age, residential status, and religion, wherever they transpire in the data. This study therefore explores the following research questions to surface the reasons behind differential outcomes within the context of a business school close to London, situated during the Covid-19 pandemic (and its immediate aftermath), through in-depth lived experience counter-storytelling by racially minoritised students.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 outlined the rationale for this study and my positionality as the researcher. The rest of Section 1 below provides the research questions driving the project, followed by the main concepts and theories informing the lens taken, and the methodology for conducting the research. Section 2 then offers the data analysis and findings, models created and conclusion with recommendations.

[2] BAME is an acronym for Black, Asian, and minority ethnic. It is a problematic homogenised category used in UK data to monitor outcomes against those of White students. Whilst acknowledging that it is problematic, I will use it in this study as a shorthand.

Research Questions

Within the context of a UK business school:

1. How do racially minoritised undergraduates experience belonging and transformation at university, and what impact does their race have on that experience?
2. What, if any, are the links between student belonging and transformation?
3. How can universities enhance belonging and transformation to achieve social justice for racially minoritised students?

Chapter 2: What Do We Already Know? A Review of Literature and Concepts

Introduction

The concepts explored in this review of literature were guided by sector research reports and scholarly publications highlighting the impact that students' sense of belonging has had on their engagement and success at university in the period since the Widening Participation (WP) agenda began. Whilst the inequality focus was originally centred on socio-economic disadvantage in the 1990s/2000s, access and participation targets have more recently broadened the spotlight to encompass the lower degree outcomes awarded to Black, Asian and minority ethnic students compared to White students. Whilst government monitoring and evaluation of universities' efforts to address this WP agenda centre around metrics of 'continuation', 'awarding' and 'progression' to highly skilled work, I have looked beneath such neoliberal measurements to understand the human experiences which may contribute to these statistical differentials. Scholarly work identifies sense of belonging as pertinent to student engagement and success at university (Strayhorn, 2018: 17) whilst race activists point towards the structural limitations of racism in education causing reduced outcomes for marginalised students in the UK and beyond.

In my literature review I therefore sought to understand the concepts of belonging, transformation, and race, which naturally led me to read about related concepts of mattering, decolonising, and Whiteness. In doing so, I developed a blended theoretical and conceptual framework (Rocco and Plakhotnik, 2009) influenced by Critical Race Theory, decolonial thought, and transformative pedagogies, as discussed below. My literature review began by using these as key search terms in SCOPUS and then followed the trail of cited literature within around the first 50 articles of relevance to these concepts and topics.

Belonging

Publications on the topic of student belonging have proliferated in the past five years (Gilani and Thomas, 2025b: 7), corresponding directly with the duration of my doctoral studies, and centre predominantly around the US student experience. Belonging is a term in common parlance within HE; it is an aspirational concept which universities strive to create and engender so that students feel comfortable attending classes, engage in their learning, gain 'good degree' outcomes, and meet government employability targets. There is a contended yet common consensus on the meaning of belonging. This was originally a psychological term, which has also been used widely in sociological studies, but is now well established in the field of education (Pittman and

Richmond, 2008; Ahearne and Anderson, 2024). Belonging is predicated on emotions and feelings, which is why it is commonly referred to as a *sense* of belonging (Strayhorn, in Quinlan, 2016: 51).

Belonging refers to a feeling of 'groupness' (Chin, 2019: 717) and a 'feeling of being integrated' (Graham and Moir, 2022: 3) in contrast to simply being an individual surrounded by other individuals. There is implied connectedness in belonging, and an element of protection and safety in the collective. Late-twentieth-century attachment theorists building on the work of Freud (1890), Bowlby (1951), and Fromm (1941) have posited the need to belong as a basic human function; Baumeister and Leary (1995: 497) define it as a combination of 'frequent, affectively pleasant interactions' plus 'consistent caring' and reciprocal concern for each other's welfare. However, Felten (in Langridge, 2024) questions whether the term 'belonging', with its connotations of possession, is even an appropriate term to use when students of colour with heritage from former colonised nations may have histories of ancestral enslavement and of 'belonging' to White people.

Belonging is a sense of ease with oneself within a social, cultural, relational and physical context (May, 2013: 3) and is typically seen as consisting of two elements – a sense of fit among the people and within the environment of an institution, and the sense of being valued in that space (Langridge, 2024). As Maslow (1943; 2017: 11) theorised, safety is a human need, secondary only to the meeting of physiological needs, and precedes the ability to love and belong. It is these needs for safety within the group, and belonging to that group, which are the focus of attention in this study. Belonging, as a 'love need' (Maslow, 1943: 381), is defined as both giving and receiving love, and so is incomplete unless it is reciprocal. In the context of this study, friendship and trusted relationships with others and the institution are the forms of connection defining belonging, rather than romantic or familial love.

Belonging engenders emotional attachment to a group (Guibernau, 2013: 28) and a home in which individuals can develop and grow. Loyalty, obedience, and familiarity are the conditions of belonging, and individuals share principles, values, and interests (ibid.). Belonging goes beyond simply having positive relationships; it provides a secure sense of fitting in, without which the 'socially rejected' tend to self-deconstruct and find less meaning in life (Lambert *et al.,* 2013: 1419). In the context of higher education, Ajjawi *et al*. (2025: 9) describe student belonging as 'a state of relating' based on respect, recognition, vulnerability, and connection. Murphy *et al*. (2020) demonstrated that the greater the daily adversity non-traditional students experienced at

university, the poorer their sense of fitting in socially and academically, which suggested a risk of poorer outcomes for those who experience racialised exclusion on a regular basis. This concurs with Nunn's (2021: 122) findings that ethno-racial minority students (Black and Latinx) in the US reported half the level of student belonging on campus compared to that reported by White and Asian students.

McIntosh (2002), citing Native American wisdom, explains that to feel belonging should be an 'unearned entitlement' within human society, yet in reality it is a 'privilege for a few'. The consequences of not belonging can range from loneliness, alienation, and stress (Mellor *et al*, 2008: 217), through to seeking belonging anywhere it is available, including in ideologically extremist groups (Cohen, 2024). Belongingness requires not only inclusion and safety within a context of shared identity and group connectedness but also acknowledgement of individual difference (Gravett and Winstone, 2022: 13), which is difficult to achieve in the context of higher education massification. Allen *et al*. (2021: 92) propose a framework for belonging comprising four core components: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions, with 'understanding one's own heritage' identified as an important cultural skill within these competencies of belonging.

Sense of belonging (belongingness) and need for belonging (motivation for pro-social behaviour) are linked, for people have diverse levels of need to belong, and desire varying breadths and depths of social connectedness. Strayhorn (2012) offers seven core elements of belonging including the following: it is universal, fundamental to human drive, and affected by social identity intersections; it produces positive outcomes; and needs to be satisfied continually. For Strayhorn, belonging is a *consequence* of mattering. For Yuval-Davis (2006: 199), a person's belonging can either be self-identified or identified by others and is constructed across three layers: social locations; individual identifications and emotional attachments; and ethical and political value systems. She differentiates between belonging and the politics of belonging, the first being an internalised sense within the imaginary, and the second being a conscious ascription or rejection of self to the (dominant) collective values. Gao (2023: 271) sees belonging not as a static and coherent state, a romanticised version of feeling at home, but rather a contested and fluctuating state 'torn by intersecting political forces' where group boundaries are maintained.

There is a positive correlation between belonging and persistence at university, although even high-achieving graduates experience fluctuating belongingness across their years of study (Gilani

et al, 2024). One measure of this is the lower rates of entry to highly-skilled graduate employment for Black and Asian LBS graduates than their White counterparts (Londonshire, 2020b). Within the university context, 'belongingness' requires continual renegotiation throughout students' academic studies, impacting how they feel and act (Guyotte *et al.,* 2021). Particularly for racially minoritised students, the extent to which they feel social acceptance, well-being, and self-worth (Gummadam *et al.,* 2016) correlates with their sense of belonging within the institution of study.

Unbelonging

Belonging is not always a choice. It can be ascribed, and whilst it always offers some form of advantage in terms of safety from isolation, there can also be numerous disadvantages including limitations concerning whom one can marry and practices of dress and behaviour, as well as acceptance and alignment with values which limit inclusion in other groups, such as not drinking alcohol, or only socialising with same-sex friends. Where the balance of equilibrium between the pros and cons of group membership upon individual identity is unfavourable, individuals experience dissatisfaction and disappointment and seek membership in alternative spaces and groups (Guibernau, 2013: 28). Therefore, belonging requires compromise; sometimes this compromise causes too much harm to the individual and becomes unbearable, leading to active unbelonging, which can be seen as a form of transformative resistant capital (Yosso, 2005: 81). Individuals can be powerful and resistant whilst remaining 'invisible' (Brayboy, 2004: 128). Unbelonging is a 'borderland between belonging and not belonging' (Rodricks, 2024: 1), in which those who reject a concept of belonging which is based on socially accepted White norms choose/are pushed to exist at university. Butler (2021: 17) explains unbelonging as 'simultaneous presence and exclusion' in spaces where the possibility of inclusion is to some degree an illusion. Rushdie (2012: 54) writes of a 'double unbelonging' for those whose families migrated to the UK and who feel no sense of belonging either in the host nation or the country of family origin; this is a sense which may impact the growing number of 'bicultural' (Schlossberg, 1989) UK residents who identify as 'mixed heritage'.

If fitting in is foundational to belonging, then there are situations in which all of us choose not to belong as our values do not match with those of others in that environment, causing misalignment and discomfort. Choosing to 'misfit' (Rodricks, 2024: 7) in such a space is a form of resistance, and one which is active and agential, not passive and received from others. It is a rejection of the hegemony which organises life in a way which does not value, respect, acknowledge, reassure, or support one's identity, and which only celebrates normative models of being. Unbelonging is a 'contested state torn by intersecting power relations' (Gao, 2023: 267)

and is not simply the opposite state to belonging. Notions of belonging automatically categorise people using the processes of exclusion, inclusion, and otherness (Bhambra, 2006: 37), and the resistance of unbelonging problematises the unity of the 'us' who are included and the 'them' who are not. For People of Colour, the racialised lived experience requires constant negotiation between 'being and belonging', between being authentic and not being at ease (Akuoko-Barfi *et al.,* 2023: 462).

Mattering

Belonging gives access to an environment in which individuals feel they matter (Guibernau, 2013: 28), and community is where mattering takes place (Gravett 2023: 31). Whilst belonging is contextual, and fluctuates across space and place, the sense of 'mattering' is seen to stay fairly constant once achieved (Langridge, 2024). Where belonging requires some element of assimilation, and therefore some students will necessarily experience belonging-uncertainty (or choose active unbelonging) if rejecting the level of assimilation required, mattering is about contributing, feeling valued, and adding value, both in the immediate context and within wider society. Mattering is conceptually distinguishable from belonging (Flett, 2018: 6). It first arose from the work of Rosenberg and McCullough (1981), who highlighted the importance of being depended upon and feeling significant in the lives of others. The dimensions of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989) are defined as attention (being noticed if absent), importance (others being concerned for our fate), ego-extension (our success/failures impact others), dependence (being needed), and appreciation (being recognised for our contribution), with the opposite end of the belonging scale from mattering being marginality.

By this reasoning, if racially minoritised students feel that the people and the procedures of a university recognise their heritage, culture, values, and experiences as valid and of importance to the wider community and the curriculum content, they will feel they matter. Mattering is positively correlated with less social anxiety and loneliness, whereas not mattering has been shown to cause psychological distress (Flett and Nepon, 2020: 664). Schlossberg (1989) suggests that to move from feeling marginal to mattering, like all movements through liminality, a ritual or ceremony is helpful. This ritual reconnects people with the community, so they feel like they are important, are appreciated, and matter. She goes on to suggest that higher education environments which focus on making students feel like they matter will see higher levels of involvement and accomplishment of goals.

Felten (in Langridge, 2024) argues that increasing a sense of mattering amongst students is a

more viable and impactful endeavour for universities to strive towards, to counter any active rejection of belonging in that context. Students who experience psychological distress, for example through racism and daily microaggressions, are particularly vulnerable to a feeling of not mattering (Flett and Nepon, 2020: 671). Sue and Spanierman (2020) list the consequences of microaggressions as the burden to represent; powerlessness; invisibility; and loss of integrity, all of which are barriers to feeling a sense of mattering to others.

Transformation

The word 'transformational' has been in favour with post-92 higher education institutions in the past few years, enacted through the widening access and participation agenda that conveys a sense of duty to change people's lives between their points of entry and exit (Turner, 2020; Coulson, 2021). Mostly this has related to conformity with employability and enterprise expectations and with an ethos of 'acquisitive individualism' (Graham and Moir, 2022: 9), driven by management metrics. However, relational pedagogues see belonging as the vehicle to 'becoming' (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2021: 8) rather than merely a tool to increase retention and progression. Horner (2022: 109) argues that student belonging and becoming are intertwined and in 'constant dialogue'. For Barnett (2009), being and becoming are wrapped up in the link between knowledge and transformation, and universities must first decide which changes they are seeking to engender in the people who study with them before determining which encounters can enable this. Becoming, as a concept, implies a future focus for completion. Becoming is active 'being in the making' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012: 565).

The neoliberal 'student as customer' model of higher education presumes employability as the route to emancipation and liberation from the constraints of lower socio-economic status (Gravett, 2023: 24). Yet the data show graduate outcomes (both degree classification and sustained employment/rate of salary) are clearly higher for White than for Black students (home-fee) across the UK (DfE, 2024) and within the context of this study (Londonshire, 2024). Therefore, employability is only liberating those with existing privilege, albeit Whiteness rather than financial privilege.

Transformational education has been the preoccupation of pedagogies focused on social justice throughout the past century, with scholars such as Freire (1970) and hooks (1994a) specifically seeking to transform and liberate students through emancipatory learning practices. However, their vision of transformation was not one tied to professional identity or future workplace inclusion, but to the self and the community. The transformation envisioned by Freire was one of breaking free from the chains of the autocratic workplace and inventing new community-

driven working environments which benefit those who have been oppressed by prevailing employment practices. hooks also sought to ignite a spark in her students, inspiring them to gain knowledge through critical engagement with information explicitly for the purpose of action. She sees the explicit purpose of education as the disruption of normative thinking, to engage students in critical thought and reflection, to inform action and change. Freire (1970: 73), too, rejected what he termed 'the banking concept of education', resisting the 'blank slate' idea of the student and calling for problem-posing education where students develop the power to perceive their existence in the world critically, rather than accepting 'the world *with* which and *in* which they find themselves' (Freire, 1970: 56). The goal here is to see reality as changeable, ever-shifting; incomplete, not fixed. Through critical thinking and analysis of the world (transformative education), and knowing that change is possible, students are then 'beings in the process of *becoming*' (Freire, 1970: 57).

Walker *et al*. (2019: 199) take the same view when they state that 'transformation requires praxis, that is, critical reflection plus practical action where students enact their new knowledge in their everyday lives', causing macro-level changes through incremental micro-level changes in themselves. In this way, a 'hyper-critical community' is sought, to continually interrogate and revise practices and procedures to transform the institution and the lives it serves (Barrow, 2006: 358). Transformative pedagogies aim to develop students' reflexivity to question their deeply held values and alter their position of being and acting in the world (Dal Magro *et al.,* 2020: 591). Such learning is seen to necessarily involve '*struggling productively*', facilitated through relationships whereby students '*feel heard*' (Murdoch *et al.,* 2020).

Hawkins and Edwards (2015) see doubt as a vital element in transformation through learning, for without doubt, there can be no accommodation of new ideas. When 'threshold concepts' are introduced to students, they are caused to question their own intuition and presumptions and become unsettled before they can grasp and accept the concept within their own thinking. An example of this would be a student moving through a perspective transformation by accommodating a Marxist view of the tourism industry, or a feminist view of leadership. Such threshold concepts, they argue, cannot then be unlearned, and have a long-term impact on personal identity (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015). It is not clear whether this is the form of transformation universities purport to offer, or whether students come to university to access the established professions and assimilate to existing societal institutions, rather than questioning and disrupting them.

Versions of transformational education which see entry to the workforce and contributing to

industrial innovation as the goal are argued by decolonial scholars to conceal the consequences of postcoloniality and modernity behind notions of 'progress' and 'development'. The form of change which sits behind these ideologies of transformation is one which contributes ultimately to profit and corporate monetary value, in which humans are seen as resources. The transformation of the individual in this version, in its most raw form, is in its bending and fitting and joining, rather than exploring, challenging, discovering, or disrupting. Through 'engagement', 'assessment', and 'progression', students act upon their own 'bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct' to perform actions on themselves which 'may transform them' into 'befitting, educated members of society' (Barrow, 2006: 358).

To transform students' lives or offer a transformational education, universities must first identify the changes they seek to enact in the human beings they recruit as students, before then identifying the types of learning 'encounter' that will produce these changes (Barnett, 2009). It would be counterproductive to commence designing a curriculum without having first considered what qualities will be developed in the students which lead them to have fulfilling and worthwhile lives (Pring, 2015).

However, such 'internal goods' of education are less tangible and measurable than 'external goods' such as employment rates and degree grades (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002: 7), and therefore do not lend themselves to assessment or metrics. Even those metrics provide only a partial picture. In some disadvantaged areas of the UK (e.g., Teeside), salary is not a comparable marker of the value added to a person's life if a graduate chooses to stay and contribute to their hometown economy rather than move to London for a higher salary (Turner, 2020) or to serve the community via a public sector role with lower wages. Is transformation only measurable in the individual, or can the transformational impact of a person be measured within their community?

Transformation through education need not be occupationally framed in order to benefit the economy. If the end goal of education is viewed as enabling critical thinking and for graduates to become active and critical changemakers (Coulson, 2021), the economic and social benefits of this need not be stated goals, but rather useful by-products, of an education. Transformation has long been linked to the aim of decolonising education, positioning the teacher centrally (Dei, 2016) in the critical process of including, acknowledging, and valuing those whom society de-normalises as 'Other'.

Othering

Said (2003) defined how the 'West', which stemmed from the western Roman Empire, had overpowered and oppressed people from the 'East' through the process of colonisation. In decolonial thought, the Occident (West) is pitted against the Orient (East), through a process of constructing 'the Other'. The Other is anyone excluded from membership of the West and is rarely 'seen', but rather 'looked through' (Said, 2003: 107); Others are viewed not as citizens or even people, but as problems. The 'subject race' (Said, 2003: 227) of colonialism was deemed a problem to be solved, and decolonial thinkers argue that the same power relationship still exists and is replicated through the systems and practices inherent in modern Western society. The term 'Other' has since become common parlance, along with its associated verb 'othering', which is to exclude and make someone feel contrary to the norm through denigration and deficit implication (Crozier *et al.,* 2016: 41). The verb 'othering', used by CRT and decolonial theorists alike, holds meaning in any context where a person perceives they are treated with less value or worth than 'Western' people.

Within HE, 'the Other' is constructed as the 'non-traditional' student who enters via a widening participation route, and is 'less prepared' for university study than the White middle-class student. With the targets of Londonshire's (2025) Access and Participation Plan being students who identify as Black/Asian, male, and entering with a BTEC qualification, a mental health condition or from a poor background, the 'other' in this study comprises around three-quarters of Londonshire's undergraduate Business School population. Regardless of majority representation on campus, 'othering' can still be experienced through the conveyance of expectations, the policies and practices, the food and social activities offered, the imagery and tone of décor, and the interactions with 'traditional students' or staff who were educated via 'traditional' routes.

Decolonising/Decoloniality

There is a distinction between decolonising and decoloniality, although the terms are often used interchangeably. Decolonisation in its literal form is active withdrawal from colonies, and is the label given to the deconstruction of the formal structures of colonial rule by one country over another, a school of thought led by activist scholars including Fanon (1986), Glissant (1997), Said (2003), and others throughout the twentieth century. If colonialism is understood in historical terms as the unequal distribution of resources and exclusionary 'ways of knowing' which enabled modernity to become possible (Stein *et al.,* 2020: 52), decolonising is necessarily a reversal of outcomes in the present of this unethical and unequal history. Without a proper understanding

of this past and how it influences the present, universities and schools will simply be institutions of social reproduction and nothing will change (Coelho, 2024). Decolonising requires acknowledgement of complicity in the reproduction of injustices from the past in the systems of the present. However, social identity theories suggest that this tends only to be voiced in the passive tense implying 'bad things have been done' to certain peoples, cultures, lands, and lives, with a social amnesia as to who the subjects of these bad actions are (Leonardo, 2004: 144).

Decoloniality involves challenging and transforming colonial ways of thinking, knowing, and being that continue to shape contemporary power structures, in order to decolonise systems and processes (Macleod, Bhatia, & Liu, 2020: 294). Attempts to enact this within the context of higher education have variously taken the form of redistribution, recognition, and representation; these are all important actions yet prove insufficient to redress the past, which leaks into the present, as shown in data on life outcomes for People of Colour with heritage backgrounds from former colonised nations. In decolonial thought, it is accepted that colonialism cannot be reformed as its habits and systems exist in modern-day form, so decolonising education commonly takes the form of interrupting, or disrupting, ways of knowing and epistemologies which are Eurocentric, to make room for alternative knowledge generation. However, to do so relies on accommodating uncomfortable terms such as 'white ignorance' or the softer 'white innocence' (Tate and Page, 2018: 143) and accepting that imperialism, white supremacy, and racism are all forms of white knowledge (Rudolph, Sriprakash, and Gerrard, 2020: 17).

Decolonising is more about the future than the past (Coelho, 2024) and focuses on analysing the legacies which are visibly acting in the present. Universities in the UK have translated decolonising to mean mostly pluralising the curriculum (Adebisi, Jivraj, and Tzouvala, 2023), which is often sanitised by the term 'diversifying', making space to embrace knowledge generated in and about the Global South, and by Indigenous peoples. However, critics of the decolonising movement argue that adding to what already exists is a 'difference which makes no difference' (Stein *et al.,* 2020: 51) where structures remain the same. Andreotti (2024) argues against simply adding 'Other than White' names to reading lists, and factual amendments to lecture content, but for the necessary accommodation of both existing Western logic and more 'wide-boundary wisdom', which focuses on embodied knowledge forms.

Since the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter resurgence, there has been a further move towards anti-racist pedagogies in some universities as a part of decolonising, in the recognition

that as colonialism and racism are intricately linked, therefore, so must decolonising and anti-racism be linked. Decolonising is seen as a never-ending project because colonial logics lead to problematic patterns and injustice will always find new ways to reproduce itself (Coelho, 2024).

Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity are terms which are often used interchangeably in British society, yet they do not maintain consistency of meaning across time, users, or even the four nations of the UK (AdvanceHE, 2020). The term 'race' is a sociopolitical construct (Saini, 2019) with varying inclusions and exclusions which, amongst other factors, incorporate skin colour, place of birth, nationality, and/or regional and continental family origin. The instability of the boundaries between one social group and another means various constructions of race, ethnicity, and culture have been used to fix definitions across space and time, based upon roots, ancestries, origins, and lineage (Bhambra, 2006: 34), yet failing to account for the fluidity intrinsic to such conceptions of communities. As race has no biological basis, it is purely a social construct whereby 'race is the politics of pigmentation' used to stratify society (Leonardo, 2002: 32).

Majority-White society rarely highlights that White people have a race at all, as the term 'race' is constructed (Rutherford, 2020) and used mainly by White people to refer to anyone who does not fit the normative model of White European heritage. It is rare for White people to be asked 'where are you from?' or 'what is your race?', and when faced with the question 'how do you identify?' recently at work, I experienced, as a White person, 'the privilege of being surprised' (Love, 2004: 230) to be asked and feeling anxious about how to respond. I had never questioned my racial identity openly and had not thought about how others might identify me (a form of White privilege in itself). Where one social group is universalised as the norm, all others remain necessarily marginalised, with varying distances from the central distinction of 'them' and 'us' (Bhambra, 2006: 36). There is no clear consensus on terminology which is acceptable to all of the 8 million people in the UK who do not tick the box 'White' on equal opportunities monitoring forms when describing their heritage. Nevertheless, in 2021, the term 'Person of Colour' was the least favoured in a survey by British Future (Katwala, 2021) and since then the term BAME, which had been in common circulation has been disaggregated in public sector policy (CRED, 2021). However, in the past couple of years, the use of the term 'People of Colour' has travelled from the US and Canada and seems to have become more acceptable amongst academics and activists in the UK. Whilst this term includes all people who experience racism based on skin colour, the term both excludes ethnic minorities who experience other forms of discrimination rooted in racism, such as antisemitism and Islamophobia (APPG, 2018) and fails to recognise the severity

of racism experienced by Black people as a particular legacy of slavery. For some, this term does not recognise the discrimination faced by White minority groups. However, the Migration Observatory (2020) reports that 0% of the discrimination experienced by White people in the UK is reported as having been a result of their colour or race.

Whereas race is a social construct founded in domination and subordination, to highlight difference (Olusoga, 2017), with no biological rationale (Bhavnani, Mirza, and Meetoo, 2005: 15), 'ethnicity' groups people by shared history, culture, language, and (however distant) geographical origin. Ethnicity is a more detailed reference to the identities a person may hold, such as Black British Caribbean, or Asian British Pakistani, or Mixed White Black African. It is, therefore, most respectful to reference ethnicity, where it is declared, whilst also recognising the power of unity within broad racial groupings when contrasting the Global Majority (or People of Colour) with the White minority.

There is a move within UK government to disaggregate the racial category of White, potentially by using the category of 'White other' to distinguish Western European from Eastern European ethnicity (CRED, 2021: 50) and a request for publicly funded bodies to resist comparing 'White' with 'non-White' groups, as this is felt to be insufficiently analytical. The term 'ethnic minority' is taken to refer to people who do not identify as White (Richardson, 2018). Whilst this is incorrect, as it includes the 0.1% White UK minority population that consists of Gypsy, Roma, and Irish Travellers (Lammy, 2017), I have used the term in the generally understood fashion, as the majority of the 18% of British people who identify as 'ethnic minorities' (ONS, 2021) are People of Colour who cannot choose to 'pass as White' in Western society. However, I do so recognising that this is an imperfect solution which will fast become outdated.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated in the field of law in the late 1980s and early 1990s, building from two previous movements, Critical Legal Studies and radical feminism (Delgado *et al.,* 2017). Learning from feminism's uncovering of the hidden patterns and habits which make up systems of domination, Critical Legal Studies sought to uncover the hidden power dynamics within the US legal system, which used dominant White culture to veil the impact of race and class within legal practices, doctrines, and education (Li, 2018). CRT promotes storytelling and narrative as valid methods of understanding the experience of living in a racialised society, and as tools to examine race as a social construct. CRT aims to draw connections between racism and other forms of domination and subjugation within the law, and more recently within other power

structures such as education systems and workplaces to deconstruct notions of fairness, meritocracy, and neutrality (Howard and Navarro, 2016: 258). Critical race scholars apply CRT to education in defiance of deficit models and to question the Anglocentric curriculum in schools and universities. CRT is defined by its activist intentions, seeking not simply to understand how society is organised along racial lines, but to change the norms and rules underlying this organisation in a bid to lever race equity.

CRT scholars argue that because racialised societies benefit the White elite classes (financially) and the White working classes (psychologically), there is little incentive amongst the prevailing majority to eradicate these systems. This leads to soft outcomes such as 'colour-blindness' or 'colour-evasion' (Jackson and Morrison, 2017, cited in Gillborn, 2019) whereby advocates feel they can rise above 'petty racialized disputes' (Gillborn, 2019: 113) to value a person's true worth, creating multicultural policy aimed at everyone just 'getting along' rather than having equal access to life opportunities.

CRT provides a way to identify and challenge both the overt and covert ways in which race and racism shape social structures, discourses, and practices in legal and political settings. Over the past 25 years, researchers (Gillborn, 2005; Lynne and Dixson, 2013) have applied CRT to educational settings to bring an alternative ontological perspective to traditional organisations, including schools and universities.

Ten years after its original inception as a theory, Ladson-Billings (1998: 12) lamented that 'CRT argues that racism requires sweeping changes, but liberalism has no mechanism for such change.' However, two decades later, I believe the Black Lives Matter movement, established in 2013, which surged across the globe following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, opened a window for such change, despite political rejection by the government of the time (Economist, 2020). In the past five years, Access and Participation Plans in UK HEIs have focused on reducing degree-outcome gaps between Black and White students, and whilst there have been gains, mostly attributed to assessment changes during the pandemic, the gap has in fact increased. With the move to disaggregate BAME to its constituent ethnicities rather than using it as a catch-all term, there is hope that student success funding can be targeted where the need is greatest. For example, this permits universities to differentiate between the progress and experiences of Black African and Black Caribbean people, as the latter group consistently suffer worse outcomes across many life stages (CRED, 2021).

Whilst CRT originates in the examination of prejudice against Black people within discriminatory

power systems, it can be more widely applied to advocate for change on behalf of all People of Colour. The diversity of constantly emerging CRT-based work in the UK is deemed adaptable enough to accommodate 'decentred, unstable notions of blackness' (Warmington, 2012: 16) which will benefit people with Asian, Arab, Chinese, Latinx, and other diverse heritages.

CRT is 'a form of race-based oppositional scholarship' (Burrell-Craft, 2020: 10). There are seven tenets of CRT, which emerged as the theory developed over a 15-year period from its legal origins in the late 1980s to encompass wider societal settings such as education. These are: interest convergence (Bell, 1992); counter-storytelling (Delgado, 1989); critique of liberalism (Gotanda, 1991); Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993); intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991); racial realism (Bell, 1992); and social change (Solórzano and Smith-Maddox, 2002). I give a brief overview of those most relevant to this study below.

Interest Convergence

Delgado *et al.* (2017), referencing Bell's groundbreaking work (1992), posit that only as the interests of both the White and Black populations converge does change ever become a real possibility in White-majority society. Interest convergence occurs when White people make changes to include Black people when they stand to benefit at least equally, if not more, themselves. Contemporary examples include equality and diversity initiatives in universities, such as decolonising the curriculum, which have been shown to have little or no impact on the Black–White awarding gap (TASO, 2022).

Starck *et al*. (2024) differentiate between moral and instrumental motivations for equality and diversity approaches in universities, arguing that only those with a moral cause can positively impact outcomes for Black students, whereas instrumental causes which promote the sharing of diverse perspectives (signalling global future workplaces) only bring better outcomes for White students. Such instrumental EDI approaches reflect interest convergence, whereby funding is allocated to equalising outcomes and increasing belonging for Black and ethnically minoritised students, but actually White students benefit all the same. Interest convergence is the compromise, the bargaining, which exists between Black and White people in the struggle to share power and resources. It is the White-sanctioned route to change, which is very slow and incremental so as not to destabilise the status quo. Interest convergence is the placation of both oppressed and oppressor through achieving a path which does not remove resources (security, safety, money, opportunity, networks, educational advantage) from the powerful to distribute it to the under-resourced. When White people stand to gain from this in some way too, the 'benefits appeal' is used to speak to White interests (Trawalter *et al.,* 2024: 786). Interest

convergence is always purported to be in the interests of the structurally subjugated but really serves the best interests of those in power.

People who do not regard themselves as the perpetrators of racism do not see a reason to change what they are doing, for in their view, society maintains justice through punishing perpetrators alone, rather than through taking a shared responsibility by addressing the structural inequality experienced by the victims. In their view, racism is sited within individual acts and intentions, rather than being embedded within every structure of Whiteness through acculturation. Because mostly, White people are unaware of the structural and historical values of Whiteness and do not recognise occasions when their decisions are based on these cultural beliefs, they do not consider themselves to be racist (Freeman, 1978, in Lynn and Dixson, 2013: 15). It is for this reason that Bell's (1992) 'racial realism' principle – that racism is a permanent, indestructible, and an integral part of society – is included as one of the main tenets of CRT.

Counter-Storytelling

Critical race methodologies strategically use multiple, often creative, methods in combination to surface the knowledge of People of Colour, who are traditionally left at the margins of academic research (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002: 37). Such methods include poetry, performance, visual methods, and composite character generation. Whichever methods are chosen, the intention is to provide counter-narratives to the majoritarian stories told in White-majority society about Black people and those from ethnic minority backgrounds, many of which have their origins in biological racism (e.g. eugenics) and more recently in cultural racism. Deficit theories which purport that racialised disadvantage stems from within the person, not from limiting structures, are countered by stories of lived experience of oppression and group validation confirming that participants are not alone in their experiences. Counter-storytelling is a tool 'for exposing, analyzing and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege' (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002: 32), because stories, 'no matter how singular, can still speak truth to power' (Rodricks, 2024: 2).

People with different racial identities have vastly different experiences of life, and counterstories offer a window into differing realities of the same world, to break the silence that dominant stories enforce and to evidence discrimination so it can be combatted (Delgado *et al.,* 2017: 51). Black storywork focuses on how Black people 'counter society's rejection of Black life' (Toliver, 2022: xix), and the purpose of counterstories is to dismantle racism, challenge dominant discourse, disrupt accepted racial narratives, and create compassion in order to engineer reform.

Whiteness as Property and White Privilege

Whiteness is a deep-seated legacy of the mentality required to colonise, dominate, and enslave (Mills, 1997: 19). Leonardo and Porter (2010: 149) state that 'Whiteness is the immovable mover, unmarked marker, and unspoken speaker'; ubiquitous as a mindset, an imaginary, a racial frame or lens through which the world can be viewed and is viewed by those who pass through society without experiencing racial disadvantage, prejudice, or discrimination (McIntosh, 2002: 97). Whiteness is a racial discourse with which anyone can engage, regardless of their skin colour, just as feminism is a discourse which men can support (Leonardo, 2002: 31). Whiteness is 'empty', existing only to make other ethnicities visible (Anderson, 2013: 46). White people (often unknowingly) reinforce Whiteness because they never experience racism, but to become self-aware of embedded assumptions based on our own identity lens and to 'unthink' those assumptions takes active intention and deconstruction (Gillborn, 2005: 7).

In identifying 'Blackness', at any point in time, we must necessarily identify the oppositional norm of 'Whiteness'. The concept of Whiteness goes beyond the colour of a person's skin, it is a role and a way of thinking (Thuram *et al.,* 2022). Whiteness is something which most White people don't realise they have, for 'White people perform and sustain Whiteness continuously, often without conscious intent, often by doing nothing out of the ordinary' (Applebaum, 2007: 456). This allows them to pass through various barriers and checkpoints in life with relative ease. One of the foundations of CRT lies in the concept of 'Whiteness as property'. Originating in the US, with its history (shared with other European nations) of African enslavement, proponents of CRT argue that this ownership has found other forms of expression in modern Western society since the end of formal colonialism, and that these continue to ensure 'unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines' (Taylor, 2009, cited in Burrell-Craft, 2020: 11).

Such checkpoints (McIntosh, 2002) include educational assessments, access to higher education and research institutions, housing in affluent areas, entry to prestigious professions and employers, or simply the ability to move freely without being questioned by authorities. Whilst intersectionality (one of the tenets of CRT) means that not all White people pass through all these checkpoints or hold all the full 'valuable asset' (Harris, 1993: 1713), it is class, gender, sexuality, and disability, *not* race, that inhibit this access for those White people who don't. Such powers would not even be regarded by most White people as power per se, yet without these permissions and entries, life is considerably more stressful and uncertain. Such allowances and opportunities are collectively referred to as White privilege: 'White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas,

clothes, tools and blank checks' (McIntosh, 2002: 97).

White people are cognisant of the disadvantages suffered by Black, Asian, and minority ethnic people, but are rarely aware of the reverse concept; namely that White people are advantaged, and therefore privileged in global society. To accept this, as part of any work towards achieving equality, means that White people must take a questioning and critical view of themselves (Bhopal, 2018: 23), relinquish some of their advantages and share their privileges with People of Colour. This concept is hard to accommodate for subscribers to the ideology of meritocracy, and it can be painful to relinquish long-held ways of thinking and knowing (hooks, 1994) to recognise the 'visceral nature of whiteness' (Blaisdell *et al.,* 2022: 475).

'Whiteness' is an unwritten order which distributes privilege and resources favourably towards the dominant racial group, depriving other racial groups of power via the economic, sociopolitical, cultural, and belief systems of postcolonial White society (Derman-Sparks and Bunson Phillips, 1997: 9). Those categorised as White across the globe stand at a vantage point where they have a restricted view of race and its harmful effects on those who are racialised as 'other than White'. As Bain (2018: 9) explains,

> Whiteness, then, points not primarily to the people socially categorised as White, but to the processes of categorisation through which White power and White motivated self-interest circulate so as to reinforce themselves. Whiteness is a 'set of power relations'.

Being racialised as White is also seen to enable what is known as White ignorance, a concept which sits on the flipside of White privilege. Bain (2018: 12) explains this as a 'wilful ignorance' which does not absolve those who take this position of their responsibility for its detrimental consequences. Through Whiteness, not as a skin colour but as a vehicle for enabling or restricting access to power, Mills (1997 cited in Bain, 2018: 12) argues that 'one has an agreement to misinterpret the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by White epistemic authority.' The privilege of Whiteness necessarily requires that White people fail to see how they benefit from their White identity (Bhopal, 2018: 101) and purport to accept that racism exists, yet without any agents or racists (apart from extremist groups).

Whiteness can be held in hidden forms behind terms such as 'social capital' and 'cultural capital' and, particularly within the field of education, 'academic capital' (Bourdieu, 1986; 1996). Its

complex web of norms can be veiled and replicated in all aspects of a society which considers itself meritocratic. Within higher education specifically, students classified as 'non-traditional' are often seen as lacking in self-confidence, which feeds into the narrative of the 'weak' or 'needy' student, situating the problem within the individual and not the system making them feel so. This unwittingly creates negative discourse around the WP agenda, with such 'new' 'non-traditional' students viewed as lesser versions of yesteryear's students. Subsequently, 'A vicious cycle of misrecognition is put into place, subtly reasserting the dominance of certain forms of White, hegemonic masculinity in universities' (Burke, 2018: 377).

Whilst some White people dispute that they experience White privilege, Fernandes (2017) found that amongst Latinx populations who self-identified as White (yet may not be identified as White by society), many avoided answering questions about White privilege. This suggests an active distancing from 'Othered' identities such as Black, indigenous, or 'brown' Chicano and a move toward proximity to euro-historical Whiteness whilst being uncertain of inclusion in unearned advantages due to past racial injustices against their heritage. Whiteness, like Blackness, is a fluid social category and can reject from White identity some who have white skin tone (Selod and Embrick, 2013:647).

Intersectionality

CRT also highlights how the various intersecting layers of a person's identity as 'other than White' impact their oppression cumulatively. The concept of intersectionality has been defined as 'the belief that individuals often have overlapping interests and traits based not only on their racial identity but also their class position, gender, and so forth' (Kumasi, 2011: 216). The term 'intersectionality' was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), who critiqued the impact of laws and legal judgements and their differential impact on people dependent on their combined racial and gender identities. The concept originated from the Black feminist schools of thought which highlighted that 'the major systems of oppression are interlocking' (Combahee River Collective, 1977: 210) meaning that multiple oppressed identities can intersect so oppression is compounded but misrepresented as resulting from just one of those oppressed identities. These 'major axes of social divisions' (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016: 11) combine in a person's identity, creating greater oppression the more they overlap. It is right, then, to consider groups and their experiences with acknowledgement of their defining identities, because, for example, the impact of racism on a young Black man may be different to that on a young Black woman.

Intersectional data is not always available, but I am aware, for example, that Black female students in LBS are the least satisfied with their university experience by their final year of study

(Londonshire, 2019). I am also aware that Black male students are the most likely to leave before completing their Business School degree (Londonshire, 2020c). So, whilst Black female students are least satisfied, they are more likely to stay to the end of their degree and voice this opinion than Black male students, who leave without having the opportunity to give this feedback. Both are problematic eventualities for the students concerned, whose life outcomes are negatively impacted. Whilst intersectionality is vital to any deep analysis of data, being Black is deemed to compound the intersection of other identities (Akuoko-Barfi *et al.,* 2023: 462); Blackness is always front and centre of a Black person's identity due to the particular and complex history of anti-Black racism embedded in colonialism and its neocolonial aftermath.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have explored the literature and concepts which informed this study outlining how belonging and mattering, transformational pedagogies, and Critical Race Theory have previously been applied to higher education research to understand student experience and outcomes. I have explained how each is central to my research design to unearth the meanings ascribed to situations which may impact racially minoritised students' sense of belonging and limit their engagement in transformative opportunities which could lead to better life outcomes. In the next chapter, I outline my methodology and methods of data collection and analysis, detailing how these align with my ontological and theoretical approach.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The first decade of CRT educational research primarily focused on counter-storytelling and the permanence of racism (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004) but has since moved to encompass the other tenets of CRT, including the interrogation of Whiteness. Whilst informed by CRT, my methodology encompasses wider influences from decolonial theory (Said, 2003; Freire, 1970; Zavala, 2016; Mignolo, 2009; Moosavi, 2022; Stein *et al.,* 2020), decolonising methodologies (Smith, 2012), and arts-based participatory methodologies (Seppälä *et al.,* 2021; Manathunga *et al.,* 2021; Leavy, 2019), which I have found to complement each other well.

My axiology, ontology, and epistemology all influence the methodologies I have been willing to consider and the research questions I set myself, as these needed to relate to what I thought could be known and how this knowing could be achieved. In this chapter I discuss the decisions, choices, and considerations that played a role when I was selecting my methods, and how I constructed a methodology to suit my understanding of what is possible, knowable, and valuable.

Axiology to Methodology

My own axiology is based on prioritising all forms of wisdom, calmness, mind and body connection, determination, variety, and 'newness' (new experiences, new perspectives). These values enable me to feel comfortable with uncertainty, to seek fairness, balance, and harmony, and to celebrate difference and complexity. This axiology informed the methods I chose, which access deeper reflections, perhaps unattainable through speech alone, by using visual forms to represent inner thoughts. My ease with uncertainty allowed me to hand participants control over the narrative without seeking to constrain the structure of the discussion. This choice aligns with a belief that words are only one way of communicating amongst many of equal value, including dance, animation, poetry, drama, music, and others, and a desire to platform embodied forms of knowledge as wisdom (Andreotti, 2024).

Research Paradigm

Constructionist philosophical paradigms naturally lead researchers to use methods such as narrative enquiry, case studies, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, and participatory inquiry. The methods chosen enable researchers to spend significant amounts of time learning from their participants about their experiences, thoughts, perceptions, feelings, responses, and interpretations of a chosen topic. Constructionist research seeks to understand

how people make sense of their everyday experiences, communities, relationships, environments, and natural settings (Adom *et al.,* 2016: 6) and involve not just analysing how participants construct their own knowledge, but often also the co-creation of knowledge through that process of gathering and analysing data. In the act of sharing experiences, researcher and participant create new understandings of those experiences. Co-production of knowledge with 'silenced' communities has been proposed as a way for outsiders to understand the subjective social experiences of members of that group (Segal-Engelchin *et al.,* 2020: 1278) and bring forth the silenced knowledge of marginalised people.

Constructionist researchers believe there are multiple, equally valid realities; this leads them to hold an epistemological outlook whereby knowledge is understood to be co-created. What is real is created in the moment, and the knowledge held is created differently by those within the same environment. For these reasons, constructionist researchers employ a methodology whereby participants are partners in the creation of knowledge and the role of the researcher is to probe and explicate on behalf of the participants. There is usually a social justice imperative and transformative intention to constructionist research, whereby all participants benefit from knowing the outcomes (Lin *et al.,* 2016: 45), and this is the approach which has guided my planning for this research.

I am motivated by the political and socially transformative cause of educational research, seeking not only to impact change in learning and teaching culture but also to affect the beliefs and emotions upon which a desire to change the status quo must be founded. It was important for me not to take a reductionist approach for the sake of obtaining 'validity' but rather to foreground experiential evidence as sufficient 'lived experience evidence' (Williams, 2021), placing value on any one participant's attributed meaning, to stay close to 'real-world phenomena' (Sue, 2017: 171).

Qualitative inquiry has a history embedded in the study of race and politics, stemming from the positivist forms of colonial anthropology, through to the sociological ethnographies of minoritised communities in urban settings. Objectivism has traditionally been held as central to Western thought, and yet has failed' to 'make the problems and politics of racial and social justice, and White privilege, go away' (Denzin, 2017: 9). A more critical interpretive approach was called for, with a social justice commitment to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual (Denzin, 2017: 9). I therefore sought a critical qualitative methodology and methods which honoured the stories of People of Colour who experience the world differently

to me, and y*et al*lowed their stories to be analysed and given in evidence of race as an organising system which accounts for differential life outcomes. I chose Critical Participatory Inquiry as the epistemological stance which informed the design of my methodology (Call-Cummings, Dazzo and Hauber-Ozer, 2023: 28).

Critical Participatory Inquiry (CPI)

Participatory research spans a spectrum of methods, all intending to include the researched community in the researching of themselves, often examining questions of power as a research collective. Co-production is the aim of participatory inquiry, although no strict adherence to a set of methods is advocated: rather a commitment to collaboration and co-creation. As this is a doctoral study, I could not extend participation to the co-authoring stage, but did include group sessions to allow participants to question one another about their experiences and stories as part of the data collection process

Critical Participatory Inquiry (CPI) aims to democratise power through participation (Vaughn-Guy, 2024: 218), to achieve 'good enough' power relations between the researcher and the participants (Call-Cummings and Ross, 2022). CPI builds on the criticality which is sometimes lost in the expansion of participatory inquiry generally by drawing directly on critical theories (e.g. feminism, Marxism, Critical Race Theory) and seeking to democratise knowledge creation. However, CPI is not a methodology: it is an epistemological stance which uses reflexivity to inform the choice of methods.

Using a critical arts-informed methodology anchored in CPI, allowed participants to describe and interpret their own surroundings and define aspects within the business school environment which affect them emotionally, physically, socially, and mentally. I anticipated that this post-digital environment would include *spaces* beyond the tangible built, *places* cross-referencing analogue and digital worlds (Wardak *et al.,* 2022: 134), such as WhatsApp groups, Zoom meetings, social media accounts, and virtual study groups. My approach allowed for various interpretations and worldviews and invited participants to explore these through arts-based methods.

To avoid examining only a small snapshot of isolated views, I provided holism in my findings by considering a range of participants across a range of characteristics who shared the experience of being 'other' than White. This included students who were both home and 'overseas' domiciled, and students of varying ages from 18 upwards – including mature learners with several

years' life and work experience in the UK or further afield – across genders and religions. The factor that was common to all participants was that they were studying within the same business school and were sharing some of the same spaces as one another, whether virtual or physical, for at least one academic year.

This study applies a critical lens to the data, influenced by the tenets of Critical Race Theory, decolonial theory, critical and emancipatory pedagogies, and aspects of critical ethnography, which is rooted in 'exposing oppression and inequality in society' (Cohen *et al.,* 2017: 295) and seeks to empower and emancipate its participants through the process of participatory research. Critical research seeks to bring about positive change in the futures of its participants, moving the researcher beyond simply recognising and declaring positionality and reflexivity and into activism. By activism, in the context of my research, I mean actively advocating for change and promoting it within various fora so that new action is taken to bring about positive outcomes. This may necessarily require discomfort, unsettling of norms/protocols/behaviours, unpicking of beliefs and experiences, and disrupting customary practice to make way for new and innovative ways of being. Such a methodology with activist intentions means considerable discomfort for me as a scholar for, as part of the academic status quo, I am forced to consider whether I am blissfully ignorant of the harmful limiting structures of which I am a part (Call-Cummings, Dazzo and Hauber-Ozer, 2023). Critical arts-informed research aims to care for the self and the community in the process of enabling all to become 'attuned' and to flourish, not merely to represent and reproduce (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012).

Critical research unveils issues of power, marginalised voices, oppression, inequity, and structural barriers. Issues of power and empowerment are foregrounded within the immediate context of the research study when a critical methodology is employed. Critical Participatory Inquiry moves beyond describing a setting or situation, towards explaining it and understanding it through a critical lens and ultimately changing it in response to those findings.

Reflexivity is crucial to CPI, as the researcher constantly checks their own impact on the research process, from planning, to employing the methods and then interpreting the data. Data are created and discussed by and with participants, on occasion generating new data as they reflect on their own thoughts, interpretations, experiences, and descriptions. In using two methods (photo-voice and collage) I enabled participants to both reflect individually and as a group, permitting them to impact one another's interpretations and explanations of their experiences in response to questions from the group.

In taking a critical qualitative approach, I have reconsidered the methods which enable me to access stories in such a way that they are as little disturbed by my influence as possible. Structured interviews set up a didactic power relationship whereby I, as researcher, am the leader and I own the process. Of course, in any setting, participants may only present one side of their 'truth' and may distort their interpretation in response to a perceived agenda. This can never be fully mitigated against, but trust between participants and researcher is a vital foundation for CPI, as insider/outsider standpoints may fluctuate and affect the data offered. Placing my focus on the 'knower' rather than being led by the 'known' (Mignolo, 2009: 162), accepting that much of what we know and how we come to know it is unique to the knower (Call-Cummings, Dazzo and Hauber-Ozer, 2023: 4). I was mindful of 'getting' participants' perspectives rather than 'taking' their perspective (Epley, 2014), which allows me to listen and hear their stories rather than devising questions based on what I think their experiences may be.

A critical research approach uses methods which enable a representative overview to be obtained from multiple realities, and even realities which may change through deeper or group reflection (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz, 2013). Wider social contexts must be accounted for, even when a micro-context is being examined, for macro-level issues which provide criticality to data analysis (such as structural racism, sexism, or socio-economic distribution of resources) may be reflected in micro-level issues. Interviews can be seen as contrived 'quick-fix' activities which betray complexities in the wider context (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006). I wanted to dive deeper into students' lives on and off campus, considering multiple aspects to give a fuller picture, and engaging participants over a sustained period of time (one academic year) to enable multiple and deeper reflections beyond a one-off interview.

Decolonising Methodologies

In creating an arts-informed methodology founded in CPI, I was drawn to the criticality of decolonising methodologies. These approaches ask the researcher to question themselves throughout the process of research to reflect continuously on 'Who am I?'; 'What is this research for?'; 'Why me?'; 'What do I intend to use this research for?'; 'Whose knowledge will be privileged?'; and ultimately 'Whose life will be transformed?' (Smith, 2012). Decolonisation is the 'rallying cry' (Mbembe, 2016: 32) of scholars and activists trying to redress the racist legacy of European colonialism. Decolonising methodologies present a challenge to Eurocentric research approaches that further marginalise the experiences and knowledges of minoritised populations. Instead, decolonising methodologies do not focus on specified methods but, rather, aim to

generate findings which translate directly into actions for social justice (Keikelame and Swartz, 2019).

I have been prudent about the possible implications of my research, asking myself who my research outcomes will serve (Lipscombe *et al.,* 2021). As a White researcher taking a decolonising approach, I have turned my 'focus inward' (Keikelame and Swartz, 2019: 6) throughout each stage of the study to ensure I am aware of my positionality and that respect, care, honesty, and trust are at the heart of my choices. Decolonising methodologies require reflexivity to be present throughout and demand a willingness to perhaps tread untrodden paths and take risks such as not structuring discussions/interviews in advance, or allowing participants to choose the route they take in a CRiT walking (Hughes *et al.,* 2010) study.

The walking interview affords the collection of data which is sensory and surfaced through motion (Lynch and Mannion, 2016: 344), revealing lived experiences created through the combination of people and place. Walking interviews have been suggested as a particularly apt method for researchers seeking to assess 'campus climate for students of color' (Harris, 2016: 365), and combining this method with photo-voice permits a chain of potentially emancipatory methods to be created which allow students to make the key decisions throughout the process of data collection.

In employing a decolonising methodological approach within a UK context, I sought to acknowledge the lasting legacy of imperialism within present-day institutional norms and structures. Through its economic, sociopolitical, and cultural transformation of Europe, imperialism developed the consciousness of Europeans and formed the foundation for their sense of Europeanness (Smith, 2012: 62), which prevails even in this post-Brexit era. Beyond the events of history, imperialism and colonialism extend their reach into 'our heads' (Smith, 2012: 63). By taking a decolonising approach to my research, I needed to be cognisant of this reach and its potential internalisation within the minds of both myself and my participants, regardless of our ethnic or other identities.

Imperialism and colonialism are markers of a period in world history which sought to categorise people in terms of their economic value to Europe, and which established a process of 'othering' non-Europeans. This categorisation of 'other than White' can be seen to this day in data collection, albeit in attempts to remedy injustice, where ethnically minoritised communities in the UK are homogenised and contrasted against White communities to evaluate various life

outcomes (Black *et al.,* 2023). Equally, whilst terminology will change as soon as it is stigmatised, the replacement of terms such as 'Third World' with 'developing world' or 'Global South' does not alter the sense of othering which results for people whose histories and identities are attached to these geographical locations. The norm of White European is replicated across academia through curricula, academic publishing, and theorising about the world. Taking a decolonial approach to research requires not only reflection on intentions and methods, but reflexive self-analysis and an awareness of self. It intends to unveil a White European outlook to challenge its impact on the research process and participants and recognise its impact on any analysis and findings. To 'get out of my own way' as a White researcher exploring the lived experiences of racially minoritised people is to have my Whiteness ever-present in my thoughts and discussions, and to accept what participants tell me as their truth, despite never having experienced the world in the same way as they describe it.

Parker and Lynn (2016) note that qualitative research on Black people's lives in the US is fraught with imbalances of power between White researchers and Black participants, resulting in the exploitation of People of Colour where White researchers do not recognise or acknowledge the power struggles between the two. Interestingly, there is a common presumption that the researcher will always be White and the researched participant Black. With reference to the removal of or lack of emphasis on personal narratives, Fine (1994: 25) reminds us that attempting to offer an objective version of universal truths about lived experiences denies the 'privileges, interests and politics of researchers'. I was led, therefore, to follow a participatory methodology which enabled participants to define how they saw the problem which my research sought to understand, endeavouring to find out how university is working and what it should be working for (Biesta, 2015:13). This opened the possible parameters of any resulting data-gathering discussion, in line with Freire's theory of dialogic action (Freire, 2005: 151). Such an approach renders 'power with' rather than 'power over' vulnerable groups and provides for equal power-sharing in the process between the researcher and the participants (Keikelame and Swartz, 2019: 3).

Decolonising methodologies intersect with critical race methodology by foregrounding race and racism at all stages of the research process, compelling me as the researcher to highlight power imbalances throughout, wherever they manifest in the process of research. Both decolonising and critical race methodological approaches seek to challenge the dominant discourse, paradigms, and theories used to explain the experiences of People of Colour or racially minoritised groups. Their intentions are to emancipate and liberate marginalised research

participants and their cultural communities, and expose ignorance, exploitation, oppression, and power imbalances based on ethnicity or culture.

Critical Race Methodology

Whiteness is entrenched in research methods and methodologies (Boyd, 2021). Wishing to decentre Whiteness in my research approach, I looked for ways to quieten the impact of the researcher on the methods. Aiming to centre voices from the margins of what is assumed to be normative, I looked for methods which enabled participants to take the conversation and the data they offered me in a direction of their choosing and allowed for avenues to be explored which had not been predetermined. Whilst I held in mind the bounds of this inquiry, I expected that data might be found in surprising places and not necessarily only within the lines of my initial research questions. Critical race methodology in education centres race and racism in all aspects of the research process and is informed by five elements, according to Solórzano and Yosso (2002: 25):

- The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination (including gender/age/sexual orientation)
- The challenge of dominant ideology
- The commitment to social justice
- The centrality of experiential knowledge
- The transdisciplinary perspective.

My methodological approach adheres to all five of these guiding principles. Through acknowledging the intersecting identities of my participants, I particularise my analysis of their data to include intersectional characteristics such as gender, language, age, and home/overseas domicile status. My starting point for conducting this research is an acknowledgement that, across the higher education sector, the status quo is not working fairly for all students and that Black, UK-domiciled students experience particularly poor outcomes in comparison to their White counterparts. My methodology and methods foreground the experiences of under-represented voices from marginalised students, accepting (and believing) their interpretations of experience as their 'truth'.

Participatory Arts-Based Methodologies

Chapman and DeCuir-Gunby (2018: 189) call Critical Race researchers to extend their repertoire to include visual methods. Visual parts of the brain are older, and so visual methods invoke

deeper levels of consciousness (Kahu and Picton, 2022). As I considered my methods over time, I was drawn to arts-based methodologies and methods, having experienced the impact of these as a participant myself. This enabled me to see their power in research, and how well they fit within a participatory and emancipatory methodological framework. Having been exposed to the methodology myself gave me empathy with my participants, especially those who may feel less confident engaging with 'art' or vulnerable and exposed in discussing their artistic creations as a group, or with an outsider such as a researcher.

Truly participatory methodologies seek participants' input at all stages of the research process as they aim to empower participants from disempowered social groups (Kara, 2020: 46). Whilst my participants were not involved in the planning of the research design, I offered them freedom regarding the focus of discussion, the events they recounted, and the objects/scenes they photographed as prompts. I wanted to find a way for the participants to feel they were not just 'the researched' but were also the 'researching', to limit the extent to which they saw themselves only through the researcher's eyes (Dazzo, 2024: 417).

Arts-informed methods align with a participatory methodological framework. Art gives participants a vehicle to communicate when they are 'lost for words' or when emotions are difficult to verbalise (Eaves, 2014: 151). Whilst the terms are used interchangeably, for some there is a difference between arts-based methods, which involve the full process of art generation, and arts-informed methods, which are influenced by, but not grounded in, the arts (Eaves, 2014). Arts-informed methods can enable participants to 'excavate' their own experience (Segal-Engelchin *et al.,* 2020), for art can be disrupting and disconcerting (Eaves, 2014: 148). Through the creation of visual symbols and metaphors, social realities can be indirectly expressed whilst exploring issues that are difficult to verbalise such as power and taboo. Karlsson (in Arthur et. al, 2012:12) explains this as 'knowing through images'. Embodied methods reach deeper truths than traditional research methods (Leigh and Brown, 2021) and photos depict a 'truth' which written and verbal forms cannot convey so richly (Allen, 2020: 249).

Research Design

Whilst I am guided by Critical Race Theory, as noted above, I do not seek to explicitly test that theory. Theories have informed my framing of the world and what I believe constitutes knowledge and how we can access that knowledge. But I remain open to new ways of understanding the world, rather than seeking to test an existing theory's validity (deductive).

Rather, I have used theory to explain my interpretation of the data (inductive) and have not used data to prove the theory.

This research is informed by the quantifiable data which already abounds in academic papers and government reports investigating and monitoring the 'BAME awarding gap', or the 'ethnicity degree awarding gap', as it has come to be known more recently. Within the HE sector we know there is a differential average degree outcome correlating with students' ethnicity, and we have enough data over a sufficiently long time period to accept this finding (2016–present). I have not set out to prove this differential outcome exists. I have endeavoured to understand why it exists, in one particular environment, at this particular time, with a particular set of people.

I did not use surveys, randomised controlled trials, or any tools associated with manipulation of factors, measurement, impartial observation, or extrapolation. I instead considered a range of qualitative methods, more suited to a constructionist philosophical stance, such as focus group interviews, paired interviews, walking pair observations, video diaries, and other forms of narrative enquiry. Uma, one of the participants, confirmed that my decision not to use surveys was well informed, for she felt that feedback in student surveys hadn't led to any noticeable change in her lived experience, which had caused her to become despondent about offering her experiences and opinions:

> *… we are not filling in surveys because we're tired of being ignored. [Uma] [I]*

Paulo Freire's 'cultural circle' approach to rural education, whereby he suggests not presuming that anyone has absolute knowledge of anything, has greatly informed my own view of appropriate research design. I have a certain understanding of situations and behaviours, but another person will have a different understanding, and neither one is more valid than the other. My methodology implies that 'everyone knows some things and does not know others' (Freire, 1971: 61) and, through my participatory approach to research, my endeavour is to 'all seek together to know more' (ibid.) Freire's dialogic approach to research via cultural circles aims to learn 'with the people, about the people's world' (Freire, 2005: 153) to ultimately achieve their liberation through cultural synthesis. In my research approach I sought to learn, with the students who participated, about their world as they saw it and to enable them to critically reflect on what this means to their own development and the future development of the University community (for racially minoritised students in the future).

In pursuing 'catalytic validity' (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007: 203), whereby transformation is the resulting outcome, I needed to follow a methodology which enabled and promoted change in participants' lives and the structures within which they experience their lives. However, I was concerned about the extent to which this would be possible if I did not identify with the same issues/struggles/challenges/problems as my research participants. Through continuous reflexivity and acceptance of the pros and cons of being an outsider rather than an insider to their experiences, I am comfortable that I am no worse placed to do justice to their stories than anyone else who is an outsider. I accept, however, that they may have told those stories differently, perhaps with more unspoken understanding, to a researcher of colour, with whom they may have shared a common first-hand experience of racial injustice.

During the data collection I asked participants to reflect on the methods used and how they felt about using them. Students said they felt heard and appreciated the opportunity to tell their stories; some clearly benefited emotionally from cross-validation of their experiences in the group activity. One participant, Nathan, explained that the method of non-stick collage had provided a cathartic experience: 'It felt good, a release what I had inside of me' [Nathan] [G].

Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority, Protocol Number: SHE/PGR/UH/05726. However, the ongoing ethical considerations in my study concern the impact of discussing sensitive issues with students. Concepts such as belonging and transformation are open to a vast array of interpretations, some linked to positive emotions and others to negative ones. My ethics application was approved based on consideration of physical hazards alone, such as the risk of infection with Covid-19 and transmission of this between participants in the group collaging activity. However, my own ethical considerations are broader than the physical forms of harm. I have been mindful of the potential for racial trauma to be linked with the emotions a student feels when discussing their sense of belonging or not belonging. I was also mindful that for some participants a sense of belonging has eluded them during their university experience so far, particularly for the Covid-19 generation, who experienced severe isolation during lockdowns. I knew I would be able to refer students to independent support within the University's well-being and student support teams should this happen and took care not to probe participants if signs of emotional harm became evident. However, I needed to balance this by avoiding risk-aversion, which might limit the data gathered. In allowing the participants control over the direction of the conversation, I had to be prepared for this direction to be neither fully controllable by me, nor

comfortable for me to hear. I invited a Pastoral Tutor (who identifies as Black) to sit outside the in-person collaging activity in case participants became upset or wanted to talk confidentially. The fact that this tutor is Black was coincidental good fortune, but also essential to providing an insider listening ear for the participants. Had they not been Black I would have sought a different tutor of non-white heritage. With the virtual session, I checked all participants had someone at home with them, in case of distress.

In keeping with participatory design, at the end of the collaging group activity, I asked participants if they had a particular pseudonym they would like me to use in the reporting of their data, and three participants offered their preferred names. For the other participants I selected names appropriate to their ethnic identities based on students I had taught in the preceding three decades.

Participants

I began my call for participants in October 2022 through speaking about my study at student induction sessions and asking any volunteers to spread the word about my study and refer their friends to volunteer too (snowball sampling). I created some slides (Appendix M) outlining the purpose of my study, which I presented in a large lecture theatre to second- and third-year students during induction, and visited some classes in early October to recruit students there. Recruitment strategy was an important element of my research design, as the study dealt with sensitive topics and required participants from particular ethnic backgrounds. It was essential, as a White woman researching racialised experiences of othering, to build trust beyond just requesting participation. I needed to be visible and audible to students; an email or poster would not suffice. I recorded a short video of myself explaining the study, which was uploaded to the virtual learning platform and played at the end of some lectures. Sensitive research can deepen the personal connection between researcher and participant (Culshaw, 2019: 4), so I needed students to see who I was and hear why I was researching this topic. Unlike in Culshaw (2021), my video was not to demonstrate that I had the same background as my participants, but that I had some comprehension of the challenges they may face linked to their identity.

Through snowball sampling I hoped to beat the post-Covid-19 trend of low participation and poor campus attendance, building trust via referrals from participants. However, this did not prove fruitful. Students explained that race was not a topic they discussed with their friends and peers, and they didn't feel keen to let others know they had volunteered for the study. It is natural that drawing attention to difficulties and differences may induce negative self-perceptions. Therefore,

some marginalised people may wish instead to focus on similarities and overlook barriers and challenges, so as to assimilate with the majority and not stand out. Alemán and Gaytán (2017) attribute this to the internalisation of majoritarian ideologies, a reluctance to examine personal experiences resulting from marginalised identities, and/or denial of experiences relating to racialised oppression. Rather than choosing between exclusion or assimilation, a further position taken by some racially marginalised people is that of invisibility to avoid the White gaze as much as possible and preserve their cultural integrity (Brayboy, 2004), which may have further impacted my recruitment.

To constantly relive traumatic experiences or re-examine the intentions and power relations behind certain behaviours one has personally faced – 'racial battle fatigue' – is exhausting and damaging to the person (Smith *et al.,* 2011). For many amongst ethnic minority populations, the effect of microaggressions (brief, commonplace indignities conveying negativity or hostility) on their health is enough of a burden in itself (Pfizer, 2021); it has been described as 'Death by a thousand cuts' (Nadal *et al.,* 2011). It is therefore reasonable that, for some, to mentally dissect emotions through deeply reflecting on lived experiences in a racialised society is a step too far, and assimilation to the dominant culture is preferable and protective of the self.

Authenticity is important if participants are being asked to talk about sensitive issues and give their time freely. Speaking to students in person at induction, and building trust via referrals from tutors of colour, subliminally vouching for my racial literacy, enabled me to counter the lack of snowball response. If I had not built trust with staff of colour over the preceding two years through allyship and collaborating on ethnicity awarding gap projects I would have struggled to get more than four participants. I simply could not have conducted this study without building trusting relationships with staff first.

I had to think critically when deciding who I invited to participate, and how to approach them without perpetuating a stereotype I hoped to challenge. I had to decide whether to focus on a much smaller number of potential participants to isolate my findings to one ethnic group, or stick with the homogenising category BAME. I decided to include all racially minoritised groups included within the category 'Black, Asian, and minority ethnic' appealing to the 62% majority of undergraduates in LBS. My rationale for doing so was partly realism about the numbers of participants who would volunteer. At that time Black, undergraduate male students in the Business School experienced the lowest student satisfaction overall (Londonshire, 2022), the highest attrition in their first year, and the poorest degree outcomes of all ethnic minority home-fee students, yet there were only 28 Black, male (home) students starting the term and if almost

a quarter would have withdrawn (as statistics predicted) by the end of the year, I would have little chance of securing a viable number of participants from the remaining 18 if I focused on this group alone. I therefore threw my net wider and engaged all participants who were minoritised based on ethnicity, to look for patterns across their experiences of being 'othered'.

Having planned to use Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022), I did not seek to justify data saturation, '*whatever* that is' (Braun and Clarke, 2021a: 212), but rather to reach 'information power' (2021a: 212). Saturation implies a positivist research design, which is not in keeping with my approach as it seeks to quantify when 'enough' data has been collected, based on a point where more data would not lead to further discovery of information (Lowe *et al.,* 2018). However, my study is not claiming to prove consistency across a majority, for if just one person experiences adverse outcomes linked to racialised experiences this is a sufficient measure of a system's effectiveness (Denzin, 2017: 12) and of a subsequent drive for change.

Eleven undergraduate students participated in this study, giving consent by signing the participant information form in Appendix A confirming their ethnic identity (see Tables 1 and 2 below). They permitted their collages to be photographed and shared anonymously as an output of the research, along with extracts from their transcribed interviews.

	Male	Female
Black British African	3	1
Black British Caribbean	1	0
Mixed Black&White British	0	1
Mixed Black&White Portuguese	0	1
South Asian - Indian	1	1
Chinese	0	1
Other Asian - British Filipino	0	1
Total		11

Table 1 NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY

	Mature/Young	**Home/International fee**	**Ethnicity**
Aisha	Young	Home/EU fee	Mixed Black & White
Beatriz	Young	Home/EU fee	Mixed Black & White
Bernila	Young	Home/EU fee	Other Asian
Gamu	Mature	Home/EU fee	Black British African
Hamid	Young	International fee	Asian - Indian
Jing	Young	International fee	Chinese
Nathan	Young	Home/EU fee	Black British Caribbean
Obi	Young	Home/EU fee	Black British African
Prince	Young	Home/EU fee	Black British African
Sean	Young	Home/EU fee	Black British African
Uma	Young	International fee	Asian - Indian

Table 2 ETHNICITY DECLARATIONS, AGE CLASSIFICATION UPON ENTRY AND FEE STATUS OF PARTICIPANTS

The wholeness of each human experience can become lost in the process of cutting up stories for thematic analysis, so it is helpful to have a summary of the key stories told by each participant as a reference tool when reading the findings sections. Table 3 below shows the main themes raised in note form (constructed after each interview) and can be used as a crib sheet when reading the rest of this dissertation.

Further diagrammatic visualisations of the participants' main stories told in their 1:1 discussions with me can be seen in Appendix O. These diagrams formed part of the 'sitting with the data' stage of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) but are useful to reference as visual interpretations and reminders of the holistic narrative of each participant.

Participant	Main stories
Aisha	• First in family to attend university • Identifies as Black mixed heritage female • Home student, grew up in London • Only had friends of colour before university • Studied abroad in France for one semester in final year • Experienced racism on holiday in Tenerife; in the French university; in the Londonshire halls of residence; in a local pub; in a religious student society
Nathan	• Home student grew up in London • Identifies as British Black Caribbean • Came to Londonshire upon recommendation of good social life by former college friends • Came to Londonshire with friends from FE college • Undertook a placement year working within the University in 3rd year
Beatriz	• Grew up in Portugal, came to Londonshire as an EU student • Identifies as Black African/white mixed heritage female • Lived in halls in first year then locally, staying in Londonshire during vacations for work
Bernila	• Home student; grew up in rural UK • Identifies as British Filipino • Came to Londonshire as boyfriend lived nearby • Experienced failure and repeating modules in her early years • Studied abroad in Spain for a year • Lived in halls in her first and final years • Held voluntary role of student rep
Gamu	• Home student living 12 miles from the university in the same county • Identifies as Black African female • Mature student with a young family • Sought a degree to progress her professional career • Held several paid and voluntary roles in the university • Worked part-time professionally alongside the degree and roles • Close friendship with another mature student on her course • Reported peer conflict in class with younger students
Hamid	• Overseas student from India • Identifies as Asian Indian male • Lives off campus 20 miles away • Travels in by bus • Has some friends on other campus whom he plays football with

Jìng	• Overseas student from China • Identifies as Chinese female • Direct entrant to final year of study • Doesn't mix with the Chinese student community • Lives in halls • Feels very isolated and lonely • Feels she has insufficient English ability to either understand fully or be understood
Obi	• Home student commutes from family home in same county • Identifies as British Black African male • Studied at FE college locally • Plays basketball and football at university
Prince	• Home student, commutes by bus from London • Identifies as British Black African male • Repeated a year due to failure • Has a disability
Sean	• Home student from London • Identifies as Black British African male • Lived in halls in first year then commuted from family home in London • Good social life in first semester of 1st year, but prefers to study off campus • Works part-time and attends the gym
Uma	• Overseas student from India • Identifies as Asian Indian female • Lives on campus • Held role of Student Rep for her programme in second and final year • Held casual role within an administrative department of the University part-time in final year • Experienced overt and covert racism on campus, on the buses and in the local town

Table 3 PARTICIPANTS' VIGNETTES

Methods

Having already observed that participants' multilayered narratives and reflections on experience can be revealed using arts-informed methods (Finney and Cresswell, 2022), I selected photo-voice (Wang and Burris, 1997) and non-stick collage (Roberts and Woods, 2018: 628) as the tools of my critical arts-based inquiry. Both methods challenge objectivity and singular reality (Gerstenblatt, 2013: 295), making space for multiple truths through an embodied, multisensorial process (Scotti and Chilton, 2019: 360). The artistic skills required are minimal, and certainly require no prior training, experience, or achievement in the discipline of art. This reduces the potential anxiety caused by asking non-arts students to participate in research using arts-informed methods. I also reassured participants of this using my personal narrative as a failed GCSE Art student to demonstrate that I was not in any position to judge their creativity.

Inspired by the CRiT walking method used by Samatar *et al.* (2021: 4) to understand how female students of colour make use of and repurpose university spaces through 'walking-the-talk', I originally hoped to engage students in videoing themselves walking on campus, talking about their experiences and feelings in different places and spaces. However, rather than participants voicing their thoughts whilst filming in public, I moved instead to the less conspicuous method of photo-walking, whereby the participants used their own smartphones (with the option to borrow one from the University if they preferred) to take photos of anything which caused them to reflect on their sense of belonging (or not) or transforming (or not) at university.

The students then brought these photos to a 1:1 'enhanced' (Kara, 2015: 83) discussion with me, with no preset interview questions. The photos provided the structure for the discussion, and the participants could choose whether they shared the photos with me or kept them private. The discussions were audio-recorded only; five students showed me their photos on their phones at the time, whilst only three sent them to me for permanent use later. The other six students looked at their photos as they spoke but did not share them with me in the discussion or later. For several of the participants, the use of photos from their personal phone library informed the structure of the discussion and moved the method towards 'snap-along' ethnography (Malafaia *et al.,* 2024) as some of the images had already been shared on social media at the time of taking, and had had emojis, captions, and filters added.

Writing in 2003, before the advent of smartphones, Kusenbach (2003: 472) noted that 'go-along' embodied methods of data generation navigate familiar environments and personal landmarks, much like flicking through a photo album. The photo-voice walks my participants undertook

literally created those albums, as participants moved through the institution identifying norms and questioning their context through discussion with me. Photovoice as a method sits within the group of methods known as photo elicitation. With photovoice, participants generate/create/bring their own photos to the discussion, whereas photo elicitation traditionally uses photos supplied by the researcher to prompt discussion.

Once the individual discussion of photos was completed, each participant was invited to a group non-stick collaging activity. Ten of the 11 participants joined one of two collaging sessions, either in person or virtually. They each created an individual collage to represent their experiences of belonging and transformation at university, and subsequently explained these visual representations to the group, discussing these experiences together. The group aspect was important to me in the design of the study, as I wanted to provide an opportunity for cross-validation of meaning-making between the participants: firstly, to build community and enhance their sense of being heard, and secondly so they could receive insight on one another's collages from an insider perspective, which I couldn't provide as a White researcher.

Having previously favoured focus groups for research which endeavoured to understand racialised lived experience (de Sousa *et al.,* 2021), I felt a two-stage method with individual photo-voice discussion gave greater opportunity to centre and value whole personal stories whilst avoiding groupthink or similar dynamics which might inhibit or limit some participants' contributions in groups. However, the value of group validation was key in the second method used, whereby individual collages were explained to the participant group and commented upon by members. Participants had reflected deeply with me individually before creating a visual representation for others to view and cross-validate.

Quoting Sfard (1998: 5), who claims that we 'live by the metaphors we use', Kahu and Picton (2022: 37) propose that if metaphors do not just reflect reality but shape it, both enabling and constraining behaviours, there is value in understanding the metaphors participants use to depict their experiences. In using collage with students to visually represent their metaphors for experiences and feelings, this arts-informed method aligns with decolonising participatory methodologies, and allows for reflection on the 'visual reconstruction of an experience' (Culshaw, 2019: 271). Kahu and Picton (2022: 45) even suggest that alternative metaphors for their situation can then be suggested to participants, but in keeping with the principles of decolonising methodologies and in order not to impose White interpretations upon participants' data, I chose not to do this. I had previously been misinterpreted as a participant in an arts-informed activity when describing my own collage and found this to be a negative experience. I

felt that the researcher had not really 'heard me' and had imposed their own understanding of the world upon my collage, which was quite unsettling. I therefore wanted to ensure my participants did not feel constrained by my interpretation of their collage metaphor.

I decided not to analyse the visual creations themselves, as I did not have any artistic or psychological training to interpret the meaning of, for example, the foregrounding or backgrounding of characters in the collage, or the participant's deliberation over such decisions. Taking an emancipatory approach whereby participants had the power to 'place' and move items on the page as their thinking grew (Roberts and Woods, 2018: 630) I used collage as the method, not the data. I then encouraged participants to analyse their own metaphorical creations, treating them as experts on their own experience.

In the photo-voice interviews and the group discussion of the collages, through the process of decoding their visual representations aloud, participants could 'make explicit their "real consciousness" of the world' (Freire, 1970: 88). In doing so, they showed how they themselves acted as they experienced situations and scenarios and thereby gained 'a perception of their previous perception', which hopefully allowed them to understand their reality differently (Freire, 2005: 88). Certainly, one participant remarked at the end of the collaging group activity that she had only now realised how much more she could have belonged, through learning of other people's experiences as students:

> *… looking at what I didn't do, and also but I know why I didn't do it, and that doesn't mean that I don't belong, it just means that I could have belonged more, you know? [Beatriz] [G]*

The use of multimodal methods allowed participants to delve deeper into their own experiences, with two points of individual reflection and a further group validation and questioning opportunity to push their own analysis, as '*only* multimodal research can do justice to truth's complexities' (de Rijke, 2024: 301).

The audit trail (Thompson, 2014) diagram in Figure 3 below shows the timeline of research activity. It starts with the initial recruitment of participants in 2022. This was followed by the two sequential methods of photo-walking and 1:1 discussion in 2023, the group collaging activities (one conducted online, the other in person), and then the data-analysis stages of transcription, visualisation, and RTA using NVivo in 2024.

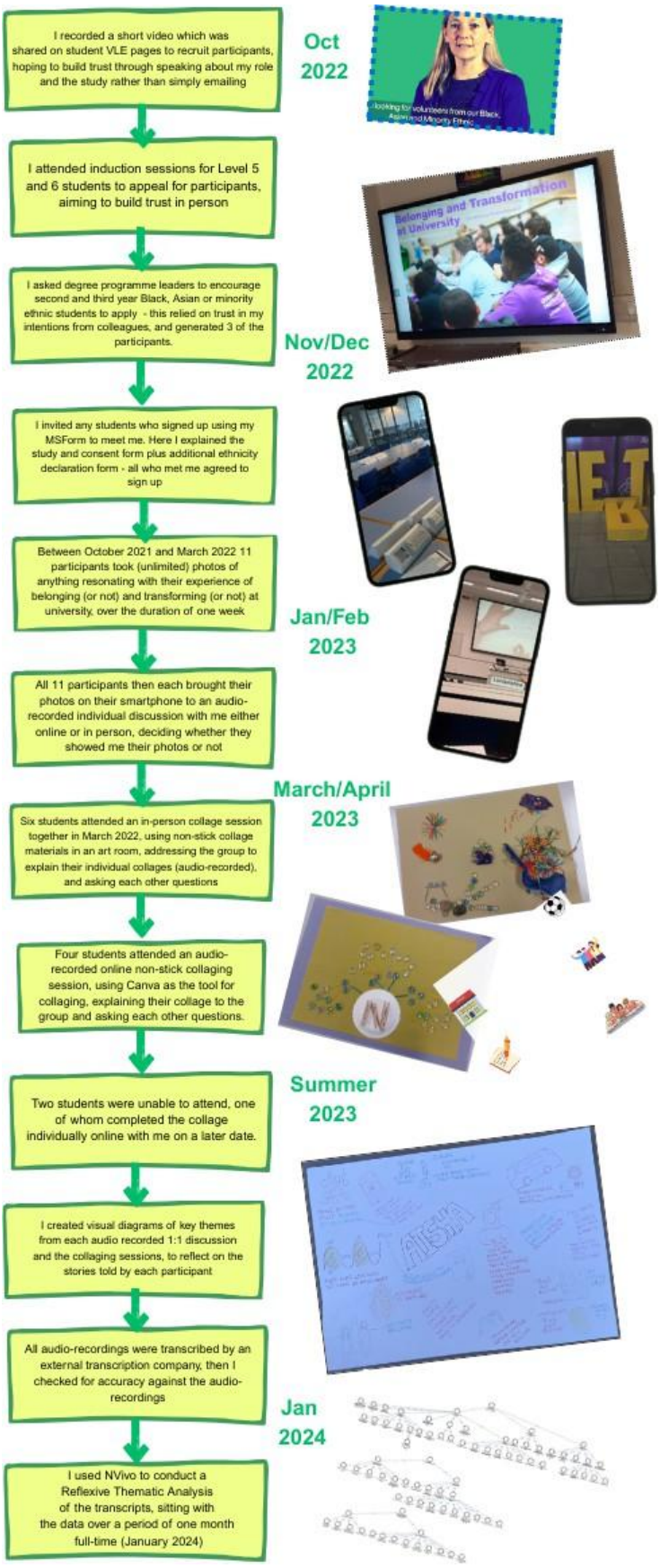


Figure 1 AUDIT TRAIL OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OCT 2022-JAN 2024

Data Analysis

I followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to generate the findings of this study, informed by a hermeneutics of 'suspicion and empathy' (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 160). I chose this method of data analysis because it offered a deeper engagement with the data over a longer period of reflection, with several cycles of 'sitting with the data'. Their recognition of the subjectivity in generating themes, rather than themes emerging without researcher creation, fitted well with the constructionist paradigm of my research design and the reflexivity which has characterised my whole approach to the study. Taking the view that language is social and meaning is flexible and active, I sought to identify participants' realities in the mind-dependent truths they conveyed through their use of language. For this reason, I looked for meaning in their spoken words, prompted by their visual creations, and not in the creations themselves. It was important to ensure a spread of comments across the genders and ethnicities represented by my participants, so I collated the number of coded references from each to ensure all voices were recognised in my findings (Figure 4). The largest number of coded comments came from Black male and East Asian female participants.

RTA is more about '*sensibility* than strictly following procedure or technique' (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 268), so the following stages of analysis unfolded iteratively over a period of one year:

1. Relistening to audio recordings of the interviews.
2. Sketching diagrams of the main themes I identified from each participant's interview (Figure 2) to mentally process the meaning through a Creative Analytic Process (Yuen, 2016).
3. Rereading the transcripts of each interview plus the two group collaging activities, then journaling my personal reflexive responses.
4. Spending a month identifying patterns in the data which I grouped as codes, subthemes, and themes using NVivo14, then organising these under three overarching themes. (See Appendix H for code book and Figure 5 for example thematic map as per Braun and Clarke (2023: 5))
5. Refining, defining, and naming themes (Appendix J), cycling backwards and forwards through the data, and reflecting on concepts in the literature, taking items of meaning from the transcripts as labels.

	Gender	Ethnicity	Number of coding references
2	Female	Black	39
3	Male	Black	121
4	Female	Asian	45
5	Male	Asian	28
6	Female	Mixed Heritage Black and white	89
7	Male	Mixed Heritage Black and white	0
8	Female	East Asian	100
9	Male	East Asian	0

(0 = no participant at that identity intersection)

Table 4 BALANCE OF CODED ITEMS ACROSS GENDER AND BROAD ETHNICITY GROUPINGS (TO DEMONSTRATE WHICH INTERSECTIONS ARE NOT COVERED IN THE DATASET)

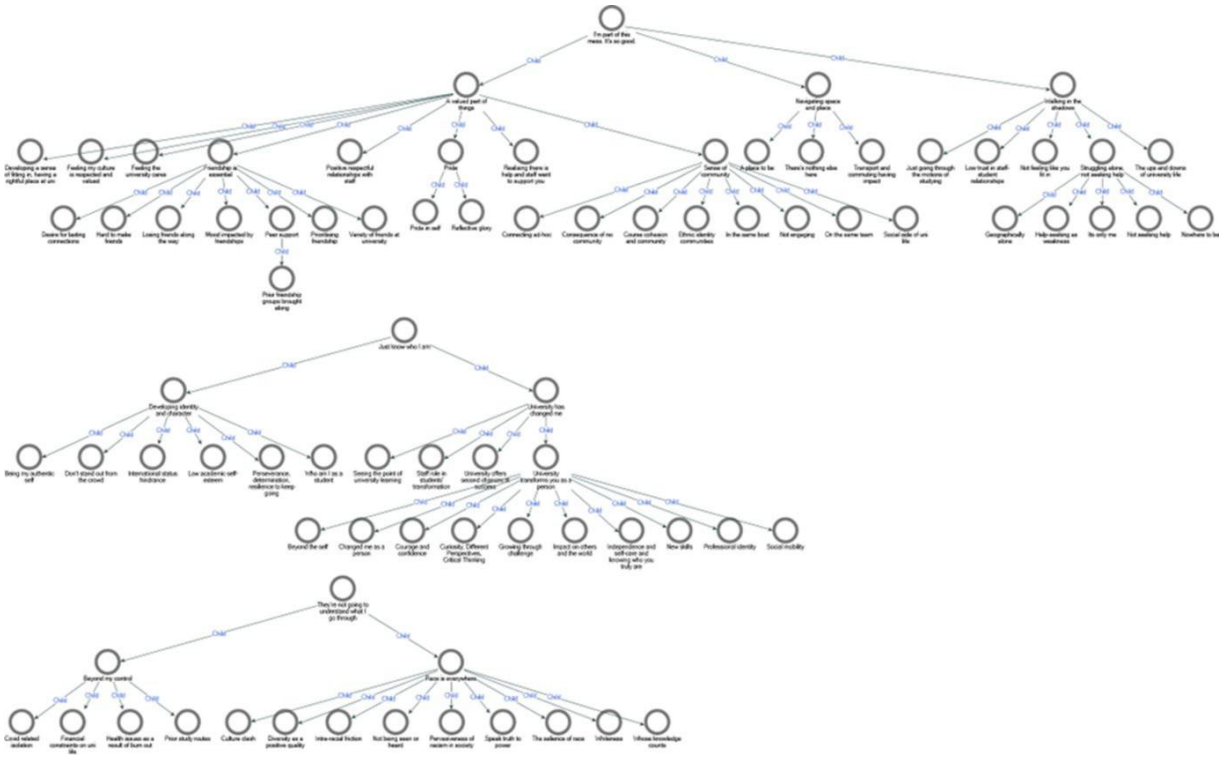


Figure 2 THEMATIC MAP (NVIVO), SHOWING THEMES, SUBTHEMES, CODES, AND SUB-CODES (SEE APPENDIX K FOR MORE DETAILED VIEWS)

Figure 2 (above) is the visual representation of the coding which generated the themes. These themes were then collated under three overarching themes, which were labelled using verbatim quotes from participants' transcripts which represented the sentiment of the higher theme. These were:

- ‘I’m part of this mess. It’s so good’
- ‘Just know who I am’
- ‘They’re not going to understand what I go through’

I chose not to use member checking in my analysis, as the nature of the critical analysis meant participants’ data might be unrecognisable to them, or may even upset them (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 278), and I was seeking to minimise harm and recognise multiple versions of truth. No RTA is ever fully complete, as it is situated and subjective, and those factors are constantly changing. I endeavoured to use the ‘slow wheel of interpretation’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 268); the largest proportion of my project time was spent on data analysis. However, there comes a point when a researcher just stops, having reached a ‘rich, nuanced analysis’ built around a singular central argument which tells an overall story (Braun and Clarke, 2022: 97), which I endeavour to convey in Section 2 below.

Chapter Summary

This study achieved methodological integrity through reflexive engagement with methods and forms of data analysis that were suited to decolonising, participatory, arts-informed approaches and critical theories of research. I considered a variety of methods, rejecting some on practical and others on ethical grounds, eventually choosing a multimodal combination of visual methods which enabled counter-storytelling and gave ultimate power over the narrative to the participants. This allowed them to reflect on the emotions and feelings that arose from their experiences and to represent these metaphorically through photos and collage. In the next chapter, I outline the findings generated by my analysis of the stories as relayed through these visual methods and discuss how they reflect theoretical concepts from CRT and decolonial scholarship.

Section 2: Analysis of Findings

This section outlines my data analysis, interpreting the transcripts through a lens informed by my conceptual framework. Four chapters follow, discussing the concepts generated from my analysis of the data: these are Relational Belonging, Structural Belonging, Contributory Belonging, and Transformation at University. The chapters centre the pervading impact of race and of Covid-19 upon the participants' experiences of each of these concepts.

Key:

Quotations from the data gathering activities are identified with the following annotations at the end of each, and the name of the participant

[I] = data gathered from individual photovoice discussion

[G] = data gathered from group collaging session

Chapter 4: Relational Belonging

Introduction

Relational Belonging is the term I have given to students' sense of belonging amongst the people of a university community; it refers to a sense of 'fit' and 'groupness'. Relationships are vital for social cohesion at university, without which students' academic performance and well-being are adversely affected (Priestley *et al.,* 2022). They make life more sociable, more meaningful; they connect the dots between domestic life and study life, and they lead to a sense of being seen, heard and valued. Relationships at university can encompass connections between staff and students, students and other students, students and people in the local town, people in workplaces linked to their degree, and even people in another country, for those who study abroad. The Covid-19 pandemic threw a spotlight on the importance of relationships when social isolation was legally enforced, and building positive relationships for learning (Su and Wood, 2023) became very challenging.

Relationships with staff, both academic and professional, are an important factor in students' sense of belonging, and in whether they perceive the university as 'caring' about them. For the participants in this study, relationships at university dominated the discussion and were a central aspect of the collages they created. It transpired that Relational Belonging comes in various forms, ranging from invisible traces of other students, through acquaintances who merely say 'hi' and 'bye', to firm and lasting friendships. In this chapter, I outline the meaning students created through relationships at university and how this impacted their sense of belonging. I also highlight the ways in which race and Covid-19 were implicated in the development of this sense of Relational Belonging.

Invisible Community

An invisible community exists between visible people and is revealed through unplanned social interactions which happen organically. Some participants had a sense of belonging to a community which wasn't based on close connection or enough knowledge of one another to term as friendship per se, but rather a shared experience of being a student in the same place and time. Christensen (2009: 27) developed a model of belonging which at the macro level involves a sense of belonging to an imagined community which she describes as an important link in the exclusionary construction of 'us/them' (Anderson, 2013), the included and the excluded. Uma reflected on her invisible community via her collage, using the campus roundabout as a key metaphor for belonging:

> *… the roundabout is like a point where all of us collectively come together at some point, and I feel like it leaves behind traces, so if you and I were to cross the roundabout, maybe at different times in the day, I go back at 2, you go back at 6, but when I'm leaving the roundabout at 2 I feel like I would leave behind some part of me there, when you come at 6 you're going to pick it up or vice-versa. [Uma] [G]*

Uma elaborated that the connections between people are not always visible, nor even those between named individuals who know each other. Despite this, she felt there was a community built on invisible connection to the institution, existing in the same space and having the right to enter and remain on the campus at different times of day and night without even seeing each other:

> *Overlapping lives, those traces, those tiny… those lines that you can't see, but they exist. [Uma] [G]*

Uma spoke also of studying in the library after classes and finding an internal sense of community and belonging in the knowledge that other students, whom she does not know personally, are struggling to learn and complete assessments too:

> *I'm also struggling with that … so are the students so they understand me. [Uma] [I]*

She has an internal recognition of community as comprised of unknown individuals all sharing a connection to the institution. In the comment above, this is reinforced by knowing that those invisible individuals share a similar experience of 'struggling':

> *And one of the things that makes me feel like I'm belonging is because when I go there, depending on if people are there or not, I see myself as I'm not the only one pulling a late-nighter. [Uma] [I]*

Nathan contrasted this sense of invisible connection between students on campus with his sense of isolation when living off campus and being more removed from the invisible traces of others:

> *I live off campus and I feel like it's twenty times worse because, you know, there's no one around. [Nathan] [I]*

Beatriz emphasised how an unplanned event had given her an increased sense of belonging to the university community. There was a power cut; the library and halls of residence all had to evacuate, and at this time she saw the full extent of the previously invisible student community who might normally just leave traces across the campus at different times of day:

> *[...] there had been like a blackout at the LRC, something similar, […] those are the times where you connect more with students around. [Beatriz] [G]*

Beatriz related this to other ad hoc events that initially might appear to be negative or cause complaints, but in fact also provide a shared experience through which to bond with others.

> *… When the [University] bus doesn't come, and when the electricity fails at the LRC, or when I don't know, different things happen, that's when I feel like it's easier to relate to students, because you have that in common, even if it's something bad, even if it's to complain about your university, that's when you have something in common with them. [Beatriz] [G]*

Beatriz felt a shared ownership of the 'problem', giving her a sense of communion with others:

> *I think that's what I mean by we're all part of the problem, but we still complain about it, we still complain about [the] Business School. [Beatriz] [G]*

Beatriz's observation of these frustration bonds implied that not knowing one another personally did not stop people forming an important community to which she felt she belonged. In her explanation of the power cut which had resulted in an evacuation of all buildings, she stated,

> *It was nice to see all those people around … although I didn't connect with anyone. It was nice to see, […], everybody together … even though this was an unplanned, […] thing I felt like […] I belonged somewhere, because I could see the amount of people that live there [...] [Beatriz] [I]*

In summarising the feeling this event gave her, and her similar feelings when the entrance to the LRC is busy and chaotic, she said,

> *… like even the struggle of coming in, makes me feel like, I belong somewhere. [Beatriz] [I]*

I'm here, I'm part of this mess. [Beatriz] [I]

Students spoke about struggling, feeling lonely, feeling unsupported, feeling overwhelmed by busy areas, deadlines, funding delays, and other aspects of university life, yet they each seemed to find community and belonging in getting through these difficulties alongside other students doing the same. It appeared that this 'productive struggle' was not only part of the transformative learning process (Murdoch *et al.,* 2020) but was also part of the process of belonging. Sharing anything, even negative experiences and emotions, builds a sense of connection and belonging through similarity and collectively overcoming a challenge. For Beatriz, this frustration led to a positive emotion once she realised others were feeling the same way, as if there was comradeship in the struggle:

So, there's always a difficulty to go in and out, then I feel like I'm part of this mess. It's so good. [Beatriz] [I]

… but even having something to complain about unites us all. [Beatriz] [I]

Acquaintances

Much like Uma's collage with the invisible traces of people crossing the roundabout, Prince alluded to the power of just being part of this transient community of people who were all on similar journeys. For him, the lack of long-term engagement was no hindrance to fleeting 'micro-moments' having a big impact upon his belonging (Gravett et. al., 2023: 1982):

… every time I come to uni I meet someone new, even though I may never see them again but I meet someone new, they tell me about their experience in university and where they've come from. [Prince] [I]

Far from this being a lesser form of human engagement, Prince found the passing interactions he had with other students to be enough to contribute to his own transformation, which implies that it is these feelings which create the culture of a community. In contrast, Hamid felt these fleeting interactions lacked substance and care:

… they're like a hi-bye relationship … when we see a person we say, 'Hi, what are you doing? You're doing good' That's it, that's it. Then, after that, we just keep moving. Next day, we never know if we're going to see that person, we just don't mind [care about] them. Do you get what I mean? [Hamid] [I]

Obi explained that in his first year he had been timetabled with students studying other degree programmes and so had had less regular contact with a single cohort:

> *… not knowing people and having to go to classes, and you're not really like communicating with anyone other than the teacher. [Obi] [I]*

However, in his second year he had established better friendships, spending more time with the same students in classes. This structural change had enabled him to create lines of communication and mutual support which

> *… created a bond that wasn't there through all last year, and yeah it was very good. [Obi] [I]*

All the participants faced challenges in making friends and found limited opportunities to establish true connections with other students during their (albeit Covid-disrupted) university years. There seemed to be a general sense of individuals moving around the campus, getting on with their lives independently of one another. As Bernila stated,

> *… like everyone's in it for themselves, which is true, I'm in it for myself as well. [Bernila] [I]*

However, Bernila certainly had prioritised friendship over her studies all the way through her university career:

> *I've done more social networking than I've done studying. [Bernila] [I]*

Living in halls of residence seemed to provide most of the opportunities for friendship, although in the case of Jìng, who entered her final year of study in the University having spent the first two years studying in her home country, China, language issues limited her ability to connect with other residents in any meaningful way:

> *I've got some friends but actually many things I have to do by myself, just take a walk and sometimes I cook some lunch with my flatmate. [Jìng] [I]*

For Jìng, the smallest episode of inclusion or developing a friendly relationship was cause for great happiness, as she had so few meaningful interactions with her peers:

> *I take a walk with my roommate, so I feel I belong, they are my roommate, we took a walk to [XXX] Lane so we are very happy. [Jìng] [I]*

When she did have opportunities to connect with flatmates in a deeper way, her language skills prevented her from fully participating in the conversation and left her feeling lonely:

> *I met a classmate who lives in flat four, I'm flat three, so we live close, so we always go to class together. Yes, but she don't know how to speak Chinese, so I just use English to communicate with that girl so actually it's a little tired [tiring] for me. [Jìng] [I]*

Joining societies and social activities didn't seem to provide the connection she craved from others either, as Jìng explained:

> *I join some events like roller skating, but this is not opportunity to communicate with others. [Jìng] [I]*

Sean initially felt a sense of belonging with the people around him in halls and friends he'd made through socialising in his first year through clubbing and societies; however, this then subsided, and he looked elsewhere for a further sense of belonging.

> *… it's just the same music, the same like vibe and stuff like that, so it just at times just drifted me away of not belonging to that place. [Sean] [G]*

Hamid was quite vocal on the stark contrast between British and Indian culture: in his opinion, Indian people are more tactile with one another and share more vulnerability with each other than British people. The need for friendship and social networks crosses cultures, but the need to recruit friends for social support is lower in countries with more highly developed systems of organised support and, therefore, the motivation to form trusted friendships is reduced in these countries (Apostolou *et al.,* 2024: 3). Coming from India, where friendships and community have not yet been so widely replaced by state health and wellbeing services, Hamid seemed almost perplexed as to why fellow students were not being open and communicative with one another:

> *I don't know what people, maybe people are really afraid of … they don't want to share their thought. I feel, like, lonely.* [Hamid] [I]

By integrating into the prevailing culture of the University, described above by Bernila as defined by a sense that 'everyone's in it for themselves', Hamid sounded almost as though he had resigned himself to becoming part of the problem, changing his manner and suffering in silence:

> *… sometimes I feel like an introvert by doing this. Yeah, like, I don't go to people, like, I'm not making any friendship. Like, I'm feeling shy to go to one another and make friend. [Hamid] [I]*

Nathan, in describing the metaphor within his collage, reinforced this image of students not interacting or sharing the journey, but instead ploughing their own furrows. In his case, he was in a group of friends who had all previously been at college together, who didn't make new contacts.

> *…it [the collage] shows that I'm, everyone around is moving freely, compared to how I was. [Nathan] [G]*

He expressed frustration at not being able to break free from the chains of his previous peer group and described seeing many different people he'd like to connect with but not knowing how to. He seemed frustrated that although there were visible opportunities around him, he felt he could not avail himself of them. It seemed to him that he could neither break out of his own long-standing peer group nor penetrate another peer group because students moved around in established groups from prior colleges.

Firm Friendships

Some participants clearly held a stereotypical view that university friends would be friends for life and would be a constant presence through key life events:

> *… everybody tells you, oh you're going to make friends for life, oh you're going to meet your husband. [Aisha] [I]*

Bernila concurred with this aspiration:

> *… university's where you make friends for life. [Bernila] [I]*

She explained that she was still close friends with her first-year cohort, despite their having been 'split up' by studying in different countries for their year abroad. This closeness was evident as she recalled meeting these friends on her first day of university.

> *… because we've known each other since the day one, I swear to God, it was […] September 20XX, 24th of September, that's when we all met, and we've been friends ever since. [Bernila] [I]*

Bernila later explained that she planned to visit friends who were in the year below her and were now studying abroad in Spain, demonstrating that her friendship circle extended beyond those in her own lectures and reached into other year groups on the same degree programme. She also recounted meeting a student from the year above:

> *…we've become the best friends. [Bernila] [I]*

However, Gamu, as a mature student, felt she would only see her other mature friends in the future, leaving behind those who were younger in terms of their age and life stage. Older people have been shown to generally place less importance on making friends for socialising and support than younger people (Apostolou *et al.,* 2024: 5), perhaps as they have other forms of support already, and often caring responsibilities which take them away from campus outside of class time:

> *… sometimes you make friends, sometimes you don't, and I'm not here to make friends, you know, and the ones I click with I want to be able to click with for future.* [Gamu] [I]

Whilst no socio-economic background information was requested from participants, many referenced aspects of life which implied they needed to work to live whilst studying. 'Working class' is a very broad term, to which British people assign themselves from a range of postcodes, income levels and job titles, including many 'first-in-family' university students, like Bernila and Gamu above. Working-class and racially minoritised students often seek to avoid class and cultural alienation by selecting more modern universities with diverse populations, although they might have received offers from elite traditional universities (Reay *et al.,* 2001). Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds experience greater cognitive dissonance when entering university, as they feel they have to comply with middle-class values which do not match those of their home communities. In addition, for students of colour, aspiring to middle-class respectability can cause internal conflict when assimilating to 'the raw material of whiteness' (Sonnekus, 2021: 185), causing additional racial dissonance (Passi, 2024). To combat this sense of being out of place, working-class students can be more willing to progress to university if their friends come too (Dolan, 2020).

Nathan lamented not making firmer friendships outside his pre-existing friendship group from college:

> *I feel I could've done something completely different and I felt like I kind of just came to university because my friends came to university. [Nathan] [I]*

Yet whilst he desired to be free from that group, he still valued it as a positive influence in his life which he wanted to keep. He appeared conflicted between the sense of safety and camaraderie he took from his long-term friendship circle, and the constraints it put upon his making new friends at university. He felt that, as he was in his third year, the chance had gone:

> *… it's the fact the people from first year have already met their friends that they wanted to meet if you know what I mean. [Nathan] [I]*

Rodricks (2024: 9) demonstrates that the 'kinship that is toxic may also be the one that anchors', making it simultaneously comfortable and uncomfortable to be part of a familiar community. This comment by Nathan about his collage described how he felt stuck and like he didn't belong, whilst envying others their (apparently greater) sense of belonging:

> *And I feel like it's only happened to me. [Nathan] [G]*

Individual Lives and Loneliness

Aisha demonstrated strength and resilience by remaining a student at Londonshire despite racist events in her first year having caused her to consider dropping out. She never really recaptured a sense of bonded community thereafter, due to disjointed online then hybrid learning and a year abroad. She highlighted the difficulty of adjusting to a new year group after a co-curricular sandwich year. She continued to consider leaving:

> *I don't know my classmates, so, like, when you're doing group work, you don't know these people … So yeah, I remember I really wanted to drop out. [Aisha] [I]*

Bernila had additional concern about social isolation and implied she had lived in the same halls of residence as a student who had taken their own life in their first year. This had increased her level of concern for others. She appeared to be preoccupied with the welfare of those around her, which was a matter of constant priority:

> *So as a first-year student I was shocked, you know, and that's why this year I decided I need to know everyone in my flat, just in case, check up on them. [Bernila] [I]*

> *… they told me it was nice to have someone that brings the flat together, because I did ask everyone to WhatsApp to like, you know, just to make sure that everyone's communicating … I've got to make sure that at least they're alive and doing well. [Bernila] [I]*

Hamid lamented the lack of community in comparison to his homeland India, and reflected,

> *But the negative thing is, [we] don't have a good community. That's a big deal. [Hamid] [I]*

> *In India it's different. People have a … community. They hold each other, they share their thought, we just feel like a brother and sisters. They all are really friendly; they are quite close community. [Hamid] [I]*

Hamid identified poor mental health as the main reason for loneliness amongst students. This correlates with recent research (Hillman, 2024) showing that poor mental health is the primary reason undergraduates in England consider dropping out of university.

> *People are lonely over here. People feel, like, lonely. I think most of people are having mental health problems, like, I don't know, they are afraid to share their thought to each other. [Hamid] [I]*

Hamid demonstrated what it requires for him to leave the house each morning and undertake the lengthy and frustrating journey to university to spend his days in classes where he feels he has no connections with his peers:

> *… go to the mirror, have a good smile to make myself boost up my mental health. [Hamid] [I]*

He noted the social distance between people in the UK and remarked upon the reserved nature of British culture and how it impedes the development of firm friendships. His message to others was:

> *Don't be afraid of attachments. [Hamid] [I]*

Bernila, too, felt the difference between Spanish and English culture upon her return for her final year after studying in Spain. She relayed how busy the LRC had become since her first year, due to a large influx of postgraduate students at Londonshire, and how this had overwhelmed her and put her off studying in the LRC. Whilst she had been abroad, however, she had found a sense of belonging in similarly crowded environments, such as a Spanish marketplace. She implied this was down to the culture in each place, and therefore the sort of interactions that took place there:

> *It depends on the country. UK, everybody's much more depressing … Yeah, I'm walking down this corridor, why are people staring at me like that? Not even a hi, hello, if you're going to stare, at least say hi, hello. If I was to do that in Spain they would say hi, hola, como estas, that kind of thing. [Bernila] [I]*

Uma concurred that the UK felt like a lonely place, but in contrast to Bernila's aversion to the LRC, she felt it offered her sanctuary and community:

> *[…] there's lots of ways I do feel alone a lot in this country but going to the LRC especially […] that's my place. [Uma] [I]*

> *From last year I used to work in there after classes and that's what I meant by belonging is that I feel that I am not alone. [Uma] [I]*

Uma explained that witnessing others working late in the LRC made her realise she wasn't alone in struggling with deadlines, which led to her experiencing a sense of community:

> *… if I see someone else struggling, obviously that's like not a good thing to wish for someone else, but if I do happen to see someone else struggling, I feel like I'm not alone. [Uma][I]*

Nathan expressed frustration that the main focus of university life is work, with little play:

> *I feel like right now within [Londonshire] University it's mainly just work, work, work, work [...] you can't just keep doing work, work, working, because you know, trying to be successful otherwise you're never going to have time to actually enjoy yourself or be, have fun you know … [Nathan] [I]*

The lack of connection and community he perceived created a constant pull to withdraw from the University in favour of a better experience elsewhere:

> *Everyone keeps to themself here. [Nathan] [I]*

Jìng felt that she would be happier in her home country, and thus felt no sense of belonging:

> *So, if I have study pressure, I feel I not belong here. I think if this is a Chinese environment, I work better. [Jìng] [I]*

Gao (2023: 274) states that a social constructionist approach to the study of belonging and unbelonging should place the focus not on whether immigrants feel a sense of belonging, but rather on the question: 'Where are immigrants made to belong, by whom, how and why?' In Jìng's case, there appeared to have been very few, if any, attempts by peers to include her within the group, whether in class or in her shared flat. In Gao's interpretation, agency in creating a sense of belonging does not lie simply with the individual but is shared with those in their immediate community. Perhaps there is a case for teaching first-year students the actions they need to take to create a sense of belonging *for others*.

Jìng, in deciding which photos to take to represent a sense of belonging, really struggled to identify a sense of belonging to visualise, because she spent so much of her time alone:

> *I feel lonely but I have to finish it, so I didn't, I haven't took so many pictures. [Jìng] [I]*

> *Sometimes I study in the LRC alone, at night. [Jìng] [I]*

> *I always do it by myself alone, it's too difficult for me. [Jìng] [I]*

Jìng felt she had nowhere to be other than in her room or in class. Due to language issues preventing her making firm friendships, between classes she had no purpose other than to study

alone. The isolation she recounted sounded extreme and she became emotional when explaining that she had spent most of her time in the UK alone in her room:

> *… so, almost one week, I always stay in my room and write my essay. [Jìng] [I]*
>
> *I just go to the Asda to buy some food and always stay in my room and sometimes I go to kitchen to cook for myself and I finished my essays. [Jìng] [I]*
>
> *But sometimes I feel alone, like. Sorry … Most of the time, I'm alone. [Jìng] [I]*

I was conscious not to trigger intense emotions in Jìng for fear of causing harm. Conversations about race and belonging can be threatening, particularly if there are unequal power relationships between the interlocutors (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 217). Jìng had tried to find solace in community through socialising in her flat, her class, and by joining societies. I informed her of the academic and pastoral support available and how to access this, which seemed to cheer her a little, but it is a poor substitute for friendship and what Kaplan (1948) terms peoplehood.

Jìng could not find a way to be her authentic self, either with students from her own culture or students from others. When she did interact, she only spoke about her university coursework and had no deeper conversations than that, presumably due to language limitations:

> *… we just communicate about the study. [Jìng] [I]*

Clearly, for Jìng, the structures were not serving her as well as they could as she felt isolated and unsupported as a direct entrant, largely due to perceived communication barriers. Loneliness causes psychological detriment and emotional harm to well-being (Apostolou *et al.,* 2024) when people are unable to form the trusting relationships which provide a safety net within group living. Jìng's lack of language proficiency appeared to limit her ability to feel a part of the group, leading to emotional pain.

Jìng conveyed how little she felt seen or heard by anyone, staff or her peers. She felt particularly unseen by UK home students. She believed the latter mostly lived off campus, and so didn't socialise with international students:

> *… sometimes I feel lonely and not belong here. [Jìng] [I]*

I think UK students they will not live in the flat; live outside campus. [Jìng] [I]

However, for those living and commuting from their family home in London, it was equally difficult to make connections outside of class, as Aisha explained:

> *I get home at, like, eight, it's going to be dark, it's going to be late. So, it's like I don't even have time to hang about because I don't want to be travelling home too late. [Aisha] [I]*

However Beatriz, who first lived in halls and then in the local area, linked the lack of social interaction in her student life not to commuting, but to a lack of confidence in meeting people:

> *… if I had the guts, I would have made some friends. [Beatriz] [I]*

Feeling Stuck

There can be an active rejection of some initial forms of belonging, when students become more discerning. They may come to feel distant from the values of those groups in which they initially invested time and energy, but yet lack the power and agency to change anything, as Gamu explains:

> *I think we decided to sit back more and that was not belonging. [Gamu] [G]*

> *… this is like a sense of not belonging at university, feeling like no matter what direction you go you will be stuck in the same position, like that. And everyone else around is really doing the thing that they want to do, and yeah, I'm stuck in the same position. So yeah, so I wasn't belonging. [Gamu] [G]*

This same sentiment of 'stuckness' was strongly expressed by Nathan, both in his interview and his collage:

> *Well, I feel like in first year [sighs] didn't really feel like […] I was belonging to [Londonshire] … I didn't really feel in place. [Nathan] [I]*

This 'stuckness', feeling out of place, seemed to be the flipside of having a tight friendship group, something which usually correlates positively with a sense of belonging (Pittman and Richmond, 2008). However, the group was based on old friendships from college and no new friends could penetrate what Nathan termed the 'bubble'. Black-heritage students have been shown to

gravitate towards friendships with other Black students to foster belonging through shared understanding (With Insight Education, 2025: 6).

> *… also people are in their, like their own little bubbles … they're just, like just stay away, you know, I've got my group, you've got your group, kind of thing. [Nathan] [G]*

Relational Belonging is nurtured and created in the new environment through interaction with peers and staff. This leads to relationships based on one's new identity as a university student. Nathan's self-segregation from new students appears to have been somewhat reluctant. In his interview and collage, Nathan conveyed a sense of being trapped, knowing there was something more which he can't access, something he was missing out on. At the end of explaining his collage to the group, Nathan brushed his hand across the paper and discarded all the items on the page as he said the words:

> *… and then I will be free. [Nathan] [G]*

Dissatisfaction is a strong predictor of Black, male student drop-out from university (Strayhorn, 2008: 28) but it seemed Nathan's 'persistence' (Tinto, 1993) meant he was reaching a point of liberation (hooks, 1994a). This physical action demonstrates the power of this collage method in accessing embodied expressions of feelings and experiences.

Groups and Teams

Obi's first-year course structure prevented lasting friendships forming as the cohort comprised several different degree paths and students might only be together on one module out of four, meaning regular contact with the same people was unlikely to occur.

> *The first year, classes were quite muddled up. There would be different people in every class, you'd couldn't really create like a particular bond. [Obi] [I]*

Hamid concurred that students are like strangers in a class together. He was also on a large programme with several degree paths included in the cohort, and would have liked to have more collaborative opportunities:

> *I don't know the name of the next person who is sitting in front of me. We're like strangers to each other, we just know the names … They doesn't know, even, who is sitting next to them … I think not having a good community. [Hamid] [I]*

Obi found that the second year provided more cohort identity and frequent contact with the same people. This allowed him to connect more fully with his classmates, especially through groupwork:

> *… group work just makes it almost compulsory to communicate with people. [Obi] [I]*

Whilst experiencing the frustration of team members not pulling their weight in the group, he understood how essential teamwork is to building community:

> *I'm not a fan of it, but I understand why it's done. So, I guess it is a good thing. [Obi] [I]*

However, in his second year, as he was involved in groupwork in a more cohesive cohort who saw each other in most modules, Obi felt like his course had become

> *… like a team almost. [Obi] [I]*

Nathan, too, felt greater connection was enabled by the restructure in his second year on the same course as Obi.

> *I have made a few friends in like, you know, even class and they've, you know, we've all been able to speak and I've felt more comfortable, that was within second year. [Nathan] [I]*

Bernila commented that the course cohesion she experienced – across all the programme's year groups, not just her own – was a point of envy for students on other degree programmes who lacked a sense of community:

> *Even my friends from other courses, like [X] and [X], they keep saying, wow, I can't believe you're friends with your course mates. [Bernila] [I]*

She explained that these friendships were due to the interactivity of the teaching and learning in her course in comparison to others:

Yeah, when we're in class everyone talks. However, I think in some courses it's all like, do your work, do your work. [Bernila] [I]

… they, in a way they feel kind of jealous because we have such a bond with our course mates. [Bernila] [I]

Bernila attributed the sense of connection across the cohort to a desire not to disappoint the course leader. Therefore, the students kept in close contact with one another to ensure no one let their tutor down. There was clearly a sense of a 'team', comprising both students *and* tutor. This was not something she felt when studying the optional modules from other courses:

… but I don't think a lot of courses do that, which I would find, I don't know, I don't feel any sense of belonging in any of those modules, I'm sorry to say. [Bernila] [I]

…we always inspired each other to actually do well, like if someone's slacking off…we can't do that because, oh, what will [tutor] say, and everyone just starts writing, we help everyone. [Bernila] [I]

Hamid wanted to feel a shared sense of struggle with his classmates, which he compared with the sense of a 'team' when playing football socially:

The belonging is they're all like playing like a team, holding each other, yeah, not criticising anyone on the ground, on the field, it's a ball doesn't criticise this, say yeah come on, you've got it, yeah, type of motivation, yeah. [Hamid] [G]

That was helping, yeah. Belonging, like what I said, they really help me to do my part in the assignment. We were just working as a group, communicating each other, and if I'm going to make a mistake, they'll just try to recorrect it … Improve each other, yeah. [Hamid] [I]

Bernila also agreed that working in a group was a motivating factor, enabling everyone to achieve more than they might have achieved alone:

[…] we decided that we're going to do all our group works together, we did the same modules, so we're always together […] we were pushing each other […] [Bernila] [I]

Bernila recounted how she realised she felt belonging at Londonshire once she arrived in Spain to study abroad and felt a sense of unbelonging in the university there, amongst the other British students who were doing the same thing:

> *… here [at Londonshire] I had my support, I had my friends, this is where I belong. [Bernila] [I]*

She relayed how at Londonshire, her course peers looked out for one another and had mutual concern for one another's progress:

> *Even for people that are slacking off, like me, because when I see them do work, I actually do work, like none of us are left behind, yeah. [Bernila] [I]*

Her identity as a student was heavily influenced by the rest of her cohort. She drew energy from their energy and showed a sense of not wanting to be left behind. There was healthy competition between them, whereby they helped each other to do their best so they could all represent their course together:

> *I'm with them, you know, like I've got to be like them. [Bernila] [I]*

Prince also implied that tutors were part of the 'group' that inspired him to do better, both in a competitive and in a confidence-boosting way:

> *… I think it's the, it's the staff and my peers around me … Because, […], seeing them be successful and prosper shows me that I can be that person. [Prince] [I]*

However, Gamu and her mature friend had to constrain their assertiveness to conform to the more passive group norms of the younger students by 'stepping back' from full engagement:

> *So, at that particular time I didn't feel I belonged because of that particular comment […] and they took it quite seriously. I think there was, there was a time where they wouldn't even speak to us. [Gamu] [I]*

> *… to the point where after that, every lecture we will step back. [Gamu] [I]*

This continued until the tutor intervened to mediate, after which they returned to their 'normal' confident behaviour:

> *… so, we became the normal people that we were initially, before the chaos in the middle. [Gamu] [G]*

Impermanence

The main outcome of a poor sense of community appeared to be students dropping out of university. This is a phenomenon experienced more frequently by male students and by Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi students in the UK than any others (Hillman, 2024: 11). Four participants mentioned the impact of losing friends who had dropped out, or discussed their own desire to leave university, which they had all managed to overcome. Aisha spoke about friends who left during the Covid lockdown:

> *… before you know it you've stopped talking to them, or they drop out so you don't … like when you do go back to university you don't see them anymore.* [Aisha] [G]

However, she had built new friendships in her final year:

> *I don't have the same friends that I started off with. [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha had to draw on significant internal resolve to counter the desire to give up in the early weeks of her first year, when her initial sense of belonging was challenged and destroyed by obvious racist microaggressions, and when some of her flatmates used overt racial slurs:

> *And I had a bit of a meltdown. I was crying on the phone to my mum, I was just like, 'I just want to go home.' [Aisha] [I]*

Nathan, like Aisha, considered dropping out of his first year:

> *Like I felt at the start I just wanted to drop out, that was at the start. [Nathan] [I]*

Although he hadn't left at that point, by his third year he was still worrying about whether it had been the right decision to attend Londonshire and looking for alternative options:

> *… even, like now, I don't want to drop-out, but I want to like change university … once I've finished my placement year. [Nathan] [I]*

Sean clearly lost some early friendships during his first-year:

[…] but we was good friends, and then obviously when they dropped out I hardly hear from them or anything like that. [Sean] [I]

Bernila, who had maintained very firm friendships at the University across four years of disrupted study, explained that this had not been the case at the partner university in Spain:

I tried, but I don't think I'm friends with anyone from my uni over there. [Bernila] [I]

She also lamented losing close friends who had completed their degrees and graduated, leaving her less motivated to study without them:

[…[if […] like the friends that I've made, you know, are here, then, yeah, I'd probably switch up so fast, but they're not here. [Bernila] [I]

Safety in Friendship

Two of the participants spoke about studying at the same university as their schoolfriends , and both the positive and negative sides of this. Obi remarked that this enabled him to feel comfortable, but affected his sense of belonging:

I had one or two friends from my school that came along with me, to university. But like it kind of made me feel like at ease, I believe … I was like comfortable for me to be in the campus and that, and like going there, but also at the same time I would say that like I wasn't really belonging there. [Obi] [I]

Nathan, too, relayed the safety he felt in being at university with long-standing friends, stating:

I felt like I wouldn't be able to, I wouldn't have been able to have done the years without them, you know, I'd have been really bored, you know. I felt like they kind of helped me through that process and I helped them as well [...]. [Nathan] [I]

He reported that if they hadn't been there:

'[…] I feel like I wouldn't have felt any sort of belonging whatsoever. [Nathan] [I]

Within the context of studying abroad, Aisha summed up the protective effect of having friendships, or at least connections, with other students from Londonshire when she arrived:

> *[…] so it was kind of like we were each other's safety blankets. [Aisha] [I]*

Staff–Student Relationships

Participants spoke mostly positively about the staff of the University; and one tutor was commended several times by two participants for her care of students, which exceeded expectations. Strong staff–student relationships can improve students' academic performance, autonomy, confidence, and aspirations (Bovill, 2020). Tutors played a key role in the lives of the students. Where students felt cared for and valued by their tutor, their sense of belonging was enhanced, as Bernila emphasised when she described her tutor:

> *[…] she was my backbone. [Bernila] [I]*

> *[…] without her I wouldn't be sat here right now, I would have probably dropped out, you know. [Bernila] [G]*

She explained that this tutor was the conduit for cohort connection and community:

> *[…] everyone's like connected with each other, all thanks to [tutor].[Bernila] [I]*

Aisha commented that the same tutor's care and concern mitigated her desire to give up on her studies during the lockdowns and Covid years, when her sense of belonging was negatively impacted:

> *So yeah, but I think the Covid, what made me feel like dropping out was the lack of the support and like not feeling like belonging, but what made me continue on was the support of [tutor], and also like my family. [Aisha] [I]*

Equally motivating was the sense of not wanting to let the tutor down, which in turn motivated peers to support one another:

> *[…] like if someone's slacking off … we can't do that because, oh, what will [tutor] say, and everyone just starts writing, we help everyone. [Bernila] [I]*

I did send her an email at 11.30 at night, she responds 12 midnight. I was shocked […] she's always made sure that we're safe […] she's like our mum. [Bernila] [I]

Caring relationships with tutors replicate family situations, helping students to feel that they are cared about as people, not just for their grades. This is essential to countering feelings of insignificance (Flett, 2018: 225). The tutor referred to by Bernila and Aisha above is of Asian heritage, but this seemed secondary, if relevant at all, to the care and concern expressed for her students. Perhaps such familiarity resonated more with students racialised as other than White, but the tutor is known to go above and beyond for students from a vast range of backgrounds, nationalities and identities which her degree programme attracts.

Uma concurred about the importance of tutors in her future,

[…] their knowledge, their lessons, everything, be it the tiniest second, the tiniest moment, I feel like I'm carrying that with me when I graduate or when I leave. [Uma] [G]

She also outlined the positive impact of the support she had received from her tutors:

But here, I can ask my professors, I can't understand this, can you explain it, and they sit down and they help […] For me, with my course, with my professors, they have been such lovely human beings […] I literally remember breaking down in front of them and they just take their time and help me through it … hearing you as an individual. [Uma] [G]

This level of personalised support gave Uma a sense of being truly seen and heard, and created connections:

The teachers don't care where I'm from. They just see me as a person. And that is how I want to be seen. [Uma] [I]

Prince had at first struggled with his studies alone and hadn't wanted to seek help, but later realised that he could draw on the wisdom and knowledge of his tutors and benefit from their support:

[…] that picture, made me think that there are people that are smarter than you, there are people that can help you and like I don't know everything. [Prince] [I]

In describing the photo-metaphor of the fallen letter within a word of foam letters in a corridor (see Figure 6), Prince sees the letters that are still standing as representing the help of tutors and peers who had got him – the fallen 'R' – back on track and pulled him up:

> *It represents that you can fall over, but the other letters are still standing up, so they're […] it represents help, assistance, a sense of handholding, I guess. [Prince] [I]*



Figure 3 'LONDONSHIRE FALLING OVER' - PHOTO TAKEN BY PRINCE

Even though she was a mother herself, Gamu also referred to the role of her tutor (who was of a similar age) as a parental guide:

> *[…] she's given so much, and that really, you know, she's taking us as a mother, you know, and she gives us so much, sometimes I can tell, she's giving us so much. [Gamu] [I]*

Nathan remarked about his tutors' commitment to students, almost as if this had become a later realisation, that:

> *[…] they're not just actually coming in to just get paid and go, you know. [Nathan] [I]*

He also directly attributed his confidence to the interpersonal connections he had with his tutors:

> *I feel like they just gave me that extra boost, you know, to want to just do good and get the grades that I want. [Nathan] [I]*

Such connections are vital if students are to be able to create a self-image of competence and excellence, and are even more important for Black male undergraduates like Nathan, who are at greater risk of not fulfilling their potential (Londonshire, 2020b; Londonshire, 2023b). It is essential that staff form encouraging, confidence-building relationships with Black male students like Nathan in the quest to reduce outcome differentials and improve the future life chances of those like Obi, Nathan, Sean, and Prince.

Obi tended to rely on seeing his tutors in class, rather than seeking out additional opportunities for individual guidance. He knew his personal tutor as they had taught him on some modules, but when asked if personal tutoring has had much impact on his experience, he responded:

> *Not really, it was more like if you need them urgently, but I wasn't really like needing them and if I want a tutor, it will just be in my class anyway. [Obi] [I]*

Likewise, Sean seemed to feel that he was surrounded by support and could access it, but for him it seemed to be just part of the atmosphere rather than something he engaged with actively:

> *[…] there's teachers around me supporting me, helping me with my subjects as well. [Sean] [I]*

Hamid felt the relationship with his tutors was a supportive and positive one, even using vocabulary associated with friendship rather than authority:

> *The tutorial, the teachers are quite, really, really, really friendly to us as students. [Hamid] [I]*

Jìng related her sense of belonging to her level of self-confidence, which seemed to correlate with positive staff interaction and academic feedback:

> *Sometimes I feel I'm belonging in Business School and sometimes I'm not, yeah … Sometimes I feel confident, like my tutor said my essay is good so I feel confident, so I feel I'm better and have improved my English and the study ability in here. [Jìng] [I]*

The relationships Bernila had developed with her tutor and classmates seemed to be the most important aspect of studying at university for her. She attributed her personal success and transformation to this Relational Belonging, portraying relationships and personal growth as entwined in a process of 'becoming' (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2021):

> *I belong in [degree programme] with my friends, so we represent that. [Bernila] [I]*

> *The University and the Business School as well has given me lots of chances, lots of experiences rather that have helped me grow and at the same time feel that sense of comfort, be it with my teachers, or with my friends. [Bernila] [I]*

Sean explained that relationships between students and staff are the basis upon which attendance rests:

> *I feel like if the tutors motivated them more, or like reached out to them, or had like that relationship more with them, then I think more of the students will like attend more [...] the tutors on my course. [Sean] [G]*

When marginalised students feel disengaged from their learning, they are more likely to want to stay at home rather than attend classes (Flett, 2018: 225), as Sean intimates above. The connection between tutors and students is vital in any relational pedagogy for meaningful engagement in learning (Gravett and Winstone, 2022), yet it is becoming ever more difficult in the context of the marketisation of HE, larger cohort sizes, more modular delivery, and increased workload pressure on academic staff (Gravett *et al.,* 2021: 6). However, building trust through 'wise feedback', which conveys the tutor's belief in the student's potential to reach a higher standard (Yeager *et al.,* 2017), has been shown to benefit students from historically under-represented groups in terms of engagement, grades, and retention (Carrell and Kurlaender, 2023). Other 'trust moves' (Felten *et al.,* 2023: 6) which convey care between tutor and student include showing both authenticity and sensitivity to others' identities, all of which serves to remove some of the uncertainty in the minds of racially minoritised students as they start university and look for signals of belonging.

The power distance perceived by Prince in his first year between himself and his lecturers became disrupted when new, younger lecturers were recruited, and he felt the latter took active steps to reach out to students. Perhaps the smaller age gap meant a smaller perceived power differential

and made these tutors seem more welcoming and approachable:

> *I think it was the … the younger lecturers that are … that I know are closer to my age because I spoke to them. And […] they were like 'no I'm here to help. I'm not just here to teach and go away.' [Prince] [I]*

Uma raised issues of low student engagement as a result of staff teaching style:

> *Some professors some teachers … I'm not calling them bad teachers but they don't just maybe they cannot…you know, bring it out, bring out the interaction from students, which we understand. [Uma] [I]*

When asked what would have helped him to connect with support tutors, Nathan replied:

> *That's a good question and I have no idea. Maybe something like people actually getting, and staff getting in direct contact with me saying, you know, just like emailing me and letting me know that there's support there, yeah. [Nathan] [I]*

Where staff reach out to students who don't feel able to engage in help-seeking, the results can be life-changing:

> *I came up to her, I was like, can I speak to you after class, but I never did, I just ran away [laughs] … [Bernila] [I]*

> *… I bolted straight out, and then she called me two hours later and she was like, hi, … you know, is there anything you want to talk about, and then I said what I said, and then she helped me get through it through … Pastoral Care, and it was a great help, I went through counselling. Yeah, I felt like I really belonged in this uni because they were spoiling me too much. They spoiled me so much that, you know, I pulled my weight, I think I got one of the highest GPA in [my course] in that module. [Bernila] [I]*

Bernila used the term 'spoiling me', which conveys a sense of being undeserving. Yet she directly attributes the academic outcome to her getting the personalised support she needed. It is interesting how she notes that the care she received motivated her to 'pull her weight' and thereby own the outcome herself. Such ownership is vital to feeling a sense of personal achievement. The care shown by the University was then reciprocated in her level of care towards

herself, which was motivated by her desire not to let the staff down.

For some of the students, staying motivated through difficult times had proven almost impossible, but all had been kept afloat by their tutors when they were considering giving up.

> *I spoke to [tutor] about it, and she kind of just said, look, you're going to be fine, like don't worry, you're going to be fine, just push through. [Aisha] [G]*

Nathan was on a placement year at the time of participating. This allowed him to gain feedback on his skills, abilities, and demeanour from a senior colleague, which appeared to build his trust and positive self-image:

> *[…] she's been able to like see and that's the fact that I'm able to communicate with people effectively and I'm just only a nice person and she said that's not something that you can, that can be taught. [Nathan] [I]*

Uma held a view of her tutors as 'gurus' who were able to help her become a 'visionary'. Such language is informed by Eastern cultural references and would not be used as part of any UK higher education strategy. This language of mind-reading implies Uma feels great reverence for her tutors and assigns them responsibility for their partnership role in her self-development, rather than seeing education as an individualistic pursuit of that goal:

> *They're shaping my mind, they're shaping me because even at first glance they do know me better than I know myself. [Uma] [I]*
>
> *… coming from India we think … teachers, we call them gurus. [Uma] [I]*
>
> *So, for me a teacher is a leader, someone who leads me, a guru. [Uma] [I]*
>
> *… a teacher is there to read the mind. They are fantastic mind-readers and they understand them. [Uma] [I]*

However, Aisha spoke of negative interactions with staff around a common cause of complaint – group work:

> *… when you're dealing with the troubles of group work and you're just trying to get support from your lecturer, and then your lecturer's just not supporting you, it is really stressful. [Aisha] [G]*

Impact of Covid on Relational Belonging

As Gravett and Ajjawi (2021: 4) note, the remote teaching that took place during the Covid-19 period created the possibility for us to gain a more nuanced understanding of where and when students feel they belong. They argue that times when students do not feel a sense of belonging can prove productive by spurring them to question their decisions and choices and reframing the way they conceive of their student experience going forward.

Aisha recounted that students who were studying during the Covid years had their friendships greatly disrupted, and this may have impacted their ability to develop the lasting bonds they had hoped to form:

> *So, you kind of like have to start again, in terms of friendship, like other people who went to university before, like before the pandemic, they would have stayed there the whole time and made their friends. [Aisha] [I]*

This was particularly acute when second chances to make friends in person were removed by the ongoing pandemic. In Prince's case, his second year and repeat second year were both disrupted by lockdowns and then by hybrid learning, which limited his ability to recoup the loss of friendships from his solitary first year:

> *In my first year, I didn't really talk much. I didn't really make lasting relationships […] I think like the worldwide pandemic has heightened that for me that I need to make relationships that last. [Prince] [I]*

> *So, I felt like that was a big driver in my hunger in wanting to get back to university, the actual building, and make new friends and try and nurture the ones that I already do have. [Prince] [I]*

It is interesting to note that despite severe restrictions on social contact being in place nationally and globally during much of the second half of his first year, Nathan had clearly made sufficient connections in the first semester to describe it as the best year of his life.

> *Yeah because when, when I came here as well it was Covid times, so that just made things even worse, you know, there was no clubs open, people used to try and host parties when they would get, you know, locked off or whatever, but we were shut down because like, you know, they're not actually allowed to, you*

know, host parties within this time [...] So, it was just hard, but then again if I'm being completely honest with you, I felt like first year was the best year of my life. [Nathan] [I]

Sean concurred that his first year was very sociable in a spontaneous way, and led to a sense of belonging, despite the Covid limitations from March 2020 onwards:

[…] in my first year I used to like go clubbing a lot, like to [the University nightclub], so going there and it was like, it was a sense of belonging, because like it just made me feel at ease. [Sean] [G]

Prince recounted how during lockdown he felt he wanted to '*be'* somewhere between classes, but there were no digital spaces in which to socialise and make connections with peers, which left him demotivated and disconnected. This shift from learning spaces being something we 'have' to something we 'do' (Mulcahy, 2018) was a hard transition for Prince, as he needed the infrastructure of campus and peers to stay connected to his purpose:

Like getting up for 9 am lectures on the computer then going back to sleep straight after wasn't serving me. [Prince] [I]

Joint attention phenomenon (Tice *et al.,* 2021: 4) shows us that concentration is harder to sustain without the presence of co-viewers. This seems to have impacted heavily on Prince, especially with students leaving their cameras off in virtual lectures.

Beatriz felt that the pandemic had taken away an essential aspect of her student life, and therefore her ability to build a whole student identity.

[…] then one thing that was completely wiped out was the social part of uni. Like the uni part of university, not the university part of university. [Beatriz] [I]

Beatriz summarised that during normal times it is possible to feel a sense of belonging, despite limited or no friendships, purely by being on campus. As belonging is multifaceted, if some of the criteria for belonging are fulfilled while others are missing, some sense of belonging might yet remain:

[…] let's say that you don't have friends, you still belong, because you still have to come here and see people, and you know how the campus looks like and

> *everything, so there's all these aspects about belonging, it's just which ones you have. [Beatriz] [G]*

It is not inherently negative to feel one doesn't belong, although this has a better impact on the self if the choice of 'unbelonging' is one's own (Christensen, 2009: 27) rather than resulting from the choices of others who exclude, reject, or are indifferent. As researchers, we must avoid making normative assumptions about what belonging looks like and where it can take place. Maybe the 'invisibility' of some Relational Belonging is sufficient to feel connected to others, as in the case of Uma's collage roundabout metaphor (Appendix D), and Beatriz's power-cut photo (Appendix C). When achieved in tandem with Structural Belonging (described in the following chapter), perhaps such transient relationships negate the need for deeper Relational Belonging whilst still enabling transformation. Sean clearly identified how he had transformed, but did not link this with any great sense of belonging:

> *I know most students, they don't feel like they're belonging to the University. [Sean] [I]*

Impact of Race on Relational Belonging

Race Is the Weather

Relational Belonging can be impacted by people outside of the campus and within the local town. Aisha sought sanctuary amongst a smaller group of flatmates who all identified as Black and Asian, which gave her a thread of belonging after the earlier racist events she had experienced. However, she continued to feel 'othered' throughout her years of study, with a later incident occurring on the University bus which left her again shocked at the contrast to her life in London. The bus driver drew attention to her change of hairstyle and questioned how she could look so different in her photo ID. Calling attention to Black women's hair and hairstyles is a form of microaggression which flags up difference and otherness (Blaisdell *et al.,* 2022: 477; Smith, 2025); it highlights oppression through the distinction between Black women's self-definitions and their everyday treatment in White society (Hill Collins, 2000: 89). This pressurises some Black women to use 'chemical shackles that press curly roots into straight submission' (Norwood, 2017: 69) in order to adhere to the norm of European hair, but many now see wearing their 'natural hair' as an act of decolonising the mind and resisting hegemony. Aisha was offended by the presumption that she was being fraudulent, and shocked that people in the town were not regularly seeing ID cards on which Black women had different hairstyles to their current style, highlighting a particularly intersectional oppression for Black women alone:

> *I was getting on the [Londonshire Uni] bus, and this bus driver was so rude … in my student ID I had my natural hair out. And then I was wearing a wig at that time, I was wearing a blonde wig. It was just after my birthday, my twenty-first birthday, so yeah, I had a blonde wig on. And the bus driver, he was so rude. He was like, 'Is that you?' And I was like, 'Yes, it's me', and he's like 'pfff, you look so different'. Yeah, and I just thought that is so rude and so unnecessary, I was literally in shock. [Aisha] [I]*

Whiteness was far more evident in the suburban town surroundings than in London, and this was a shock to experience:

> *… it's 2019, and it's twenty-five minutes out of London on the train, so you wouldn't think that you'd experience these things … I haven't really experienced that before in my life … I've just come to the outskirts of London, and I can see a difference in the way of being treated and the people that I live with … [Aisha] [I]*

> *And I just thought to myself, like, 'How dare you?' Do you know, like, 'How dare you?' So that was an experience, and, again, it's the same, sort of, in London that would never happen. [Aisha] [I]*

These findings concur with those of a study by Read *et al.* (2003: 266) which reported that some Black students chose London universities specifically to feel greater belonging. In some cases in the study, students even dropped out of another university outside London to join one in the capital to reduce the sense of being 'othered'.

Aisha explained her shock at experiencing overt racism for the first time in the suburban Londonshire town, having lived in London entirely before that.

> *… so this was like a few weeks into university, when I had like experienced racism, in [the pub]. [Aisha] [I]*

Coming to university outside London can bring to the fore a sense of being 'other than White' for students who have lived within urban majority-minority populations where ethnic and cultural difference is the norm. Equally, for overseas students of colour, studying in the UK can bring about their first exposure to racism:

The first thing you get is judgement because I have faced, even when staying in this country, I'm not going to say in the School, but even when staying in this country I have faced racism which is something not really you should be facing. [Uma] [I]

That's happened only once in my life in here, in the UK, and I hope it doesn't happen again. [Uma] [I]

And Black communities, like African countries as well [...] So, I have faced a person calling me that, saying the 'N' word and saying that you should just go back to what you were, you're just going to be dogs, and that is not the thing I want to listen to. [Uma] [I]

Researcher: So, there are things that have gone on. The racist incident that you mentioned, was that whilst on the University site and interacting in the University setting or in wider [Local Town]?
Uma [I]: In wider [Local Town], in wider [Local Town]. I was, I can tell the experience if you like [Sighs]

Clearly, for students of colour moving to the UK for the first time from Asian, Caribbean, or African former colonised nations, the history of the relationship between their country and the UK is not just historical but is apparent in the present. For Uma, racist comments in the local supermarket (above) and on the buses brought into sharp focus how the history of colonisation influences the present sentiments of the UK population, and how racism is part of life, the 'weather' (Sharpe, 2016), for students of colour at Londonshire:

Because that just shows that you are nothing, no different than your ancestors. UK built an empire that's built on blood and bodies. [Uma] [I]

Mbembe (2016: 45) states that 'non-racialism is the antithesis to the rule of the market'. Uma is calling both the UK at large and the University to account for how they have benefited from the link between colonialism and capitalism in this historic market. As a student of business, Uma is asking for this link to be made visible and acknowledged. This societal racism was also felt on campus, and whilst Uma acknowledged that the University as an institution does not want racism to pervade the experience of its students, and cannot screen applicants for racist attitudes, she demonstrates that racism is a frequent experience for students of colour nonetheless:

It's not the University wants to do this, it's like the people who come here do and it's not like you can just admit those people who don't … [Uma] [I]

Multiple times throughout these 1 and a half years that I have been here, multiple times I've felt that … Only since coming to the UK, yes. [Uma] [I]

She shows concern that her fellow students of colour will be experiencing a similar level of racism if she is, and that her experience is not isolated or a 'one-off':

First is it's being done to me while I am in the UK, while I am a student. The second being that's a shop that is being frequented by other students. [Uma] [I]

Thing is, it's not just me. If you reach out to more people, majority of the international BAME community that have come here, they have faced racism in some way or another. Some subtle … some very explosive and explicit, but they have. [Uma] [I]

More insidious forms of racism, in the form of hidden racist attitudes, also affected Uma – and by association her fellow students of colour – whilst on university premises:

[…] this is something that we see happening every day. Even on University grounds, I might not hear something very explicit but I might see, and I have seen like White people avoiding me. [Uma] [I]

And then the bus drivers being racist, there is a lot of international students face that. [Uma] [I]

Microassaults (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 41), as described above, include name-calling, avoidant behaviour and purposeful discrimination. Uma explained that it is difficult to challenge such forms of racism as they are embedded in social structures and atmosphere, conveying sentiment without words or actions, leaving them hard to evidence and call out.

[…] [a] word or an action is written and recorded; sense is something you feel. [Uma] [I]

An example is how Aisha felt in the pub where the bartender served White customers before her, and in France, where classmates went silent after she explained her personal experience of being 'othered' in Tenerife:

> *I'd noticed that, like, the server, they basically looked at me and then they looked at a White couple, and then he chose to serve the White couple. [Aisha] [I]*
>
> *[…] the girl of the couple, she was, like, getting really rude, swearing, threatening, like, stepping up into my face, and, like, threatening to, like, get physical. [Aisha] [I]*
>
> *[…] the server, he was treating me as the aggressor … You know, it's not fair. [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha reiterates that the expectation in White-majority contexts is often that the victim of racism will learn to handle it, and the perpetrator will not be expected to change their behaviour or learn why their actions were wrong:

> *[…] the victims of […] this, sort of, racial thing, whatever, we are taught how to deal with it, but I see that those who are inflicting it are never held accountable. [Aisha] [I]*

Sue and Spanierman (2020: 112) argue that institutions can deal with microaggressions in two ways: (1) remove/mitigate the causes; (2) work with marginalised groups on how to take care of yourself if you experience such an incident. As removing the causes is a long-term structural issue, one which Bell (1992) argues will never happen due to the permanence of racism, institutions can in the meantime offer fora in which students can call out and process the damage done to them with appropriate support, whilst also educating the perpetrators on the impact of their acts. Aisha explained how knowing she would not be believed if she reported racist microaggressions made her feel like she was struggling alone because it could not be evidenced:

> *And so, of course, it's hard to say, 'I'm a victim of this'. [Aisha] [I]*

She compares this surreptitious form of racism to the more overt racist incident she experienced in her first-year flat, to explain how so many of her experiences of racism go unnoticed or unacknowledged by others (White people) yet create an ever-increasing number of microaggression 'mosquito bites' on her psychological well-being (Liao and Taylor, 2023):

> *[…] and so I said, 'Okay well, I'm going to have to report this'. And I went to report it and, again, the same thing. I said, 'I feel like I'm being bullied, and it might be racially motivated'. But the thing is with, like, racially motivated, nobody's going to outright, apart from the guy who sent in the GolliXXX, nobody's going to outright call you slurs or whatever, but you feel these microaggressions [...]. [Aisha] [I]*

Derald Wing Sue, the psychologist who first coined the term 'microaggressions', argues that the voices of the most oppressed and silenced tell of

> … the many hurts, humiliations, lost opportunities, need for change, and the often unintentional microaggressions endured as they struggle against an unwelcoming, invalidating and even hostile campus climate and society. (Sue, 2017: 37)

This had clearly been an aspect of Aisha, Uma, and Bernila's experience during their time at both Londonshire and their partner universities abroad and in the surrounding town of Londonshire. Campbell (2024: 1176) explains that universities have historically been hostile environments for students whose racial backgrounds speak of colonial histories. Nathan spoke of the campus being 'hostile' in terms of friendship groups which do not cross or intermix, alluding to microaggressions in the atmosphere:

> *Everyone's kind of hostile at the University if you know what I mean. [Nathan] [I]*

Gamu brought an intersectional gendered layer to her comments on racism and how this adversely affected her as a Black woman in the workplace:

> *[…] just to bring that representation within the business context, because I know that, you can imagine the barriers women of my colour faced. Well, let's not even talk about the masculine side of things or even the race, we face double barriers. [Gamu] [I]*

The consequences of racist incidents and microaggressions can mean Black and Asian students pay a penalty in terms of their sense of belonging, their self-confidence, their desire to access available support, their ability to engage fully with other students in class and in residences, their trust in the institution to intervene when racist incidents are reported, their well-being, and their

desire to stay and progress through the years of study without dropping out. As Aisha demonstrates in her story, she considered dropping out of university in her first year; then having been persuaded to stay by her tutor she nearly dropped out again when she was studying abroad in France. Each time, this sense of not being able to carry on was a direct result of racism towards her by White people:

> *It was supposed to be a year abroad, but it got cut short because of how I felt at that particular institution. [Aisha] [I]*

Jìng sought sanctuary in places which reinforced her identity as a Chinese woman, with a Chinese friend. She spoke of missing her home country and the isolation she felt in the UK, so being in an environment where she didn't stand out, and didn't face language issues, gave her relief from the everyday struggle of trying to be understood and included in UK student life:

> *[…] my flatmate and I went to Chinatown, to eat Chinese food, you know, I'm Chinese so I really miss my country so eat Chinese noodles. [Jìng] [I]*

Being Othered

Participants felt that the University did truly respect and value different cultures, and that it offered opportunities for students to connect with one another and share their cultural norms and practices, in both the learning and social contexts of student life. However, Bernila had a contrasting experience when studying abroad; as a result, she drew upon her primary cultural identity (Filipino) there, as a response to being 'othered' as 'alien' (Said, 2003: 227) in that new context when her British identity was overlooked.

Bernila had spent two years in Londonshire University before taking a compulsory year studying abroad in Spain as part of her degree programme. In Spain, she felt her ethnic identity and cultural identity suddenly came into sharp focus, and she felt hyper-visible. She tried to find a community beyond the Spanish and Catalan communities, which she felt were exclusionary and rejecting, and took an active decision to reject the Spanish university, as its students had rejected her upon arrival. This was an act of unbelonging; choosing to make no further effort to belong to the student community which excluded her and othered her, she instead looked for community elsewhere and found it in abundance.

I decided to live abroad, not study abroad. [Bernila] [I]

Her search led her to find belonging amongst the market sellers in the city centre and within an Irish pub. Spending time within these settings meant poor attendance at university, but she described the experience as developing a greater sense of self:

> *They made me feel like I want to be a Filipino again, that's why I got this tattoo, to celebrate that. [Bernila] [I]*

As she was not identified as British in that environment and internal power struggles divided Spanish people along micro-culture lines, Bernila's Filipino identity was strengthened and came to the fore through a process of identity renegotiation. This aligned with Goldoni's (2017: 334) study of a Black male US undergraduate studying abroad in Spain, who felt a diminished return on his family's investment in his time abroad due to racial discrimination and exclusion. This led him to reject class attendance, preferring to learn the urban language and "invisible culture" of Spanish locals. However, these interactions were fleeting as he felt, specifically as a Black man, that he was perceived as a threat and could not build the language network he had anticipated. Research shows that peer groups are important sources of identity and cross-cultural understanding whilst studying abroad (Talburt and Stewart, 1999), so when students of colour and diverse heritage are rejected by cohorts of host nation students, their ability to gain the social and cultural capital they'd hoped to acquire are limited. Ethnocentrism (Barbuto *et al.,* 2015: 270) in the new context seemed to expose the expectation that British equals White, and therefore there was little cultural relativism in comparison to the environment at Londonshire. Bernila felt she could not be her authentic self in that context as her true self was somehow not good enough for the 'local' students, who actively made her feel that she did not belong to their group:

> *[…] local students, have been changing my work without my permission, submitting it, and then we did a presentation, I have nothing to say because I don't know what to say. [Bernila][I]*

Othering is reinforced by language barriers, perceived and actual. Whilst many overseas students arrive in the UK with good English language competence, those for whom it is not a national language or who were not taught in English at school can find it difficult to adjust. This adversely impacted Jìng's ability to connect with others at Londonshire as an overseas student, where her language competence marked her out as visibly 'Other':

I think I can't, when I finish with my lecture, I will ask other students, I can't understand what they're saying. [Jìng] [I]

The Authentic Self

Self-policing of one's authentic self was something Gamu highlighted in relation to maturity. As a mature student with confidence that other younger learners had not yet developed, she was mindful not to dominate the tutorials:

[…] how do I balance myself so that I don't come across as intimidating. [Gamu] [I]

There was perhaps also a stereotype playing in the background of her thoughts relating to the prejudiced image of 'the "angry" person of color archetype' (Leonardo and Porter, 2010: 151), about which she felt she needed to be extra vigilant.

[…] but this particular student approached myself and another mature student, and said that what we are doing is actually not helping them to build their confidence. [Gamu] [I]

[…] because 'we know it all', that was the expression they used. [Gamu] [I]

[…] I need to be mindful of other students, who might have something to share. They might not share it when a question is asked, but they might have something to share, but how do I manage that so that I don't come across as, I don't know, to intimidate them? [Gamu] [I]

[…] although I thought I was being engaged to help motivate others, it was perceived as me being intimidating, so I need to be aware of that side as well. [Gamu] [I]

This feedback, which led Gamu to worry about being perceived as intimidating, inhibited her ability to express her authentic self. This is something staff at Londonshire highlighted during a Black History Month guest talk in 2023 when women tutors from Ghana and Nigeria explained they had learnt not to laugh or speak too loudly, for fear of being perceived by colleagues as overbearing or dominating. Sue and Spanierman (2020: 50) identify the pathologizing of a communication style as a microinsult, borne out of contrast with a 'dispassionate and objective' Western communication style, the insular, undemonstrative English norm (Said, 2003: 231).

Gamu clearly felt her authentic self was a misfit in the classroom, and she became self-conscious about the way she was behaving, questioning whether she would be perceived as 'intimidating' or 'confrontational':

> *[…] so behind closed doors had to send out an email to say, this is what's happened, so please forgive us if we are not as engaged as we want to be able to give younger students the opportunity to also contribute. [Gamu] [I]*
>
> *I wouldn't say I was confrontational. [Gamu] [I]*
>
> *[…] it's just not knowing that someone could take an offence to me being engaged in the class so much. [Gamu] [I]*

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000: 69) refers to various forms of 'controlling image' within the matrix of oppression at the intersections of race, gender, and class, including the stereotype of the highly educated Black woman who works 'twice as hard as everyone else' and is labelled as aggressive, unfeminine, and 'too strong' or '*too* assertive' (Hill Collins, 2000: 81, 77, 81). Clearly, Gamu was policing herself in a way which appeared to be regulated by this stereotype.

Nathan found that he could be his authentic self whilst he was on placement, where he was interviewed for a project about student life:

> *I was able to open up with her, you know … like just about, you know, just life experiences and things like that, you know. [Nathan] [I]*

Initially, Aisha was open to sharing her cultural practices as a way to connect with new students:

> *[…] they saw the food that I was making and, like, 'Oh my goodness', like, you know. But it was a nice exchange. [Aisha] [I]*

However, she reflected that, in her excitement to meet new people from different backgrounds, and wanting to widen her circle to include White friends for the first time in her life, it had been unwise to bring her authentic self to these new relationships:

> *[…] my approach to making friends, I was a little bit gullible and a little bit too optimistic. [Aisha] [I]*

This openness had left her exposed after the racist incident in her flat, and following this breach of trust she shut her authentic self away in the presence of White flatmates. It took three more years before Aisha felt she could express her authentic self publicly:

> *I only started to cover my hair and be visibly Muslim beginning of this year. [Aisha] [I]*
>
> *… before that, I was doing things that Muslim people should not be doing like going to the club and stuff like that. [Aisha] [I]*
>
> *I never really met, I don't think I met any Muslims at [Londonshire], like, as my friends. [Aisha] [I]*

Bernila felt that the nuanced Spanish-Filipino culture was more accepting of her sociable nature and excitable behaviour, and that her authentic self-matched better with Spanish sociability than the reserved UK culture:

> *I never felt like I belonged to the Filipino community here. [Bernila] [I]*
>
> *UK, everybody's much more depressing. [Bernila] [I]*

Uma felt unable to be her authentic self around UK White people too. In relaying a story about White students who avoided standing near her at the bus stop on campus, she expressed her hurt and frustration that she was unable to address this herself directly and there was no mechanism in the University for dealing with such surreptitious bias:

> *So, I ignore that because the reason being again fear. What if that's a White person, a UK White person and if I say something to them, what's going to happen to me? So, I can't speak out. [Uma] [I]*
>
> *[…] no matter how much we try to be rational and emotional, feelings are the things that do drive us around, that drives everything around the world. [Uma] [I]*

The 'feelings' of which Uma speaks here, and her sense that White people move away from her at the bus stop, is evidence of what Sue and Spanierman (2020: 113) have identified as a

heightened perceptual wisdom and intuition which People of Colour develop to protect themselves from invalidation. As the Macpherson report (1999: 362) stated, 'A racist incident is any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person', therefore perception is more important than proof or intention.

For Jìng, the overriding feeling was one of being on the verge of failure and fear of making a mistake of some kind, either culturally or communicatively, due to a lack of integration within UK society. She expressed a reticence to be her authentic self, for fear of making 'mistakes', perhaps culturally:

> *[…] but I don't want to make mistakes, you know, and afraid to talk with others. [Jìng] [I]*

Shared Racial Identity as a Cultural Asset

Students who have closer ties with other students from similar cultural heritage backgrounds experience a protective effect of this bond. Chavous *et al.* (2018) found that students who had stronger 'racial centrality' between them struggled less in attaining their academic expectations. Whilst it is lamentable that such a need exists, they reported greater resilience in the face of racist microaggressions and stronger academic identity in a negative racial climate than students with weaker racially centred relationships. Aisha's story certainly concurred with this, as her shared racial identity with flatmates of colour served as a 'cultural asset' (Chavous *et al.,* 2018) following the two racial conflicts with White flatmates:

> *So, we were a flat of nine, I think, and me and my girlfriends, we were two Black and two Asian. And then it was the other three White flatmates with the exception of one Indian. And then there was a flatmate who just minded his business, he was barely in the flat. So yeah, that's literally how it divided. [Aisha] [I]*

> *I think because we were ethnic minorities, that's what brought us together. I think religion, because we all weren't super religious, it just didn't make a difference. Think it was mainly because of just the ethnic, kind of, just feeling more, like, relatable to each other. [Aisha] [I]*

Uma, Gamu, and Beatriz emphasised the importance of shared personal characteristics in developing a sense of belonging, which implies that shared racial identity across both staff and students builds relational belonging:

> *[…] because we are always looking for similarities and that is the thing where the belonging comes in because we are looking for similarities. [Uma] [I]*

> *[…] even if I have something that I have in common with those people I always have people around me that have a similarity to me, and that helps me to belong. [Beatriz] [G]*

Uma exemplified this using a scenario whereby if a White member of staff had been racist to her following her interview with me, she would presume all White people were racist due to shared racial identity, a shared 'invisible' Whiteness (McIntosh, 2002).

> *[…] if someone were to be racist to me and then I look at you and you're sitting here, you're talking to me, and then if I leave the room and then I face someone who's racist to me, I'm going to say all these White people are racist […]. [Uma] [I]*

Gamu, too, mentioned a heightened awareness of her similarities with other students and staff:

> *I think it represents like me coming from a different country, these are people at university, they're very similar, that I see around, and then this is me, and other people that I find they have similarities to me. [Gamu] [G]*

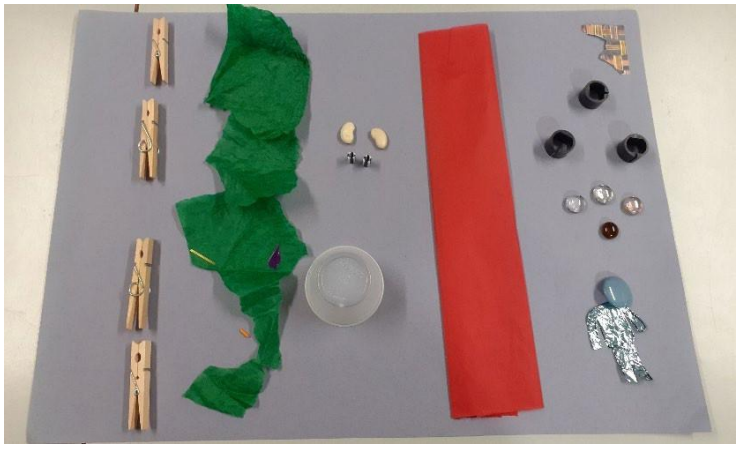


Figure 4 GAMU'S NON-STICK COLLAGE

Often, students feel they must hide their true self in order to feel included in achievement settings (Bovill, 2020: 16), but Gamu felt she could be her authentic self with lecturers who shared her Black heritage. Beyond showing empathy through listening and advising, tutors can enact authenticity through validating and recognising students' lived experiences (Gravett and Winstone, 2022: 5). Gamu demonstrated the importance of this in her collage (see Figure 7):

> *[…] this is also lecturers who also look like me. [Gamu] [G]*

> *That was something, that said I belong, because you know that if people are from the same community as you it understands me better, and so therefore if you're approaching them for help and support it's a lot better, that's just my understanding of how I see things, as a Black person, yeah. [Gamu] [G]*

She intimated that her friendship circle of White friends did not understand her in as great a depth as her Black tutor who could emotionally concur with her experiences (Warrener and Douglas, 2023), although her main White friend in the group shared the characteristic of maturity with her, which mitigated some of this social distance.

However, she later had to continue living with these same students who had revealed racist opinions, and this led to a terrible impasse within the residence:

> *[…] when certain flatmates walked in, it was just, 'I just don't even acknowledge you'. And, again, it's really awkward living like that. [Aisha] [I]*

Ethnic Identity Societies

Whilst ethnicity was a characteristic which could bring students together on macro-lines, it was also one which could divide along micro-lines. Bernila, Aisha, Sean, Jìng, and Uma had engaged with student societies centred on ethnic identity. For Uma, this had provided the comfort and connection she had sought:

> *[…] for Asians to have, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, for them to have a community feels like we have created that … It gives me a sense of belonging … It does. For Asian students, it does. [Uma] [I]*

Sean felt both accepted and disappointed by his membership of a society based on ethnicity:

I could relate as well because with the [cultural society] like obviously I felt belonged, because it's with people like that, it's like a Black society so I felt like I belonged to somewhere … they had like one or two events so for like Valentine's edition and stuff like that, which was good, but at the same time towards the end I just realised like it really wasn't it, if that makes sense? ... So yeah, just literally left and just carried on with the uni lifestyle, so yeah. [Sean] [G]

[…] because with the other societies like [cultural society], I just felt like what I was hearing about it, I didn't want to be a part of that. [Sean] [G]

The cultural society served its purpose early on as a place in which Sean could belong to a community based on shared heritage and identity, but once it had connected him with others he no longer needed to engage with it. Once that sense of belonging had been achieved, he had greater confidence to engage more widely and not require the structure of a society to make connections. Prince had not joined a society, but felt in his final year that he would do so if he had his time over again:

Yeah, I think I would join the BAME society, to learn about different cultures, […] if I did it again. [Prince] [G]

To which Aisha queried:

Wouldn't it be the [African-Caribbean cultural society]? [Aisha] [G]

This interaction demonstrates the confusion which can arise when many ethnic minority groups are homogenised into one acronym BAME, a problem which Aisha highlights and corrects. However, it isn't clear whether Prince was limiting his exploration of 'other cultures' only to those linked with the Black diaspora.

For Aisha, when joining a religious society, overt religious symbols and the overseas/home cultural distinction both created a division between her and other Muslim students, leading to a sense of rejection and lack of belonging within a student society she'd expected would accept and represent her. 'British Muslims' are commonly presumed to have South Asian ethnicity, essentialising Muslim identities and othering non-Asian Muslims in the process (Johnson, 2018:1677). This was a particularly hurtful affront, as people from racial minority groups often

seek sanctuary and confirmation of their experiences in a 'collective peoplehood' (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 114) which offers some immunity to racism:

> *So yeah, I joined [religious society], but it was for me, I'm not going to lie, like I didn't feel like I belonged there … Yeah, so obviously for me covering my hair and like practising my religion, that's something that's happened over like the past year, so obviously when I started university I wasn't … yeah, I was a Muslim but I wasn't practising, but I had the intention to, which is why I joined [religious society], but then […] when I went there in terms of the diversity, like there was nobody that was like Black like me, and also […] everyone would kind of find whoever's from their country and they'll speak in their language, I don't understand what they're talking about, yeah. And then like it just felt really just quite rude, like I remember one time I was standing there with them, and we like salaam each other, salaam alaikum, peace be upon you, and they just, they salaamed other people around me, not even me. [Aisha] [G]*
>
> *[…] as Muslims we shouldn't be behaving like this. [Aisha] [G]*

Interestingly, as both a mixed-heritage Black and Muslim woman, Aisha had not joined a society associated with African-Caribbean culture and had only endeavoured to join a religious society. Her growing religious identity outweighed her ethnic identity in this case, even though all her friends in school had previously been of a similar ethnicity rather than religion:

> *[…], it's really funny because my cousin says to me, like, 'Why are all your friends, like, mixed? Why's it all mixed? Why are you all light?' And I was like, 'I don't know, it's just, I don't know'. [Aisha] [I]*

However, she had made an active decision to widen her circle on arrival at university:

> *Because usually you, you know, it's human nature to, […] draw towards people who are similar to you, whether it's, like, looks-wise, like, interests-wise. But it is nice to, […] branch yourself out and expose yourself to different people. [Aisha] [I]*

Research has shown that Black students often face challenges when attempting to form friendships with White peers, resulting in their social circle mainly comprising other Black

students (Mimirinis *et al.,* 2023: 6). The cause of this is Whiteness, which allows the dominant White majority to 'occupy space within a segregated social landscape' (Kobayashi and Peake, 2000: 393) where racially 'othered' people are pushed to the margins. Thereby, those who occupy mixed racial identities are often forced by society to identify with one or the other, usually the minoritised heritage if they do not 'pass' for White (Harris, 2018) and fall outside the 'benchmarks of Whiteness' (Akuoko-Barfi *et al.,* 2023: 472).

Bernila had also joined a society based on ethnicity in her first year, and had done so intentionally, seeking not just to participate, but to lead; however, she was thwarted by Covid-imposed social restrictions:

> *I'm trying to, you know, be part of this uni as much as I can, just before I go, because I never got to be […] the [ethnic identity] Society President, I never got to be that one. [Bernila] [I]*

She also felt the society had attitudes which excluded her and rejected her:

> *[…] I met the society leaders, so they're quite nice, but would I join? Probably not because, I don't know, it's just not for me. I feel like, I just, they have that presence, like you're not, you're not part of this thing. [Bernila] [I]*

Jìng initially hoped that attending her East Asian cultural society would enable her to build a sense of community with others of shared heritage, but found that it was lacklustre and didn't offer her the structured connection she sought:

> *I joined but they never organised events together, so I don't know others…in the last year, you know, I think they don't have so many, how to say that? So many passion to organise events, I think. [Jìng] [I]*

Student-led societies are vital for building informal connections, yet perhaps require some staff support to maintain continuity of service over the long term.

Relational Whiteness

Uma felt that being an overseas student of colour in White UK society was doubly as lonely as being a home student of colour. This was because Black and Asian UK residents couldn't relate

to her experience as an overseas student on a visa, even if they experienced the same racism from White society.

> *[…] being an Asian student, an international Asian student you will, I mean, I do feel alone a lot of times because the people here, whatever their race, but the people of UK, they're not going to understand what I go through. [Uma] [I]*

Although she later remarked that she did have White friends whom she could appreciate as kind and caring, even if they could not understand the fullness of her lived experience, she went on to say that others avoid connecting with her because their experience is so far removed from hers:

> *I've got White friends, I have got British friends who are so nice to me and they do judge me based on what I do, what I am, what my personality is, not based on my skin colour. [Uma] [I]*

> *[…] but then again they have got their own like, again, culture shock, culture change so if I don't conform to their culture they avoid me. It's totally fine honestly because if you don't vibe with me, if you don't feel that connect with me you avoid me, that's not like a crime, right, to avoid or like to not stay with someone if you don't feel that connect with them. But sometimes I do wish that they could understand where I'm coming from. [Uma] [I]*

Uma refers to the injustices enacted upon people in India, and other former British colonies, which have resulted in unequal distribution of resources, power, privilege, and value between these nations and the UK to this day.

> *It's like, you know, UK used to rule India like, right? [Uma] [I]*

> *And it shatters you because historically obviously we've got, as Indians, we don't have hatred but there's some form of like clapping back for UK which we do have. [Uma] [I]*

Whiteness is linked to power; it is socially produced and created from narratives of empire and nation (Blachnicka-Ciacek and Budginaite-Mackine, 2022). Uma asks UK society to apologise for the situation which has led to her feeling out of place in the UK, beyond simply being a visitor. She wants an acknowledgement of the power relations which have led to the racist behaviours

and attitudes in White society and which are still apparent in the systems and structures in that society today. Uma seeks recognition that the status quo was founded upon the 'reification or marginalisation of bodies and the normalisation of whose voices matter' (Gravett *et al.,* 2021: 8), which calls for a relational pedagogy of mattering. In feeling the past is ignored, Uma is subject to the microaggression of 'invalidating historical trauma' (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 125).

> *And with the universities, one thing I forgot to mention was that you see what's gonna make it right, how you can improve is start by acknowledging and working and being honest and transparent. [Uma] [I]*

Uma senses there is not just a cultural difference between her and her White friends, but also a power difference. This exhibits itself in a feeling of supremacy being conveyed by White students to Asian students, perhaps because the latter has what Rodricks (2024: 2) defines as a 'transnational, Desi immigrant body – a body shaped by 300 years of colonization':

> *It's not really like lots of White friends as such but I do feel like they do look down upon me just because I don't conform to their culture. [Uma] [I]*

> *I can't speak much about the UK BAME students as such except for maybe the cultural similarity, but what they have faced, I can't speak much about that but I'm sure they have [...] [Uma] [I]*

Uma is so conflicted in her relations with White people because her trust has been broken by the racist incidents that she has experienced since arriving in the UK. She clearly sees the good in people; she wants to connect with staff and students and be open, but feels so hurt by mistreatment that she cannot bring herself to truly trust others' intentions:

> *For me, with my course, with my professors, they have been such lovely human beings. But when again, when someone who looks like them, speaks like them, they do bad things to me, how am I supposed to feel? I feel conflicted because there's this something in their eyes, when they talk to me about my nationality, that's a, I don't know what to call it, that's an automated response that comes from a mind. What should I think of your nationality? [Uma] [I]*

Uma praises the staff who have supported her on her student journey and specifically mentions a White member of staff by name as someone who is non-judgemental and empathetic. Codorili-McMaster (2021:26) found no clear relationship between staff ethnicity and awarding gaps,

however, concurring with the findings of Husbands et. al (2025: 677), Uma still feels she would have been more fully understood, and belonged more, if she'd had the option of speaking to a staff member of her own heritage background:

> *Yes, but that will be good because I like had [staff member] and she is White but she is lovely and she understands and she helps a lot … I do feel like she's understanding me, she's not judging me as such. A part of me does wish that maybe an Indian would have been better there. [Uma] [I]*

Despite growing up in the UK, Bernila references having a slight Filipino accent which affected the way people in Spain *'seem' to* be unable to understand her when she spoke English, which Sundstrom and Kim (2014: 21) might term 'civically ostracizing'.

> *[…] people seem to not understand the way I speak English. [Bernila] [I]*

This is an example of the pathologising of communication styles, which is a micro-insult (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 51), leading to exclusion.

Bernila, throughout her studies both in the UK and in Spain, sought belonging from a wide group of people, not just those of a particular ethnic or social identity. She found this sense of belonging within groups of racially othered people. Here, Whiteness surfaces in the act of othering anyone who is not White, with or without intention. This leaves students of colour seeking safety and community with anyone who experiences this sense of being 'other than' White.

> *Everyone. You've got the Dominicans, there's a lot of Filipinos there, […] they're workers in [the market], Brazilians, you name it, I've probably met quite a few. That's why I don't, I feel like I don't just belong only in one group from this uni, I have other friends out there, they're all spread out. [Bernila] [I]*

Jìng herself had some internalised Whiteness in her preference for British lecturers and her underlying assumption that they spoke the correct version of English, unlike English speakers from other nations:

> *[…] sometimes I can't understand what they are saying, I mean, they speak too fast and sometimes different people have different accent, especially Indian accent. [Jìng] [I]*

Fortunately, my tutors are British so I can understand something. [Jìng] [I]

Jacob (2020) argues that the construction of what 'language' is and how language is understood links directly with social dynamics as viewed through a colonial lens. This prestige associated with Standard English is based on Whiteness, whereby speakers of English as a first language from former colonised nations such as Nigeria, Ghana, and India are seen as speaking an inferior version of English to that of British-born speakers, if they have an accent which is different to RP (received pronunciation). It is unclear whether this preference was impacting upon Jìng's comments, but it seems likely to play a part.

Whiteness was revealed in Aisha's new friendship circle, following the racist incident in the pub,

> *[…] my flatmates were, you know, half of them were White and then the other half, we were, like, black or Asian. So, I just said, 'Do you know what? I don't want to talk about it because a lot of you wouldn't have experienced what I have to experience, I just don't want to talk about it'. [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha here reveals how Whiteness is a division in all settings where People of Colour experience social interactions differently to White people. Most White people are unaware of this different lived experience within a single shared context and will question its validity when raised by a person who experiences racism. The social separation along racial lines in Aisha's flat was caused by White students' inability to understand the way the world is experienced by people who are marginalised by the White majority:

> *[…] for me, it felt racially motivated, and youse guys don't know how that feels, so I don't want to talk about it with you. [Aisha] [I]*

> *[…] youse guys won't get it. [Aisha] [I]*

> *[…] because youse guys are like, 'Oh, but you were still ... He said that you still done this' [.] I just didn't want to talk about it. [Aisha] [I]*

By withdrawing to the sphere of her flatmates of colour, who had an unspoken and unquestioning understanding of what she had experienced, Aisha protected herself from any further microaggressions that might happen when she explained her feelings and responses to White people.

> *So, then it turned into a huge argument with me and my flatmates and then, yeah, and then from there up until literally Christmas, the flat was so awkward, it was divided. [Aisha] [I]*

Further incidents with racial overtones ensued within the flat. This left Aisha questioning whether she could belong and stay at Londonshire, as Whiteness kept rearing its head there in a way she had not experienced in London:

> *[…] we were all girls, and the White students were mainly boys. I think, obviously, the girl, her boyfriend was friends with them, so that's, kind of, why she was with them. But we did try, because she was a girl, we actually did invite her out and stuff, but she never wanted to come. [Aisha] [I]*

Clearly, the intersection of race and gender had a part to play in the division. Aisha felt that this had returned relationships to the status quo of her schooldays, when friendship groups had self-segregated along racial lines:

> *Like, I wasn't shocked by it. [Aisha] [I]*

Whiteness exhibited itself in Aisha's French classroom when the staff presented the zero tolerance of racism policy. When Aisha commented that she would not be going back to Tenerife because of the racism she'd experienced on holiday there, others in the room reacted with silence, or by making noises of discomfort and disbelief:

> *And when I said that, I wasn't ashamed to say it, everybody, kind of just turned around, and some people just, like, sighed and stuff, and it just felt very uncomfortable for them to hear. [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha's story butted up against the Whiteness in the room, which always seeks to dismiss inequality between races. It promotes a worldview of meritocracy with a fair system that enables equal outcomes for everyone if they contribute and adhere to Western values. The myth of meritocracy is a microaggression which dismisses the power of systemic forces to influence educational underachievement and unemployment rates and instead blames individual deficiencies (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 54). Aisha's lived experience, as someone who has grown up in the UK and worked hard in her studies, contradicts this view of society:

> *'You can feel uncomfortable, but this is my truth'. Do you know what I mean? [Aisha] [I]*
>
> *With France, it is very [...] I feel, honestly speaking, I feel like they're, like, a decade behind. [Aisha] [I]*

Whiteness predicts that White people will feel uncomfortable when oppression is mentioned and that a culture of silence will prevail (Freire, 1970) to protect those in the normative majority. This majority does not experience the structural oppression that exists in the university system, whose inherent principles and practices determine 'terms of entry that are key to its reproduction' (Carruthers Thomas, 2019: 33). However, the emotions do not dissipate, and Leonardo and Porter (2010: 149) argue that 'anger, hostility, frustration, and pain are characteristics that are not to be avoided under the banner of safety'. Indeed, the EHRC (2019) report into racial harassment in British universities found that whilst microaggressions were increasing (27% of these were being experienced in the classroom), 66% of students said they chose not to report racism on campus for fear of personal consequences. Eddo-Lodge (2018b: 7) argues the choice is simply to 'speak your truth and face the reprisal or bite your tongue and get ahead in life'.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the concept of Relational Belonging as evidenced in the students' stories. I have demonstrated how this type of belonging is founded in human relationships and impacts how easily, quickly, and firmly students connect with one another and their tutors, to build worthwhile, meaningful, trusting relationships at university. I have also evidenced how racism and discrimination can quickly ruin these relationships when trust is broken, and exclusion, rejection, and implicit racial biases (Rapping, 2013) are exposed.

Relational Belonging is one of two foundations to feeling welcome, valued, included, seen, heard, and represented within a university community. Next, I will explore the second foundation, Structural Belonging, which can develop across the years of study and which is important to establish early in a student's journey if they are to feel a sense of belonging and transformation at university.

Chapter 5: Structural Belonging

Introduction

Structural Belonging is the term I have given to students' sense of alignment with the University's values, mission, vision, goals, aims, regulations, expectations, resource provision, and priorities. These are some of the structures of an institution; they give rise to the 'feel' of the place, the sense of who and what behaviour is welcome, and by proxy, who and what behaviour is important. Structures also include the curriculum, the assessments, the facilities, the buses, the services offered, the safety nets provided – the 'things', both tangible and intangible, which constitute an organisation beyond its people. As Sean put it, organisational structures include 'stuff that is done':

> *… stuff that is done, going to lectures, made me feel like I'm into university if that makes sense. [Sean] [G]*

When students' values align with those of the institution – and they feel the structures are supportive, reliable, fit for purpose, of a high standard, value for money, represent their interests, and help them to progress and achieve – they feel a sense of loyalty and pride. Participants spoke of pride in the institution, and in aspects of the university structures at subject, course, module, and professional services levels. They felt a connection to buildings, benches, cafes, particular rooms, social areas, and particularly the LRC. Students demonstrated that this sense of pride, once gained, is lasting and moves with them beyond the boundaries of the physical campus, as far as other countries.

Structural Belonging was evidenced when participants felt they were well treated by the institution in terms of regulations, care, and support from services such as the Wellbeing Team and the International Office. Belonging regarding these structures necessarily requires an alignment with the aims and ambitions of the organisation, and a feeling that one's individual goals will be achievable in that context as there is access to the necessary resources and support. Structural Belonging is not an attachment to the people of the University, but rather an alignment with the policies and procedures organising it and a sense that its regulations reflect values such as fair treatment, kindness, and compassion – the sense that its services provide help for those in crisis and that concerns will be taken seriously and addressed. Such actions matter in the creation of pride, and whilst there are ups and downs in the development of Structural Belonging, as much as there are with Relational Belonging, by their final year students relayed a sense of pride in attending the University and an affection for the brand and public perception of their alma mater.

However, universities are spaces where students are educated from the perspective of a particular worldview via an 'epistemological contract' (Bain, 2018: 18), and failure to sign that contract has consequences. If academic and professional staff only understand their own way of making sense of the world, they are not able to create appropriate learning situations which represent perspectives and skill sets different to their own (Jarvis and Graham, 2015).

Students' experiences of the structures of the University are impacted by their own multifaceted self-identity. Whilst race has been shown to hold significant identity salience amongst university students in the US and UK, particularly for Black Caribbean heritage students, for many, religion, life-stage, and family have greater identity impact (Aspinall and Song, 2013). However, 'Blackness' or being Muslim affect sense of belonging within an environment in ways which do not impact White students (Aspinall and Song, 2013), through 'public ethnicity' (Modood, 1996: 185), regardless of other identifying characteristics.

The term 'institutional racism' first came to national prominence in 1999 via the government's Macpherson Report on the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. The verdict cited institutional racism as one of three incompetencies of the London Metropolitan Police during the protracted investigation and led to the term entering UK vernacular. This high-profile indictment led some to question whether agents of the state could be racist and whether the structures within which they work could be causing differential outcomes for People of Colour. As Roche and Passmore put it, 'As long as we assume that, because we as individuals are inherently non-racist that we as a profession are non-racist too, and therefore that we need do nothing explicit, we miss the point' (2021: 4). Yet, as Berry (2022) explains, institutional racism isn't about the principles or behaviours of individual employees, but how institutional structures consistently disadvantage people from ethnic-minority communities. The findings below detail the structures of Londonshire which impacted a sense of belonging for the racially minoritised students in this study, which contributed to differential experiences and, potentially, differential outcomes.

Campus

Participants identified places on campus which represented safety and comfort. These included the LRCs, cafeteria, cafes, nightclub, business development hub, halls of residence, and university buses. The common factor across all these spaces is that they are public, busy, and open access. Whilst often the participants were in those spaces alone, they drew comfort in knowing they had the right to be there, and carved out little spaces within public places to which they regularly returned:

> *When I was living on campus in my first and second year, I felt like I belonged, because I was meeting new people, I had my own space. [Prince] [G]*

> *[…] the bench, just beside the LRC, that where I go to, which is my own space … that space, gives me a chance to explore, to gain even more, even new experiences, that gives new feelings, new meanings to the word 'belonging' for me … every time I go there and after classes, in-between breaks, or something, I sit there and I can see every moment there, just leading up to new paths [...]. [Uma] [G]*

Uma elaborated metaphorically on the importance of that bench, explaining how its position between the Business School, the LRC, and the business development hub gave it an extra sense of safety and comfort for her. She explained that these three buildings represented the University's commitment to supporting both her current learning and her future achievements:

> *… it gives me warmth, a bit of like, you know, the feeling that you get when someone hugs you from behind and just hugs you nice, cosy … so when I look back at it I feel that warmth and it says that with both the buildings … if you can interpret it with both the buildings standing there as sentries, as supporters, saying that 'don't worry, we'll take care of you'. [Uma] [I]*

The bench provided a reflective space where Uma felt 'held' by the Business School but also supported for the future by the business development hub. Uma brought a photo of this bench to discuss in her interview as a visual metaphor for the care she had experienced, explaining that the photo represented the University saying to her,

> *We got you. [Uma] [I]*

Beatriz mentioned the campus cafes as places where she felt she belonged, emphasising how they had recently adjusted their menu to sell meals from different cultures:

> *But at the same time, it makes me feel like I belong, because at least I have a cafeteria to go to and have my lunch. And they have a lot of options. So, I feel like everybody would belong. [Beatriz] [I]*

Students spoke about the nightclub on campus as a central space for meeting new people and finding a community of friends:

> *The … nightclub at the University, which has helped me to come out of my shell … has allowed me to embrace other people, and party I would say, I don't know, it's just helped me build a community of friends. [Prince] [G]*

The LRCs on campus were unanimously seen as safe spaces, where students found some form of sanctuary, even if they did not go there to study. Despite being overcrowded at times, the fact that they were open all hours and loaned resources to students seemed to convey 'care':

> *I took it [the photo] in the LRC in my favourite room … I'm standing inside and I'm looking out and I feel a sense of calm … So, when it's […] raining even with tumultuous change, the building stands strong for me. [Uma] [I]*

> *But if at any point during term time, I need a place to, you know, come and feel safe … There's the LRC. [Beatriz] [I]*

> *… stay here and our food and comfortable eating and everything you need to succeed in books and things. [Beatriz] [I]*

> *… times when me and my friends we'd go to the library, do some work, and stuff like that, just like, just made me some sense of belonging into the University, or like into the Business School. [Sean] [G]*

For Beatriz, tangible resources and technical help conveyed 'care' for students, creating a sense of belonging:

> *[..] if my laptop broke, I know that I can come … here at any point and there will be a laptop. [Beatriz] [I]*

For Gamu, the LRC provided an anchor to which she could cling as she began developing her identity as a student:

> *… for me, the library, carrying the books home felt that I could do all my assignments because I've got the right resources, you know, because, for me, I've never studied in a university before. [Gamu] [I]*

Having knowledge of the spaces and places on campus gave Uma a sense of belonging and community, as she explained:

> *… when someone asks me small things like, I don't know, do you know where this room is, and I know I confidently can reply to that, I feel like I belong to that place. [Uma] [G]*

Hamid felt the café on campus was a vibrant milieu of study and conversation, intertwining learning and socialising:

> *Like a feeling, like a positive energy going over there … It's totally a positive energy for me, seeing people's face, looking at them, they're having a smile. Talking [to] each other in the café, buying a coffee then doing assignments. People are really engaged in one another. [Hamid] [I]*

However, some participants felt the spaces and places available for making connections with people were limited:

> *There's not really much places where you can go and like just communicate with someone, you know, communicate with others. [Nathan] [I]*

Universities' physical spaces are a representation of the care they have for their students. Thus, a lack of sufficient space in which to commune or study reflects the institution's expectations of student behaviour and attitudes to social learning (Gravett *et al.,* 2021: 8), engendering a sense of being physically present but not part of the community (Murdoch *et al.,* 2020: 678). Aisha recounted the feeling of being out of place on campus between classes:

> *… because it's just on the days that I came it was just so busy, and like it was just a bit lonely … it was always kind of like a bit awkward, that in-between bit. [Aisha] [G]*

> *So, it did feel really lonely because a lot of the time was me by myself trying to find somewhere to, kind of, eat lunch because it's a long day. [Aisha] [I]*

Beyond Campus

Participants spoke about the town in which Londonshire is situated, just eight miles from Greater London, and how it was very different to what they had imagined or expected.

> *[Londonshire Town] is a little small, sometimes I find it a little boring but it's a quiet place, so let me calm down and I can think more about my life and have a quiet environment to study. [Jìng] [I]*

> *[…] like the area's not really built for a university. [Nathan] [I]*

> *[…] but here because there's only the University to focus. We don't even have an H&M in the [shopping centre] you have to go to [other local town] to go to H&M I feel like this, the town on its own … made me focus more on the University, if that makes sense. [Beatriz] [I]*

> *Like I even told my parents and my peers like, even after uni or when I find a nice job or nice settled-in career, I'll actually come back and move down here […]. [Sean] [I]*

The geographical location of Londonshire University, whilst a cause for much complaint about limited social life, led students to feel they had benefited from the surroundings and its limited distraction from studies. This situation had developed Beatriz's outlook on life by making her focus on gratitude:

> *… the way that [Londonshire Town] changed me, it's being grateful for what I have, but at the same time, [I] complain about it every time because [Londonshire Town] is such a small place. [Beatriz] [I]*

The campus is split across two sites, which created frustration over whether to prioritise socialising with new friends and visiting the support services on the larger campus, or remain on the Business School campus between lectures:

> *… one of my friends lived on the other campus and then you've got to think about if I go there I am not going to my other lecture, like I'm just going to stay there, like, so it's like you've got to kind of make that decision … it's the travelling to the other campus, and then obviously because you're sticking around a bit too long*

you start to feel, realise it's a bit long for you to go back to the other campus. [Sean] [I]

Sean appeared to carry a sense of belonging at the University even when he was not on campus at all. He spoke of several places off campus to which he withdrew regularly to gain reflective space away from studying, including a gym and a public library:

[…] I didn't go to the school's gym, but I went to the one just outside the campus, so I used to go there quite a lot with my friends back in the day, and that kind of like, I felt some kind of sense of belonging there […] [Sean] [G]

I felt belonging [in] this place but there was times for me I just needed a break, so I just needed to like go somewhere to just reflect. [Sean] [I]

No it's my local library back in London … so the reason why I took the picture is because like it makes me feel like I belong to like a uni environment, so like it makes me feel comfortable like, and plus it also transformed me as well because I was here in my first year or second year, I wasn't really like studying as much as I should, so obviously going to a different environment or just coming out of my comfort zone just made me feel better and I've noticed that a lot during my studies as well … that my grades have improved and like I've been understanding the subjects, so the topics even more and even better. [Sean] [I]

He explained that part of the reason for this choice to study in a London library rather than on campus was to cut the cost of commuting to campus, but it was also to remove himself from the distraction of the social side of campus life. He discussed a photo of an aeroplane, which represented him actively taking himself out of the social side of university life:

I try not to get too comfortable if that makes sense, because if I get too comfortable, I become like lazy or complacent or just like, literally, so I thought like me going away just like, it's like a mental break. [Sean] [I]

One US study found racially marginalised students will take three times as long to get to the university site if the longer route renders them invisible and enables them to 'fly under the radar' (Brayboy, 2004: 126). Individuals can feel empowered at the margins when hidden, avoiding the daily surveillance of white gaze (hooks, 2014: 25); in this way, invisibility can be a form of resistance against, rather than passive rejection of, norms. Whilst couched in terms of removing

himself from social distraction, there may have been some element of Sean avoiding being noticed and checked up on.

Transport

The University bus service was seen by participants who used it as an extension of the University campus. Participants seemed to feel that they were at Londonshire University as soon as they were on the bus. Buses, and commuting generally, are a significant feature in the lives of students at Londonshire, purely by virtue of where it is situated and the fact that its two campuses straddle a motorway. Many students commute from London and other surrounding towns and live at home with their families, at least for some of their years of study, and this can reduce their ability to connect with peers:

> *[…] when you're a commuter compared to when you live on campus, again you kind of also don't feel like you belong, because it's kind of like harder for you to make friends. [Aisha] [G]*

However, commuting can also be perceived as part of the university day, either when using local public transport or driving in, and is a collective community experience:

> *… commuting to uni in my third year has given me back my sense of belonging … [Prince] [G]*

The bus provides almost an extension of the classroom for some students, who study on their commute and even sit online tests from their bus seat:

> *Maybe some of my online classes are taking in [sic] my bus while travelling. [Hamid] [I]*

> *[…] in the bus I used to study myself, prepare for my exams. That's [a] type of [...] that's a belonging, isn't it?" [Hamid] [I]*

Sean found commuting on public transport difficult and frustrating, and has since increased his sense of belonging by driving to university instead:

I used to commute or walk to uni, and to lectures and stuff, but now that I passed my test and I've got a car now, the transformation of me from walking … to driving, really motivated me and like made me feel welcome. [Sean] [G]

In his first two years of study, he'd often ruminated about how much he wanted to drive in:

… if I drove like this would be so much easier … That was on my mind 24/7. [Sean] [G]

He implied that as his public transport commute was so difficult, the University had put barriers in the way for him. Now that he had overcome those barriers, he felt more welcomed by the University, as if he'd reached a threshold of being valued and accepted. By buying a car and having an easier journey to university, he felt he matched the normative model of a student on a professional course in a Business School and thereby felt more accepted:

… the transition from taking the train, then to going into a car, having your own personal car like, it was a massive, drastic change for me, like it made me, motivated me and I don't know, just made me like become a better person. [Sean] [I]

One of the signifiers of adulthood and independence in younger adults is the passing of their driving test. Uma felt inhibited in developing personally through this rite of passage due to her international status and the lack of earning potential which would make it difficult for her to cover the costs, due to visa constraints:

I mean, obviously I go through the driving test procedures and everything the same way, but then again maybe I don't have the chance, the opportunity, to earn enough as my peers do. [Uma] [I]

Beatriz, too, felt uncared for whilst commuting on the University buses, with their lack of reliability creating a sense of isolation:

… there's a service that I feel like, you make me feel like I don't belong, like I'm alone, let's say, which is the … you know, bus situation. [Beatriz] [I]

… as a small university place we should have, you know, a reliable form of transportation. [Beatriz] [I]

> *It makes me feel like I'm alone. For me, it's a given, like, where, wherever I live, there should be a form of public transport, because we're a community you know. [Beatriz] [I]*

In her hometown in Portugal, buses connected people who live near one another. At Londonshire, she wanted to travel by bus for the sense of community, of being known and noticed, rather than walk alone or get a taxi on her own:

> *You're just walking; when you get an Uber, you're just getting an Uber. [Beatriz] [I]*

> *… in my hometown, having a form of the transportation, the public transportation, means I can see my neighbours […] in the bus, I get to know the bus drivers. You know, I say good morning, I say good night, stuff like that. And it just makes me feel part of a community. Not having that, which for me, it's like a basic, makes me feel like I'm not … I don't belong. [Beatriz] [I]*

Hamid remarked upon the length of his bus journey and how often he is thwarted by the overcrowding and lateness, which meant he then arrives too late for his class, and must listen to the class online from the bus:

> *I need to take one hour travelling on the bus from [Other Local Town] to [Business School] campus, I need one hour journey and … if I have a class at ten o'clock, I need to attend the class in the bus while on the journey. [Hamid] [I]*

> *… the service are really poor because a lot of students just rushing and pushing each other to get the bus because we're having class at eleven o'clock, but they're getting over there at twelve o'clock because of a bus shortage. And that's really hard. [Hamid] [I]*

Learning and Teaching Structures

Jìng's fitting in was hampered by the fact that she felt she had insufficient English to understand classes and participate. She felt a need almost to hide this fact, by remaining invisible to the tutors and relistening to the recordings after the classes to try and improve her comprehension:

[…] others, students from another country, their English are very good and they know how to understand and answer the questions and answer very quickly but I just sort of watch. [Jìng] [I]

Jìng also felt that UK higher education places an emphasis on coursework in a way that other countries do not, and this is a culture shock for students entering from China.

Actually, my academic writing is not good because when I'm in China, I never write an English essay … Yeah, in China, we just write the exam, like the paper, we never write essay. [Jìng] [I]

Whilst English competency was not a problem for Uma, culture shock limited her ability to contact tutors in the early stages:

So, if I want to talk to my lecturer because again, the community that I come from, my personal experience, the community that I come from, it's not a very open community as such as the White community is. [Uma] [I]

… the feeling we associate with teachers is very different than other countries. [Uma] [I]

Beatriz, too, noted different expectations of independence in learning between her home country and the UK. She remarked on how the emphasis on research and critical thinking, rather than rote learning, led her to develop in different ways than she might have done had she stayed in the Portuguese education system:

Like all my assignments, it's me, whatever I found what I … the more I researched, the better grades I'll have. Whilst in Portugal, I would have the more that I studied, the better grades I have. So, there's that difference. [Beatriz] [I]

Hamid observed a similar difference between expectations in India and the UK:

I just want to tell that in my country it's a different way of teaching, it's a different way. And over here it's extremely different way. [Hamid] [I]

And country's different, we need study on things and just write on exam paper, we're going to some exams or type of things like that. So, over here, it's different. [Hamid] [I]

Financial Structures

Uma felt that her status as an overseas student left her uncared for by the institution when fee-payment issues were difficult to resolve across international banking boundaries:

I'm talking from the shoes of an international student. It makes me feel like the University does not care. [Uma] [I]

She relates this delay in money transfers as a particular structural issue for which international students should receive compassionate flexibility in the University regulations:

[…] *when it comes to home students, [money] transfers from within the UK takes, even if it's a huge amount, takes maximum of one day. But then international transfers, they take about a week. [Uma] [I]*

So, when students and international students need a increasing timeline maybe, let's say a 7-day time deadline extension. They should receive it, but they don't get it … Yeah, a fees extension in such because it's not the fault of the parents. It's not the fault of the sponsor of the students. It's not the fault of the student […] the bank is delaying. [Uma] [I]

Her sense of powerlessness and of being at the mercy of systems and processes beyond her control was palpable:

[…] it's not something that only I can handle, me sitting here as individual. That is connected to my country that is connected to the banking systems, international banking systems […]. [Uma] [I]

The practice of denying students access to learning platforms whilst their fees are in arrears conveys to Uma a sense of not being a valuable part of the community, and creates a lack of belonging:

> *… while the amount reaches the University's account, the student is suffering. [Uma] [I]*
>
> *I've seen my friends experience this, failing modules [and] not being able to sit for assignments or exams. So, this is something which is the University's fault. [Uma] [I]*

The specific international student experience is separate from the broader racialised experience but is impacted by it. The way in which a Black or Asian student is perceived by White society is compounded by their identity as an overseas student. Uma felt this starkly upon her arrival in the UK, when she saw that there was protection afforded to second-generation Asian students who had family in the UK:

> *… even if you're talking about the BAME community here, their parents have emigrated to this country, they have some form of support system here which we don't. [Uma] [I]*

In Uma's mind, students with migrant family histories, with overseas heritage and UK citizenship, held a more secure position in the University than international students. Certainly, the UK-domiciled students in this study all lived in their family home for at least some of their university years, an option which offers safety and financial security and which overseas students do not have. This vision of citizenship giving access to rewards like increased mobility, greater right to work, and ultimately fuller integration into society (Anderson, 2013: 114) created a divide for Uma, who felt precarious and insecure. Having no support network to rely upon in the country, and being restricted in other ways by visas and lack of permanence, left Uma feeling isolated and envious of UK-born Asian students who do not have to navigate such intricacies:

> *… there's lots of ways I do feel alone a lot in this country. [Uma] [I]*
>
> *… I felt was fear because often we have seen it, it's true as well, that the UK laws and regulations are very strict. And what it makes me feel like is that okay, if I make a mistake, oh my God, something's going to happen to me. I'm not going to be gaoled or anything but I'm still going to have to pay a hefty fine or something like that. [Uma] [I]*

She was also afraid of laws relating to visa requirements and working time limitations:

Because like let's say, 20 hours work week, in India we don't have anything like that. [Uma] [I]

Cultural Norms

Uma went on to explain that the culture shock of arriving in the UK extended beyond adhering to academic norms, and was eased by support from her peer community:

… in terms of cultural shift which is a huge cultural shock we get when we come here, in terms of being introduced. The systems that I have faced in my home country, obviously that's going to be different. [Uma] [I]

… if you are on the bus and your bus is the next stop how do you stop it because the stop buttons. And the first time I saw that I was like, 'should I press it?' I don't know, but then my friend just goes and presses it. Okay, that's how I know. [Uma] [I]

For Uma, this created a divide between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', where the having was not just monetary, but also related to the safety available through having local knowledge and proximal family. Uma goes on to demonstrate the loneliness of navigating new procedures and systems in the UK, and trying to learn the rules of behaviour and interaction, when she tells of a student who was rudely admonished by a bus driver for trying to get off the bus at a lamp post which he'd mistaken for a bus stop:

And what happens then is that he just comes back and sit and he's sad. He's disappointed, he's hurt. He doesn't know. [Uma] [I]

Whilst she found that her upbringing did not match with White students' upbringing and contributed to her culture shock, it was comparable to UK Black and Asian students' upbringing, which seemed to give her some sense of comfort and familiarity.

When I say the BAME community I mean it around the world, UK, outside UK, everywhere because we grow up in strict households. [Uma] [I]

… we have got certain things we need to follow like I see a lot of my White friends saying oh, you can just do it. I'm like no, my mom would, not literally, but metaphorically kill me. [Uma] [I]

Uma also noted that the culture shock was emphasised by the digital shock of entering the UK from India:

> *… it's not a digital country as such compared to the UK which is heavily reliant on digital stuff, on digital economy, on digital system, operating systems, everything's digital here. [Uma] [I]*

Equally, culture shock can be experienced by exchange students when studying abroad, if they are unprepared for the cultural and political mores of that country:

> *A lot of the international students were confused because some of them don't know about the independence thing that Catalonia wants. [Bernila] [I]*

For Bernila, studying abroad highlighted a cultural difference between British Filipino and Spanish Filipino people, highlighting the intersectionality of multiple cultural influences:

> *There's a lot here because of nurses, this, that, but over there [in Spain] I felt like they're way nicer than the ones here. [Bernila] [I]*

> *I'm only friends with a couple of Filipinos in the whole of UK, but in Barcelona it's a different story. [Bernila] [I]*

> *There is that, oh, my son's doing this, my son's doing that, what about your daughter, why is she still in uni, why has she got a tattoo, why is she wearing a swimsuit at the beach, why is this, why is that, you know? [Bernila] [I]*

She felt much more comfortable within the Spanish Filipino community due to less perceived judgemental expectations which she viewed as UK culturally informed.

Aisha found it difficult adjusting to a country (France) with very different political attitudes towards religion, and different cultural attitudes generally:

> *From admin to the way that they deal with certain situations. I honestly feel like they're well behind us. And, again, that was something that was hard to adapt to. So, I mean, I know with religion, they're very Islamophobic, let's be honest. [Aisha] [I]*

Getting Support/Struggling Alone

There seemed to be an expectation of being chased and pursued by tutors, rather than having the personal agency to approach them for help. Far from feeling like tutors acted in a parental role, as three of the female students had relayed, the four Black male participants knew tutors were available but waited to be searched out rather than proactively reaching out to tutors themselves for reassurance and guidance. Sean, in his final year, clearly knew there were academic skills tutors available and how to get help from them, but he still wanted his course tutors to make that connection for him:

> *So, they could like chat to the tutors at the [academic skills centre], and then they could just sort something out from there. [Sean] [G]*

He commented that despite knowing there was help available, he actively resisted seeking support until the pressure built sufficiently and he had to admit he could not resolve the issue alone:

> *Yeah, because obviously with me personally I'm the type of person that I don't really ask people for help … [Sean] [G]*

Prince concurred with Sean that he didn't feel he was entitled to seek help without it being arranged formally for him, and that he should take the 'blame' for not succeeding all by himself:

> *… Oh, yeah, cause the lecturers would say 'go to [academic skills centre]' […] but I never would […] Cos they banged on about it so much, and it just felt like a mythical thing. I felt like no one's gonna help you [...] You have to get through this yourself as you, you put yourself in this position. No one told you to come to university. That's how I felt OK. [Prince] [I]*

His unwillingness to seek support stemmed from his sense of personal responsibility for his decision to come to university and that he should shoulder that burden alone. Feelings of anonymity in a large cohort of students have been shown to cause disconnect between staff and students and a discomfort in approaching tutors for help (Gravett and Winstone, 2022: 11) as to do so conflicts with the perceived ideal of the 'good' independent student who is 'clever' (Read *et al.,* 2003: 270), and is also aligned with perceptions of Whiteness (Shah and Grimaldos, 2022). Prince explained that when he got low grades in his assignments and told his mother, she advised him to seek help, but he still refused because

Me thinking that I can do it on my own. [Prince] [I]

Prince admitted he felt like it was just him who was struggling with student life, later explaining that he now realised this was not the case and it hadn't been helpful to think he was alone:

I kind of was struggling in silence. [Prince] [I]

Like I used to think that my educational journey was mine and mine alone and that's not the way to think. [Prince] [I]

Nathan, too, felt like he was on a lone journey:

I felt like no one really cared. [Nathan] [I]

Aligning with the capitalist reverence for individualism, Prince and Sean thought seeking help or responding to the offer of support would imply weakness in themselves, and this prevented them from doing so:

I would like to like figure stuff out myself, until like I use it as my last resort to go to someone. [Sean] [G]

That's like me too. [Prince] [G]

Sean also reflected that this approach had not served him well, and he had failed to progress quickly and easily as a result:

Someone telling me to go to this to do that, that would be like my last resort, so if I'd done that back then […] I would have grown by now fully. [Sean] [G]

In later years when Prince was connected to academic skills support through tutor arrangement, he felt an increased sense of belonging as a result:

[…] this year, now that I've actually had a chance to use like the resources properly that the University provide such as [academic skills centre], I think that it's given me a sense of belonging. [Prince] [I]

Doing so gave him a broader sense of self within the University community, and he felt less of an individualistic burden to achieve success without help from others:

> *[…] it shows that when a student is struggling on one aspect of the university life there are people that you can talk to and there is help that can be provided which will make you feel like you're a part of something bigger than yourself. [Prince] [I]*

Sean, Prince, and Nathan, all Black male students, referenced not seeking help when they could have benefited from academic support. The feminising of higher education through expanded support services deters those students who are perceived as masculine, or who are performing visible masculinity, from accessing help (Leathwood and Read, 2008). Care work has long been deemed the domain of women, and feminists argue that the interpersonal dynamics of caring deal with feelings and emotions, but also power. Support being *available* to all students does not mean it is *accessible* to all students (Mimirinis *et al.,* 2023). Support is a relational matter, reliant on both the offer and the help-seeking behaviour required by the student, but this link can be broken by lack of trust, perceived stigmatisation, or cultural/gendered messaging concerning the importance of individualist pursuit and signalling of who matters in the distribution of care (Gravett *et al.,* 2021).

Within UK schools, the focus of attention is shifting to spotlight the underachievement of boys (Archer and Francis, 2006: 23), and University of Londonshire's new Access and Participation Plan (Londonshire, 2025b) prioritises increasing retention and degree classifications amongst male undergraduates, particularly Black and Asian male students. Learners must believe they can succeed at university, otherwise they have little vested interest in attempting to do so (Tinto, 2017: 257). However, the way support is perceived amongst 'non-traditional' students can be negatively impacted by any former experiences which may have led to negative self-perceptions of academic 'potential' (Spencer, 2021: 93) and low self-belief.

Racially minoritised students must decode what 'having potential' looks like and perform these traits in order to be recognised as viable (Burke, 2018: 378). To be seen as authentic, they need to speak out, engage in discussions, and write academically. Such expectations reinforce neocolonialism whereby the 'Other' is required to perform Western, White behaviours to receive recognition, but must do so within systems which reinforce inadequacy and racist marginalisation. For racially minoritised students, race has a compounding negative effect on this self-efficacy as their sense of belonging in an achievement setting is more 'debilitated by adversity' than that of White majority students (Walton and Cohen, 2007: 87), even in the absence of prejudice or anticipated academic evaluation. Additionally, Tuitt *et al.* (2016) argue that following years of silence in the school system, racially minoritised students learn not to

bring their whole selves to the university environment, so perhaps Sean, Prince, and Nathan were continuing their silence by initially not engaging with support services and staff for fear of misrecognition and in anticipation of being shamed (Burke, 2018: 378). In contrast, when staff show they care for young people, this is known to foster resilience and striving behaviour (Flett and Nepon, 2020: 671), which seems to have been the conduit by means of which Prince turned his situation around following failure. Sean seemed to be still waiting for this demonstration of care.

Nathan felt unseen, unheard, and uncared for until he saw behind the scenes as an intern. Having taken a paid role in the University's central services department, supporting various equity agendas, he had gained an insider's view of how university resources are targeted towards those who need them most.

> *… there is support out there for you no matter who you are and no matter what you're going through. [Nathan] [I]*

> *… now being here I realise that there is actually a group of people […] that are trying to better the lives of many students, especially with, from the BAME backgrounds, yeah, and that's a, that's a positive you know. [Nathan] [I]*

This comment highlights the importance of publicising the projects, bursaries, initiatives, offered within the University that are aimed at equalising outcomes for Black, Asian, and minority ethnic students, as well as demonstrating the outcomes from those efforts.

Similarly to Nathan's comments above, Prince seems originally to have thought tutors were disinterested in students, and that approaching them for help might be deemed a distraction or annoyance:

> *I realised that I could ask people for help and the lecturers were there to help not just to teach you and go about their day. [Prince] [I]*

Uma mentioned the academic skills centre as a supportive resource:

> *… if I have any doubt with my assignment, I can ask my [tutor] or I can ask them, I'm coming here, I can ask [academic skills centre]. [Uma] [I]*

Jìng clearly had not understood or registered the multiple messages she would have received about the open-access academic skills support available, because it was news to her that she could just seek help via drop-in sessions or one-to-one appointments. This would have been very helpful to her during her first few assignments, but she had never used the service at all, asking:

> *If I can't understand the lecture, the knowledge of the lecture, can I ask for help here? [Jìng] [I]*

However, when students had connected with staff, the supportive tone of interactions and the permissible concessions in University regulations when problems arose seemed to convey care:

> *I couldn't able to submit an assignment on time, but I just email my tutor, say, 'I'm not well, I'm just having high fever', she said, 'Don't worry, I'm going to give you two weeks. Take your time, just come and do the assignment'. She was really helpful and just cool. [Hamid] [I]*

Prince also felt that the University had supported him by enabling him to fulfil his potential through times of adversity, such as Covid and his repeat year, by accommodating extenuating circumstances and offering flexibility.

> *I felt that looking after myself and utilising the various deadline stretches that we can get away with really helped transform my way of thinking and studying in the University … [Prince] [I]*

Aisha associated her sense of belonging with the level of concern and care exhibited by Londonshire's support services; she rated this favourably in comparison to the level of care she received from the partner university in France whilst studying abroad:

> *At [Londonshire], whenever I've had issues, you always get the support. Things are tweaked a little bit for you … about belonging, being able to go to the wellness team at [Londonshire] and seek help. And even after that, you know, I was still checked on after going, phone calls, 'How are you doing today?', you know, 'Have you gone to lesson? Have you … this?' [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha felt that there was always someone to get help from even if the first port of call proved fruitless; for example, when working relationships between students break down entirely, or where racist microaggressions are perceived, and the group cannot remain together:

Sometimes lecturers are quite rude about it, so you do have to get somebody higher to come in, sort it out, but at least you get to a fair resolution. [Aisha] [I]

This she contrasted with her troubles studying abroad in France where she felt totally left to deal with everything on her own without staff intervention:

But in France, it was just, like, that's your own business. [Aisha] [I]

The cultural differences between expectations of students' behaviour in India and in the UK left Uma feeling too timid to ask for help, as this was not something staff regularly provided willingly to students in the Indian HE system, where reverence was expected:

Unless you've got the confidence to speak up, which we don't because as a community I feel like we are scared to open up. We are scared to speak, we are scared to ask. [Uma] [I]

[…] Generally speaking we are scared to ask because we feel like what is the other person going to think? [Uma] [I]

Reflecting consciousness of the 'good citizen' stereotype (Anderson, 2013: 99) Uma expresses fear of being cast as 'them' and not 'us'. This reflects a society where those who are economically and educationally successful as contributors are afforded the rewards of citizenship and are allowed to join the 'us' group, whereas migrants, who are seen as depending on the state or economically inactive, are perceived as oppositional to this model. Thus, they are more likely to face precarity and restriction, remaining 'them'. Uma avoids highlighting difference or doing anything which could be conceived as unproductive.

However, Uma implied that there were cultural reasons why she didn't seek help, even when she knew it would benefit her and was openly available. Having said that it was strict in India and she felt she couldn't approach her tutors there, she noted the difference:

But here, I can ask my professors, 'I can't understand this, can you explain it?', and they sit down and they help. So, for me, see, I'm only going to know that they're helping if I ask, but that asking part does not come out easy. [Uma] [I]

She suggested helping international students to adjust to this new way of help-seeking via some form of buddying scheme, informal friendship and guidance, or staff guidance in the early days of their transition to the UK:

> *If my White friend comes and my UK friend comes in and helps me out it is important. It's not only about friends but if the staff says maybe the University can hold a session with how to deal with culture shock … [Uma] [I]*

The students who had studied abroad as part of their degree also experienced struggling alone, and Bernila described an additional gendered precarity to this:

> *… there was a point where I wanted to quit study abroad because I couldn't take the pressure, the pressure from, not just from uni, but, you know, living abroad alone for the first time, as a woman, especially in Barcelona, where it's rampant with crime, especially against women, is quite crazy. [Bernila] [I]*

> *… but there I had to be extremely careful and more resilient … There's not a day where I've not been followed or harassed. [Bernila] [I]*

Whilst studying abroad, as well as feeling awkward and self-conscious like Aisha, Bernila felt positively unsafe whenever she was alone in public areas, and this was heightened by experiences she'd had whilst there:

> *Here, people just stare, but over there they would follow you all the way to your door or even try and push your door in, it was that scary. [Bernila] [I]*

Similar findings have been reported by other students who studied abroad in Spain and noted racism and sexual harassment as commonplace (Lott and Brundage, 2022: 2; Talburt and Stewart, 1999: 164).

Jìng did not seek help because she felt her language skills would let her down if interacting with tutors, so she struggled on alone:

> *I have the lectures and it is a little difficult for me so I took a picture to remember anything I can't understand so I feel a little tired for me. [Jìng] [I]*

No, I never get help. I don't know how to ask others. If I ask my tutor, sometimes I can't understand what my tutor's teaching. [Jìng] [I]

Sue and Spanierman (2020: 118) argue that marginalised people experience increasing microaggression stress over time, with the third stage being one of exhaustion and depleted energy. Whilst it is unclear whether this was due to racialised othering or purely linguistic prejudice, certainly, Jìng mentioned being tired a lot in her photo-voice discussion. She was almost entirely withdrawn from student social life, having tried and then given up on making friends or being accepted.

Bernila now felt able to contribute to her community by helping students who were repeating the year, because when she had repeated modules,

… I didn't have the support that I needed. [Bernila] [I]

Nathan demonstrated how he had suffered in silence himself, when needing both financial and academic support:

I felt like I didn't really get the support that I wanted, like so I remember I even applied for like first reason ones and I wasn't really getting the answers that I wanted and I wasn't getting like any sort of help. [Nathan] [I]

I think it was both, I think that was both financial and academic side of, yeah support. [Nathan] [I]

Financial concerns are the second most prevalent reason why students consider dropping out of university in England (Hillman, 2024). Like Nathan, Beatriz explained that initially she was preoccupied with financial concerns and this limited the amount of time she gave to developing social connections early on, leading to more loneliness and disconnection throughout the years of study as a result:

… at the beginning although I was living on campus and I had all the opportunities to do a lot of things, going to parties and everything, I wasn't doing them because I was worried about studies, or I was worried about getting a job because I needed to pay something, pay for my food, and then now I feel like the belonging, it really starts from first year. [Beatriz] [G]

The transparency and trust between students and the University was also a vital element in feeling cared for when struggling alone. Uma commented that as a student rep, she has observed that when issues are raised and students see action taken to address their concerns, this engenders a culture of care:

> *… what they are committed to doing and they are delivering on it next, delivering on promises. That is why I love my Business School. [Uma] [I]*

> *… in terms of what I know what the Business School can do and it's committed to do when the student says this needs to be improved, the Business School takes a look at it[,] talks to everyone, does it with the rule making kind of personalized response. That is what I love. I wouldn't call it personalized response as much as I would call it a duty and commitment that it is promised. So, it's about the […] honesty, […] transparency. [Uma] [I]*

However, when asked whether she thought the struggle of being an overseas student had been worth the outcome of graduating from the LBS, she answered:

> *… often at times I find myself answering no. [Uma] [I]*

> *Every time I make my voice heard, I'm alienated. If … if not alienated, I'm ignored. [Uma] [I]*

Procedural fairness has been shown to be a vital component in building trust (Scarpa *et al.,* 2021: 4) and ultimately a sense of belonging, whereby fairness delivered by senior authorities to one's social group is received as a sense of collective belonging (Valcke *et al.,* 2020: 574). For Uma, this feeling of not being heard, along with a sense of the historical unfair treatment of her nation (see p. 95), confirmed her lack of structural belonging within the University.

Institutional Pride

Bernila demonstrated pride in belonging to Londonshire when she shared a public event related to her course on a professional networking platform. She was proud of her association with her course and the success of its alumni. Reflecting on the longevity of this association after she has left university, she said:

[…] there's the tagline of [Londonshire] alumni, it means you can be from anywhere […] it's something that is to be proud of, that is to be carried like an honour, like a badge of honour for me. [Bernila] [I]

Bernila felt protective of the reputation of her degree programme, and defended it against demeaning comments, taking strength from her tutor in valuing her identity:

… we want to make sure that our course is not something so easy, you know, like because it comes off as easy … That's what [tutor] makes us feel [laughs], like superior. [Bernila] [I]

She wore outward symbolism of the University when she studied abroad, demonstrating pride in her home institution:

I was wearing my [Londonshire] hoodie over there. [Bernila] [I]

I'm actually very proud, do you know what, I always, I've always said this to the people that I met in [Spain], you know, I never regret taking [degree subject], especially from Uni of [Londonshire] [...] I advertise my uni, I'm very proud of my uni. [Bernila] [I]

Aisha, too, felt proud of the institution when wearing her hoodie, as an outward symbol of her attachment to Londonshire University:

And sense of belonging, being able to always look at that hoodie and be like, 'Yes, this is my university leaver's hoodie. This is where I studied. This is the degree that I have'. [Aisha] [I]

Beatriz's sense of pride in the institution grew as she became a part of the community, almost by accident rather than through active decision-making based on reputation or ranking:

… if I had done my research before, I'm sure … I wouldn't have gone here. But at the same time, I'm very grateful that I did. I wouldn't change anything. [Beatriz] [I]

Bernila's decision to study at Londonshire was not premeditated; it was based on convenience like several of the other participants. She moved to be with an ex-boyfriend who was not a

student of Londonshire, but she chose the University as it enabled her to live with him. Much like Beatriz and Nathan, Bernila's identity as a Londonshire student was not one she contemplated in advance; it grew once she had arrived, reflecting the finding that 'contingent choice' is more prevalent amongst working-class minority ethnic applicants (Ball *et al.,* 2002):

> *No, it was just close to his house [laughs]. We've broken up now … [Bernila] [I]*

Despite experiencing rejection and exclusion during certain episodes in her university journey, these adverse experiences had not dampened Uma's sense of pride in the institution:

> *I belong, I'm a part and I'm proud to say. Even though I've got a love–hate relationship with the University […] I'm proud to say I am graduating from the [Londonshire] Business School. [Uma] [I]*

She also links individual student success to institutional success, relaying a mutually beneficial partnership:

> *… as an organisation … claiming that … when a student becomes successful you're claiming that okay, yeah, that's our student. The student also has to feel the same. [Uma] [I]*

This led to a sense of pride in the institution, as a partner in her own transformation and changing identity:

> *When I go out, I'm going to be referred to as graduated from the University of [Londonshire]. The Business School, the [Londonshire] Business School, is one of the top business schools in the UK, it is. [Uma] [I]*

Fluctuating Belonging within the Structures

Participants spoke of not feeling fulfilment or enjoyment in learning but just going through the motions to get the grades and move on – a transactional relationship with the University, at odds with the development of meaningful, caring relationships (Noddings, 2010). This was exemplified by Aisha's comment:

> *… in terms of belonging, sometimes it was just very much go to university, attend lectures, and then go home. [Aisha] [G]*

Prince explained that during the Covid online-learning era, he would do what needed to be done to pass an assignment but didn't feel this was for his own development. Instead, it felt like he was doing it for someone else:

> *… although it was nice at the time, but it didn't serve my learning needs […] and it felt like, like I was reading books for an assignment rather than to learn the content. [Prince] [I]*

> *Yeah it was like, 'Ah, I'll just stuff this in'. [Prince] [I]*

Nathan, too, felt underwhelmed by his whole learning experience in his first year, saying:

> *I'll be honest with you[,] at first I didn't really want to be here, I wanted to leave, I was thinking about leaving [pause]. [Nathan] [I]*

Obi, too, felt disconnected and uninspired by his learning experience in first year, which started as hybrid, then became fully online after the second lockdown in December 2020:

> *I'd be a bit bored sometimes and just a bit like when is it going to get more exciting? [Obi] [I]*

Sean felt he was just doing what needed to be done to move on and complete university as he approached the end of his final year:

> *I'm happy finally to get out of this uni but obviously, I don't know, it's just like, I'm just happy to be out of the education system in general. [Sean] [I]*

Not being present on campus for much of the time limited the potential for students to feel a sense of belonging:

> *… it's hard to kind of feel a sense of belonging to [Londonshire], and the Business School, just because a lot of the time I haven't been there. [Aisha] [G]*

> *… but then that, kind of, gave me the experience of a commuting student, and that's when you don't feel like you belong there. [Aisha] [I]*

Sean concurred that during the years when he commuted from his family home, following a year in halls, his sense of belonging diminished:

> *… sometimes it doesn't feel like you belong to the University …. [Sean] [G]*

A study undertaken in 2024 revealed that in England, only 16% of first-year students reported that university life had been as they'd expected (Hillman, 2024: 6), exposing notable gaps in knowledge of higher education prior to arrival. This appeared to be particularly acute for the Covid generation in this study. Most of the participants in this study had been in their first and second year when the pandemic struck and had experienced more severe ups and downs than might be usual in student life. Sean related his lack of belonging to his demotivation from the online learning methods used during lockdown. He felt greater belonging from being on campus, and diminished belonging from the online lectures:

> *… attending to lectures, that, I'll say it made me belong and not at the same time. [Sean] [G]*

All participants experienced emotional fluctuations throughout their years of study, recounting feeling stressed at the transition to university life:

> *… obviously moving to university is, you know, when you're like 18, 19, it's a big thing, so of course it can be stressful. [Aisha] [I]*

> *…it represents a turbulent journey, but a good one. [Prince] [G]*

> *I've had a lot of problems in my first year. [Bernila] [I]*

For Jìng, these ups and downs, of which she recalled mostly feeling down, led to only a tentative sense of belonging:

> *Sometimes I feel I'm belonging in Business School and sometimes I'm not. [Jìng] [I]*

Developing a Student Identity

Bernila highlighted that there are different student identities attached to courses in the Business School, and that these stem from different reputations and different cultures of expectation and

behaviours in class. There is clearly a reflective glory by association with certain subject disciplines which are known amongst the students to be difficult:

> *Bear in mind they're doing economics and, I mean, for them, it's quite a hard subject, you know, that's why I'm not taking economics, I'm taking [a different course]. [Bernila] [I]*

Bernila felt a strong identity as a Londonshire student, even when in another country:

> *I've never felt disconnected from this uni when I was studying abroad. [Bernila] [I]*

Prince felt he could be his authentic self in his first year at university, when on campus.

> *I thought I was having an authentic unique experience, in that time. [Prince] [G]*

He then lost this sense of authenticity when all learning moved online during the Covid pandemic.

Aisha entered Londonshire with high expectations of herself, then soon lost her confidence and considered dropping out:

> *I expected to graduate with a first class, so it's like when I saw the grades that I was getting in my second year I was like, mm, no, this is not it, what is the point, I don't want to be here anymore, like I can't do this anymore, this is just a waste of time. [Aisha] [G]*

> *I was just a bit more embarrassed because I wasn't doing well, so I was like, what's the point? Like, I'm going to get a bad grade. [Aisha] [I]*

Gamu's student identity started to develop when she gained access to the LRC and could use the resources. She had previously formed her own identity as a student who reads a lot of books, having grown up in a country which had limited digital resources:

> *I wanted books, and I think at some points I carried about eight to ten books home. [Gamu] [I]*

… so, let's carry any, as many books as possible home. I didn't even get to read like two of the books. [Gamu] [I]

Gamu is a home-fee student who is resident in the UK. As she grew up and attended school in an African country, she brought with her certain behaviours and expectations of education from that environment which differ from those of UK HE:

You can imagine, back in the days, and where I've come from, my culture, we were all, you know, technology wasn't really the thing for us. I studied in, I studied in Ghana. [Gamu] [I]

… it was all about either … it's all about memorising every page by page. [Gamu] [I]

… you'd be sitting there in the assessments where there's no computer, so everything, all the books you have to memorise, all the form lists you have to memorise to be able to do your assignments erm … but then here it's completely different. So, you can imagine why I took all these books home … Level 4, thinking, right, we're back in Ghana [laughs]. [Gamu] [I]

Here, Gamu refers to two of the main identities she holds at university, relating to her age and belonging to a racial minority:

… generally, it's been a really positive experience, as a mature student and as a BAME student, yes, it's been positive. [Gamu] [I]

Interestingly, these seemed to be her dominant identities (Aspinall and Song, 2013), more prominent than individual ethnicity, religion, gender, degree subject, or commuter status, concurring with Husbands et. al. (2025: 676) that race impacts academic adjustment more than gender.

In his first year, Nathan had formed an identity as a competent student who didn't need to do much preparation or planning to perform well:

I remember one time I left my assignment literally a day before and I just thought like, yeah I could do something like that and still do good because that's what I'd done and I got about like 80% on it, so yeah. [Nathan] [I]

However, he soon realised that this was not an identity which would work well for him at university going forward, having thought:

> *I could basically make it a normal thing when that's not necessarily the case. [Nathan] [I]*

Beatriz had already started forming her identity as a Londonshire student before she arrived, through looking at the University's website and building her expectations. When she did not receive a particular resource (academic calendar) she had seen on the University website, she was disappointed:

> *… there is a kit when you start here that they left in my room, like with a can of Coke and some noodles. And I was expecting this to be on it as well, because it was on the website, but I didn't. [Beatriz] [I]*

This seemed to impact her identity as being an organised student, as she'd wanted to create a schedule and see what was going on more widely, but without this she was inhibited in her planning:

> *I can like start keeping up with dates … [Beatriz] [I]*

Like Gamu, Beatriz had been educated in another country and had brought with her certain expectations and behaviours for learning in that context. She reflected upon the importance of independence to the UK student identity:

> *Here it's completely different, at least from my course, which is, you go to class, you learn some methodology, some methods of learning, and some [degree subject] frameworks and everything, and everything is done by me. [Beatriz] [I]*

> *… here you have to find the case studies. And the more you research, the more you [...] the more grades I have. [Beatriz] [I]*

Hamid had to adjust his student identity to accommodate digital skills as an important factor, which was not something he'd envisaged when he was still in India and planning to study in the UK:

> *… over here, we use modern technology [...] Then we use to study on the laptop, like a complex stuff, like a more [...] assignments and, like, we need to type it on laptop, we need to research and do stuff. [Hamid] [I]*

Obi appeared well aligned with the University's structures and had a clear identity as a student from the start of his first year. He was focused on achievement, unlike many of his peers, who treated first year as a practice run. He felt he had benefited from this approach as he was prepared for advanced study in second year and did not find the increased level of study such a shock as others:

> *But I think because I treated first year like second year almost, I was prepared for this year more than the average person, who just took first year as just like a warm-up, not taking it seriously. [Obi] [I]*

Nathan felt there were a lot of students in his first year who didn't take studying seriously, and therefore might need a second chance:

> *… they don't take it as serious compared to second year or third year, you know … . [Nathan] [I]*

Obi demonstrated self-discipline from the outset, and appeared to have a self-identity as a hard-working student with the discipline to focus on his studies and avoid distractions:

> *… in the library, it's just, it's an environment that makes you focus. I could be there for 4 hours sometimes, just doing straight work. In my room I couldn't do that because I've a bed right next to me, I have the TV, there's just too many things. [Obi] [I]*

Aisha built her identity as a student without a template, as there was no family history of higher education:

> *… moving to university is a big deal, especially, I think I'm the first, kind of, out of my parents and stuff, to go to university … siblings, but I am the eldest, so yeah. Yeah, it's a big deal. [Aisha] [I]*

Sean felt the behaviour of attending in-person lectures created his identity as a student:

… but in my case I feel like attending lectures makes me belong, like I'm a uni person. [Sean] [I]

Gamu, Hamid, Beatriz, Uma, and Jìng all had to adjust their student identities, as their predictions about university life based on their schooling abroad had not matched the UK reality. As Jìng was only due to spend one year in the UK, as a direct entrant to the final year of her degree, she had a very short time in which to develop her identity in alignment with the structures of the institution.

Seeing the Point

In his first year, whilst living in halls, Prince had benefited from reflective time alone to work out why he had come to university and what he wanted to get out of it.

[I] … had space to think about what I was doing and what I wanted out of my degree. [Prince] [G]

He later lost this sense of direction:

Whereas when Covid hit to be honest I would open my laptop, put the lecture on and go back to sleep, and I lost motivation, which made me think why am I doing this, why is it happening in this way, and will I get the grades I wanted to achieve when I started. [Prince] [G]

Nathan seemed not to know why he had come to university, having followed the crowd and been motivated by photos of parties shared by friends at Londonshire on social media. Once he'd arrived and found that the social life was not as good as he'd hoped, he struggled to see the point of being at university, other than to make his mother proud. He needed to find intrinsic motivation for himself:

I didn't really want to come to university, but I feel like I've made that choice already now and I'm stuck here and I might as well complete it, and then I feel like once I do then I'll be free. [Nathan [G]

In his collage (see Figure 5), Nathan represented other students as happier than he was with the choices they'd made, and therefore the sense that they were somehow freer than he was:

… they've made their choices and they're happy with it. [Nathan] [G]

I have like friends that have made a choice of studying law and they're happy with studying law, or like other friend that's made a choice to come to university and they're happy with that now. [Nathan] [G]

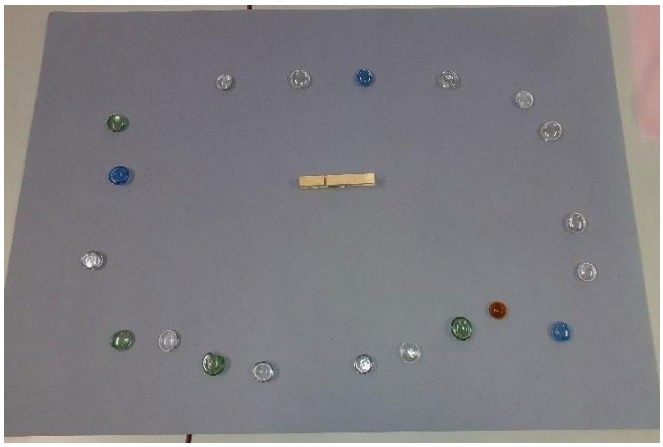


Figure 5 NATHAN'S COLLAGE SHOWING HIMSELF STUCK WHILST HIS PEERS MOVE FREELY AROUND HIM

Nathan started to see the point of his degree subject during his second year of study, as in his first year he had lacked focus and his attendance had been low.

I think that change happened for me [pause] I think it happened for me like last year when I was in my second year. [Nathan] [I]

Yeah, first year I didn't really communicate with people that much. If I'm being completely honest with you I didn't attend my lectures as much as, you know, second year. [Nathan] [I]

I feel like it was lack of interest at the time, I wasn't really interested within the course. [Nathan] [I]

Nathan's lack of interest in first-year could perhaps have been mitigated by more support from tutors and culturally relevant curricula in what Quinlan *et. al.,* (2024: 1334) term the 'early stages of interest development'. However, Nathan clearly had a sense of being out of place, and missing out on something better, both socially and occupationally. He was keen to get out of university and 'be free' and was considering transferring to another university in his final year. He seemed to be floating, unattached to a clear vision of the future, having been drawn to university under the false impression that it would provide a good social life, and staying to make his mother proud:

… if I'm being completely honest with you, I don't really see the point in university. [Nathan] [I]

… when I originally came here I was studying Business and Marketing, I had no idea what that was. [Nathan] [I]

Like significant numbers of students, Nathan saw apprenticeships as a better route to career success and wished he'd applied to an apprenticeship programme rather than university:

I feel like I could've had like an apprenticeship within [X subject] and be better off doing that rather than at university wasting away three years of my life, or four years. [Nathan] [I]

He seemed to think an apprenticeship would have led him to become more successful:

I want to be successful so that I can just, you know, yeah so I can look back and think, okay that's what I've done with my life. [Nathan] [I]

Nathan felt comfortable in the workplace context, saying about his work placement:

I feel like it's perfect for me. [Nathan] [I]

Despite progressing and gaining a placement and having had friends along his journey at university, Nathan seemed still to regret his choice to enter higher education and couldn't wait for it to end. Sean, too, was looking forward to leaving and getting on with life, as if university were a pause in the reality of that life. The other final-year participants expressed more sadness about leaving university, and greater attachment to the experience of being there (apart from Jìng, who was very sad to be there).

Uma saw the purpose of university as deciding her future for her, rather than her deciding it for herself:

It is a big part of life, something that has the capability to decide my future […] that has a big impact on my life. [Uma] [I]

Uma also felt gratitude at having the initial opportunity for success; as an overseas student, she perhaps viewed it as more of an opportunity than a home student might have done:

[Londonshire] Business School, the Business School has accepted me. They have given me the chance. I'm grateful to them. [Uma] [I]

Gamu identified the point of being at university right at the start, when she first visited the campus, as that of entering the world of business and enterprise:

So, I'm thinking Enterprise … because I like business, so I thought, right, maybe that's the place for businesspeople. [Gamu] [I]

Gamu had a very clear employability-related purpose, and friendships were not the focus of her attendance as they were for some of the younger students on her course:

… but at the end of the day we say to ourselves, we are here for a reason. [Gamu] [I]

… we're paying for this course, we're here to study, we're here to gain some insight. [Gamu] [I]

To get this outcome for herself, Gamu was very aware that she needed to be an active learner, not a passive recipient in what Freire (1970) terms the 'banking' model of education. Starting with the end in mind (Covey, 2020), Gamu knew she needed to participate and be active to make real change in her own life, showing greater alignment with the structures than her younger peers:

I'm not going to sit there not saying anything, I need to challenge, I need to understand things properly, so not saying anything, not probing is not going to help me with achieving what I need to achieve to leave university. [Gamu] [I]

I want to understand everything a bit more. [Gamu] [I]

Sean's desired identity as a business professional appeared to give him alignment with the purpose of his studies:

… in real life situations like how people wake up, they commute to work, and they make themselves feel like they're at work, it's like me with the business school, so waking up, going travelling to university, or going somewhere on campus, just gave me a sense of belonging … [Sean] [G]

However, he felt that *purpose* played an important part in maintaining his attachment and belonging to the University thereafter:

> *… but at the same time you do because you're there for a purpose, a purpose if that makes sense? [Sean] [G]*

Prince, in his final year, now felt positive about his future prospects and was considering not-for-profit employers, whereas in his first three years he had felt disconnected from a future identity in the business world.

> *Makes me feel happy, excited for the future. [Prince] [I]*

Having broadened his perspective on potential future employers, he now had greater hope that he would fit in and thrive in the workplace.

> *And it also makes me feel like the future is not so unknown anymore, like makes me feel, it makes me feel like there is a place for someone like me with a disability …. [Prince] [I]*

Flexible Structures

Bernila remarked that amongst her final-year flatmates, several had been offered a second chance:

> *… a lot of them are repeating second year … half of my flat, they're repeating the year. [Bernila] [I]*

She remembered that she had experienced a similar failure and been given a second chance at success:

> *I've done some repeating myself. [Bernila] [I]*

As she had not passed some of her modules second time around, her degree title would change to mark this difference. Her tutor had nevertheless been encouraging, and the structures had been flexible:

… for my title it's going to be study abroad instead of a year abroad because I didn't pass all the modules, and she said, does it really matter, because it's just the word difference. [Bernila] [I]

Prince felt great affinity with the University because of the care and consideration he had been shown during the period when he failed and had to repeat the year. He felt this gave him a second chance at success:

… the University has opened me up to different possibilities and like you can fail, but you can also get back on track. [Prince] [I]

Impact of Covid

Grateful for the return to campus after Covid-19 lockdowns, Prince felt that simply being around other people enabled him to transform. His comment below succinctly demonstrates the links between a community (Relational Belonging), developing in campus buildings (Structural Belonging), and enabling a sense of growth (Transformation):

So, I believe that being together in the same building in the community can help you transform …. [Prince] [I]

Covid-19 accentuated Prince's feeling of distance from social learning, and increased his apathy towards active learning during the entirely online phase of teaching in 2020–21, which offered little opportunity for experiential learning or application to 'the real world' (which had shut down at that time):

You didn't get to form any friendships because you were just there for the purpose of your assignment basically. [Prince] [I]

To be honest […] because it was so repetitive it got quite boring and I started questioning why I came to uni. [Prince] [I]

When you're here you actually feel like a person, whereas on Zoom you felt like … or, I felt like a number. [Prince] [I]

[…] like in the virtual world it wasn't what I expected so it made me start

questioning why I applied even though I was in my second year I guess. [Prince] [I]

Impact of Race on Structural Belonging

Speak Truth to Power

Participants spoke of representing the voices and experiences of People of Colour when communicating with senior leaders. Uma talked about several occasions when she had tried to raise issues of racial microaggressions in the University, and said this was because she loved the University and didn't want it to fail under scrutiny:

So doing things you can run extra initiatives and everything, but if there's some malicious comments or anything against the University, the Business School falls under it too. [Uma] [I]

Nathan only came to the realisation that the University genuinely cared when he saw behind the scenes on placement. Yet when he was struggling with issues of finance and lack of community himself he did not think the University cared about him and thought staff just followed procedures without a genuine concern for students:

I felt like they were doing it, but I felt like they didn't … there wasn't much care or interest within it. [Nathan] [I]

Having recognised that staff care far more than students can see, because much of the work is sensitive and avoids reinforcing deficit stereotypes, Nathan suggested this care should be made more visible to students who presume it doesn't exist:

I think that will be good for people to know that was going on, yeah. [Nathan] [I]

Uma spoke about 'knowing how this country works' y*et al*so described how it had isolated her. She perceived intentional rejection of her and other Indians like her by the systems and services of the UK and the University. She implied that this was because White people cannot know what it is like to be racially minoritised, as this is never their experience:

… the University has services which help but then again it can't, it's not in my shoes. [Uma] [I]

She implies here that other students are in the same boat as her, but the University can't be in that boat as it doesn't understand their collective struggle. She, therefore, seeks belonging with others who are struggling rather than from people whose job it is to support her: here, she seeks sanctuary in Relational Belonging where Structural Belonging has not been achieved.

This may account for the low engagement with open-access support by undergraduate students at LBS; they may feel that the support services do not see the world they experience and cannot walk in their shoes and so cannot truly understand and help them. This has implications for the way such services are structured and staffed. It would imply that it is essential to have diverse staff available via support services such as academic skills centres, well-being advisers, coaching, mentoring, and careers services. It is also important that students can choose who to talk to in those services, so they can find someone they trust to see the world the way they see it and therefore understand their experiences and struggles. Such a change takes proactive liberated leadership and would require positive action, if not positive discrimination, to alter the composition of the staff body to reflect the multiple intersections of gender, race, ethnicity and other characteristics of the student body.

Uma did not trust staff to take action based on students' feedback about injustice and racism. She felt she had given enough feedback to act upon over her years at university and yet hadn't seen any change as a result; therefore, she questioned the value of being asked again for more accounts of her experiences:

> *… because it comes to our mind that what's gonna happen if I fill in the survey, it's gonna be ignoring … it's nothing's gonna happen … I want the University to be honest with us … We [international students] feel that they don't care. [Uma] [I]*
>
> *… if I say the same thing to you again and again and again … if I don't see things coming out of it, I'm not gonna give a damn[.] [Uma] [I]*
>
> *… it hurts because I get my hopes up. The uni crushes it down. Why would I go again? [Uma] [I]*

Aisha relayed a lack of trust in the staff at her French university when she studied abroad. She explained that on her first day in France, she was treated differently in the shops and surrounding area as a Black woman; Aisha's mother, who had accompanied her over there to see her settle

in, was very upset about the way her daughter was treated. Then later, in her induction session at the French University, staff explained that students could raise any incidences of racism with them, acknowledging that this was common and that the University would not tolerate it. Yet, when Aisha spoke about the racism she'd just experienced on holiday in Tenerife, she felt the other students in the class reacted in disbelief, invalidating her experience, and this was not challenged by the staff:

> *And this is what I found funny, they said, 'Oh, we have a zero tolerance, and we have people that you can call if you're going through that'. And then I took advantage of that when I did go through it, and this is their solution. [Aisha] [I]*

In all the contexts relating to her university study, such hyper-visibility was a theme for Aisha as a mixed-heritage Black woman: in halls, in the local pub, on the bus, in the French university where she studied abroad, in the French shops. This relentless drawing attention to difference meant she often, if not always, felt out of place anywhere outside of major cities like London and Paris:

> *… so, belonging, I didn't feel like I belonged, obviously, because of what was going on. [Aisha] [I]*

> *I just remember I was the only black student in that class, and there was about, at least, thirty of us. [Aisha] [I]*

Uma asked me directly why I thought I had struggled to get participants to speak about their experiences for this study, despite addressing full classes of students. She implied that there was endemic distrust of staff attempts to do anything to reduce race inequity for students of colour:

> *You announced the study to a hall full of people. And you have a handful. [Uma] [I]*

> *Students are not going to interact because they have understood either from their experiences or from like second-hand … third-hand experiences that uni does not care. [Uma] [I]*

Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2021: 5) would argue that the only way for Uma to be shown reciprocal love by the University would be through achieving a sense of Mattering – through

adding value – which, as I demonstrate in Chapter 7, is achieved by contributing to the University community and beyond. However, Uma felt strongly that her opinions and thoughts as an Indian international student were not valued by the University:

> *… you've got so many other countries, other economically important countries maybe to focus on. [Uma] [I]*

Uma reveals here the 'colonial wound' (Mignolo, 2009: 161) that scars people and nations who are classified by the West as economically underdeveloped, and thereby less important on the world stage. She explains that if she and other international students of colour are to feel care and love from the institution, the University needs to acknowledge the experiences they have and the structures which limit some students from succeeding:

> *First point is not acknowledging … not acknowledging your drawbacks [Uma] [I]*

Uma felt hurt by the University's strict adherence to and unilateral application of policy regarding fee deadlines, even though international banking systems are variable.

> *… they have said we … we don't care, we don't want to discriminate. [Uma] [I]*

But this endeavour to be fair to all students was received by Uma as essentialism, grouping everyone as having the same experience; she felt this was not true and the issue was, instead, country dependent. This sense of being unloved as an individual seemed to hark back to the colonial past, and Uma described this as a constant narrative playing in her head:

> *… it came into my mind as a point of racism … because of the history that I have faced here and the 200 years old history. [Uma] [I]*

> *I think […] I am speaking for the Asian community … We have that thing playing in the background because of what UK has done to India in the past because of the colonial history of the United Kingdom. [Uma] [I]*

Uma laments that because the concept of racism is rooted in history and, therefore processes and structures which stem from that history, there will be no quick fixes, and where these are offered, they will only appease those who feel victimised, rather than change the system so it can no longer happen:

> *The problems have become so deep rooted they are gonna take years to be solved. [Uma] [I]*

> *… it's not something where you're going to quickly find a solution and job creation for it in eight months, nothing is gonna happen. [Uma] [I]*

Here, Uma hopes for a more transparent approach to eliminating inequality, requiring the University to ensure greater racial consciousness in its staff body, who can then highlight race unconsciousness in the institutional practices, procedures, and policies which form its structures. This requires naming racialisation as a historical process which remains in the present and is visible. Naming Whiteness as an ideology and calling it into question (Roche and Passmore, 2021) is an uncomfortable action, which only the most enlightened institutions are prepared to undertake.

Uma is forthright in her suggestions as to how UK society can make amends for the past and change the experience of living in White society for people from former colonised lands.

> *… for Britishers, that is something that you have to accept because that is the truth. So, it's, well, you want to try and change it, apologise. [Uma] [I]*

The Vice Chancellor of Nottingham Trent University (NTU), in response to racist social media incidents in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, acknowledged and validated the everyday lived evidence of racially minoritised students on university campuses through his public statement that '[…] racism still thrives in societies across the world, across the UK and inevitably therefore, across large institutions like NTU' (Peck, 2020). In committing to publish an anonymised list of reported racist incidents and the outcome of their investigation, NTU demonstrates an acknowledgement that racism exists on campus and will not be tolerated. Such gestures are a move towards building the trust that Uma requires, albeit not an apology for past oppression. Other universities have implemented reparations in various forms, such as the University of Bristol's (2026) Reparative Futures project to acknowledge historical links to slavery and the creation of access initiatives specifically for applicants of Black heritage.

Whiteness in the Structures

Aisha immediately felt a visceral response to Whiteness in the decision by a bartender to overlook her and serve a White couple before her on a night out:

> *I took it out on the White couple because they were smirking about it, and so he, the server stepped in, he's like, 'It's not their fault, like, I just chose to serve them, like, it's my fault. Like, don't take it out on them'. [Aisha] [I]*

Here, Aisha calls out the Whiteness apparent in the bartender's behaviour, and the White couple's acknowledgement of their privilege (evidenced by smirking). The bartender then recognises his actions as being at fault. Sue (2010: 9) lists 'second class service to a woman' as a microaggression which, in this case, was likely compounded by Aisha's being a Black woman standing next to a White man at the bar; this is known as additive discrimination.

The response of many White people when microaggressions are highlighted is often one of defensiveness and denial, because it challenges their self-identity as 'ordinary, normal, decent people' (Sue, 2010: 7). White people are mostly unaware of their own racial biases, which are the result of the sociopolitical history of the 'majority' population, imparted through systems of family, education, community, law, media, and other societal structures. Whiteness, leading to 'othering', is often hidden from White people's consciousness, and when raised can induce defensiveness, avoidance, and guilt. However, the actions stemming from this worldview are very harmful to People of Colour, and the fault lies in being unable to process and accept the outcomes which are predictable for People of Colour in a White society if Whiteness is not actively decentred or remains unspoken. Aisha was frustrated by this lack of acknowledgement or response from the White couple, telling them:

> *I was treated in the wrong way… you're barely holding yourself accountable. You know, it's not fair. [Aisha] [I]*

> *… the colleague basically admitted that the way that he treated me was wrong, but then he did, you know, hold fault onto me and said, 'But she still done this, and she done this'. [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha removed herself from the situation and suffered from the incident so much that she left the bar and went home, ending her birthday celebrations prematurely. This exemplifies the imbalance of privilege, whereby the victim of the injustice is forced to withdraw from the oppressive situation. Her response is one of refusing to contribute further to the organisation by no longer spending her money in support of it, a similar sentiment to that behind Black Pound Day and Black Business Week in the UK, which seek to keep money circulating and benefiting Black business owners, as an act of resistance.

Do you know what? I'm not going to spend my money here. [Aisha] [I]

In France, Aisha also tried to raise her concerns about being ejected from her group-work team, which she felt had racist undertones, but she found the staff unwilling to intervene:

> *… and they were going to kick me out of the group the day before the deadline, which was completely unfair. [Aisha] [I]*

> *The lecturer said he's not getting involved. [Aisha] [I]*

This may have been an example of Whiteness preventing a tutor from addressing microaggressions based on race, particularly because attitudes towards race in France are politically different to those in the UK. The concept of *laïcité* (replacement of religious values with secular values) in French sociopolitical history has led to societal rejection of racial and religious difference. It is not permissible to wear religious symbols in state workplaces, and highlighting differential treatment based on ethnicity or religion is likely to be difficult within such a context.

Microaggressions are hard to capture and materially evidence after an event. They may leave no visible mark and are not easy to record, because they can be subtle and hidden, yet they cause humiliation and pain. Sue (2010: 6) explains that 'the power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to perpetrators and oftentimes the recipients'. The response from staff was to treat the problem as if it resided in the victim, and offer support to cope with this situation, or perhaps reframe it, or build resilience and find tools and behaviours to respond to it. Whiteness is in evidence here, as the victim of racism receives attention and care, but no action is directed towards reforming the beliefs of those who caused the harm. There is an implied disbelief that racism is the motivation for the actions, a disbelief which is at the core of Whiteness. This can translate as moving the problem from the perpetrator to the complainant, with systems and processes to 'support' those on the receiving end of unjust structures (Valentim, 2024).

> *… their resolution was to put me in touch with the psychologist at the University instead of, 'what are the names of the students?' [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha reflected on the meaning of this approach. The message she received was that responsibility for resolving the issue is situated within the oppressed person, who has to 'deal with it', rather than requiring the oppressors to change anything:

I think it's more of a thing of how to deal with it instead of changing it. [Aisha] [I]

Often, being 'more resilient' is the given answer to expressions of upset over racist treatment (Kinouani, 2021: 14). This left Aisha feeling let down by the French university's support services and their pronounced zero tolerance of racism, which

… felt falsely advertised. [Aisha] [I]

The French principle of *laïcité* has caused a lot of tensions between France and Islamic nations since the ban on wearing the burka came into force in schools in 2004. Children are, however, permitted to wear hijabs, but there is obviously a lot of pressure not to, as the 'veil' is seen as disturbing and transgressive of the dominant secularism (Sheth, 2022). Aisha felt this when she was applying for a part-time job in France alongside her studies and heard that some other students had struggled to get work as hijab wearers.

It's really sad. And it's sad that it's accepted, and they can get away with that. [Aisha] [I]

Aisha found she was accepted for work with an English employer, which may not have been so easy with a French employer:

She was a British woman, and she had gone to France, she said, 'Oh, I'm going to start an English-speaking nannying agency'. And she said she's had, you know, girls going, like, 'Will you still interview me even though I wear the hijab?' Because actually, in France, in some cases, it's illegal to work with a hijab. [Aisha] [I]

In the UK, Aisha felt Whiteness present in the attitudes of what constitutes the 'norm' everywhere she went. No matter how well intentioned, there is an implied condescension and fascination with difference which marks People of Colour out as hyper-visible, objectified, and exotic (Said, 2003), therefore not indigenous to the context. There is simply no getting away from the sense that, as a Person of Colour in a White-majority nation, if you let down your guard, trust in people, take an open, active approach to connecting with a broad range of people, you could at any time have your ethnicity highlighted to you and your reason for being where you are questioned. What sits behind this everyday experience is Whiteness – a certain set of values and norms associated with White European heritage circulating in society and underlying general thinking and expectations of what constitutes the 'norm'.

Symbolism/Visual Communication

Structural values are often communicated through symbolism, branding, imagery, and tone. Universities invest a lot of money in their brand and dissemination of their strategy. The campus interior design, both furniture and decoration, convey messages about who is welcome in which spaces, what is valued, and which behaviours are expected. Gamu explained how she visited the campus to get a sense of whether she would feel comfortable in that environment before she started:

> *… it's only when you get there that you will see whether it's the place that you would be comfortable with or not, you know. [Gamu] [I]*

Gamu highlighted the symbolism of the international flags hanging along the hallway at the entrance of the campus (see Figure 9), and the impact of seeing people of different ethnic identities walking around:

> *… seeing the flags and seeing the different people from different backgrounds, where I was confident to participate … I was confident this will be the right place for me. [Gamu] [I]*

Mbembe (2016: 30) describes this 'democratization of access' to universities by (those formerly deemed) non-traditional applicants as the possibility to inhabit a space and be able to say 'This is my home. I am not a foreigner. I belong here.'

Sue and Spanierman (2020: 40) explain how 'diversity cues' transmitted through the environmental conditions of an institution convey whether marginalised groups will feel valued or demeaned in that context. The word 'diversity' implies that the system was not designed for those who are encapsulated within the term, as diversification necessarily means changing the composition of something (Nunn, 2021: 120). Gamu spoke about the safety in numbers gained by being in a diverse student community, where she expected there to be greater respect for cultural values that diverged from the White majoritarian norms, and that this would lead to a greater sense of belonging and being valued:

> *… therefore my, you know, I'll not feel a certain way, where I will feel they stirred up my views and my values may not be respected as such [Gamu] [I]*

She had been sceptical about how inclusive and respectful of diversity the University would be,

implying that organisations can project an image of equal opportunity and cultural celebration whilst structurally reinforcing everyday norms which silence certain students over others (DiMuzio, 2023: 374):

> *So, and I know sometimes, you know, you can also read about institutions on their website to see what they are all about, but sometimes it's not really reflective of what it's in, you know, practice. [Gamu] [I]*

The symbolism of flags was also noted by Bernila, but as a sign of exclusion rather than inclusion, as Gamu had interpreted above. The stark contrast between cultural identities was ever-present in Bernila's new environment at the Spanish university, where language and heritage identities conflicted on a daily basis:

> *… they put the Spanish flag up and they were saying the national anthem, this that. A lot of the Catalan students were [...] we were right bang in the middle. We were in the canteen, the cafeteria area outside, and they were just doing that, and it was crazy because we don't know like what to do. [Bernila] [I]*

Uma commented that the symbolism of the flags hanging in the University's main entrance represented a lack of care for her culture; she saw it as a form of environmental macroaggression packaged symbolically (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 39) which 'dehumanises' racially minoritised students (Blaisdell *et al.,* 2022: 476):

> *So, when I see the flags, it feels nice although they have got the flag for India quite wrong … So, there is some orange, white, green and there's a circle in the middle and that has got a white chakra on it, you know chakra like a wheel. Yeah. White wheel drawn on it. But this one doesn't, that it's missing … it made me feel like again a little bit ignored … ignoring a third world country. [Uma] [I]*



Figure 6 FLAGS HANGING IN THE ENTRANCE OF LONDONSHIRE

Professional Alignment

Sean talked about people 'forgetting themselves' due to putting so much of their energy into their pursuit of business career goals. Unfortunately, he did not elaborate on this, but I speculate that he was referring to the individualist pursuit of ambition (Hey, 2005:863) rather than the collectivist pursuit of community and connection. Perhaps this portrayed 'remnants of Whiteness' (Howard and Navarro, 2016: 260) to Sean. This statement conveyed that Sean was feeling a sense of pressure to achieve and needed to take himself away to remind himself who he really was at his core.

> *I just need a break because even in the real life there's people out there that's too like fixated in the business world or like business environment, like sometimes they forget themselves. [Sean] [I]*

There is an element of worrying that he won't fit in with the 'fixated' people, and a concern that in forgetting themselves people lose sight of their true identity. I sensed a worry about fitting in with others and the pressure to conform in order to do so, which may require him to 'forget himself' too. Non-traditional entrants to university can feel a sense of shame in 'moving up' socially, because this can imply that there is something wrong with where they came from (Dolan, 2020). Equally, employers can hold a deficit view of 'non-traditional' students from modern universities (Leathwood and Hey, 2009:433). For Sean, the development of his professional identity seemed to simultaneously motivate and trouble him, maybe because he foresaw the need to 'forget himself' and his background in order to assimilate with the Whiteness apparent in such professional organisations.

Perhaps there was a sense of Whiteness in the professional world to which he aspired, and he felt that he would need to forget parts of himself as he assumed this professional identity. Previous research I conducted with business students from Black and Asian backgrounds suggested a similar concern (de Sousa *et al.,* 2021), with one Black student commenting that whilst London has a diverse population visible on the streets and on public transport, once you're off the tube, and you watch who goes into the big office buildings, those are not the people who look like him. Sue and Spanierman (2020: 40) explain that people from marginalised groups develop 'social identity contingencies' to anticipate whether they will feel threatened or vulnerable in a particular workplace, which Sean seemed to do by ruling himself out of competing for prestigious graduate training schemes (see Chapter 6, p. 183 for further analysis of this).

Equal Recognition – Non-Essentialism

Uma was clear about the unfairness she felt in the targeting of attention, concern, and resources towards Black students over and above Asian students:

> *I'm only going to speak about the university regarding this is that, when it comes to BAME it feels like, it doesn't feel B-A-M-E, it only feels B. [Uma] [I]*
>
> *… it just feels maybe something can be done for us. [Uma] [I]*
>
> *… employability events because I was actively searching for a placement then, employability events run by the Business School would be, would have Black speakers or that … maybe mentioned something as like with the word 'Black' in the title. [Uma] [I]*

The big cultural celebration within the University is that of Black History Month each October, and Uma referred to this when she said:

> *… but I'm like not expecting a history month just for Asians. [Uma] [I]*

However, she expressed concern that other diversity events seemed to focus on enabling Black students to succeed, whereas there was little on offer specifically for Asian students. This sense of neglect did not imply resentment towards the Black students who benefited, but rather towards the University for excluding Asian students from benefiting in the same way.

> *Actually yeah, when friends come together, when my friends maybe sit down together, we do say it informally that BAME, the name just as BAME, it's only for Black people. But the thing is, we don't mean it as racist. [Uma] [I]*

Uma's comments showed an emotional response based on lack of information from the University as to the reasons for their targeting Black students more specifically for employability and student success initiatives. This was done based on data showing that Black students experience the poorest employment outcomes from higher education in the UK and across Europe (Boffey, 2023). It is imperative that students have access to the data which inspire these initiatives to justify why one ethnic group is offered extra time, attention, and networking over others. This is important so as not to create intra-racial tension:

> *We mean it as a fact that you're giving them attention, good thing. Give us some attention too, we also want it. [Uma] [I]*

Halls of Residence

Halls were the source of much social life, yet students were unprepared for living with new people and experienced difficulties which perhaps could be avoided in future by structural change. Compassion is a cognitive skill not an emotion (Gilbert, 2016; Gilbert *et al.,* 2018); therefore it can be trained, and if embedded in induction processes it might have alleviated some of the language impatience and cultural ignorance participants expressed about their roommates. The ability to establish relationships with peers is very reliant on verbal communication, and Jìng lacked the ability to engage in meaningful discussions with others, which isolated her both in classes and at home in her flat:

> *… other things like the travel and friends, we seldom talk about that because my English, I can't talk so many words. [Jìng] [I]*

Her accent was not an inhibitor to my comprehension of Jìng in the research interview, and therefore her comment below suggests microaggressions on the part of her UK flatmates in the form of their unwillingness to be patient and include her more fully in their kitchen discussions (Liao and Taylor, 2023). This left her feeling overlooked and ignored:

> *Yeah, I don't know why, maybe they … so have different accents and my accent is very heavy so they can't understand it all. I will sigh if they don't understand*

> *and like sometimes, I sit at the table, in the kitchen, and my friends sit here and they can't understand what I'm saying so they will ask my friend or I feel I was ignored, you know, because my English, I'm so embarrassed. Because our flat has many girls so we talk together, I can't talk too much, yeah. I want to talk but I can't, they speak too fast. [Jìng] [I]*

The structural approach to accommodating overseas students which places them primarily with other international students limits their interaction with home-domiciled students; however, the aim is to provide homes away from home for those who have travelled across the world, placing people from diverse countries together as they are unified by their international experience. Within home-student flats, there are also intercultural sensitivities to navigate, especially when students may have only had friends of their own cultural or ethnic background before attending university. Aisha's unexpected racist incident in halls brought an end to some of her former friendships and made her desire to leave the university altogether. However, she rebounded from this incident and continued relationships of mutual support with those flatmates who understood her experience and empathised with her:

> *I made friends with the flatmates, but literally a month into it, like, there was a big row and big falling out and a big divide. [Aisha] [I]*

> *… we supported each other through, you know, typical young adult stresses. [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha recovered from the two early racist events purely because she had the social support of other flatmates of colour, which has been shown to be vital in the recovery and coping required after racist incidents (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 119). However, Aisha felt race permeated her friendships at all stages, from school to university to studying abroad. She felt there needed to be stronger boundaries laid down, perhaps via induction processes, to govern behaviour between students so offence is not caused, and so that people of different heritages and religions can live harmoniously together in halls of residence:

> *There should be boundaries, especially when you're living with people because once, you know, things blow up, you still have to live with these people. [Aisha] [I]*

Comfort in Diversity

Participants alluded to choosing Londonshire University due to the diversity of its student and staff body:

> *I feel like when you have something in common with people around you, you can … it's easier for you to feel at home and safe. [Beatriz] [G]*

> *… people from diverse backgrounds, shapes or forms, that made me feel belonging, because I saw people and I felt right, people of the same colour as me, made me really comfortable, this is the right place I need to be. [Gamu] [G]*

Prince felt this rich diversity in the student demographic had benefited him socially. He had learned to broaden his relationships through mixing and getting to know new people in his final year:

> *Like this year I've realised that people come from different backgrounds but they can still relate to you. [Prince] [I]*

Gamu had found this to be the biggest attraction in deciding to study at Londonshire:

> *… being a mature student and making a decision to study, you want the right place to be able to do your degree, and when I saw that, and not just the differences in the flags, but also, when I came in, seeing different people from different background, I knew that I would belong, in a sense that, you know, they will be seeing people, more people like me. [Gamu] [I]*

Gamu, in her collage, literally represented the race of her friends by choosing white beads, highlighting the ethnicity difference between her and her friends very clearly. This emphasised that having White friends was an unusual friendship circle for her:

> *And then here is my friendship cycle [circle], that I made, so I had White friends [all laugh]. [Gamu] [G]*

She spoke a lot about a close friendship she had maintained throughout her three years of study with a fellow mature student, and it is interesting that she uses the words 'although she's White', before explaining that they get on well. This implies she views this closeness with a White friend as something of an exception to the norm in her life:

… this particular person is a mature student, although she's White, and me and her tend to click a bit more. [Gamu] [I]

Aisha, too, mainly had Black friends before university, so making friends with White or Asian people was an exception to her norm as well:

Never really had White friends, never even had Asian friends. I've always had Black friends. [Aisha] [I]

I'd never really been friends with somebody that's Hindu, I didn't even know what that was. [Aisha] [I]

Bernila celebrated the diversity of her course cohort and in her halls of residence, saying:

Well, in my course we're all from different backgrounds, we're very diverse, especially my group, we've got people from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, people from the Philippines, Ghana. So, we're everywhere, we've got Latinos as well in that group, and we're just everywhere. [Bernila] [I]

In saying 'we're everywhere', Bernila is grouping all non-UK students together as a category of 'othered' people who share an experience of being other-than-White. Interestingly, in the original categorisation of 'BAME' students (Black, Asian, and minority ethnic) by the Equality Challenge Unit (which predated the OfS 2001–2018), Eastern European heritage was also included in the category. Ethnic-minority groups who are deemed to be 'White passing' are mostly presumed not to warrant targeted support, as they benefit from Whiteness and European identity. They are not monitored in government statistics unless they identify as Irish Traveller, Gypsy, or Roma – groups who also experience racial prejudice due to their nomadic lifestyle.

The safety in numbers provided by ethnic diversity was a draw for Nathan, who stated that he and his friends came to Londonshire purely because friends from the year above at college posted on social media about parties on campus, encouraging them to join – there was an implied sense of safety in the known:

… we knew other people that came there. [Nathan] [I]

Hamid felt that ethnic diversity was a positive aspect of the social side of student life:

… there are different communities over there [in the café] because I'm coming from a different community, so each of the students are coming from a different community. And they're sitting each other, sharing their thoughts and helping each other to do their assignments and buying a coffee for their friends. [Hamid] [I]

Aisha explained that she felt confident she would find 'quality friends' whom she 'could relate to' because:

[Londonshire]'s quite diverse anyways. [Aisha] [I]

By 'quality', I understood her to mean friends who could empathise with her and build lasting bonds based on similarity. However, having explained that all her friends were Black-mixed-race at school, she felt positive about making friends from other heritage backgrounds:

But it was nice because I always had friends that looked like me, so it was a chance to make friends that didn't look like me. [Aisha] [I]

It was a new experience, especially my flat was quite diverse. [Aisha] [I]

… in secondary school, we were very diverse, in fact, the White students were the minorities in the classroom. [Aisha] [I]

In addition, Aisha found she met people of different religious backgrounds as well as ethnic backgrounds, and that this had also contributed to her learning journey:

I didn't know much about the religion, they actually taught me a lot. [Aisha] [I]

Hyper-visibility

During her year studying abroad, apart from a couple of comments in shops and on the bus, Aisha said she did not feel hyper-visible as a Black person in the cities of France, despite being warned by friends:

So, do you know what? One thing people would always say to me when I said, 'I'm going to France', 'Oh, be careful. It's a racist country'. Honestly, I did not feel, like, in France, I didn't feel like a minority because, I don't know if it's because I was in the south, and then I also went to Paris, of course, you have a lot of

> *Africans, North Africans. It's very diverse. And so, I never once felt like, 'Oh my gosh, I'm the only person on the bus that is this colour'. And, I mean, at that point, I wasn't covering my hair, but there were Muslims everywhere. [Aisha] [I]*

In contrast, she felt that the lack of diversity inside the French university made her feel far less welcome and comfortable:

> *It was only when I was in the school, and I think it's because it's an international school, so you're having a lot of students coming from Europe who aren't used to seeing a diverse range of people. [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha also found greater acceptance within the broader category of overseas students whilst studying in France, whereas she felt she was not welcomed into the social circle of the French students. The Erasmus students were collectively 'othered' and therefore shared some similarity with her even if this was not based on exact ethnic identity:

> *Even the group that I was in, funnily enough, it wasn't French students. It was the international European students. [Aisha] [I]*

Uma differentiated the visibility of ethnic groups along a home/overseas distinction which appeared to cause conflict, at least for the overseas students. She spoke of visa restrictions on part-time work, fee funding delays, standing out due to accent, and not being able to learn to drive in the UK as signs that there was an inequality of lived experience between the two groups, despite having the same historic ethnic heritage.

> *And it's not of just home White students but it's also about students who have grown up here. They might be Indian, they might be of BAME descent, but they have grown up here so I'm talking about UK culture students. [Uma] [I]*

Intra-racial friction was most exemplified in Aisha's story about her flat in her first year, where a White student sent a racially offensive image via the flat's WhatsApp group, causing an explosive division between flatmates along racial lines. Aisha demonstrated extreme courage by staying in the flat after the event and not dropping out of university, as she had considered doing, but the racial lines were drawn and the friction remained, albeit in silence:

December the last week, the ice kind of broke in the flat, and I was, 'Okay, I can live with these people, but, of course, there's boundaries. They're not my friends anymore, they're just my flatmates'. [Aisha] [I]

Almost a quarter of racially minoritised students report racial harassment at university (Universities UK, 2022b: 37), with racial battle fatigue responses (Smith, 2008) ranging from frustration to fear; the body may respond as if under actual physical attack, resulting in illness, headaches, and other physiological reactions. Certainly, Aisha's body responded physically to the racism she had encountered in her first semester, for she recounted how much weight she had lost and how the stress had affected her eating behaviour.

And so, you know, my mental health really deteriorated. I felt uncomfortable, I didn't want to go into the kitchen, wasn't eating. [Aisha] [I]

Racially marginalised people experience more frequent and more potent stressors in their everyday lives as a result of microaggressions. These are ambiguous and hard to challenge, but continual, pervading all aspects of life including health, education, transport, housing, and social life (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 126) creating a much heavier burden than just average life stress:

And then even more situations happened with racial intent. [Aisha] [I]

… he was in the group chat for some weird reason, and he sent in a very offensive photo of a golliXXX. [Aisha] [I]

… obviously, he'd done it for a reaction. [Aisha] [I]

He done it for a reaction, and…obviously, us Black people got offended, it was all, like, swearing and getting really aggressive and all of these things. [Aisha] [I]

Feeling optimistic about a new life at university, Aisha relaxed her guard around White people for the first time:

… even though I grew up in London, very diverse, I never really had White friends…My friends were mainly the few black students, with the exception of a few White students, and then all the White children were all friends.[Aisha] [I]

… you do see that the White students tend to group together, and then the Asians and the black students, you know. [Aisha] [I]

Tatum (2017: 76) recounts not remembering a single White classmate's name from university, and explains that 'While anger toward Whites is often characteristic of the adolescent phase, particularly in response to encounters with racism, during the immersion phase of active exploration, the developing Black person is likely to see White people as simply irrelevant.' However, Aisha entered university willing to expand her friendship circle to include White friends. This circle quickly became the source of her first experience of overt racism:

… for me, like, I haven't really experienced, like, you know, outright racism. [Aisha] [I]

… there's micro-aggressions and things like that. [Aisha] [I]

This incident led to a racial and gender split in the flat, whereby People of Colour found safety amongst each other only:

I think it was, yeah, definitely a divide in race and gender with the few exceptions. [Aisha] [I]

I think because we were ethnic minorities, that's what brought us together. [Aisha] [I]

Bernila felt the pervasiveness of racism when studying abroad in Spain because of her identity as Filipino. This became hyper-visible and usurped her identity as British, leading to rejection by English students:

… but for some reason I wasn't accepted in the British enclave. [Bernila] [I]

Well, when I met these British people, I would say English because they're all from England, but go to different unis, erm … I'm an ethnic minority over there as well, I was the only Filipino in that university. [Bernila] [I]

'Britishness', and even more so 'Englishness', is not something widely correlated with legal citizenship in the national psyche, and 16% of White people with no inter-ethnic contact feel that

British-born ethnic minorities do not count as fully British (Katwala, 2021:12). Whilst citizenship is considered inclusive of those who meet the legal criteria, it does not necessarily confer 'Britishness' to those born outside of the UK in the minds of others (Anderson, 2013: 110), for Whiteness is 'axiomatic' of Englishness (Madriaga and McCaig, 2022: 85). Instead, Bernila found safety in the 'othered' group of minoritised students, despite their heritage identities being entirely different:

> *And I swear there was only three black boys in that university and I was friends with all of them. [Bernila] [I]*

But Bernila found ways to become invisible to the majority-White student population in that context, to preserve her own sense of 'cultural integrity' (Deyhle, 1995) and sought belonging with local people to counter the rejection by British students within the University. This was an act of unbelonging, in response to feeling alienated and hyper-visible, when the promise of belonging had been broken (Gao, 2023: 276):

> *… but I belonged outside uni, to the locals. [Bernila] [I]*

> *Yeah, but local, I mean, not the Catalans, but the foreigners. [Bernila] [I]*

Brayboy (2004: 128) posits that the act of avoiding scrutiny by actively becoming invisible, finding safety at the margins, can be a source of reclaiming power, and this certainly seemed apparent in Bernila's account. She also witnessed intra-cultural racism between Catalan and Spanish people whilst on her year abroad, and experienced othering from the Spanish and Catalan students herself, which created a constant weather of simmering racial tension:

> *I wouldn't say I'm well aware of the thing, but you can definitely feel the tension whilst you were there. [Bernila] [I]*

> *I don't even want to bring up racism, but I'm going to bring it up now, erm [...] we were always getting stared at. [Bernila] [I]*

> *… it's just that there's a lot of staring going on, which is a bit uncomfortable. [Bernila] [I]*

> *I can hear them talking behind my back. [Bernila] [I]*

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have defined the concept of Structural Belonging and demonstrated how it surfaced from the dataset. I have explained that Structural Belonging develops via students' alignment with the values, mission, vision, and expectations of the University, and a sense of ease, comfort, and care being transmitted to students through overt signals, symbolism, and messaging, as well as covert expectations, behaviours, responses, and use of language. I have highlighted how race (and its intersection with gender and visa status) has a pervasive impact on whether students of colour develop a sense of belonging and alignment with the structures of a university. In the next chapter, I explore the concept of Transformation, and how this stems from Relational and Structural Belonging.

Chapter 6: Transformation

Introduction

In the previous chapters I have outlined the concepts of Relational and Structural Belonging. Once students reached a sense of Relational and/or Structural Belonging, they appeared able to identify transformation of the self, evidenced as feelings of pride, achievement, resilience, connection, and viability in both present and future achievement settings. In this chapter I outline how the data demonstrates that Relational and Structural Belonging lead to Transformation, and in the next chapter I show how a further stage, Contributory Belonging, leads to Mattering (Flett, 2018; Gravett *et al.,* 2021; Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, 2021) at university. Below, aspects of transformation are explored individually, supported by excerpts from students' narratives.

Participants in this study spoke of transforming their skills and knowledge as well as their outlook on the world. They transformed not only the way they understood situations but – by applying critical thinking - transformed their perspectives. They also transformed emotionally, through facing and overcoming the following challenges: hardship, loneliness, racism, isolation, loss of friendships, disappointment, academic failure, rejection, a pandemic, and other situations, all of which built confidence, pride and identity. For example, in her photo-voice interview, Uma represented the connection between belonging and transforming through a photo taken from a bench she liked to sit at between lectures:

> *I was sitting there and when I took the photo it was, I felt transformation and belonging at the same time. [Uma] [I]*

Reflecting on this connection from the vantage point of her final year, sitting between two buildings focused on learning about business and developing enterprise she linked her studies with her future employment. She clearly felt supported by the University in both aspects as she had taken the photo specifically to show the buildings as guardians, or as she termed them, 'sentries', exemplifying the interconnection between belonging and transformation (words used in the recruitment of participants).

Perseverance, Resilience, Confidence

Discourses on transformation at university often focus on students conforming to normalised conventions, values, and expectations, centring on the individual's need to fit into the dominant academic and future workplace culture (Arday and Mirza, 2018: 370). Bernila, Nathan, and Aisha had all contemplated dropping out, and Prince had been required to repeat a year of study due

to failure, yet all exhibited strength of character and perseverance once they had faced and overcome challenges:

> *I haven't given up. That's a big thing for me, and in all my feelings, I'd say, I … I will never give up. Keep going. Even 'til … even if I was here till I'm thirty, I'll keep going. Uhh … I'm 24 now so might as well keep going. [Prince] [I]*

> *… since I've been here at university I've learnt a lot of things and that is definitely one of them, you know, you have to get back up and […] get up and go on with your day because no one's going to do that for you. [Nathan] [I]*

The additional opportunities for personal development, offered as part of some degree routes and through extracurricular activities and roles, clearly contributed to students' sense of pride, as Bernila explains:

> *… the fact that I speak four languages already and I'm doing [degree course], with Spanish, they know that I lived abroad. [Bernila] [I]*

Nathan persevered in his applications for a placement year, as this was something he really wanted. He applied for ten roles a day during the summer months, and when his tutor advised him not to feel sad if he didn't get one, he responded with an utter, and well-placed self-belief:

> *… I've realised that perseverance is key that's why […], when I was applying for placements I never gave up. [Nathan] [I]*

The concept of resilience is actively promoted within LBS as the route to coping with the stresses of university life. Considering that only two placement students in the current year identified as British male and other-than-White, and neither identified as Black, in meeting this challenge and succeeding against the odds at a late stage in the year, Nathan had developed his resilience for the future. In a volatile labour market where skills of 'adaptability' and 'flexibility' are hailed as solutions to rejection and failure (Arday and Mirza, 2018: 371) 'resilience' has economic value, and the lack of it is purported to cause the exclusion from competitive roles experienced by Black graduates. In HE as in the workplace, confidence acts as a marker of potential ability, with resilience its counterpart in demonstrating capability; this causes misrecognition of classroom silence as a sign of 'weakness' or 'neediness'. The subtext of resilience is that the individual

should 'learn to cope and bounce back', but just as the solution to climate change is not to swim faster in response to rising sea levels, the solution to racism is not to bounce back better (Gorski, 2019). Framing resilience as an individual trait in this way places the onus on students to adapt to the HE system, not for the HE system to adapt and change itself (Goward and Tornsey, 2024). There was a sense in Nathan's comments that he knew no one could face these challenges for him; he struggled on alone, yet with the help of a positive and self-motivating internal dialogue:

> *… it's just you have to actually put your mind to it in your head to it. [Nathan] [I]*

Obi saw a change in himself relating to greater independence and self-confidence; he now felt more able to break away from the crowd and engage in activities which he preferred, rather than following what the peer group wanted to do:

> *I think, overall, I've just become more independent in what I do. Last year I was more reliant on those people, this year I see them … but I don't, I don't really, I'm not really bothered, I just do my own thing and I'm fine with that. [Obi] [I]*

> *I've just learnt this year more to just, yeah just do my own thing. [Obi] [I]*

Obi entered university with high self-efficacy, based upon previous success at college:

> *I did that in college and I got like all distinction stars, so I knew [I] had the capability to do it and I tried to bring that same mentality into where I am now, here. [Obi] [I]*

> *… now I'm really ploughing on. [Obi] [I]*

Hamid demonstrated his resilience through showing a photo taken on his journey to the University:

> *Just a kind of belonging. Yeah, because I just take that photo because that photo shows my effort to travel to the University to take part in my tutorial, lectures and all. [Hamid] [I]*

> *It is hard but, yeah. I need to sacrifice something to get what I need, what I want. So, I'm just working hard to gain what I really want. [Hamid] [I]*

Another area of student life where determination, resilience, and perseverance are both required and developed is studying abroad. Aisha recounts pride in her resilience in undertaking something no one in her family had ever done before and which she herself felt anxious about. Due to Covid, she completed her UK studies and then took the year abroad after her final year, rather than during her third year. This required even more stamina: to resist the temptation to just accept a different degree title without the study-abroad element, and – especially after the isolation of Covid lockdowns – to embrace social life in a totally different country:

> *I done my year four in year three, so I've done my final year 2021, and then this year was abroad. Oh, yeah. So yeah, so, I mean, in the end, I decided to keep going. [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha also demonstrated perseverance when her grades were lower than she'd hoped for, resolving to push ahead with her studies in the face of disappointment:

> *I remember my auntie, she's really, she's quite successful, she said, 'Nobody cares about what you, like, they just care about your degree title and where you got it from. Nobody cares if you got a 2:1, nobody asks that'. So, I was like, 'Do you know what? Fine. Let's keep it pushing'. [Aisha] [I]*

Prince represented a connection between resilience and transformation in his photo of the university's foam letters in a corridor, with one having fallen over (see Figure. 6):

> *Like taking that picture that I sent you it was by chance, like I wouldn't have taken it if it was all standing up. So, I think that that was symbolism of someone, like you can turn your life around, I don't know. [Prince] [I]*

Here, he implies perfection is not the aim ('all standing up'); rather, the aim is resilience and perseverance, and they represent transformation for Prince.

Bernila felt that her growth in terms of strength and ability to cope with life's challenges was a form of personal transformation which had resulted from being at university and living independently, both in the UK and Spain, while overcoming failure, rejection, distraction, racism, and other barriers which could have thrown her off track. Instead, she stuck to the path and made it through to the end:

> *Resilience, I think, is a lot like, if you had met me a year ago I would be crying here right now, you know, but now I think I'm more, yeah, I think I'm more, I'm tougher, as a person, I'd say. [Bernila] [I]*

However, she saw her resilience and self-transformation as the result of her life *outside university*; although it had come about *because* she was a student studying abroad, the exclusion she experienced in that environment had led her to create a large network of local contacts.

> *I've changed because of what happened outside uni, not what happened inside uni ... [Bernila] [I]*

Beatriz signalled her improved level of self-confidence as a form of transformation by saying:

> *I don't let anyone step on me. [Beatriz] [I]*

> *… when I was 18/19 even though I was an adult, I would let people step on me or do whatever they want, you know and then now because I stopped that … Maybe that's why my uncle thinks that I've changed and […that] I think that I'm more important than others. [Beatriz] [I]*

Beatriz also associated transformation with having greater curiosity, which aligns with Freire's critical consciousness:

> *I would say that those are the words that define me now[,] that those are the words that I would define as transformational. Me being more, standing my ground and the curiosity that I have now. [Beatriz] [I]*

Bernila, too, looked back and saw how she had gained confidence over the four years of study in comparison to her former self in first year:

> *… I was quite shy back then … [Bernila] [I]*

> *… I think doing this study abroad from this uni actually did make me become more confident, because I'd never thought that I would travel alone, but the fact that I'm so confident … [Bernila] [I]*

She felt proud of this change which had stemmed from her positive attitude and bravery in reaching out to people to network and make connections:

> *… that's how I managed to actually talk to people and get myself out there, just by talking, being nice. [Bernila] [I]*

Prince agreed that gaining confidence in speaking out and speaking up was evidence of a personal transformation:

> *… because it … it gave me more time to reflect on myself and what I wanted the assignment I was doing to say about myself and my way of thinking. Um, yeah, I guess. It has been a transformative experience. Well, I've definitely become more confident with myself and I speak up for myself more. Yeah, it's given me a sense of high confidence. [Prince] [I]*

Here, Prince alludes to a core aspect of an inclusive curriculum, one where students can express their own identities in their coursework, don't feel forced into one version of personhood, and are comfortable 'challenging the normative orthodoxies' (Arday *et al.,* 2021: 300). Reflective writing is something which is often feared and misunderstood by new students, as it is not something they have often encountered in prior learning, especially international students. Here, Uma seems to have embedded the practice of reflection into her identity in her final year of study, so that this way of thinking has transformed her mind, not just her study skills:

> *I do reflection even when I'm working, even when I'm working on something, there's a reflective thing going on at the back of my mind so that is my space. [Uma] [I]*

Productive Struggle

Whilst Relational and Structural Belonging seemed to be a prerequisite for transformation, this is not a smooth, linear process, and it is almost necessary for students to go through tough times to build this sense of transformation. Here, Prince outlines how negative experiences engendered a sense of belonging once they were overcome:

> *I actually felt like I had a place here […] … through all the struggles, it felt like […] my hard work was paying off. [Prince] [I]*

> *… university has just taught me that everyone progresses at different stages [...] and that success is not a linear process […] [Prince] [I]*

There appeared to be a link between taking action which challenged safety and comfort, or which went against anything 'known' in one's family background and developing a sense of pride. Having courage and pulling through the tough times built confidence and belonging, and a desire to then build this in others through sharing knowledge, skills, or experience and advocating for change. Aisha made this clear:

> *I'm still proud […] at the way that it's turned out. I still managed to do a semester abroad and, you know, come this far even through the hurdles and the indecision of if I wanted to stay there. I'm really proud that I was able to do that because, you know, it's something brave. [Aisha] [I]*

> *I knew it was turbulent and stuff, and I do remember certain moments. But I think the biggest thing is just, kind of, being proud of myself, that's it really. That's it. [Aisha] [G]*

Sean's story tallied with this. He explained that when he pushed himself and felt uncomfortable but faced the challenge anyway, this helped him to develop a sense of self-efficacy:

> *… just coming out of my comfort zone just made me feel better and I've noticed that a lot during my studies as well … [Sean] [I]*

Uma and Aisha both explained that university life integrates glamour and hardship in the productive struggle, which is an essential element of transformative learning (Murdoch *et al.,* 2020):

> *[...] this is kind of like the ugly part because obviously university's not just shine and glamour, it's got some hard stuff as well. [Uma] [G]*

> *… these are for those moments where I have broken down, where I have, I felt shattered, and that kind of are life lessons, which are important. [Uma] [G]*

> *… my university experience has been very like a whirlwind. [Aisha] [I]*

Bernila, too, had had a rollercoaster experience, but related this more to distraction and temptation than to feeling broken or shattered. Having focused on the social side, or perhaps even the 'mis-educative' side (Strange and Gibson, 2017: 88) of studying abroad, Bernila reflected

on how her transformation involved developing self-discipline and making wiser choices as time went on:

> *I over-enjoyed my life around that point. [Bernila] [I]*
>
> *I did slack off because obviously study abroad, there was a lot of temptations. [Bernila] [I]*
>
> *I think I was at the tipping point, and it just went down. [Bernila] [I]*

Prince describes the 'gradual' and 'beautiful process' of transformation through overcoming challenges and unexpected obstacles (such as Covid and academic failure):

> *… just to show me that it's OK to fail sometimes and you can get back on your feet. [Prince] [I]*

Prince was in his fourth year of study at the time of his participation, and remarked that this had felt like a long-time, but he conveyed a sense of having 'arrived' at a final point now:

> *… it took me so long to get to where I am. [Prince] [G]*

The first Covid lockdown provoked a sense of loss for Aisha and some of the other students. This gave them clarity about their attachment to the institution and the relationships they had fostered in their early weeks as students:

> *[…] I was taking a walk, and I was just really taking it in, like, 'I really love this place, I cannot wait to return, and I'm sad that it's been cut so short'. So yeah, I mean, transforming from, you know, two months ago when I applied to leave to feeling a sense of belonging … on campus… It had gone full circle. [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha seemed to detach transformation from belonging, saying she felt a fragile sense of belonging but could see she had transformed all the same:

> *[…]I didn't feel like I belonged, obviously, because of what was going on. We were in uncertain times as well because, you know, we kept on going in and out of lockdown. However, transforming is a bit more positive because […] I chose to go on, and then by about, I think it was July, I had a meeting with [tutor], and we*

ended up calculating my degree, and it will work out as a 2:1, which is a good degree. [Aisha] [I]

Despite feeling little Relational Belonging with her peers, Aisha still implied that she felt transformed. She made a direct link between her transformation and the fact that she had grown and developed perseverance through challenging times, and had succeeded despite these:

So, it was a transformation because I was going to give up, and I persevered. [Aisha] [I]

Aisha tried to avoid putting herself in unsafe situations, perhaps following a difficult first year where she felt she had been naively optimistic in expecting unracialised interactions with White students. But, through having to do certain things, she felt she had been transformed, implying this was almost against her will, but she was grateful for the process anyway:

Even with going abroad, literally, I kept on saying to [tutor], 'I don't want to do this. I don't want to do this. How can I get around it? Da da da'. And then I finally done it. [Aisha] [I]

… taught me to, kind of, come out of my comfort zone. Because, like I said to you, I was not comfortable with going abroad. [Aisha] [I]

Sean implied his low academic self-esteem stemmed from poor motivation, which he tried to counter by putting himself in the library amongst other people who were studying:

I'm not a morning person and sometimes when I have 9 a.m.'s I don't really tend to go. [Sean] [G]

I was here in my first year or second year, I wasn't really like studying as much as I should. [Sean] [I]

Because with me, I don't have a problem with doing things but it's just the start of it is the issue for me. So obviously going to the library, it helps me a lot. [Sean] [I]

This low self-confidence extended to his ambitions for employment. Sean explained that he was not aiming for employment with the most prestigious professional service firms upon graduation:

> *Obviously I'm definitely not going for the top four so I'm just looking for like either average or just medium to build my way up from there. [Sean] [I]*

Sean's use of the word 'obviously' troubled me here. Strayhorn (2008: 28) discusses how Black men receive disparaging words throughout their education which perpetuate negative stereotypes that become self-fulfilling and 'self-threatening'. Here Sean has clearly ruled out applying for the most prestigious graduate training schemes at the 'Big 4' professional service firms, despite these organisations offering diversity schemes to attract graduates of his heritage background. The use of the word 'obviously' struck me at the time as an acceptance that those roles were not for people like him. In retrospect I wish I had explored this more with Sean to understand the basis for his decision.

Uma connected her sense of belonging with the opportunities for growth and transformation she had experienced. She implied she had grown because of the support and comfort that she felt when taking risks and as a result of having the courage to engage with opportunities.

> *For me belonging is an experience that gives me comfort as well as encourages me to grow, to reach the next stage, the next stage, and so on and so forth, of myself, within me, that I have. The University and the Business School as well has given me lots of chances, lots of experiences rather that have helped me grow and at the same time feel that sense of comfort, be it with my teachers, or with my friends. [Uma] [G]*

> *… it has given me some feeling that I can't really explain, it's like a mixture of all the feelings, and that's because sometimes it's happy, sometimes it's angry, because of deadlines, sometimes it's sad, but I feel like on, it's something wholesome, and it's a part of me. [Uma] [G]*

Uma implied that despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges she has had to overcome, she feels whole and integral to the University itself. This wholeness could be a feeling of authenticity, of being the person you are destined to be. There was a sense that she felt connected to, and joined with, the University throughout her struggles, which had transformed her as a person. Smith (2013: 136) observes that culture shock can itself lead to transformational learning, through the sheer confrontation with new and different ways of living. Through this joining,

aligning, and partnering, a sense of belonging is developed which enables transformation of the self.

Nathan mentioned that overcoming the ups and downs of student life had had a greater impact on his transformation than his formal learning, teaching him humility:

> *… you go through a lot of different life experiences within a space of two years, you know, you've got a lot of things that can be humbling … [Nathan] [I]*

Transforming Professionally

Transforming seemed to relate to changes in broader identity characteristics than simply being or becoming a student. For Sean, transformation through belonging was tied to attending a Business School and his identity as a developing businessperson. For him, the evidence that he belonged to the Business School was his car purchase. The very act of commuting side by side with those whom he believed were businesspeople, on their way to work whilst he was on route to the University, gave him a sense that he was transforming into a businessperson:

> *… when I had my car at the time, it made me like feel belonging in the business environment in the school … I really feel belonging in this university and this business environment as well. [Sean] [I]*

In his interview, Sean showed a photo which he'd added text to, which I noted and asked him about:

> *So, you've also put 'hard work pays off' on there. [Researcher]*
>
> *… it's not easy to get a car and it's not easy to maintain a car as well so like, it shows just me being as a person, just being a hard-working person. [Sean] [I]*

Modern universities remove students from full-time labour, offering them the spatio-temporal resources to question societal norms as they gain practical knowledge for better employment, a process which Haghighi (2020) sees as providing a counter-space. However, Sean's eagerness to move on from this artificial learning environment of the classroom and enter the 'real' world of business was palpable throughout his photo-voice interview and collage. He measured his personal transformation by his work-readiness and his invisible inclusion in the commuting business workforce.

… yes it prepares and it also makes me feel like I'm [in] a business school. [Sean] [I]

… in terms of the business environment because I know like in the business world there's going to be quite a lot of commuting in terms of driving, or like say for example if I work for a company they'll probably provide me like a company car. [Sean] [I]

Sean had not moved from Transformation to Contributory Belonging, nor did he seem to have developed critical consciousness, as all his comments implied assimilation, individualism, and commitment to the ideology of meritocracy. The symbolism of his car signalled him as a viable businessperson, a valid commuter amongst the other businesspeople, someone who has a strong work ethic and can achieve what they set their mind to. He saw this as evidence that he could succeed in getting what he wanted if he made the required effort. It seemed this related to his university studies as well as his future self as a businessperson.

… the currency and finance, so obviously knowing the fundamentals and stuff, it makes me feel like I'm part of the business environment … [Sean] [I]

… outside of this, my subject, I know I'm going to have to prepare myself for the business world and like, obviously being in this uni helps me prepare myself … [Sean] [I]

Sean's degree subject was chosen in order to access a certain profession, and he viewed the act of studying that subject as a validation of his professional identity:

it's just like with the degree, it shows me who I am. [Sean] [I]

His sense of himself as someone who is good with numbers, commutes alongside businesspeople, and studies for professional qualifications which exempt him from certain professional exams altogether gave Sean a sense of being authentic, and experiencing the wholeness that Uma speaks about above:

… I'm dealing with numbers a lot, so that kind of like made me belong into the university and it kind of transformed me as a person as well, because like

obviously I like doing numbers, but I didn't reach out to my full potential if that makes sense … [Sean] [G]

… like the right degree for me […] so I felt like that really stood out the most for me and like made me belong to this place and transform as a person, and a businessperson … [Sean] [I]

In contrast, Nathan felt less pride in his subject area and felt it had little relevance to his future life. However, simply having been a university student, and particularly for him, a placement student, gave him an experience he could be proud of:

… the course that I'm studying right now, it's not really going to do much with the degree that I've got, you know, because I feel like it's more about the experience that you have with, like in terms of my degree, it's more about the experience rather than the qualification. [Nathan] [I]

Gaining a placement within the University had motivated Nathan to finish his degree. It made him feel that he was entering the graduate workplace with a stronger professional identity:

… at my age right now, like, I feel like life is, I wouldn't say it's the best but it's good, I'm thankful for what I have because, you know, I got a placement, not many people are able to gain a placement within their university, because it is a very, like hard market, you know. [Nathan] [I]

I feel like now I'm more about bettering myself […] and just doing well within my job and completing my placement and doing well in life. [Nathan] [I]

As a workplace skill, Gamu recognised that assertiveness is valued in the world beyond the classroom, where standing out from the crowd is rewarded, and that her developing confidence, which was unnerving for her classmates, would be advantageous in the graduate labour market:

I think it's just them having confidence issues and I hope that … they need to realise the real world is like that, you know, you just need to speak up and do what you have to do to get what you want. [Gamu] [I]

Gamu related her transformation to gaining a different perspective on how she is perceived by others. In response to a situation of conflict between herself and younger students, she had

adapted her communication style and become aware of the impact her confidence had on others who were less self-assured.

> *I've learnt something in my life, where actions of someone is not necessarily [...] how it's received or perceived by the receiver, that people receive things differently. [Gamu] [I]*

Her self-reflection initially led her to align with the majority in the class and limit herself to fit in, but when she realised this prevented her from being her authentic self in that setting, she overcame it with support from her tutor. The belief that her tutor understood her and was compassionate about her experience was vital in ultimately enabling Gamu to express herself, in the knowledge that her comments were valued as contributions and not received as a threat.

She also related the development of entrepreneurial skills to her personal transformation:

> *So, it really did help me, in the sense that how one can put a number of situations together, to then make an informed decision at the end. [Gamu] [I]*

Uma saw the purpose of university as shaping her to enter a global community:

> *And the Business School has helped me become that visionary because why I'm here is to become a part of the global world. [Uma] [I]*

Prince appeared to have been demotivated by the picture he held in his mind of someone who goes into the business world, as he couldn't align his values and sense of self with that impression. In his final year, he had started to explore where his degree could lead him and broadened his outlook to encompass roles which complemented his values. In this way, he began to see a future which motivated him to succeed:

> *… my degree doesn't mean that I have to get a job just for profit … and that's what university has taught me. [Prince] [I]*

> *And the money was, […] my example like I could get a job in a not-for-profit organisation and do good for other people. That's what it's taught me that money isn't everything. [Prince] [I]*

Prince felt that he had transformed through his realisation that there were various avenues he could explore at the end of his degree. This enabled him to relax and feel more comfortable about his identity and the question of where he might find his place in the world of work. This is important, as previously Prince had felt uncomfortable about his identity as a businessperson, and uncertain of his 'fit', his belonging, in a professional setting. However, in his final year he had been shown that his skills were in demand in charities and non-profit organisations as well, which he felt would match better with his values. This realisation motivated him to pursue master's-level study.

Higher education, through its inclusion agendas and its transmission of labour market expectations of resilience, flexibility, and adaptability, pushes those who are 'excluded' and marginalised towards a process of '*individual* "transformation" into normalised personhoods' (Arday and Mirza, 2018: 371). Colonialism 'deculturizes people' (Zavala, 2016: 4); healing oneself from this requires envisioning alternatives to capitalism, which is challenging in the field of business and management; likewise, disciplines like economics and marketing are founded upon economic growth and increasing profit margins. There was a constant tension for Prince in studying a business subject (with its roots in historical oppression), until he realised the skills attained could be put to alternative use.

Taking account of Prince's discomfort and internal conflict over his future in the business world, a decolonial stance on self-transformation would move institutions to make spaces in which students are able to 'decolonise their understanding of how they have been transformed as people' (Zavala, 2016: 5), and enables them to do so in a way that doesn't reduce everything to mere marketability and economic logic (Gudynas, 2011: 18). For example, it might do this by helping students to

> *… [find…] out what else you can get from the university, other than a degree … [Prince] [G]*

Despite struggling with loneliness and the silence resulting from language anxiety (Engin, 2017: 7), Jìng held ambitions to remain in the UK higher education system after her final year, so as to increase her employability. It is interesting to note that severe isolation and constant sadness did not dampen her drive to study in the UK rather than return to China for postgraduate study. This highlights the elite status of an education from an English-speaking nation, which international students value highly; this elitism is infused with Eurocentric norms and leads to 'brain-drain' from Global South nations (Lloyd and Ordorika, 2021: 28).

> *I want to study in the UK and study a master's, yeah, I want to have a master's degree and then I can find a good job. [Jìng] [I]*

Obi had ambitions to take a placement year, but this seemed to be motivated by worry that he wouldn't get a graduate job. His fears were well placed, as internal statistics (Londonshire, 2020b) show Black male Business School graduates have the lowest rate of entry to professional and managerial jobs of all gender/ethnicity splits, despite having a higher general employment rate than others. Indeed, not one of the 35 undergraduate students from Londonshire undertaking a placement year in 2024/25 was a home Black male student. Obi appeared to lack clarity about his professional identity in his second year and wanted to take a placement year to increase his chances of gaining graduate work at the end of his degree.

> *I've heard they're quite hard to get because when you leave, when you graduate you don't go straight into the workplace from what I hear. It's very competitive because most people are getting degrees now, so a work placement would really help my chances. [Obi] [I]*

Hamid felt he had gained a more 'real' understanding of the business world through studying at Londonshire than he would have done if he had remained in the Indian HE system, and this gave him a stronger sense of his own identity as someone who would become a business professional.

> *… we've got a real experience to learn what is actually happening in the world of business, it's quite interesting. Over there, we are just going through some books, that's it. No real experience, nothing. [Hamid] [I]*

The business and enterprise hub building, in which small businesses are incubated by the University, featured several times in participants' comments about transforming at university. Students felt inspired by sharing their environment with actual businesses which had been created or nurtured by the University, even if they never actually crossed paths with the business owners in their daily lives.

> *… transformation, for me, was the enterprise area where I wanted to participate, I wanted to be involved, and that changed my mindset on how business leaders think. [Gamu] [I]*

‘Who Am I?’ Transforming Self-Image

Participants developed their self-image as university students throughout their years of study. This was not an identity anyone arrived at university with, so there was a period of discovery and learning new behaviours, which took longer for some than others. Those behaviours included help-seeking, independent study, time management, balancing studies with earning money, attending taught sessions, and spending time wisely in between:

> *Also, just kind of adapting to doing a degree, and having to be completely independent in your learning, compared to like school where you’re like monitored more, and encouraged more. [Aisha] [G]*

In describing her tutors as gurus, Uma revealed that she needed their guidance to become her full self and access parts of that self that she hadn’t accessed before. She suggested there was a partnership between tutor and student which created the student’s new identity, something students could not do alone:

> *I have got capabilities that I might not know. [Uma] [I]*

> *The teachers, they are teaching me, they’re shaping me. [Uma] [I]*

Bernila created an identity for herself as a ‘good student’ based on being hard-working, getting high grades, and taking difficult subjects:

> *I was a good student when I was here. [Bernila] [I]*

When she felt she was slipping below both her own and her tutor’s expectations, she felt shame and guilt, which she used to motivate herself to do better:

> *… sometimes I feel ashamed because I've been a bad student last year … I've still got some of my personality from last year, where I'm lazy and doing everything last minute, and I've become so disorganised. [Bernila] [I]*

> *… I feel like I'm not doing the most, like I should be. [Bernila] [I]*

> *I feel like my efforts are not showing through at the moment, because I've been slacking off. [Bernila] [I]*

Coming from an East Asian background, Bernila appeared to feel pressure to live up to the expectation of the 'model minority' (Archer and Francis, 2006). This is a form of micro-insult (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 49) based on a stereotype implying that only certain minorities are accepted in White society, whilst others are less desirable (Gao, 2023: 275). Bernila also felt the push factor of not wanting to fall into care work, a field which her family and others from the Filipino community worked in. Although she respected the labour and dedication such work involved, her student identity was not only motivated by the idea of a future self in business, but also that of a possible self in care work, which she wanted to move away from. She seemed to have both the push and pull of knowing what she does want and what she does not want.

> *I didn't even plan on taking this course before, I was just going to be a carer for the, I didn't want to say just going to be a carer, but it's a great job, like it's a very rewarding job, I still have it, and, yeah, I just wanted to be a carer for the rest of my life and no ambition to pursue the career that I wanted, you know. [Bernila] [I]*

Bernila's experiences in Spain seemed to change her approach to life. She remarked that she was very different in appearance now compared with her first year, when she met the stereotype associated with her East Asian heritage:

> *I look completely different than I did first year, I was, I would say your standard goody two shoes, Asian, you know.[Bernila] [I]*

The 'good Asian' stereotype is one which is accentuated in the US but is known in the UK education system too. The British Council (2024) states 'East Asia has long been one of the UK's largest sources of quality international students'; here, 'quality' alluded to the 'model minority' high-achieving, meek, non-challenging student, who studies hard and competes academically for high grades (Yu *et al.,* 2023: 1698). Bernila went on to overthrow this stereotypical exterior by getting tattoos, partying, being sociable, and missing lectures, all of which countered this 'good Asian' trope. Jìng, too, suffered from 'Western' expectations when she knew she could not communicate actively in class or with support services due to language and cultural differences; she experienced patronising attitudes from flatmates as an invisible microaggression (Yu *et al.,* 2023). Sue (2010) sees this stereotype reinforcement as a form of microaggression which *others* the communication style of Asians in White education contexts, where active verbal contribution is expected.

Nathan was aware of his development over time and appeared to link transformation to becoming the best version of himself in the end. He clearly thought he had not fully transformed yet, but could give evidence, through the feedback he'd received on his placement, of this process taking place:

> *… since I've come here, like when I first came here I felt like I wasn't the best version that I could be, I still, currently I'm not the best version that I can be, because no one's perfect, you know. [Nathan] [I]*

Hamid's identity as a UK student was associated with his digital competence and his ability to work in a group, which seemed to contrast with the individual learning preferred in his home country:

> *That's transform, I suppose, again, I know just to make me to understand what a group assignment should be, and how it should be, to be done.[Hamid] [I]*

Aisha felt university was an opportunity to recreate herself and build a new identity outside of her family responsibilities:

> *… coming from a single-parent household, a lot of the responsibility fell onto me, so it was kind of an escape. [Aisha] [I]*

Becoming Someone New

Participants spoke of a holistic development of the self, a changed self-identity; some brought this back to their home community, where they felt noticed or different. Prince, Sean, and Nathan all referred to this change as becoming a 'better person' which related to living from core values of strength, integrity, and hard work (Pflug, 2025):

> *… which has helped me become a better person … [Prince] [G]*

> *… made me like not a better person, but just more aware around my surroundings and like, and just like making me feel good at times … [Prince] [G]*

> *… I've kind of like transformed into a better person. [Nathan] [I]*

> *… when I was commuting to the uni and stuff, I'd always tell myself, 'I need a car, I need to do this and that to help become a better person or transform', … [Sean] [I]*

Uma implied that belonging and transformation are connected by growth:

> *… belonging also means growth for me … [Uma] [G]*

> *… to know more, to learn more, why I am here, to know, to learn, to settle down or not, like know my goals, know what I want. [Uma] [I]*

Ironically, given her account of receiving ostracising comments from extended family when she returns home, studying in the UK had given Beatriz a greater sense of her own cultural identity as contrasted with UK culture and identity:

> *… it transformed me in a way that I feel like I'm more Portuguese now. [Beatriz] [I]*

> *… because […] I came to a foreign country. They see me as an immigrant there, yes, but I never see myself as an immigrant. [Beatriz] [I]*

As with the other overseas students in this study, Beatriz seemed to benefit greatly from being in a different cultural environment to her homeland, and making comparisons between the two appeared to develop her sense of national and cultural identity and her understanding of the world:

> *Your nationality, it's … it's a very big thing when you're outside of your country. So, I feel like I'm way more Portuguese now. I talk about Portuguese, so about Portugal so much and I didn't before … I compare everything to my country and I didn't before, like before, I didn't have anywhere to compare to. Now that I do, I feel like being Portuguese is more part of my personality than it was when I was in Portugal. [Beatriz] [I]*

Mbembe (2016: 39) argues that as the individual's bonds associated with a nation weaken, their bonds with the 'transnational class' strengthen, and they become a global citizen with 'local roots'. Being an international student left Beatriz feeling 'different' to the majority in both her home country and the UK. This is clearly a result of having developed her knowledge and experience beyond that of her family and friends back home, yet it was something she had not internalised as a self-image. Both Bernila and Beatriz seemed to belong to two national identities

as globally conscious citizens. This sense of belonging to a much wider group, perhaps of displaced and distributed people, was marked by Bernila's comment:

> *I feel like I don't just belong in one place, I belong everywhere. [Bernila] [I]*

Bernila related transforming to a sense of 'reverting' to her former self, as if the development of self-discipline was evidence of transformation. There is a sense of finding the authentic self in her words, similar to Uma's mention of 'wholesome' above. Perhaps by being challenged, uncomfortable, taking risks, and facing disorientating dilemmas (Mezirow, 2000) yet coming through them, one returns to a fuller version of the self and is transformed:

> *… this is me transforming back to myself, because I over-lived my life over there … [Bernila] [I]*

Like Bernila, Sean seemed to feel that he had reverted to his true form in his final year and that this had been a transformation, like a tuning fork that has been struck but then returns to its core vibration:

> *… now that I'm in my final year, everything, I just left it in my past and just transformed if that makes sense, just calmed down a bit and just focused more on my studies than partying … [Sean] [I]*

The words Sean uses suggest the shedding of skin, or a different form of the self, like a caterpillar emerging from a cocoon, or a snake shedding its old skin as it grows bigger. Saying he 'just left it in the past' implies a moving away from former behaviours, like Bernila, and a change in demeanour and focus. Whilst Sean does not refer here to any challenges, it felt like the challenge was one of self-discipline; like Bernila, he had developed boundaries, in order to focus and resist temptation and distraction. He described this as gaining a deeper understanding of himself:

> *… it just made me like transform as a person and just know who I am ... [Sean] [I]*

Obi, who was in his second year of study, was still developing his sense of transformation, and appeared less able to cite examples of transforming than the final-year students but could see that he was starting to change his behaviour and choices. Instead of being led by others, he was reverting to hobbies he had enjoyed when he was younger:

I think that's a case of like, yeah transformation, because I went from one thing and going back to something I was more familiar with. I feel like I was being more like true to myself … [Obi] [I]

Is the transformation in working out who your authentic self is? [Researcher]

Yeah, like what is me? What like, what I'm good at and what I enjoy most. So, yeah I think it links with both. [Obi] [I]

Curiosity and Critical Consciousness

Through the development of criticality, participants explored new ways of thinking and being in the world, which translated into deeper learning about the self and others (Williams, 2016). The students observed that they'd had a change of understanding about the world and gained new perspectives through critical thinking. Prince demonstrated this by saying,

… my experience at uni has also changed my way of thinking, and also opened me up to taking more points of views … and different perspectives on the same things … it's also allowed me to think about that all opinions matter, and not everything has to be one sided if you understand what I'm saying. [Prince] [G]

… it's taught me to have an open mind about things … [Prince] [I]

He makes a connection with ethical behaviour too, which had influenced his decision to work beyond the profit-making industries:

I was saying that the University has taught me the importance of ethics. [Prince][I]

Critical thinking is implied in this statement, as he has contemplated the ethics of different businesses throughout his degree studies and now applies this to his own judgements around setting up his future life and how he treats others. This shows a change in thinking, which forms part of self-transformation.

… it gives you a chance to express yourself in your, regardless if that's not what you're supposed to do in your assignment and it gives you a chance to spread your own views and disagree with other people and not to cause fights but in a

friendly way. It gives you a sense of like 'oh yeah, I'm actually doing something, this could actually lead somewhere'. [Prince] [I]

I felt that Prince's developing criticality was opening him up to opportunities for change-making. He elaborated that the power to transform is within oneself, but requires a will to change:

I feel that it can happen, but you within your being you have to … you have to want to be successful and transform your way of thinking and your process through the university, […] life. [Prince] [I]

Aisha felt that transforming happened through relationships with other people, thereby implying, like Prince, that it cannot happen in isolation. Aisha relates the outcome of this transformation through relationships as developing a more 'open mind', which links with Prince's comments about seeing different perspectives:

… this was a point of transformation because, you know, you're having an open mind, and you are building relationships with people that you usually wouldn't. [Aisha] [I]

Uma shows how she has been shaped by negative experiences at university, but that these experiences have taught her lessons, perhaps on how to view the world and how to respond to it:

… they have shaped me today to be where I am, and I believe in some way […] they are kind of like seeds of lessons planted with me, so they are going to continue to shape my life in the future. [Uma] [G]

She also shows how coming to the UK as an international student has enabled her to gain new perspectives and understanding about the world:

… the University of [Londonshire] accepting me has given me a chance to come abroad to learn more. [Uma] [I]

Bernila felt the same sense of gaining new perspectives through being in another country for her year abroad. This experience presented opportunities for her to travel within Spain and across other countries in Europe to see friends from her studies and gain worldliness:

> *I've only got a few months left here in Barcelona, I should just take it all in as much as I can, not studying, but the whole culture itself. [Bernila] [I]*

> *I've learnt a lot from them, you know, I was speaking to different people, different backgrounds, ages … [Bernila] [I]*

Nathan inferred that the transformation in his thinking was a move from shallow thoughts about the self to deeper ones about the nature of success, making his family proud, developing resilience in the face of challenge, and being independent in life:

> *I feel like before I thought, I wasn't really thinking about things like that when I first came here, I was thinking about, you know, buying new shoes or buying a nice jacket, or buying a nice hat, but now I don't care about that … [Nathan] [I]*

Nathan felt he was transforming even when only three months into his placement year. He said this work experience had developed him through:

> *…understanding how others, you know, perceive things and things like that … [Nathan] [I]*

Reflecting on how his thinking had evolved during his university years, Prince commented:

> *[…]I think about what others are going through in a deep way, and I would say before I went to uni I was compassionate, but I would only think about the people that I really cared about, to be honest, like my family. [Prince] [I]*

I had a sense of both Nathan and Prince moving towards critical consciousness (Freire, 1970); towards seeing their purpose as beyond themselves, relating to their community. Derrick Bell (1992: 150) explains that 'Education leads to enlightenment. Enlightenment opens the way to empathy. Empathy foreshadows reform.' In Nathan's case, his education encompassed workplace learning which had opened new routes to empathy. He had not yet acted upon these understandings, but I could see his experience on placement was showing him how the University structures could be reformed. A further step towards activism in his final year would present Nathan with an opportunity to develop Contributory Belonging, and a chance to integrate these new understandings into his everyday life to complete his transformation (Johansson and Felten, 2014: 75).

Beatriz related her transformation to a change in her thinking too; she had built her curiosity in a way that would not have been developed had she remained in the Portuguese education system. She felt her curiosity and critical thinking skills had been nurtured throughout her three years of UK study:

> *… I feel like in terms of a student, it transformed me into this curious person[.] [Beatriz] [I]*

> *I wouldn't be curious like I am here. Here I feel like if I'm not curious [,] if I don't go after the information, no one is going to give it to me. So, I'm just going to be this 22 years old that doesn't know anything about politics, the politics or the environment, you know, anything? [Beatriz] [I]*

Aisha related transformation to pushing herself outside of her comfort zone and dealing with the challenges presented to her. Despite feeling rejection when she studied abroad, her summary of the whole experience was positive:

> *I loved it. Despite the experience at the university, it was so nice to live somewhere different, it was so nice to submerge myself into another language. Yeah, it was a nice experience. [Aisha] [I]*

Jìng had experienced constant loneliness and exclusion as an overseas student at Londonshire, but could reflect that even this experience had changed her thinking:

> *But after I arrive in the UK, I know how to thinking more, you're thinking more … [Jìng] [I]*

She also implied that the acquisition of knowledge was transforming her future possibilities:

> *… thinking many things about my knowledge and I can use it, I mean practical use it … [Jìng] [I]*

Obi was the only student to link his transformation directly with his grades and his academic progress:

> *I did pretty well grade-wise and this links with the transformation part as well by the way. [Obi] [I]*

Independence

Aisha chose a photo of her halls of residence and titled it 'In My Own Campus Accommodation' when she spoke about it:

> *… tying that back to transforming, this was a new beginning of being independent and pursuing my higher education … [Aisha] [I]*

This marked the start of her independent life, which was a new threshold for the whole family to pass together,

> *… when I was dropped off, family came, and there were tears shed. It was, yeah, good memories, actually, from moving to [Londonshire] … [Aisha] [I]*

Aisha reflected upon her personal growth in independence through her collage, showing how this growth would not have happened had she not attended university and studied the course she did:

> *… these two images represent like growth and independence … [Aisha] [G]*

> *I think starting university I was quite independent and very adaptable, but I think it's definitely strengthened those skills more. [Aisha] [I]*

Nathan developed this independence and self-care through necessity; he realised that his life was now his own and he was the only one who could create the future he wanted. Confidence and independence come from overcoming challenge, as Nathan explained:

> *… it's the learning curve, you know, you're not, like when you drop on the floor you're going to get back up, you're not going to just sit on the floor and wait for someone to pick you up … [Nathan] [I]*

For those students who lived away from their family home, independence and self-reliance had developed out of necessity:

> *If I look two years back, I'm a completely different person. In terms of my personal life. I'm more adult, I mean, I pay my bills now, two years ago, that didn't happen. [Beatriz] [I]*

> *… if I want to go somewhere I have to rely on myself to go somewhere like I have to get an Uber it's myself not that the University would have to help me get somewhere. [Beatriz] [I]*

As a commuting student who lived with his family, Obi had found other ways to develop his independence whilst on campus, through sport and social activities. Obi related transformation to making independent choices and decisions which went against the group consensus. In his second year he started choosing to go to activities alone and make new friends as a result:

> *… but this year I've just become more independent, and I'm not really too bothered. [Obi] [I]*

> *But this time I'd just go play football, not on my own but like not with them, and just see new people and meet them. [Obi] [I]*

> *I just feel I've become more independent and self-reliant. [Obi] [I]*

Sean, too, related his change in behaviour and self-control to a developing sense of independence:

> *… it also transformed me as well because like instead of like me going [to] parties all the time, I've minimised it now, and it's made me feel like I don't need to do that so often now … [Sean] [G]*

Coping with the immediate increase in independence was a steep learning curve for some students, like Sean:

> *[it's a] big transition from becoming a Sixth Form student to becoming a university student, so like obviously there's quite a lot of freedom … [Sean] [I]*

Sean demonstrated how he had managed to develop the self-discipline required to be independent by his final year, despite returning to live with his family after his first year in halls:

> *… obviously because in my household I can't, in my house I just can't study at all, and it's not just in my house, it's anywhere as well because even when I was living on campus at the time, in my own room, I just couldn't study like, so just going to the library just really stood out to me the most. [Sean] [I]*

Jìng also quickly learned to live independently upon arriving as an overseas student.

> *After I arrived UK, I learn how to cook, yeah, and I can go to the supermarket, choose different foods by myself … [Jìng] [I]*

Each of these examples demonstrates how the experience of living independently and assuming responsibility for one's own life builds one's internal locus of control, which is shown to develop self-efficacy and positively correlates with satisfaction, motivation, and performance (Barbuto *et al.,* 2015: 270). For commuter students, this aspect of the traditional university experience is muted if they continue to live within the family home, and perhaps this factor is worth further investigation in future studies of belonging and transformation.

New Skills

Participants reflected on the skills they had developed as a student and which they had not previously held. Aisha was clear that gaining new fluency in a language had transformed her:

> *… in terms of like transformation that's like helped me transform in terms of like French … [Aisha] [G]*

Nathan felt that his personal organisational skills had developed and that this evidenced his transformation:

> *Being at university, transform[ed] me in a way that I'm more organised. [Nathan] [I]*

Obi, too, intimated that his personal organisation and time-management skills, plus his stamina for independent learning, were all increasing and demonstrated his transformation:

> *So, I think that helped me to know like, even if something doesn't count to the end goal you still have to take it seriously. I think that helped my personal development. [Obi] [I]*

Sean also reflected on his changing mindset, and related this to his more focused behaviour as evidence of his transformation:

> *I feel like with the partying scene, to me it's too repetitive, so at that time I just got bored of it and I realised I don't really want to be doing this all the time, so I just like switched my mindset, transformed, just settled down a bit … [Sean] [I]*

Jìng had been at the University for the shortest length of time of all the participants, having only completed a few months of her direct-entry final year. She did not participate in the group collaging activity, so provided fewer stories to analyse. However, her experience implies that a sense of belonging can develop minimally and yet still enable a student to reflect upon how they are changing and transforming in the process:

> *I think I've become more independent and my study ability was improved in that I know how to read the article and search for information on the internet and search some useful information about my knowledge and my major. [Jìng] [I]*

Despite having few friendships, Jìng could clearly recount how she had developed new skills and abilities, even though these had been developed through solitary pursuits. Therefore, her gaining these skills contributed to an identity change, which is evidence of transformation. As Jìng shows, transformation can still occur with little sense of belonging, although perhaps in feeling she has achieved some sense of alignment with university expectations she is in the process of developing Structural Belonging.

Bernila's skills development increased during her year abroad. She acquired rich cultural and social knowledge and networking skills, plus other life skills, which she then shared with her peers upon her return to the UK:

> *… what I remember from Barca is me speaking to locals, actually speaking Spanish and Catalan, you know, learning to try new food, spending time with chefs, you know … [Bernila] [I]*

For Prince, development of his social skills transformed him into a 'personable person':

> *… because before I came to uni my mum would remind me, saying, say stuff like remember you need to go out with your friends, and I just wouldn't listen, because I didn't want to, whereas when I came to uni I was kind of forced to, because I didn't know anyone, and like you … I came to uni by myself, so I had to make friends and be a personable person I guess. [Prince] [G]*

Sean demonstrated transformation through feeling 'ready'. This threshold point at which a student feels ready to do something they have been training for, or preparing for, is the cusp of a new proven identity. It is a liminal space where they believe they are competent, having received academic feedback to that effect, but are as yet unproven in the real world of the workplace, so they 'try out new identities' (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015: 27). Perhaps only once they enter the workplace or the further study environment can they truly say they have been transformed in terms of skills. Sean implied he was at the threshold between Transformation and Contributory Belonging:

> *… it's about time to put my skills into the real world and start getting ready to do stuff … [Sean] [I]*

Social Mobility

Participants connected transformation with movement up the socio-economic scale, either by understanding the habitus or norms and values associated with another class (Bourdieu, 2002), or through economic earnings and status. Sean had a clear idea that university would lead him to a good job and a professional identity:

> *… in business in general you're dealing with like either calculations or just like meeting new people in the business world. [Sean] [G]*

Bernila viewed her course and her cohort and, therefore, her skills and experiences, as different to those of other students in the Business School, particularly in terms of developing networking skills:

> *That's what me and my friends would say, we're not just here to make friends with these lot, we're going everywhere, we're making friends with a lot of people, making connections everywhere we go. [Bernila] [I]*

Her pride in the skills and social networking her course afforded were obvious, and she related these to a different future than she would otherwise have gained access to:

> *I was stuck in the countryside before, the jobs that were going on there, it's just, you know, care homes, care homes, care homes, there were a lot of care homes, but here everyone's, everyone's thinking of doing something, like they've got, they've got a goal, that's why they came here … [Bernila] [I]*

Edgeworth (2015: 352) outlines how rural areas in the UK are framed as idyllic spaces linked with old-fashioned values and traditional, historically constructed White norms, where 'to be ethnically Other is to be "out of place"'. Whilst her focus was on moving for job opportunities, Bernila, as one of only two pupils in her school from an ethnic-minority background, may also have felt constrained in this environment and was not keen to return to it, having experienced life close to London and in a major Spanish city whilst studying abroad.

Beatriz felt her future potential had been enhanced by studying in the UK, and that she had become more socially mobile as a result. Through feedback from others around her, she realised how much she had transformed:

> *I feel like I have a lot to learn. But at the same time, I feel like I'm way better than if I was in Portugal. [Beatriz] [I]*
>
> *… like uncle of mine … he told me that I think that I'm important now because I live outside … [Beatriz] [I]*
>
> *… he said Ohh, you come here and you think you're better than us. [Beatriz] [I]*

Her uncle's comments imply she has acquired a new set of social skills which afford her access to a different stratum of society, and that there was a visible sense of leaving behind her old identity. Perhaps this was evidence of irreversibly 'becoming' something new, something no one else in the family identified with. Such fear of change comes with stigma, whereby those who uphold the status quo treat those who leave as traitors (Benton, 2007), as 'others'.

> *… these … these stigma people that come to the UK like pushing these people that come to the UK and that they feel more important than others. [Beatriz] [I]*

Feelings of guilt and shame can arise when 'moving up' the social ladder, because there is a sense of leaving behind a familiar way of being, which could be understood as implying that the old way is therefore inferior (Dolan, 2020). This is something with which 'non-traditional' students grapple, and which ultimately can lead to them dropping out altogether if the pressure of living with two sets of values becomes too internally conflicting. Despite such pushback from her family, Beatriz observed that the change had been total and positive, and only through the deep reflection on experience involved in this study did she come to realise this:

> *I feel completely transformed. [Beatriz] [I]*

I'm so transformed that I didn't realise that I can transform[.] [Beatriz] [I]

And I like the person that I am today. [Beatriz] [I]

I do feel like other people can tell that I changed, yes. [Beatriz] [I]

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the meaning students made of transforming at university, evidencing the internal changes students perceive within themselves and which they attributed to their university experience. I have shown how transformation includes development of a self-image as a student; acquisition of personal skills (confidence, persistence, resilience, assertiveness) and professional alignment with a future self (commuting businessperson, strong global networker, not-for-profit marketer, entrepreneur); and self-management (organisational skills, budgeting, balancing work and study, living independently). I have demonstrated how students can feel transformed whilst experiencing only minimal Relational or Structural Belonging, as in the cases of Jìng and Aisha throughout, but also Sean, Nathan, Prince, and Gamu at times. In the next chapter, I demonstrate how some students move into a deeper phase of connection with the University – Contributory Belonging – through contributing to the structures and relationships within the institution, and how this leads to a sense of mattering.

Chapter 7: Contributory Belonging and Mattering

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the meaning participants made of transformation at university and explained how this was sequential to developing Structural or Relational Belonging, or both. Most of the participants had reached the stage of transformation, with only Jìng (who had been at the university for only a few months) unable to recognise elements of personal transformation beyond having acquired the prescribed academic skills. Two of the participants, Gamu and Bernila, evidenced deeper belonging through their contribution to the university community, which appeared to create within them a fuller sense of mattering to the institution. Three others – Prince, Nathan, and Uma – also showed a move towards entering this phase of belonging. In this chapter, I outline the concept of Contributory Belonging, generated from the facilitated discussions, and link this with theories of mattering.

What Is Contributory Belonging?

Belonging, thus far, has been described as falling under one of two categories: Relational Belonging or Structural Belonging. Whilst some students enjoy good personal and academic outcomes and a sense of self-transformation from experiencing one or both forms of belonging, some go on to form a deeper connection with the university community and achieve a greater sense of 'becoming' (Horner, 2022) and 'mattering' (Flett, 2018; Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, 2021; Gravett *et al.,* 2021). I have labelled this Contributory Belonging because it is a stage characterised by a spirit of generosity, donation, taking action, and creating change for others – contributing. Through such actions, participants' sense of worth, value, and visibility in the University is accentuated, as is their knowledge that they 'would be missed' if not there (Flett, 2018).

As students move into this stage, they initially engage in prosocial acts of *giving* towards their close peers through peer support, and imparting knowledge, experience, and wisdom. Necessarily, this requires students to spend time building their own skill set and knowledge before they can contribute to those of others. Therefore, it is a later stage of belonging, which takes place once Relational and Structural Belonging (and thereby Transformation) have been developed. It would be difficult to imagine a student being able to contribute to their community, beyond actions like giving opinions in surveys and other surface-level interactions, without first feeling like a part of that community themselves, and understanding the structures and needs of the people within it; contributing, perhaps, but not contributing to change. For this reason, Contributory Belonging is sequential to both Relational and Structural Belonging and to Transformation.

I see Contributory Belonging as the gateway to Mattering, which has been described as 'feeling valued and adding value' (Prilleltensky *et al.,* 2020: 6), and as being depended upon and needed (Rosenberg and McCullough, 1981). This is a process of coming to critical consciousness (Freire, 1970), showing pride and care for the university community and motivation to improve its structures for the benefit of others through 'critical generosity' (Bartlett, 2018; Zembylas, 2023).

Beatriz exemplifies these different levels of belonging in her comment below. She felt she had reached a ceiling whereby she had attained both Relational and Structural Belonging, and, as a result, Transformation, but not Contributory Belonging and therefore, had not moved on to Mattering.

> *… it's just like a spectrum, some people feel like belonging, it's something very, very … that for you to belong you have to participate, you have to do this or that. I feel like I belong and I don't participate and I don't do activities. [Beatriz] [G]*

For Beatriz, there are different ways to belong, and to feel belonging does not require participation over and above transacting with the University. Students can belong to the institution, or amongst other people, yet choose not to contribute or participate beyond learning, and/or living, on campus. Beatriz only realised how much more she could have belonged when she found out, while taking part in the group collage activity, how many opportunities had been available to her all along with which she had not engaged.

> *… I feel like what makes me not belong is seeing how much I could have done and I didn't. [Beatriz] [G]*

Forms of Contribution

By participating in this research study, students felt they were contributing to change in the University and the Business School. Uma felt a burden of responsibility to represent Asian students as best she could, especially as she was unsure whether any other Asian students had volunteered, and she might have been the lone voice representing the issues her community faced. The pressure to represent one's group is deemed a consequence of microaggressions (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 107).

> *What I care about is how I'm going to represent. [Uma] [I]*

Gamu, too, felt a responsibility to represent her community's voice within the University, both through the research participation and her paid role:

> *I know that a lot of students perhaps within a university […] might need someone like me to represent them and voice like their opinions to the University. [Gamu] [I]*

> *… be the voice for individuals that do not have the voice, you know, it's just a passion that's within me. So, taking that role, I feel I belong because I feel like I contribute. I felt this is my chance to support students in a university that might not necessarily have that voice or […] necessarily might not have the ideas shared. [Gamu] [I]*

Participants emphasised the importance of not just having staff support at university, but peer support too, in both study-related activities and social life. The latter took the form of reciprocal generosity between peers who would offer help to those they could, depending on their experience and skills, as a contribution to the wider student community. Such contributions might include time, energy, imparting experience and wisdom, listening and supporting others through their struggles, and showing peers how to use systems and resources. More committed acts of contribution included taking paid or voluntary roles in the University such as Student Representative, Peer Mentor, or Equity Advocate; or by taking roles in societies, hosting events, and gathering teams for entrepreneurial challenges. Gamu, Nathan, and Bernila all demonstrated a desire to represent the needs of their student peers and advocate on their behalf. Nathan only gained this insight during his placement year within the University, when he started to recognise the level of care and concern for students' welfare offered by the institution and expressed a desire to broadcast this message to students. Nathan recognised that there were many chances to contribute whilst a student, through making things better for the community, and that this could then lead to the transformation of others:

> *[…] people are looking to make a difference, so when they're making their difference, that's also helping the community … within the [Londonshire] University transform into something better than it already is. [Nathan] [I]*

> ***Ah I see, okay, so everybody transforming together? [Researcher]***

As well as, instead of just one person transforming, or just one go at transforming. [Nathan] [I]

[…] making things better for everybody? [Researcher]

Yeah. [Nathan] [I]

Some of Gamu's sense of belonging came from her voluntary role working alongside staff in the classroom as a Peer Mentor. She felt she was not just receiving from, but also contributing to, the Business School community. Also, through her paid Race Equity Advocate role, Gamu felt she was helping to ensure representation in the institution's decision-making:

I'm glad that the University actually acknowledged that's, that representation is needed in a university to be able to support those from those backgrounds. [Gamu] [I]

Gamu presented a clear example of Contributory Belonging. Not only was she active in many aspects of university life but she was also working part-time in a professional role outside of her studies and raising children. Gamu arrived with a contributory mindset, which stood her in good stead to contribute quickly to the university community.

I'm very much heavy in my community where I live. I set up a group which represents the Black community in [Hometown] and it was more a case of bringing that representation and helping my community where I live to integrate more within the, […] town, because we're not, and that was doing really well. [Gamu] [I]

In drawing a parallel with her life outside of the university, where she celebrates the achievement and progress of businesswomen in the Black community, Gamu conveys the importance of recognising progress against the odds of structural oppression by developing a sense of belonging:

I've also set up an awards scheme to recognise women of colour in business…It has belonging in the sense that this is my community. [Gamu] [I]

Gamu had realised there were many Black, Asian, and minority-ethnic students who were struggling, and she took on a paid role in the University to counter this, advocating for race equity on behalf of students:

> *… that is really important, because sometimes they suffer in silence. [Gamu] [I]*

> *… being part of the University as a worker, you know, so as a student, to be able to…my community, not just my community, but, of course, the BAME community in general, was very important for me. [Gamu] [I]*

As an entrepreneur in her own community, Gamu had a clear purpose for attending university. She wished for her already existing enterprise to grow and expand, for the benefit of others:

> *I mean, my business, although, like I said, I'm not providing, it's not product-based business, it's a service-based business, but I'm still using that kind of application we used, even [...] how to make your service available for customers and that sort of thing. [Gamu] [I]*

Gamu developed her existing experience and knowledge further through voluntary enterprise activities, which she said had played a role in her transformation:

> *… because I've always had an interest in business, I went into this simulation to be able to gain further knowledge, because they did say, we'll kind of give you an insight into making important decisions, […] and that has actually changed my mindset […] because we had to do branding as well as part of it, and we had to present our branding to some of the judges. [Gamu] [I]*

Gamu was valued highly by the University and made to feel she mattered:

> *[…] basically I scored 100% in his module and he thought I […] could be of help to support other students, basically. It's just sitting in his class and sharing my experience of that particular module, in how I went about, you know, how I put things together to be able to achieve that level of grade, and […] he said he would*

like to recommend me to perhaps one day becoming a lecturer [laughs]. [Gamu] [I]

Gamu's story gives a clear demonstration of the sense of 'fit' gained by aligning with the structures of the institution, which enables students to move into the contributory phase of belonging and gain a sense of adding value and mattering.

Whilst such contributions are rightly rewarded with payment, other students felt they were contributing in a less formal or visible way and seemed to gain similar benefits in terms of belonging. The start of Contributory Belonging is often at the level of close-peer contribution. Whilst it is difficult to separate this from the behaviours which lead to Relational Belonging, contributing seemed to commence at course level and involve more than simply being friendly and existing alongside people. There was an active intention to help, and share wisdom, knowledge, and experience.

Hamid explained how peer support related to a sense of community and saw the act of sharing as essential if everyone is to improve together. There was a sense of collectivism in Hamid's comments which contrasted with some of the British students' comments about competing against each other and everyone being out for themselves:

So, we can share our thoughts, they're going to get the knowledge, and we can share many things. If I have, like, if I'm good at one thing, I can share that, and so they're going to get the knowledge. We can pass knowledge to each other; we're going to be connecting and build a strong community. [Hamid] [I]

He also relates peer support to improved emotional state and reassurance:

And they can hold [...] If I'm a bit down, my friend can hold me up. Going to say, 'Mate, you're going to be fine, okay'. [Hamid] [I]

Not criticising anyone, not complaining. They just, like, a lifting up. Yeah, lifting up each other to make their potential at the fullest to do the assignment. [Hamid] [I]

Gamu had a coursemate who was also a mature student, and she felt that the younger students benefited from their openness and willingness to share and support them.

> *Yeah, definitely, and we're always in the same group together, and so if there's any group assignments, I mean, some of the students, younger students also like to work with us on group work because they know we share, they know we, you know, anyone that's been in a group with us, we try and do a lot of work for them as well, not for them, but try and encourage … [Gamu] [I]*

Bernila, too, advised her Spanish peers who were making mistakes when she studied abroad, drawing on her identity as a good student despite the social rejection she experienced there. Whilst she says she got 'mad' with them, she also had a sense of imparting wisdom and experience and offering guidance:

> *… why am I so strict, why do I got to get this reference right […] I was like, you've got to get your reference right because [...]. [Bernila] [I]*

> *… people need to know how to reference, but these people don't know how to reference, that's why I got mad at them[.] [Bernila] [I]*

Bernila and her UK final year peers were also imparting their experience and knowledge to students in the year below them on the same degree path:

> *… we've been sharing experience about what their final year was like here and what to do, what not to do, whereas we told them what and what not to do whilst you're abroad. [Bernila] [I]*

This sense of giving and not just receiving, and passing on peer support to develop a chain of belonging, was evident in Beatriz's stories:

> *So, knowing where things are, online, in terms of university also helps, with feeling that I belong to the University. That I'm part of it, because something was given to me that I'm now able to use, to help others. [Beatriz] [I]*

Bernila referred to herself as one of the 'best' students, when explaining that her tutor had created an extra student representative position on her course so that all the 'best' students returning from a year abroad could be given a role. This was not said arrogantly, but rather to show the level of pride her tutor had in the students, and the positive energy she conveyed to them in valuing their contribution.

> *I think [tutor] got overexcited because some of her best students came back from study abroad, so she brought in three student reps. [Bernila] [G]*

It was on returning from her year abroad that Bernila felt a greater sense of wanting to give back and get involved, which led her to contribute to her student community:

> *I'm a student rep and I wanted to be part of the Student Council, I'm trying to, you know, be part of this uni as much as I can, just before I go … [Bernila] [I]*

In her final year, Bernila became very focused on her identity as a business student, aiming at entrepreneurship and entering the business world. She used this identity as a way of contributing to her peer community:

> *… every time we drink we're not talking about mad, crazy things, we're talking about business plans [laughs]. There's videos of us just sat down there like this, we look like Mafia bosses, talking about plans, you know … Trying to target a proper clientele, whatever it is, anything businessy. [Bernila] [I]*

> *We even made plans, you know, to have our own businesses in the future and attend uni for speeches … [Bernila] [I]*

Impact on Others and the World

Prince realised part of his transformation consisted in his new ability to influence others around him in a different way:

> *[…] this has allowed me to transform the way I communicate with other people […]. [Prince] [G]*

Prince revealed that he saw transformation as something which can be internal and not necessarily known by others; it occurs in a person's thought process and impacts how they treat others. This form of community transformation is hard to measure, as it is an attitude change rather than an overt action.

Prince mentioned gaining a deeper understanding of others through peer interactions as part of his transformation. He demonstrated how this change allowed him to positively influence others, reaching the threshold between transformation and mattering.

> *Some of them were new people, some of them I've known all through my course so I think I feel that their perspective really helped me grow as a person and be more compassionate towards others […]. [Prince] [I]*

In the collaging activity, Prince conveyed his ultimate realisation: that he was not struggling alone, and everyone has different struggles with university life. He used the symbolism of hands with different skin colours and referenced cultural celebrations and racial diversity within the student population to represent inclusivity. He then explained that this image also symbolised people facing different struggles. Taking a CRT lens, I felt Prince conveyed how race brings a different layer to both the greatest challenges and common student struggles; he did not speak, for example, of the struggles that students with disabilities have, despite mentioning that he had a disability. In his initial explanation of the image he'd selected, he only referred to race and culture, and not to other layers of oppression within the 'matrix of domination' (Collins, 2000). The intersection of both identities he inhabited would have formed interlocking power constraints, yet he only referred to one, perhaps because disabilities are socially individualised, where constraints of race are seen as collective:

> *And the second picture should be hands of all different colours, all races, and these hands represent, they represent me learning about different cultures within the uni, and how different cultures celebrate different events, as the University holds a lot of cultural events, that people are open to learn about new cultures. This has also taught me that not everyone thinks the same, and everyone has their own struggles within their … but they could be on the same or similar journey as you. And it's given me a sense of transformation to think about others and their journey, and how I can help them. [Prince] [G]*



Figure 7 IMAGE OF HANDS USED BY PRINCE IN HIS DIGITAL COLLAGE

Prince referenced transformation as a process of realisation through thinking 'about others and their journey' and how he could help them. Bringing a Freirean analysis, I see this as Prince entering critical consciousness and thereby moving towards activism on behalf of wider communities oppressed by society. He had moved to think beyond himself and his own 'stuckness' (Alter, 2024), having released himself from the inactivity and disengagement of his first year and the Covid-impacted year and was now seeking relationships with others. He appeared to be moving into the conscious leadership stage in that he felt he had something to offer in terms of freeing others from their 'stuckness' and oppression.

There was clearly a link between realising the impact one can have on others and receiving impact from others oneself; this contributed to a sense of transformation in Prince, Gamu, and Nathan. Nathan craved independence and freedom from what he saw as the constraints of studying and being at university. He mentioned wishing he was at another university, wishing he could have got an apprenticeship instead, and feeling disconnected from other students, all of which seemed to limit him and make him long to be free:

> *I think I'm getting closer to being free, because at the moment I do feel a bit free because I'm doing what I like, like I enjoy this job that I'm at, at the moment. [Nathan] [G]*

This disconnect had been mitigated by the relationships he developed on placement, which he felt had been positive and which had created a stronger sense of affinity with the University than he'd felt as a student alone. If more students could take paid roles within the University, perhaps they might also feel more connected and impactful, rather than feeling they have no influence. Perhaps becoming economically active and 'working' in a paid role causes one's

contribution to feel more valid and valuable within the neoliberal framework of transformation to which many students subscribe (or conform), particularly within the context of a business school.

Prince also related transformation to having one's contribution through study recognised, highlighting an award he had not known about until very recently:

> *I recently found out that you can … you could win, I think it's the [Londonshire] Award[.] [Prince] [G]*

Not Contributing

For eight of the participants, the deeper, more committed forms of Contributory Belonging were not evidenced in their stories, leaving them at the stages which precede Mattering. These participants all demonstrated a sense of Relational or Structural Belonging and of Transformation but had not moved into the phase of Contributory Belonging and Mattering. As this was the majority experience, it is worth examining the barriers to moving from Relational and Structural Belonging into Contributory Belonging.

Prince had started university with no intention of engaging outside of his learning, as he explained:

> *I came to the uni to study, I didn't really want to do anything else. [Prince] [G]*

Beatriz, too, felt that the social offering was not something she wanted to engage with, but recognised the impact of this on herself and others in terms of loss of community through apathy:

> *[…] let's say the Business School has a lot of events for us, and a lot of the times I don't go to the events, and I think, because I think oh no those events are not very important to me, they're going to be boring, something like that, but maybe I'm part of the problem because if I were going, I was going to stand there, this might be interesting, it might be relevant to me, so I'm part of the problem. [Beatriz] [G]*

This sounds like a compulsion to reject before you are rejected. If they focus on earning money in part-time work and withdraw from anything extra-curricular, students are necessarily less

available to engage in the university community. However, by not taking a risk on engaging in something unfamiliar, some participants maintained safety and comfort yet lost out on a deeper sense of belonging. Only by reflecting on what the other participants had relayed via their collages did Beatriz realise the full extent of this loss:

> *I feel like you've experienced so much, and compared to what I've experienced […] I've experienced so little in the University, I feel like I could have definitely engaged more. [Beatriz] [G]*

She then summarised her reflections from the group collage activity as amounting to a personal decision on whether to belong. This implies that sometimes students choose to unbelong, or at least to not fully belong:

> *… it really is up to us to decide where and what to do, if to belong. [Beatriz] [G]*

Contributing and Mattering

Contributory Belonging was less evidenced in the dataset than Relational and Structural Belonging. I propose that this is because it is a later stage in the development of belonging at university, and whilst belonging is not solely dependent on time in situ, two of the participants had only been at the University for less than 18 months. Amongst the final-year students, Gamu evidenced the clearest sense of Contributory Belonging: she held several roles within the University, took part in enterprise competitions, and shared the expertise she had gained outside of her studies by advocating on behalf of Black women in business. She also felt able to contribute confidently in class and support younger students in groupwork and cited validation by tutors of the value she added to the University and her peers.

Bernila had reached the stage of Contributory Belonging; her tutor had shown the value of her contribution by creating additional Student Representative roles for her 'best students'. She was also taking responsibility for the well-being of others in her halls, engaging actively in enterprise discussions with her peers, and intended to return to the University in future to share her success with new students.

Prince seemed to be at the threshold of Contributory Belonging, as he had found his place within the structures by discovering his future career might be found in a not-for-profit context. He had

also reinvigorated his Relational Belonging post-Covid and seemed keen to support students with the same issues he had experienced when struggling previously.

Nathan clearly identified ways in which his student experience had changed his mindset and had been 'humbling'. Since working within the structures of the University on placement he seemed to be in a good position to enter the Contributory Belonging stage by the time he returned to his final year of study. He had contributed to organising an internal staff conference in his placement role and had become aware of the many ways in which the University cares for and supports students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This gave him a greater sense of Structural Belonging and placed him in a good position to move into Contributory Belonging by sharing this understanding in the next academic year.

Uma had tried to enter Contributory Belonging by seeking to work with the Students' Union but felt rebuked. She was sad that, in her view, she had not been listened to and her ideas had not been valued. She had been a Student Representative and held a part-time role in an administrative department of the University sharing her insider knowledge of the University's processes with others, but did not convey a sense of Mattering or feeling she was adding value, despite her active contribution. There appears to be a need for the institution to recognise the student's contribution for it to lead to Mattering; it cannot simply be generated internally within the individual without external validation of the value they are adding.

Sean, Aisha, Jìng, Obi, Hamid, and Beatriz gave no evidence that they felt a sense of Contributory Belonging, appearing only to feel Relational and Structural Belonging. These enabled them to identify ways in which they had transformed as a person, through the new skills and abilities they had acquired, but they did not talk about a sense of adding value to others or the institution. I would therefore argue that they felt they belonged and had transformed through being a student at Londonshire University, but did not feel they had contributed to, or mattered to, the institution.

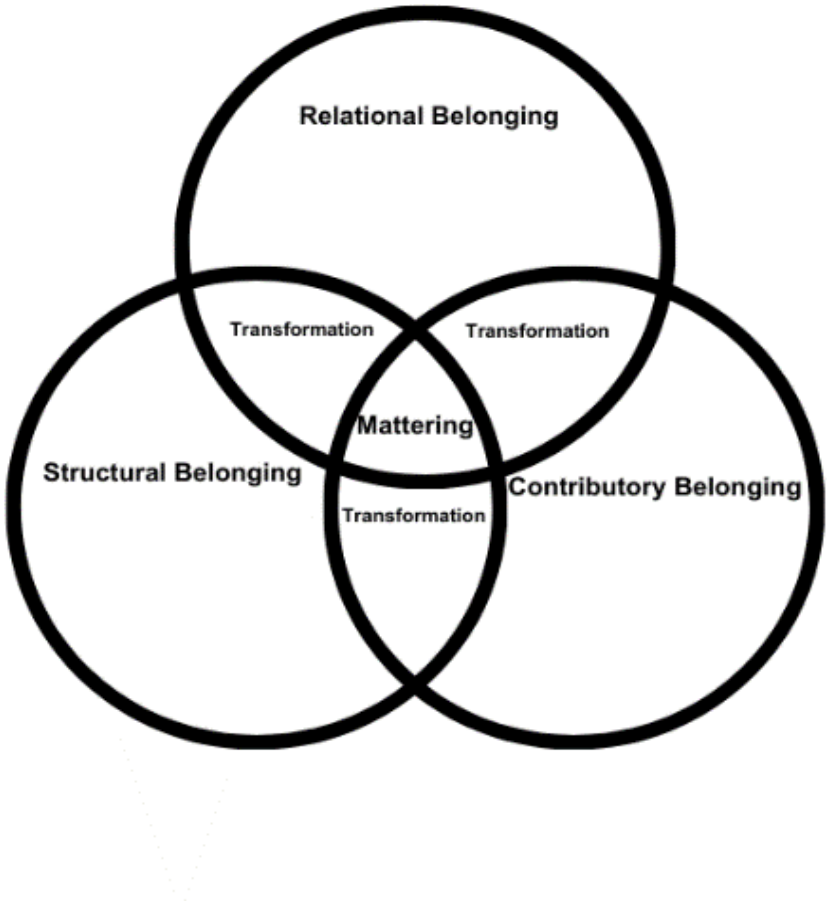


Figure 8 MODEL SHOWING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELATIONAL, STRUCTURAL AND CONTRIBUTORY BELONGING, TRANSFORMATION AND MATTERING

Impact of Race on Belonging and Mattering

I propose that all three forms of belonging at university are impacted by race and racism, which creates additional challenges and barriers for students of colour with which White students do not have to contend. The impact of race on participants' experience at university can be described as the 'weather' (Sharpe, 2016: 104) in which context all life takes place for people who are racialised as 'other than White'; therefore, it cannot be ignored when seeking solutions to eliminating life outcome differentials. As Uma explained, issues of race and ethnicity are sensitive topics to discuss, and yet they have an ever-present, silent impact on her life:

They are lingering around unaddressed. [Uma] [I]

In contributing to this study, students gave their time willingly and without reward. It is hard to recruit students to do this, but even more so when discussing personal topics which are emotive and link to negative experiences. Therefore, simply participating in this study could be seen as an act of contribution, and I wanted to provide the conditions for students to connect with one another whilst doing so, to increase their sense of belonging in the process. Reflecting on this now, I see that the group collage activity was a vehicle for generating belonging. The students interacted and reflected upon each other's stories and collages, and through the act of sharing, caring about each other, and donating their narratives to this research, they added to their own belonging.

It is hard for anyone to feel valued, to matter, if they do not contribute. How can they receive feedback on their value to others if they do not participate, give, engage, or contribute? It is important to feel valued through *adding value*, yet racism, prejudice, oppression all remove opportunities to both add value and feel valued (Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, 2021). Feeling a sense of Contributory Belonging, therefore, can be a tough challenge for students of colour who may constantly perceive, in the ways that have been discussed throughout this study, that they are not as important to society as UK White students. Knowing that, in the historical past, they hadn't been considered important to the UK, they also sense that they won't be valued as highly as White students in the graduate labour market. Data shows that they will find it more difficult to gain highly skilled employment and high salaries, and awareness of this can lead students to take a transactional approach to learning and feel unable to 'add' value. It seems vital, then, that universities not only offer opportunities and encourage engagement, but actively create routes for contribution as part of the curriculum. Examples might include summer schools, studying abroad, a placement year, internships, casual part-time roles in the university, student representative positions, and projects working with employers, amongst others. Through such contributions students might then experience a deeper sense of Mattering, which in turn will increase the positive life outcomes of their time at university.

In Figure 8 I demonstrated the relationship between Belonging, Transformation, and Mattering. Taking account of the analysis and discussion of the impact of race upon students' experiences of each, I adapt the model here (Figure 9) to represent race as 'the weather' (Sharpe, 2016) within which racially minoritised students make meaning of all three concepts, and Covid as part of this climate at the time of the study. The two factors combined as a 'pandemic within a pandemic' (Laurencin and Walker, 2020: 10), impacting the situated, contextualised nature of this study. However, I believe much of these findings are transferable to similar HEI contexts

during other pressing times such as the current cost-of-living crisis (2024), and applicable to future unforeseen constraints upon student life.

As discussed above, students exhibited differing levels of belonging dependent on their experiences of loneliness and inclusion, the complexity of their lives, racism, financial and commuting constraints, engagement with extracurricular activities, perceived care from tutors and university services, time studying abroad, adaptability to online learning and lockdowns, inclusion by student societies, and other aspects of student life. In the model below (Figure 10) I have endeavoured to position each participant at the intersection of Belonging, Transformation, and Mattering that is most represented in their stories, whilst acknowledging that these states are dynamic and in constant flux, changeable throughout each participant's years of study at Londonshire.

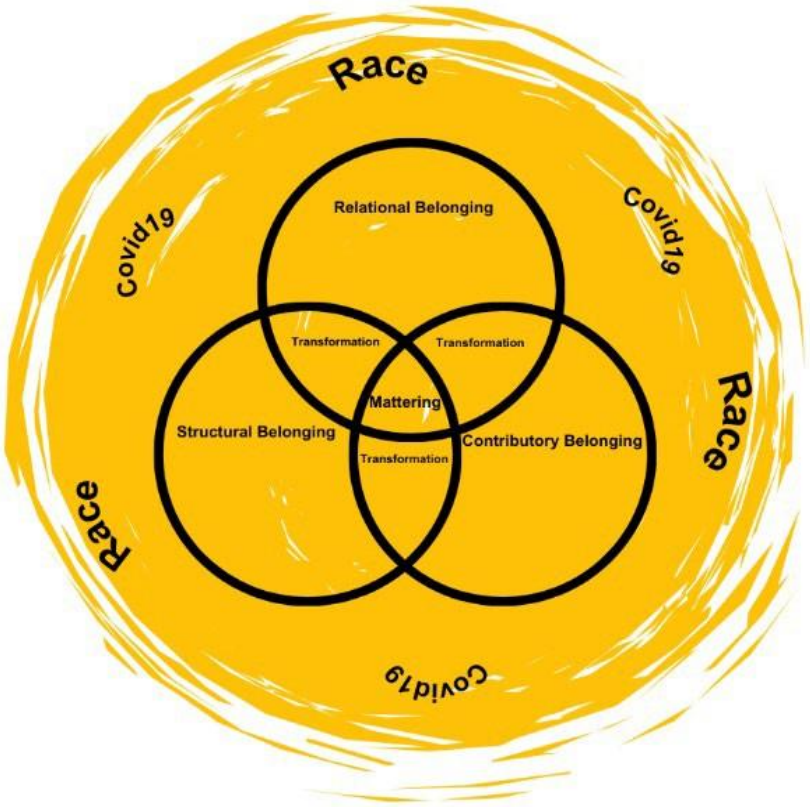


Figure 9 MODEL DEMONSTRATING COVID-19 AND RACE AS 'THE WEATHER'

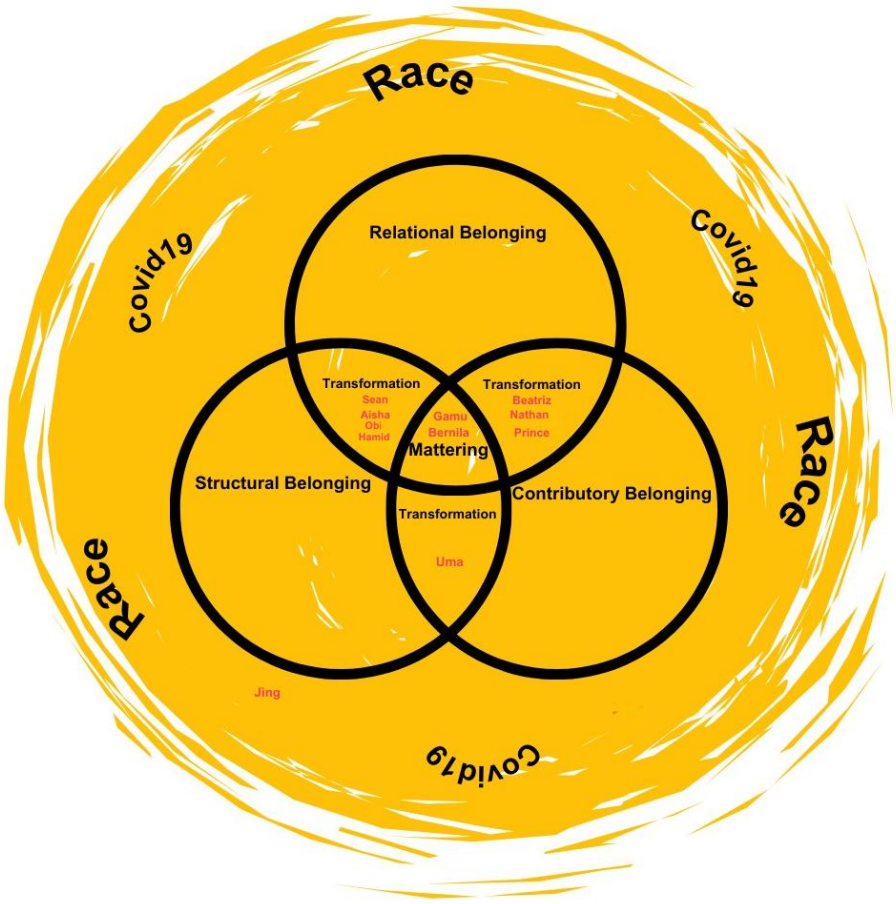


Figure 10 MODEL ADAPTED TO SHOW WHICH PHASE OF BELONGING AND TRANSFORMATION EACH PARTICIPANT DEMONSTRATED

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have outlined the concept of Contributory Belonging and argued that moving into this deeper phase of belonging enables students to feel not only valued but that they add value themselves, and therefore matter (Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, 2021: 6). In the following chapter, I conclude this study and offer recommendations for practice, drawn from the findings, to reduce race inequity in university outcomes.

Chapter 8: Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

The previous chapters discussed theoretical concepts and quantitative data informing the design of this study, the ontological and methodological approach taken, the methods chosen in alignment with these, and a discussion of findings from the data gathered. In this final chapter, I outline the original research questions, offering the conclusions I have drawn from the analysis of the findings, noting the limitations of the study, and setting out my contributions to method, knowledge, and practice.

Research Questions

Within the context of a UK business school:

1. How do racially minoritised undergraduates experience belonging and transformation at university, and what impact does their race have on that experience?
2. What, if any, are the links between student belonging and transformation?
3. How can universities enhance belonging and transformation to achieve social justice for racially minoritised students?

This study contributes to the growing field of knowledge about students' sense of belonging at university by connecting the concepts of belonging and mattering with the concept of transformation and examining how racial identity impacts all three.

Conceptualisations of belonging differ, with emphasis placed variously upon, amongst other factors, institutional contexts, subject disciplines, personal interests, academic thriving, and interpersonal relationships – both fleeting and sustained (Kahu *et al.,* 2022; Ahn and Davis, 2019). My findings show that belonging consists of a multifaceted, non-linear series of episodes of connection and disconnection with the people and structures of a university community. On occasions, the lack of belonging is an active decision of resistance, an unbelonging, showing agency and personal boundaries. Sometimes not-belonging is experienced without agency, as rejection, and this can lead to isolation, loneliness, apathy, and a pulling away from others. At the harsher end of not belonging lies marginality (Schlossberg, 1989), where students consider dropping out altogether if they are unable to harness marginality as a vehicle of resistance (hooks, 1994b). Mattering has particular salience to the outcomes of people who are subject to stereotyping and marginalisation (Flett, 2021: 8). 'Oppression, the antithesis of mattering'

(Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky, 2021: 5) requires an antidote founded in belonging, both relational and structural, which enables students to connect, contribute, and create change, reciprocating as both donor and recipient of a sense of mattering (Pearlin and LeBlanc, 2001: 7).

Research over the past decade has generated several frameworks to explain students' sense of belonging at university, revealing the importance of place attachment, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and social relationships. This study supports those findings whilst extending our knowledge of how racialisation and othering in White-majority society impacts student belonging. The model I developed suggests that enabling racially minoritised students to contribute to change in the university context can counter some of both the natural and racially accentuated fluctuations in belonging that can occur, moving students into a more secure state of mattering. There is known to be a positive correlation between belonging and mattering (Flett, 2018: 228), although fewer students feel they matter than feel they belong (Flett, 2018: 234). Whilst I am in broad agreement with Strayhorn (2012) on the core elements of belonging, I argue that belonging precedes mattering, not the other way around. I propose this progression from belonging to mattering can be harnessed in university policy and practices so as to reduce race inequity and make lasting change in both students' lives and the evolving higher education context.

My findings show that belonging at university can be achieved at three broad levels: Relational, Structural, and Contributory. It is possible for students to feel they belong purely at one of these levels and achieve some sense of self-transformation as a result. However, if two levels of belonging are experienced, the student appears to demonstrate a stronger connection to the university community. Some students achieve Relational and Structural Belonging, go on to experience self-transformation, and can reflect on their university experience with a sense of fit. However, those who move beyond Relational and Structural Belonging and enter the Contributory Belonging phase – which entails giving back to the university community, demonstrating generosity, giving ideas, donating time and energy, and making an active contribution – not only transform but ultimately feel they matter. This enables a sense of *becoming* more than the person you are to yourself, by becoming someone to the community; becoming a leader, a guide, a change-maker, a partner, an active part of the structures.

Each of these phases of belonging is unfixed, and the process of moving through them is not linear or irreversible. The data showed that students can flow back and forth between the phases of belonging depending on events in their life which are beyond their control. Most notable of these events throughout the students' stories was the trauma of the Covid-19 pandemic for

which there will be a long disaster recovery process (Ahearne and Anderson, 2024), and the 'ordinary, not aberrational' (Arday and Jones, 2022: 9) impact of race upon the lived experience of people 'other than White'.

This study has shown how belonging can fluctuate, pass, increase and decrease, retract, and build back, whereas the transformations students observed in themselves appeared to be permanent. No participant demonstrated any evidence of transforming and then losing this sense of transformation thereafter. Some viewed their transformation in relation to the self only; others related transformation to their impact upon the community around them and making a difference to other people's lives. When students moved into the Contributory Belonging phase, they felt a greater sense of becoming part of the University's structures, rather than the simple alignment with those structures which had been achieved at the stage of Structural Belonging.

Being part of the structures – contributing – took the form of assuming leadership or partnership responsibilities: for example, creating a group focused on starting a business or entering an enterprise challenge competition, or assuming more formal roles such as Student Representative, Peer Mentor, Student Equity Advocate, or Society Chair. This might also take the form of classroom contribution, although only one student spoke of active contribution in class, which highlights the need to research classroom belonging, and specifically consider how belonging develops in the quiet student (Akinbode, 2015). The two participants who had moved into the Contributory Belonging phase conveyed a sense of mattering insofar as they felt valued, and added value to, their university and the staff and student community within it. They felt noticed, depended upon, and needed by others in that environment, including by their tutors.

By participating in this study, the students conveyed a sense of *donating* their time, energy, and stories. Their involvement demonstrated a move towards the contributory phase of belonging for all except Jìng. Jìng chose not to participate in the group-collage activity and showed little evidence of belonging at any level in her photo-voice interview. She was the participant with the least time spent at the University, as a direct entrant to her final year, and this lack of belonging clearly presented a challenge to her achieving much sense of transformation. In keeping with O'Dea's (2023: 103) findings that language barriers reduced sense of belonging amongst Chinese direct entrants, Jìng certainly felt no ability to give or contribute in any way, due to her isolation and anxiety about her spoken language ability. She is, therefore, represented in the model (Fig. 10) as totally outside of the realms of belonging or transformation. Any model of belonging will have outliers and those who choose not to belong; but future research might test this model with more direct entrants from non-English speaking countries to check whether Jìng was an outlier

or whether specific adaptations are required for her student demographic.

All 10 of the other participants had clearly grown through the challenges they had faced, whether external or internal. Everyone felt a positive connection to the University, and a sense of pride in themselves for staying and persevering. The challenges this cohort of students faced included some which are permanent and will continue to impact them and new students, such as racialised microaggressions, overt racism, loneliness, self-doubt, and peer pressure. Other challenges were, hopefully, unique one-off barriers due to Covid-19, such as infection and death rates that disproportionately impacted Black and Asian communities (Arday and Jones, 2022; Race Disparities Unit, 2021), enforced isolation in lockdown, and online-only teaching.

Whilst no organisation can predict the next global crisis, whether it is a pandemic or another devastating *force majeure*, universities *can* predict the ongoing everyday challenges that will be faced by racially minoritised students before they get to the campus, whilst they are on campus, and when they graduate, and can mitigate these right now. The stories told through this study show how race impacts the lives of Black and Asian students in the UK, regardless of whether they arrive on a temporary visa as overseas students or are second/third-generation British residents of Black or Asian heritage who have lived their whole lives as UK citizens. The recommendations which follow propose actions which can be taken by any university with inequitable outcomes as a route to reducing the impact of racialisation upon the student experience. For, as Nathan stated in his interview:

> *… there's certain barriers that people face and I think that's what it's mainly about, the fact that […] they can easily be dealt with if we all come together and work together. [Nathan] [I]*

The richness of the narratives draws attention to issues which numerous other students are experiencing alongside these participants. As counter-narratives, the power of each individual story lies in its ability to reveal the evidence of lives lived under the White gaze. The findings in this study have been analysed with race anchored at the heart (whilst acknowledging intersecting oppressions including age, gender, and Home/international status). Individuals' experience of the world is inextricably linked to complex histories of oppression and racism and how these are embedded in society's structures (Akuoko-Barfi *et al.,* 2023: 463). Throughout the chapters I have highlighted how both race and Covid impacted on participants' lives during their undergraduate study in the period 2019–2023. I have also drawn attention to Whiteness, wherever it has been obvious, and also where it is suspected or invisible, for without Whiteness there would be no

'Other', and throughout the students' stories there has been an ever-present sense of being othered by those holding unearned structural advantage bestowed via a system of Whiteness.

This study supports the suggestion that universities should create programmes in line with CRT, which raise awareness and 'contest blatant and subtle racism' (Goldoni, 2017: 338), both within the home university setting and within partner universities for those studying abroad. Pre-departure opportunities to discuss demographic composition, cultural heritage, and local support organisations, and to hear the experiences of students of colour who have visited those partner universities, are vital in preparing racially minoritised students for studying abroad. For students of colour to fully gain the social and cultural capital provided by global opportunities they need to be supported to engage, otherwise the outcome will be affected, as shown by Bernila and Aisha's examples of a shortened period of time abroad or low attendance and failure once there. Neither participant built a social network of students within their partner university setting, and Bernila sought the safety of local culturally diverse and 'othered' communities instead. Whilst both benefited greatly from the experience abroad, this was not without significant racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2008).

Universities must strive to engender a sense of mattering, moving beyond belonging and transformation. To achieve this, students who are oppressed in society must have access to opportunities, as well as to structured occasions within the curriculum when they can contribute, feel valued, matter to others, and make life better within their own immediate environment (Ahearne and Anderson, 2024).

It is no coincidence that both the concept of mattering and the social and political movement of Black Lives Matter have gained prominence during the years of this doctoral study. Not-mattering stems from feeling insignificant and disrespected, one of the causes of which is racism, and can be experienced as not mattering to people either in one's immediate environment or to society in general. Both are equally harmful, especially if experienced simultaneously. Some students who are marginalised due to their ethnicity or culture may feel 'we don't matter to them' (the University) and this can be compounded if they also feel that their ethnic group does not matter to society (Flett, 2018: 223), as in Uma's case. Universities must make extra efforts to reinforce their care for students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds to counter the messages they receive from wider society and increase their sense of visibility and value within the institution. As Freire tells us (2005: 33), 'Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage'; therefore, it cannot fear reality but must instead recreate and reinvent that reality for the future. Students must be part of that process, by reaching their own critical consciousness at university and

leading the change they want to see in the world through contribution and adding value to others.

How universities address the impact of racism, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue to counter exclusion from opportunities, groups, support, and personal fulfilment is a major preoccupation of our transnational, post-Covid era. Universities are contradictory spaces, where marginalisation and transformation constantly co-exist (Samatar *et al.,* 2021), and the outcome of this cannot simply be left to chance and resilience. Through enabling a fuller sense of belonging and valued contribution amongst students of colour, leading to transformation and an increased sense of mattering, the recommendations below provide an immediate starting point that universities can use in order to actively progress race equity in 2026. In all actions taken towards that end, we must consider

> *making culture towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible (hooks, 2014: 145)*

As Tuck and Yang (2012) emphasise, decolonising is not a metaphor, and whilst the word has been subsumed into educational terminology, it requires the redistribution of resources in order not to become 'the difference that makes no difference' (Stein et. al. 2020: 51). The recommendations below concern how universities could target resources so that Black, Asian, and minority-ethnic undergraduate students feel a greater sense of belonging and transformation, can add value to their community and institution, and feel that they matter. Such a distribution of resources must reject a race-evasive, universalist approach, so that funds earmarked for 'racial projects' to improve degree and employment outcomes for Black, Asian, and minority-ethnic students do not inadvertently preserve White privilege (Tikly, 2022: 868). It is my hope that these recommendations will enable universities to grow, progress from being non-racist to becoming anti-racist, and go on to develop an action-oriented approach of deconstructing and redesigning the policies and procedures (Sue and Spanierman, 2020: 255) that currently impede the well-being and success of racially minoritised students.

The process of 'writing back' via narrative resistance (McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, 2017) involves Critical Race scholars publishing as a form of countering hegemony and thereby shifting the discourse on students from ethnically minoritised backgrounds, shining a light on the policies and practices which impact their lives negatively. This opens a window for such students

to become empowered and inform the change that will be required if they are to benefit equally from the systems which create limiting situations for them in a White-majority society. It is important to me that I use my academic privilege as a researcher by disseminating and acting upon the findings of this study to achieve more equitable outcomes for students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

CRT scholarship has the potential to alter our views on race and racism (Chapman and DeCuir-Gunby, 2018) empowering those racialised as other-than-White in higher education systems. Whilst accepting that writing about the social world can only ever hope to generate 'part truths' (Back, 2007: 155), through using my White privilege to platform the voices of students of colour I hope this study causes colleagues across the HE sector to, first and foremost, talk openly about the powerful social realities portrayed through this research, for we 'can't fix what we can't talk about' (Tatum, 2017: 42). The cues given in my recommendations can then be used to identify and challenge 'unwitting prejudice, ignorance and thoughtlessness' (Macpherson, 1999: 49) in our thoughts, behaviours, policies, procedures, curricula, and spaces which disadvantage students from racially minoritised backgrounds at university and compound inequity upon inequity (Gillborn, 2005: 18). Through co-creation, with students of colour, of institutional anti-racist and relational pedagogies of mattering, there is hope that belonging, transformation, and mattering can all be brought within the reach of every student through their years of university study.

Universities should provide counter-spaces for students of colour to experience community compassion and develop the confidence, courage, and criticality to contribute to and inform change, whilst benefiting from the sense of mattering this engenders. Scholar-activists and educators can combine these arts-based methods not only for further research, but also in solidarity spaces and community-building activities, to hear hitherto-unheard voices and nurture diverse connections through 'social collaging', as I did during my university's 'Global Week'. Here I witnessed the power of students coming together to tell their stories, through reflections portrayed in collage, as a lunchtime social activity. Gilani and Thomas (2025a) found that students felt an increased sense of belonging simply by reflecting upon their own belonging with others, so by using methods such as photo-voice and non-stick collage, as I have done, universities can enable students to increase their own belongingness purely by exploring and discussing it.

Universities must also examine their structures for Whiteness – which ensures all White groups benefit, whether they like it or not (Bhopal, 2023: 123) – and embed mechanisms to challenge

and reconstruct such vehicles of inequity. To that end, direct outcomes of this study so far include the commissioning of an anti-racist structural review within LBS, the embedding of relational pedagogy within the School's curriculum portfolio redesign for 2026, and the design of bespoke pre-departure guidance for students of colour who are considering studying abroad. In addition, 62 Londonshire staff attended anti-racist staff development workshops I organised with the Dean's support, and a Black male empowerment group has been established for UG students in LBS. I have also been invited to advise the Londonshire Clinical Psychology department on creating greater belonging for their students of colour and have spoken at one international and two national conferences about my findings and recommendations for increasing belonging and mattering for racially minoritised students. The potential impact of this study is far-reaching, and its findings are transferable not only to HE contexts in White-majority nations, but also to UK FE contexts and to other organisations looking to recruit, retain, and nurture racially minoritised applicants through developing a strong sense of belonging.

Study Summary

This study has demonstrated the link between belonging and transformation at university, and the pervasive impact that racism has on racially minoritised students' experiences of both. Through arts-based exploration of lived experience students can feel heard, in a truly embodied sense. Belonging fluctuates through the productive struggle (Murdoch *et al.,* 2020) of social learning and social life, as well as the endeavour to align with values, expectations, and the culture of the learning environment. Relationships are foundational to belonging, transformation, and, ultimately, mattering, from which community is enhanced and change enacted, in both the self and for others. Belonging amongst the people and within the structures of a university lead to student self-transformation, and for those who achieve this, contributing to both the community and its structures leads to a deeper sense of mattering.

Limitations

I was fortunate that almost equal numbers of male and female students volunteered to participate. However, it was notable that four of the six female students spoke within minutes about how race, racism, and being racialised as Black or Asian in the UK had impacted them. In contrast, not one of the male students referenced race or racism directly at any point. This may have been due to the male students having neither age, race, nor gender in common with me as researcher, whereas the female students had gender in common with me. It may also have been further compounded by societal expectations of male resilience, toughness, and repression of overt emotion in the face of challenges. White neocolonial society is patriarchal (hooks, 1994b:

7) with varying 'discourses of bravado' (Sonnekus, 2021: 187). Generation Z is exposed to prominent ideologies of hegemonic masculinity through social media, which promote a stoic, robust, dominant, materialistic, status-driven vision of men, which renders Black men's lives 'racialized contradictions' (Smith *et al.,* 2011: 63). Such societal models create a 'vicious cycle of misrecognition' of any non-traditional students who do not match the White hegemonic masculinity reasserted within universities (Arday and Mirza, 2018: 379).

I believe that the young men in this study withheld stories of the impact of race in their daily lives at university because their trust in me, as researcher, was harder to establish due to the unmatched identities between us – I was a total outsider to all the identities they held. Trust may be harder for Black men to establish generally for, as Kehinde Andrews (2017) states, "No matter who you are, what your background is, you are a black male and therefore a threat." Or perhaps they were all tired of talking about race (Eddo-Lodge, 2018a) so withheld aspects of their stories which linked to racialisation, feeling that it would not lead to change. In future research, a male co-researcher would be a useful addition to the research team; perhaps participants could also be recruited from a cohort of male students who receive coaching or mentoring around racialised lived experience, so that their level of comfort in exposing vulnerability might be raised.

This study took place during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was an extraordinary set of global circumstances and represents a time that was – and hopefully will be – like no other in the lives of either the participants or the researcher. It is therefore even more uniquely contextually and temporally situated than otherwise might have been the case. The existing isolation and loneliness were compounded for some who had been in their first year of university when the UK lockdown commenced in March 2020 (Aisha, Nathan, Bernila, Prince). Others (Hamid, Gamu, Obi, Beatriz, Uma, Sean) joined the University in September 2020, a time when hybrid pedagogies remained, but there was more freedom of physical movement and interaction, although a second lockdown was issued in December 2020. The only student who had joined the University after all Covid-19 restrictions had been lifted was Jìng, who was a direct entrant to final year in September 2022 but nevertheless experienced the greatest sense of isolation and loneliness.

The number of participants was necessarily limited to enable the two methods to be combined so that *thicker* data (Braun and Clarke, 2022:16) would be generated. Even so, several ethnic identities were represented: Black British African, Black British Caribbean, White and Black African, Indian Asian, Chinese, and Other Asian Filipino. If repeated, using a team of researchers, a larger cohort of students encompassing more intersections of ethnic identity, ability/disability, sexual

orientation, religion, and age could be included to gather more nuanced experiences, and a further self-declaration of gender identity could be requested to avoid reliance on the 'sex' category on the student record alone.

The decision to use RTA as my tool of analysis was in keeping with the reflexive constructionist approach of my study; however, it ultimately broke the wholeness of each participant's story. In looking for patterns of meaning across the stories, cutting up the transcripts and separating elements of each person's story, I feel I sacrificed the cohesion of each narrative. In retrospect, perhaps a case study analysis or a narrative inquiry tool would have maintained the integrity of each life history in a more fluid capacity.

Future Research Considerations

Using the same multimodal approach, repeating the study with another cohort of students unimpacted by a global pandemic during their university years would enable additional consideration of the impact of Covid-19 on belonging and transformation. This would provide a unique contrast between those who started university during the Covid-19 pandemic (in 2020–21 or 2021–22) and those who commenced in the aftermath without restriction on social contact (whilst acknowledging the lasting impact of prior social isolation in one's formative years; OfS, 2023). This would offer insight into the impact of social distancing, fear of infection, and total online teaching upon students' sense of belonging and transformation as compared with the on-campus experiences in the following years of study. It is important to acknowledge the impact of this unique experience on this generation of students, and to consider the intersection of ethnicity and Covid, for it is widely known that families from ethnic-minority backgrounds in the UK were more adversely affected by the pandemic than White families (UK Government, 2022a). Therefore, it seems sensible to assume the existence of a higher prevalence of stress and anxiety amongst students from racially minoritised backgrounds during the pandemic years as a compounding factor in their student experience.

The desired outcome beyond the submission of my research is to combine aspects of the 'real data' gathered from participants to form fictitious characters who impart an aggregated narrative via an art form such as animation. By creating composite characters (Appendix M) to represent the anonymised experiences of a number of real participants I aim to convey the findings of my research in a way which does not just resonate within the minds of my colleagues but also creates a visceral, bodily reaction within them in recognition of the experiences being portrayed (Petty *et* al,

2020). It is my belief that this method of communicating lived experiences is powerful and impactful to a wide audience, as it challenges habitual ways of thinking and perceiving (Eaves, 2014: 148), whilst still protecting the identities of those who contributed their narratives.

Contribution to Method

For researchers seeking methods which align with the principles of decolonising methodologies, I offer a contribution to method which I developed through necessity during the Covid-19 lockdown period. In conducting this arts-informed inquiry partially via digital methods, I contribute to the method of non-stick collage, bringing its application into the digital realm and extending its potential use across time zones, oceans, and international borders. Using visual software such as Canva as a tool for researching lived experience via non-stick collaging has proven adaptable to the purpose of this study, and I advocate for its viability in a range of studies where digital poverty can be assessed and overcome before participants are asked to engage.

The combination of individual photo-voice discussions followed by group collaging is a powerful non-extractive tool for surfacing unheard voices whilst also building belonging through group validation of experiences. The combination of methods enabled transformational change for the participants, through deep reflection on experience, resulting in realisations such as '… it just means I could have belonged more' [Beatriz], which demonstrated how the respondents were individually impacted by learning from one another's stories in the group session. Additionally, the non-stick collaging method proved powerful in refining a single message that participants wanted to communicate from their multiple photos, using a variety of abstract materials to convey meaning. This is a methodological contribution to research in business education that gives participants increased power over the story told by the research.

Contribution to Knowledge

Whilst previous researchers have identified relationships, environment, and processes as factors which impact students' sense of belonging at university, my model provides a new way to look at theories of belonging by linking belonging with transformation and mattering. In contrast to Strayhorn's (2018: 36) description of belonging, which describes 'belonging as a consequence of mattering', my analysis of findings proposes that mattering is a stage beyond belonging, rather than a precursor to it. I also demonstrate that transformation (in terms of skills acquisition, confidence, assertiveness, and other character developments) is possible through Relational and Structural Belonging, whereas mattering is only achieved through Contributory Belonging.

Contribution to Practice

The concept of 'originality' is one founded in the value of subjectivity, renounced by decolonial thinkers and researchers as a product of modernity (Mignolo, 2009: 162). Instead, I here contribute to what exists already, adding the nuance of context and temporality. My analysis of the lived experiences of 11 undergraduate business school students of colour in the Covid era at a university close to London nonetheless offers insight for HEIs around the world serving students from racially minoritised backgrounds, showing how they could take action to increase belonging, transformation, and mattering amongst their cohorts. In so doing, they would be responding directly to the voices of students who continue to experience racism in all its forms on campus, in the surrounding location of their university, and when engaging in co-curricular endeavours such as studying abroad.

Additionally, the methods I have developed can be applied to community-building and listening to unheard voices, which cannot be captured via national student surveys and mid-module feedback forms. Such arts-informed inquiry methods can bring lived experiences to bear on strategic planning and on the design of equity initiatives to reduce awarding and employment differentials for Black, Asian, and minority-ethnic students, as well as students with other protected characteristics. Below, I offer seven recommendations for practice resulting from this study.

Recommendations

1. Conversations about Race and Antiracism Staff Development

Regular, open conversations about race should be embedded across universities for both staff and students. These spaces enable unheard stories and lived experiences to surface, fostering a deeper understanding of how race shapes university life. Such insights inform more effective, equitable decision-making and support initiatives aimed at strengthening student belonging and structural transformation. Creative and visual inquiry methods, such as photo-voice and collage, can be used to encourage reflection and expression, helping participants articulate experiences that may otherwise remain unspoken, enabling co-creation of appropriate amelioration initiatives. The contested nature of such discussions can be highly triggering for both facilitators and attendees, requiring brave spaces to be constructed with psychological support options attached. Facilitators should expect resistance and vulnerabilities to be expressed on the attendees' journey from apathy to awareness to agitation to advocacy. Self-care time must be planned into the facilitators' workload for the project, and supervisory-style mentorship should be resourced for anyone leading such initiatives to reduce burn-out and racial battle fatigue.

2. Relational Pedagogy

Undergraduate curricula should be intentionally designed around relational pedagogy, placing connection and meaningful interaction at the centre of learning. This includes nurturing relationships among students as well as between students and staff. Consideration should be given to how physical space and timetabling structures foster or hinder these connections. Students' timetables should facilitate continued engagement within cohorts, supporting stronger relationships, enhancing belonging, and enabling students to contribute more confidently within their learning communities.

3. Racially Sensitive Study Abroad Preparation and Support plus Partnership with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)

Study abroad preparation should incorporate a racialised perspective, drawing on the experiences of previous students in each destination. This would equip students of colour with the knowledge needed to make informed choices about where to study and how to navigate different cultural contexts, particularly in relation to race. In parallel, universities should explore partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States to

broaden opportunities and foster inclusive international engagement. However, the political climate in the US is increasingly hostile for anyone racialised as other than White, with Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in education suffering from withdrawal of funding and staffing, so such relationships may bear less fruit than originally hoped for when this study commenced in 2020.

4. Increased Opportunities to Contribute

Students should be given expanded opportunities to actively shape their educational experience. This includes involvement in the design, delivery, and assessment of the curriculum through paid roles such as curriculum consultants, equity advocates, empowerment champions, and peer mentors. Where possible, these roles should also extend into teaching and learning activities, enabling students to participate as co-creators rather than passive recipients of education. Within the current financial restraint across UK higher education there may be fewer funded roles available, so this recommendation may be harder to resource until HR freezes are lifted.

5. Promotion of the Institution's Care for Students

Universities, Schools and workplaces should more visibly and proactively communicate their commitment to student wellbeing and success. Marketing and communications should highlight the range of programmes, initiatives, and bursaries designed to improve the experiences and outcomes of minoritised students. By using diverse channels such as social media, podcasts, and roadshows, institutions can reach those who may not engage with traditional forms of communication, helping all students feel recognised, valued, supported, and personally cared for.

6. Cohort Cohesion

Curriculum design and timetabling should prioritise keeping student cohorts together rather than dispersing them across large, shared modules across multiple programmes. Maintaining cohesive groups supports the development of a strong sense of community, fosters peer relationships, and enhances students' sense of belonging within their programme.

7. Coaching for Belonging, Transformation and Mattering

A structured coaching programme should be implemented across all undergraduate levels to support students' sense of belonging, personal growth, and contribution. In the first year, coaching should focus on connection and compassion, helping students adjust to their new

environment and feel supported in their learning and connections with others. In the second year, the emphasis should shift to courage and confidence, encouraging students to take calculated risks and develop self-belief. By the third year, coaching should focus on criticality and contribution, enabling students to recognise their transformation and actively contribute to their academic and wider communities. If mandatory, students would need to be persuaded of the benefit of such coaching through case studies from previous students who have benefited. Personal Tutors could also embed these elements within their practice when meeting with students 1:1 or in groups across the levels of study. Employers receiving students on placement could adapt a shortened version of this coaching plan to help students build professional connections, feel valued and able to contribute in the workplace environment.

8. Othering and Belonging Research Group

An Othering and Belonging Research Group should be established to monitor and evaluate the implementation of these recommendations. Using creative and participatory research methods, the group would provide ongoing insight into the effectiveness of these recommendations, ensuring that initiatives remain responsive, impactful, and aligned with the goal of fostering inclusive belonging across universities and their stakeholder partners (e.g. Study Abroad institutions and employer Advisory Boards). A network for researchers investigating belonging and othering in the field of Education would also inform how secondary schools can respond to the requirements of the new *Every Child Achieving and Thriving* white paper (2026) to monitor and track students' sense of belonging by 2029, and inform how employers can respond to the Institute of Student Employers' (2024) report on the *Rise in graduates feeling disadvantaged in job applications***.**

Final Reflections

This five-year study has impacted me greatly, both in the daily work that I do and the way I understand the world. It has been, and will continue to be, challenging to hear the students' stories and to analyse these and relay the findings to others to inform anti-racist structural change. My experience of playing a video of my three-minute thesis with associated imagery at a recent conference, where I felt anxious about the responses I would receive afterwards, is an example of the discomfort of doing this deep work properly. Using words like 'racism' and 'racist' is highly emotive, and I could not predict whether the video would resonate, trigger pain responses, or provoke 'whataboutism' (Bowell, 2023). The only colleagues who commented as we left the room were staff of colour, who looked visibly moved and expressed appreciation. My heart was racing as this is a highly charged topic, and the impact on me personally of conducting this research and speaking publicly about it has been challenging, with some specific areas of difficulty that stem from being White. This personal impact has now been recognised by senior leaders in my workplace and I am encouraged by the offer of a mentor/supervisor to support me in debriefing such experiences as I continue to research and lead projects which challenge race inequity for, as Eddo-Lodge (2018a: 63) argues, "racism is a white problem…" that "…white people must take responsibility to solve."

To advocate for change on behalf of those whose experiences I do not share is difficult and complex; it requires constant dialogue with people at the frontline of the experience, and immense amounts of mutual trust. I truly hope I have done justice to the students' stories; they asked to remain in contact with me to learn of the changes resulting from the project, and I will honour my promise to do so. I will use the powerful combination of arts-based methods to both build belonging within student communities and in my daily student voice work going forward. This doctorate provides a springboard from which I will take practical action to advance race equity, founded upon the knowledge my research has created about racialised experiences of belonging and transformation in a business school context.

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Appendices

A. Ethnicity information form
B. Literature Review Articles and Chapters Stored on OneNote
C. A Selection of the Participants' Photos Used in the Photo-Voice Discussion (Anonymised)
D. Participants' Non-Stick and Online Collages (by Pseudonym)
E. My Time Map
F. My Non-Stick Online Collage on Belonging (as Practice of Method)
G. Reflexivity thoughts throughout the write-up
H. Codebook
I. Theme Generation
J. Refining, Defining and Naming Themes
K. NVivo Thematic Tree Diagrams
L. Winning poster presented at EERA ECER Conference, Cyprus 2024
M. Images designed for composite character stories to be used in staff training video
N. Slides for use in recruiting participants
O. Researcher's visualisations of the transcripts – 'sitting with the data' phase

Appendix A. Ethnicity Information Form

Investigation into Belonging and Transformation at University – ethics protocol: SHE/PGR/UH/05726

In this study I am investigating whether students from different ethnic backgrounds experience belonging and transformation at university similarly or differently, and if so how. For this reason, if you are happy to do so, please tick the box which best represents how you identify your ethnicity. This information will be stored in my password protected university OneDrive file, anonymised and only used for the purposes of this research project.

Your Student ID Number: ☐

White

☐ British

☐ Irish

☐ Any other white background (please detail) ☐

Black or Black British

☐ Caribbean

☐ African

☐ Any other Black background (please detail) ☐

Asian or Asian British

☐ Indian

☐ Pakistani

☐ Bangladeshi

☐ Any other Asian background (please detail) ☐

Chinese

☐ Chinese

☐ Any other Chinese background (please detail) ☐

Mixed

☐ White and Black Caribbean

☒ White and Black African

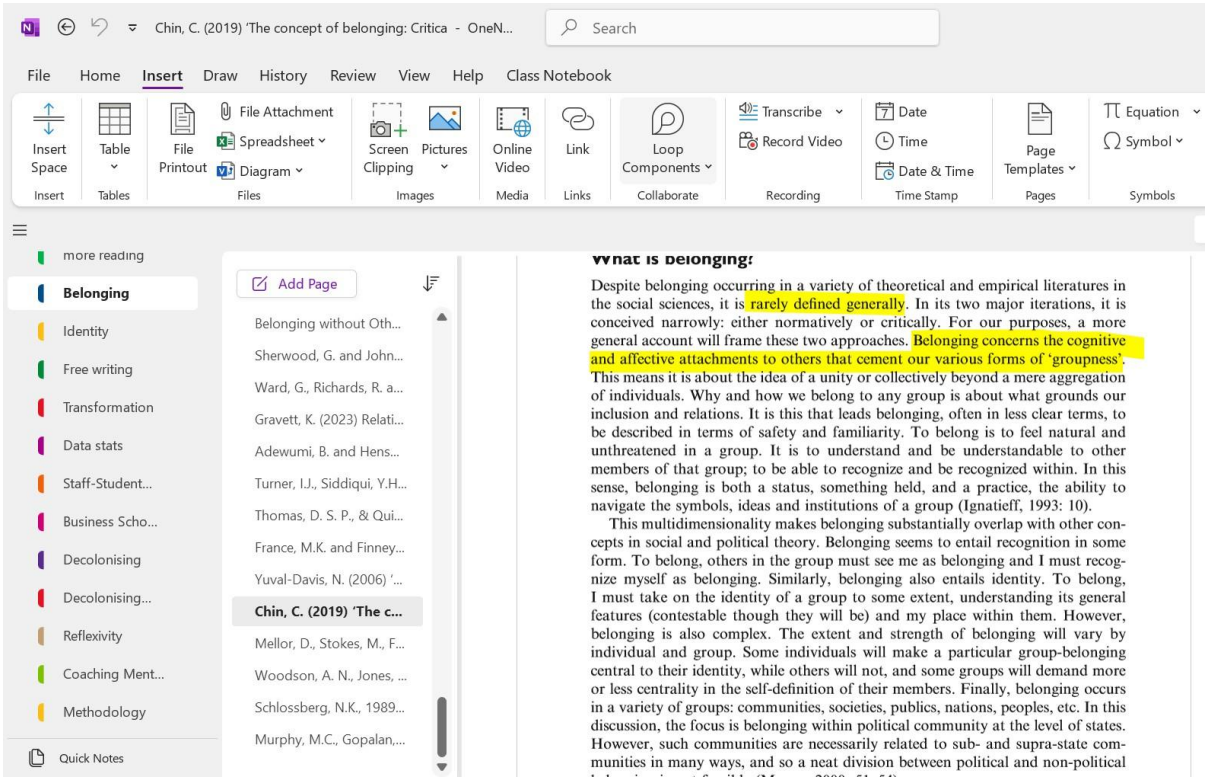
☐ White and Asian

☐ Any other mixed background (please detail) ☐

Prefer not to say

☐

Appendix B. Literature Review Articles and Chapters Stored on OneNote



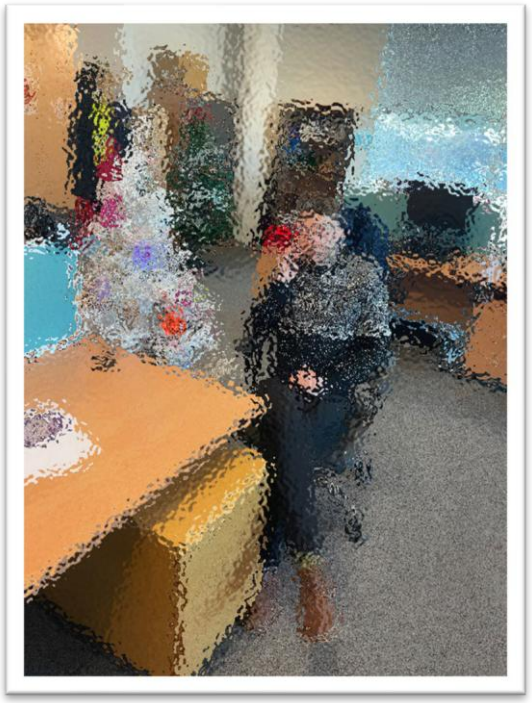
Appendix C. A Selection of the Participants' Photos Used in the Photo-Voice Discussion (Anonymised)



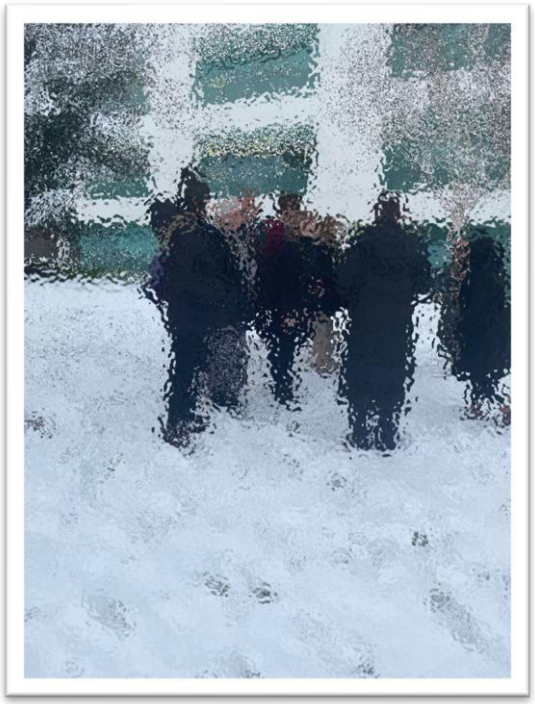
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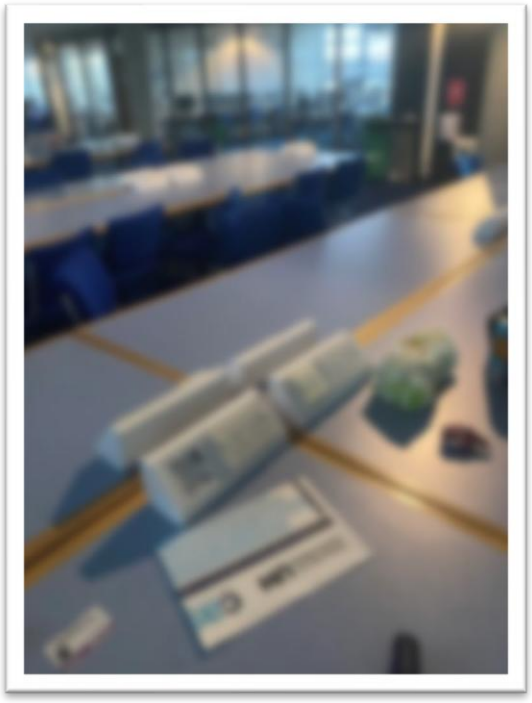
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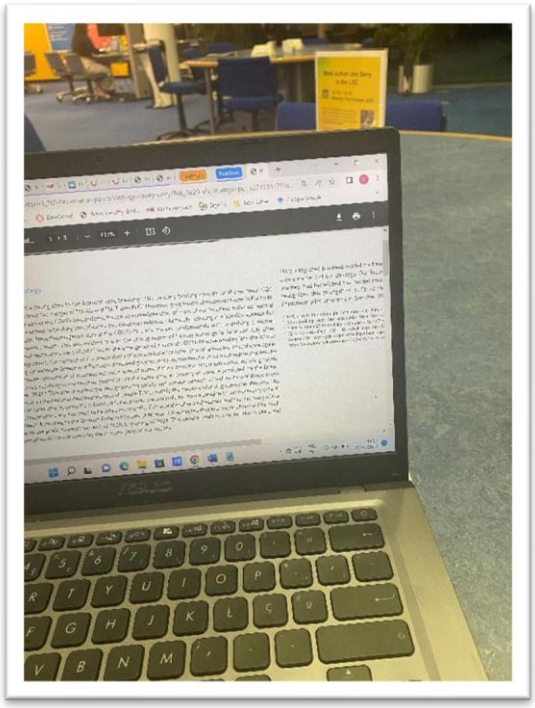
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Beatriz



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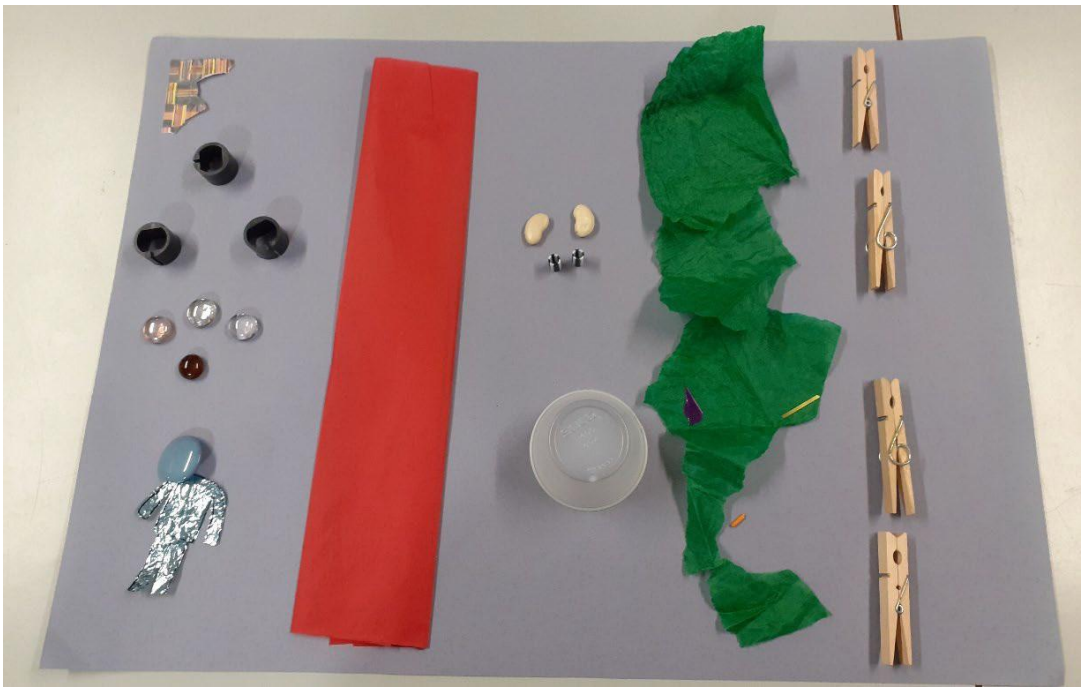


Jìng



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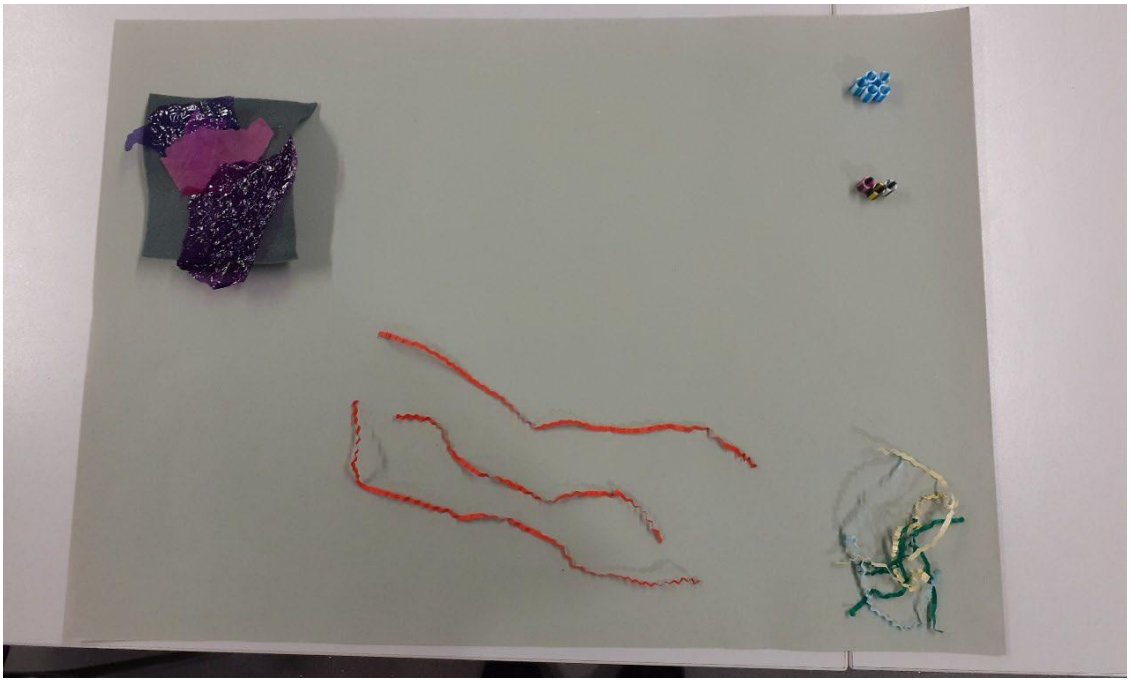
Appendix D. Participants' Non-Stick and Online Collages (by Pseudonym)



Gamu



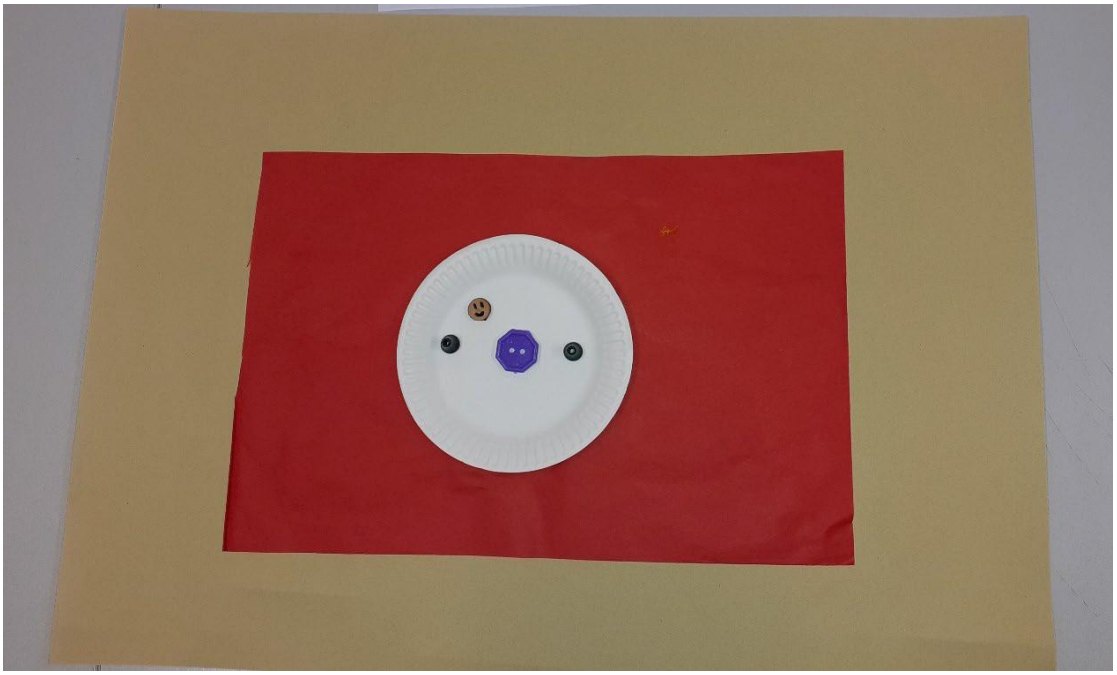
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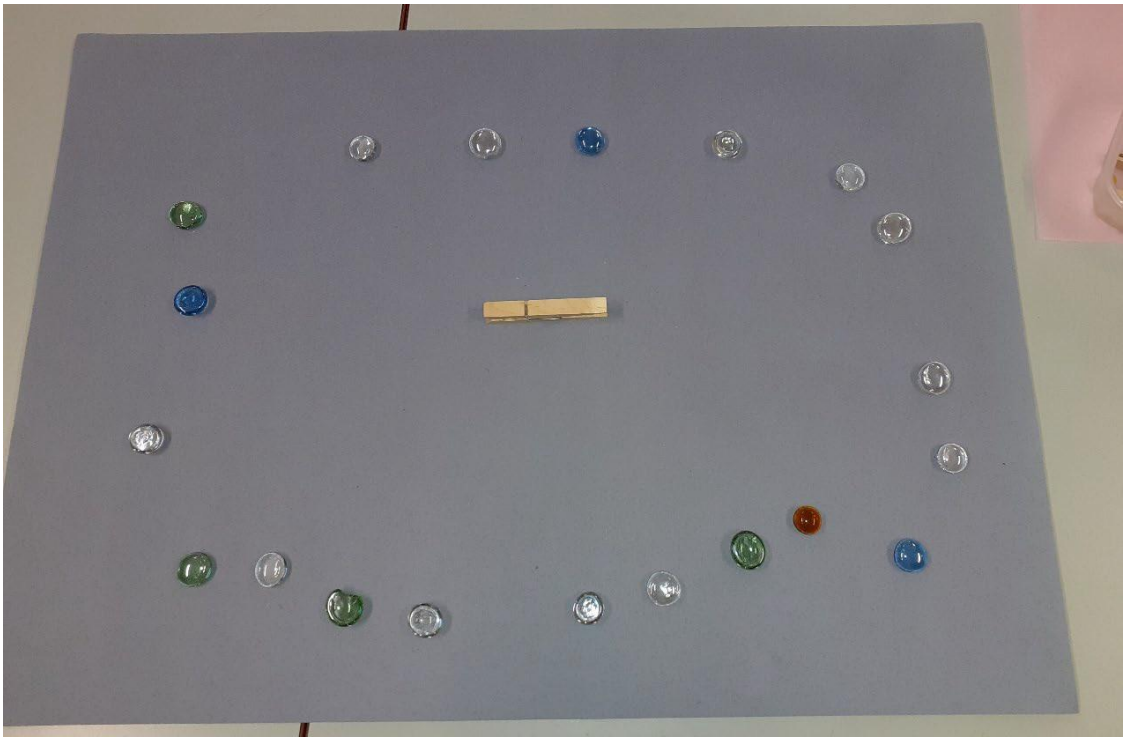
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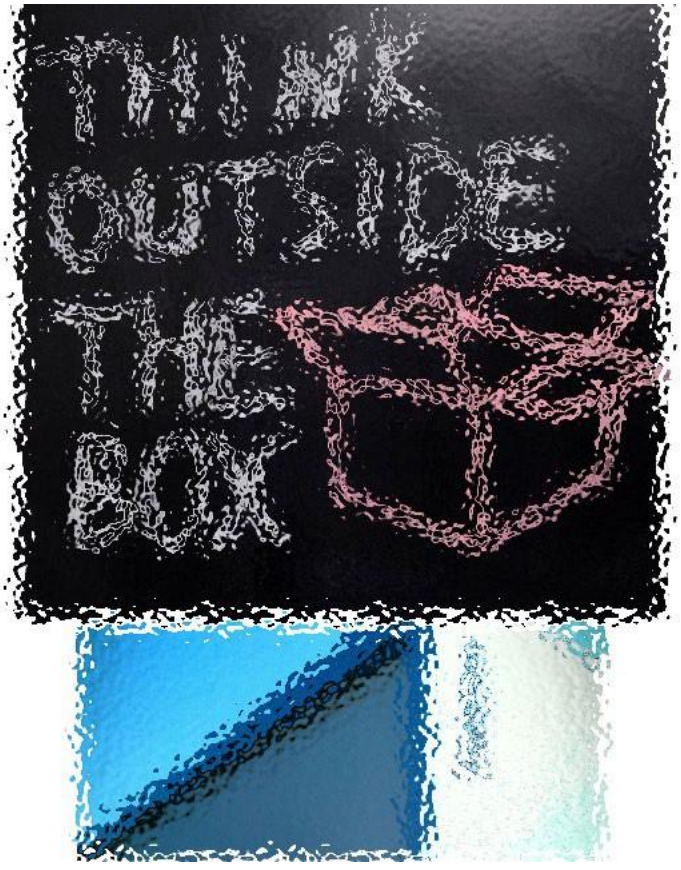


Nathan


First Day in Service
(614 & 644)
NEW Enviro400City's for The Comet



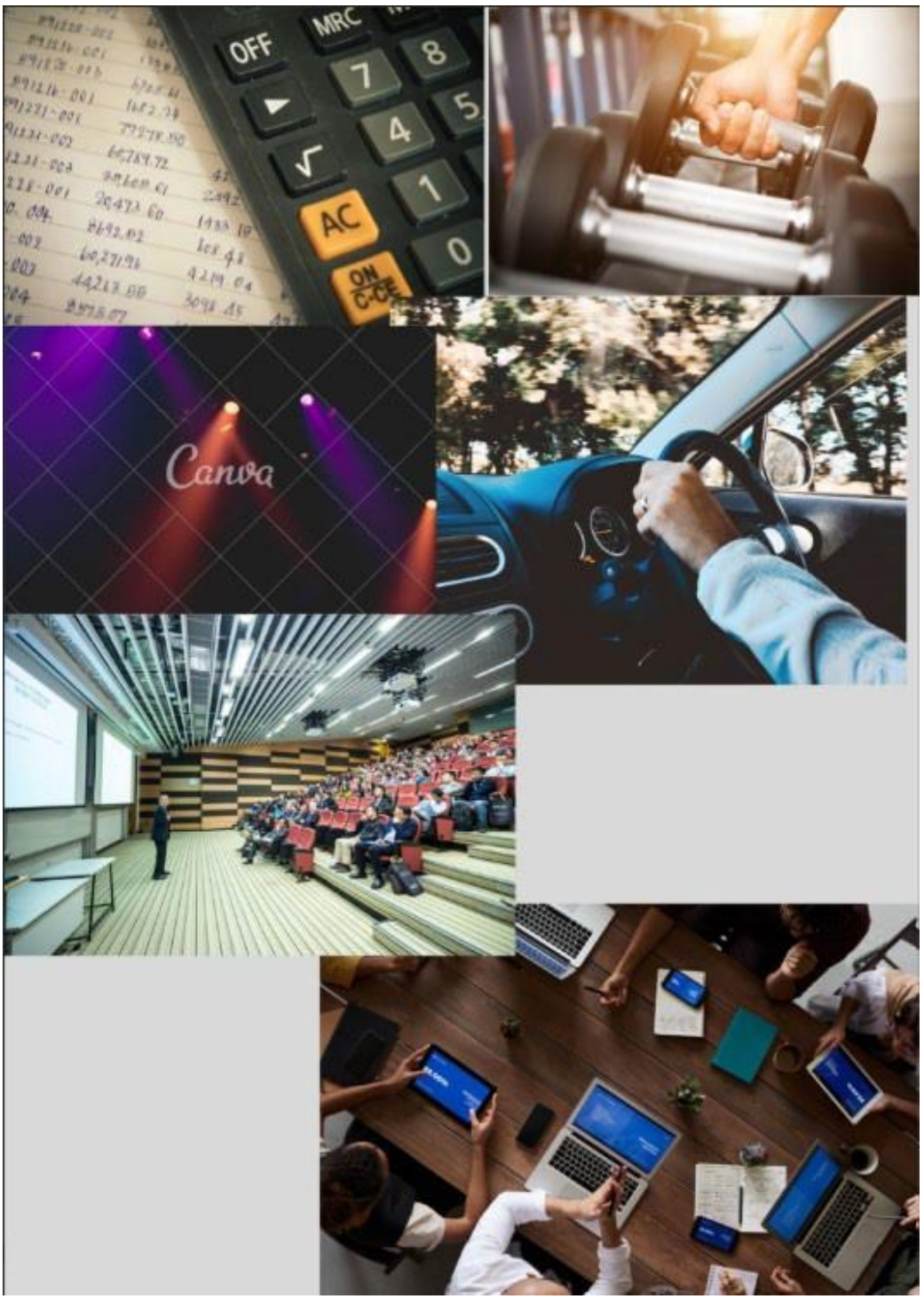



DANCE
OUTSIDE
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Prince

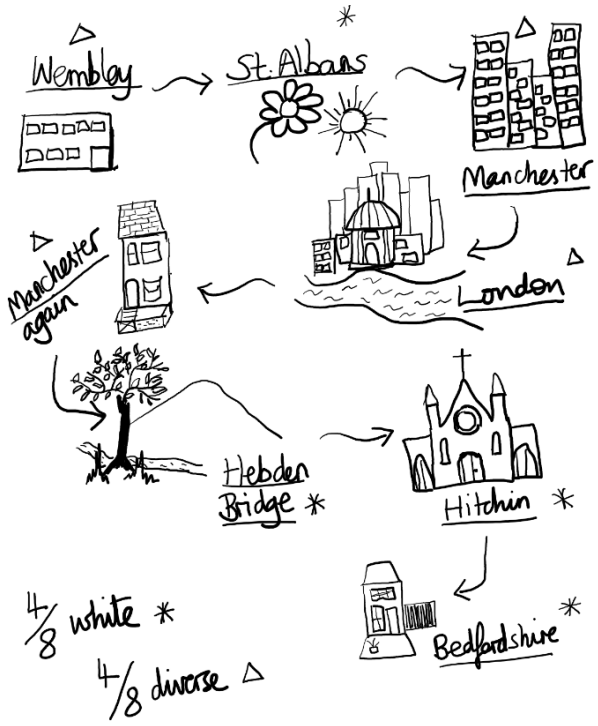


Aisha



Sean

Appendix E. My Time Map



Appendix F. My Non-Stick Online Collage on Belonging (as Practice of Method)



Appendix G. Reflexivity Notes Made Throughout the Writing of This Study

In retrospect, presuming a desire for anonymity may have been driven by a neo-colonial mindset which hails objectivity, and some cultures may find abrasive, especially with reference to forced name-changing in oppressive histories (Kara, 2015:44).

I again felt uneasy at this point, on the verge of hearing an incident of overt racism in a supermarket, and I refused the offer to hear more detail because of my own anxiety at opening up trauma wounds. I believe this is a symptom of whiteness and white fragility in myself, being uncomfortable with hearing about the distress of racist abuse.

I have witnessed this White obsession with Black women's hair myself in an airport queue with a colleague when our personal conversation was interrupted by the White woman behind us to touch and comment on my Black colleague's braids. I was astonished at the interruption, but my colleague commented that this was a common occurrence for her.

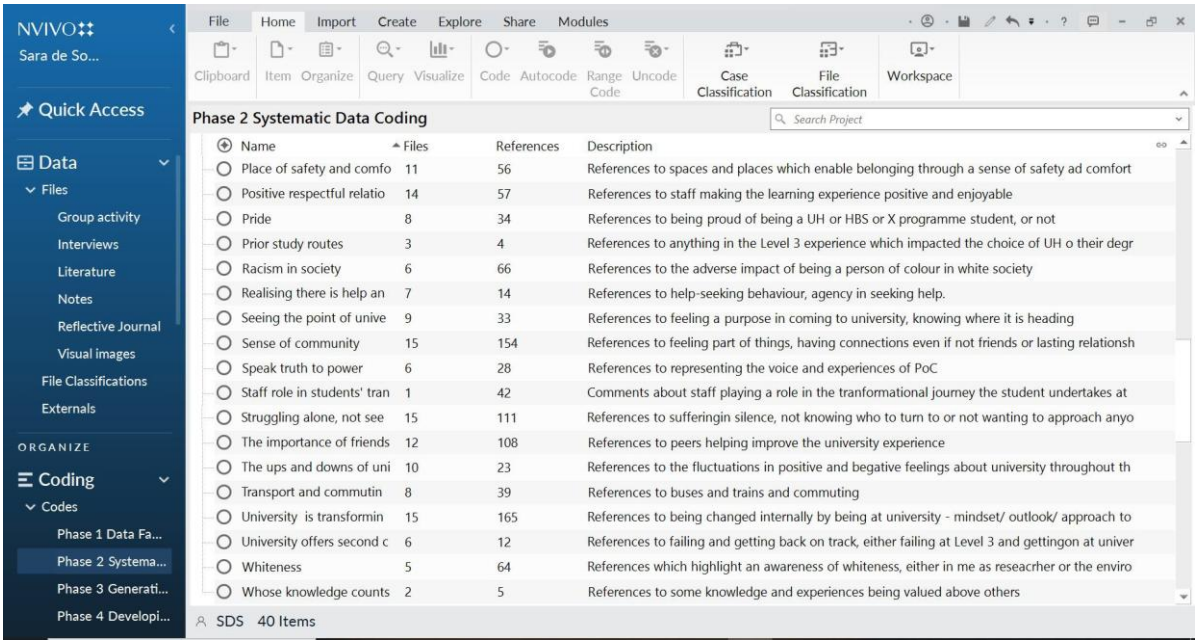
I have witnessed this when friends of colour feel the atmosphere change or the tone of a conversation with a White person differently to me, using their intuition to know that there is a racist undertone to the conversation which I cannot see or hear.

I have never been warned not to go to a country based on how my race would be received, which is an element of global white privilege.

I have never felt othered based on my skin colour, race or ethnicity, and feel in a very privileged position to say that. I even notice slight deference to the UK view on education policy and research whenever I do travel and have experienced being a spectacle of note when in South America where I was likened to 'Princess Diana' by a passing stranger. I have had family members of colour comment that they are treated differently in public when with me than without. I have been conscious of this absence of othering in my life throughout this study.

However, upon reflection, in doing so I was influenced by colonial ideologies of objectivity and inadvertently tried to remove the researcher subjectivity which, when relistening to the interviews, comes across as lacking emotional validation of participants' stories. By trying to regulate my own white lens, I revealed my own internalised regard for positivist objectivity.

Appendix H. Codebook



Appendix I. Theme Generation

Phase 3 Generating Initial Themes

Search Project

Name	Files	Referen	Description
Speak truth to power	6	28	References to representing the voice and experiences of PoC
Whiteness	5	64	References which highlight an awareness of whiteness, either in me as reseacrher or the environment of U
Whose knowledge coun	2	5	References to some knowledge and experiences being valued above others
Reflections on arts-based m	15	102	Codes relating to participants' feedback on using arts-based methods in this research
Collage activity reflectio	5	50	References to the process of doing collage as a group
Photo-voice activity fee	11	52	Participants' comments on the process of taking photos then coming to reflect upon them outloud with
Transformation	16	252	Codes relating to changing as a person over their time at university
Seeing the point of univ	9	33	References to feeling a purpose in coming to university, knowing where it is heading
Staff role in students' tr	1	42	Comments about staff playing a role in the transformational journey the student undertakes at university
University is transformi	15	165	References to being changed internally by being at university - mindset/ outlook/ approach to life/ persp
University offers second	6	12	References to failing and getting back on track, either failing at Level 3 and getting on at university, or fail
Unbelonging	16	217	Codes relating to factors that impede, limit, obstruct a sense of belonging and connection; feeling alone
Just going through the	6	9	References to not feeling fulfilment or enjoyment in learning, just doing things as a ticket to get the grad
Low trust in staff-stude	5	22	References to staff having a certain untrue impression of the student
Not feeling like you fit i	12	52	References to feeling out of place, not belonging, not worthy of being at university generally
Struggling alone, not se	15	111	References to suffering in silence, not knowing who to turn to or not wanting to approach anyone for hel
The ups and downs of u	10	23	References to the fluctuations in positive and negative feelings about university throughout the years of s

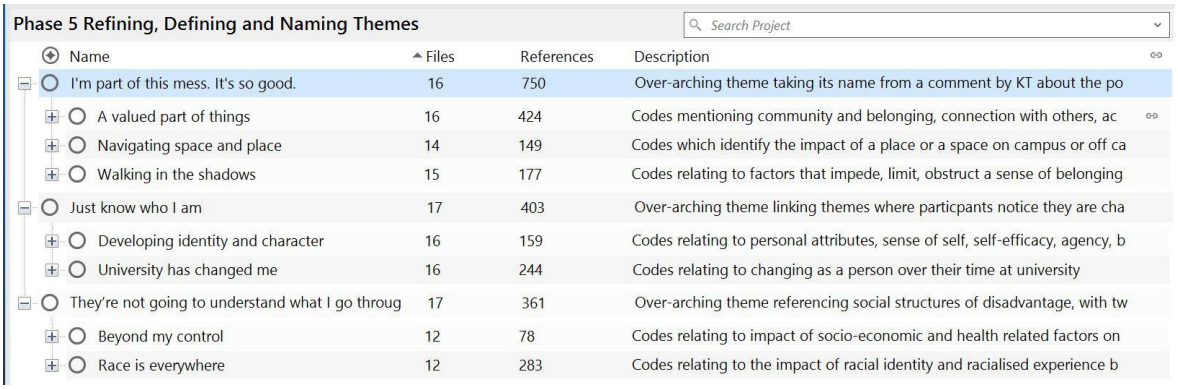
SDS 49 Items

Phase 4 Developing and Reviewing Themes

Search Project

Name	Files	Refere	Description
Reflections on arts-based methods	16	104	Codes relating to participants' feedback on using arts-based methods in this research
Transformation	16	244	Codes relating to changing as a person over their time at university
Seeing the point of university learning	9	33	References to feeling a purpose in coming to university, knowing where it is heading
Staff role in students' transformation	4	47	Comments about staff playing a role in the transformational journey the student undertakes
University offers second chances at suc	6	12	References to failing and getting back on track, either failing at Level 3 and getting on at uni
University transforms you as a person	15	152	References to being changed internally by being at university - mindset/ outlook/ approach
Beyond the self	2	3	Codes relating to gaining a broader perspective and thinking of others and how they may b
Changed me as a person	9	17	Codes relating to holistic development of the self, a changed self-identity, perhaps bringing
Courage and confidence	6	10	Codes relating to developing courage and confidence
Curiosity, Different Perspectives, C	11	26	Codes relating to a change of understanding about the world, and the gaining of new persp
Growing through challenge	9	16	Codes relating to being different as a result of facing and overcoming challenge
Impact on others and the world	5	6	Codes relating to seeing their place in the world and what contribution they can make or kn
Independence and self-care and k	9	17	Codes relating to the development of autonomy, agency, independence and self-care
New skills	9	19	Codes relating to gaining new skills and abilities not previously held
Professional identity	8	18	Codes releating to the development of a professional identity in the world of business or a c
Social mobility	4	10	Codes relating to movement up the socio-economic scale, either in understanding of norms
Unbelonging	15	177	Codes relating to factors that impede, limit, obstruct a sense of belonging and connection; f

Appendix J. Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes

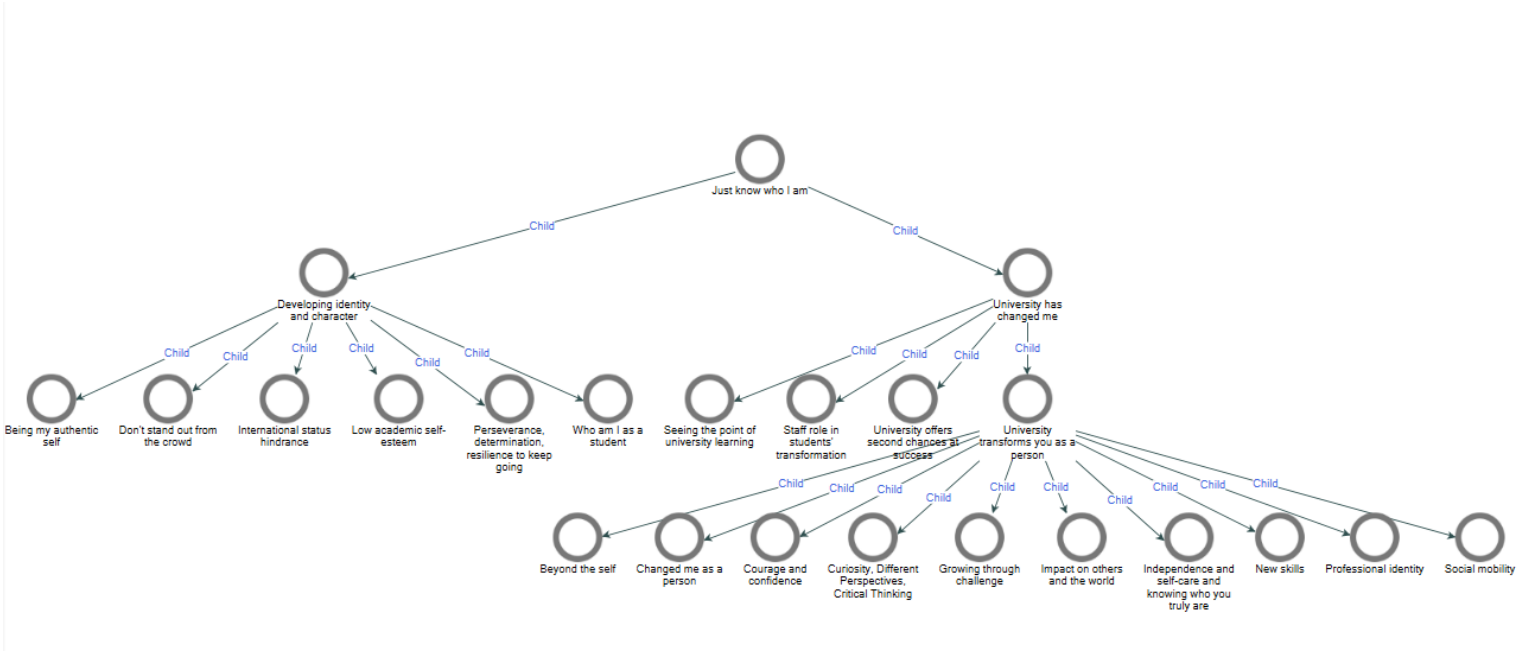


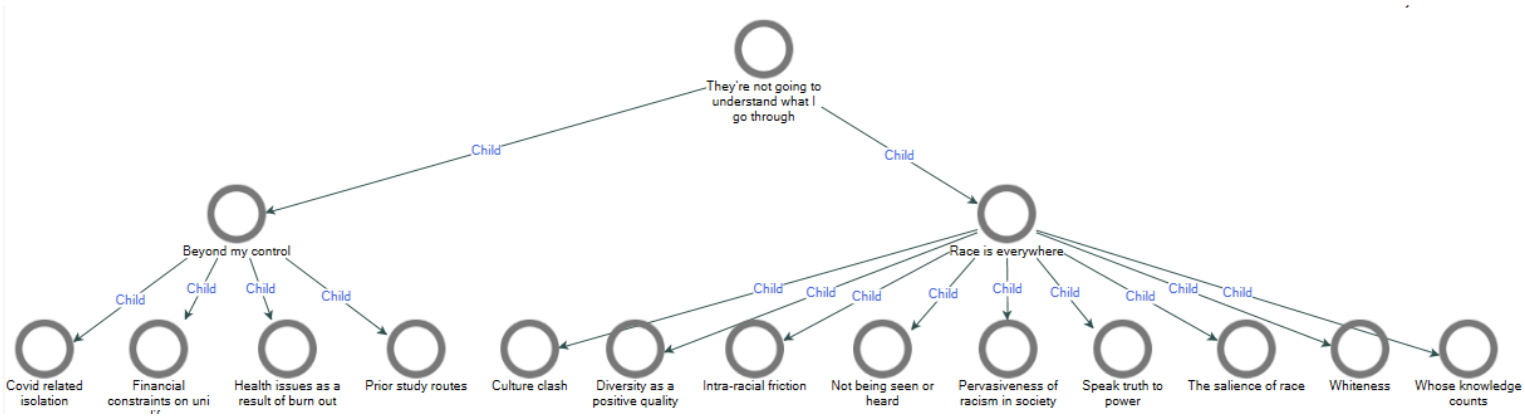
Phase 5 Refining, Defining and Naming Themes

Search Project

Name	Files	References	Description
I'm part of this mess. It's so good.	16	750	Over-arching theme taking its name from a comment by KT about the po
A valued part of things	16	424	Codes mentioning community and belonging, connection with others, ac
Navigating space and place	14	149	Codes which identify the impact of a place or a space on campus or off ca
Walking in the shadows	15	177	Codes relating to factors that impede, limit, obstruct a sense of belonging
Just know who I am	17	403	Over-arching theme linking themes where particpants notice they are cha
Developing identity and character	16	159	Codes relating to personal attributes, sense of self, self-efficacy, agency, b
University has changed me	16	244	Codes relating to changing as a person over their time at university
They're not going to understand what I go throug	17	361	Over-arching theme referencing social structures of disadvantage, with tw
Beyond my control	12	78	Codes relating to impact of socio-economic and health related factors on
Race is everywhere	12	283	Codes relating to the impact of racial identity and racialised experience b

Appendix K. NVivo Thematic Tree Diagrams





Appendix L. Winning poster presented at EERA ECER Conference, Cyprus 2024

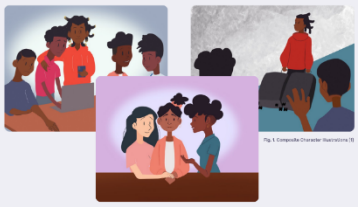


Helen Burchill
Scholarship Winner 2024

Belonging and Becoming

An Exploration of Meaning-Making around Belonging and Transforming at University amongst Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Undergraduate Business School Students

University of Hertfordshire UH
School of Education



Sara de Sousa, EdD Student, University of Hertfordshire, UK

Why is this important?

- Non-continuation rates are higher and attainment rates are lower among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students in the UK (Neves & Brown, 2022).
- Diminished sense of 'belonging', taken as an essential foundation for achievement, has been linked to poorer academic outcomes for racially minoritized students than for white students in the UK (HEFCE, 2015; Millward, 2021)
- Black students in UK HE are significantly less likely to feel they experience a sense of belonging (Neves & Brown, 2022).
- Conceptualisations of belonging differ, with emphasis placed variously upon, amongst other factors, institutional contexts, disciplines, personal interests, academic thriving and interpersonal relationships (Kahu, Ashley and Picton, 2022).
- Transformational education includes disrupting perspectives, reflecting on assumptions, verifying understandings and integrating these into daily life (Johanssen & Felten, 2014).
- Some forms of education transform students to fit with existing systems; others transform students to be critical, practice freedom, and creatively discover how to transform the world (Shaull, in Freire, 1970).
- There is a gap in knowledge concerning the connection between belonging and transformation, particularly as it pertains to racialised lived experience of undergraduate students in UK HE.
- This study contributes to the growing field of knowledge about students' sense of belonging at university by connecting the concepts of belonging and mattering with the concept of transformation, centring race as a permanent compounding factor.

Research Questions

1. How do racially minoritised students make meaning of belonging and transforming at university?
2. Which experiences are important for racially minoritised students to feel a sense of belonging and transformation at university?
3. What is the inter-relation, if any, between belonging and transforming at university?

Reflexivity

As a white researcher exploring the lived experiences of students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, I have needed to consider my positionality carefully. My methods were selected to empower participants and enable infinite responses based on deep reflection over time – something a survey or structured interview would not permit. I participated in a collaging activity myself to experience first-hand the impact on the self, reflecting on the emotions it surfaced in me before asking others to do the same. I created a time-map (Manathunga et. al., 2019) to consider how I bring a white lens to my data collection in order to plan how I will counter this.



Methodology

This study took an arts-based ethnographical approach, situated within a constructionist ontological paradigm, informed by decolonising methodologies (Smith, 2012) and Critical Race Theory's counter-storytelling tenet (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

'Photo walk' → Photo-elicitation discussion → Non-stick collage

Methods

A three-stage multi-modal method was employed.

1. Students photographed anything which resonated with a sense of belonging or not belonging in the Business School.
2. They brought these for a 1:1 recorded discussion.
3. Later, the participants met as a group to create individual non-stick collages on 'belonging in the Business School', and their group discussion of these was audio-recorded.





Sampling

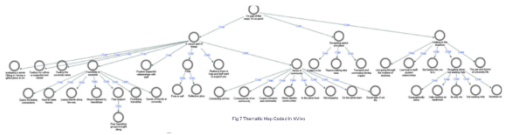


Purposive sampling via lecture promotion and tutor referrals: 11 second and final year undergraduate students participated across one academic year – 5 male students and 6 female students.

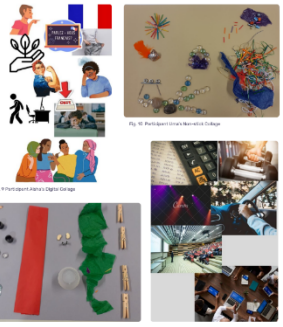
Findings and Analysis

Three overarching themes were generated and named from the transcripts, using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022):

1) **I'm part of this mess, it's so good**
2) **Just know who I am**
3) **They're not going to understand what I go through**







A model was then developed to visualise the three forms of belonging evidenced in the dataset: *Relational Belonging*, *Structural Belonging*, *Contributory Belonging*, and how these relate to two forms of Transformation: *Transformation of the Self*, and *Transformation Beyond the Self*.

Two compounding factors beyond the control of the participants were identified – Race and Covid19 – represented in the model as 'the weather' (Sharpe, 2016, p104) within which participants lived at the time of the study.



Conclusion

Belonging can fluctuate, pass, increase and decrease, retract and build back. Racialised lived experience has a significant impact on the extent and stage of belonging reached. Transformation through education is permanent. No participant demonstrated any evidence of transforming then losing this sense of transformation thereafter.

Initial transformation is experienced in relation to the self only, and depends upon relational and structural belonging; deeper transformation is gained through, not just belonging, but mattering, impacting the community and making a difference to other people's lives.

Belonging and transformation are, therefore, linked. The first two stages of belonging result in self-transformation. The third stage of belonging is required to enter the deeper phase of transformation beyond the self.

Race and racial minoritisation in white-majority society negatively impact the extent to which students of colour feel a sense of belonging (relational and structural) at university, but if supported and enabled to enter the contributory stage of belonging, this can be mitigated.



Contribution to Practice

Contribution to Method

Related Literature

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. Los Angeles: SAGE.

Johansson, C., & Felten, P. (2014) *Transforming Students: Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Kahu, E.R., Ashley, N., and Picton, C. (2022) Exploring the Complexity of First-Year Student Belonging in Higher Education Portfolio. *International and Academic Belonging, Student Success*, Vol 13(2) https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2264

Neves, J. and Brown, A. (2022) *Student Academic Experience Survey*. Higher Education Policy Institute.

Shaull, R. (2004) *An Introduction*. In: Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd. London.

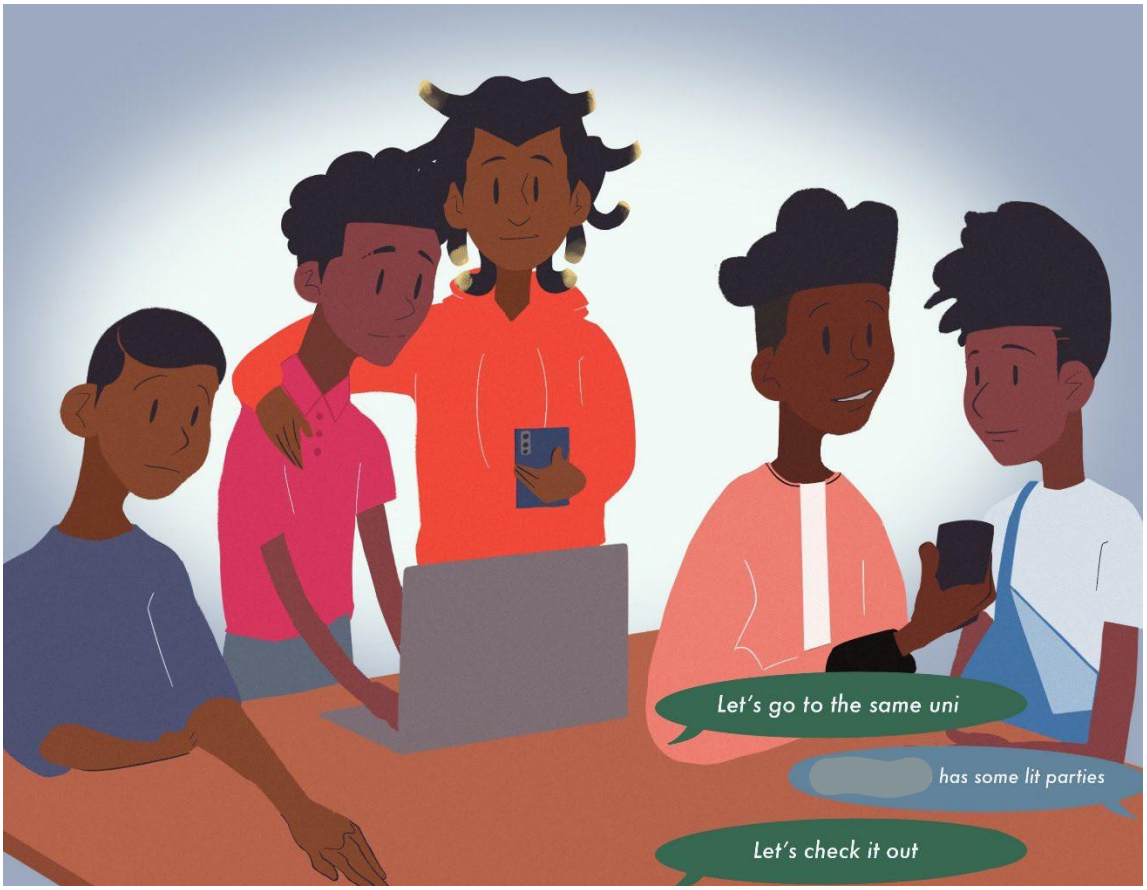
Solórzano, D. G. & Yosso, T. J. (2002) Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 23-44.

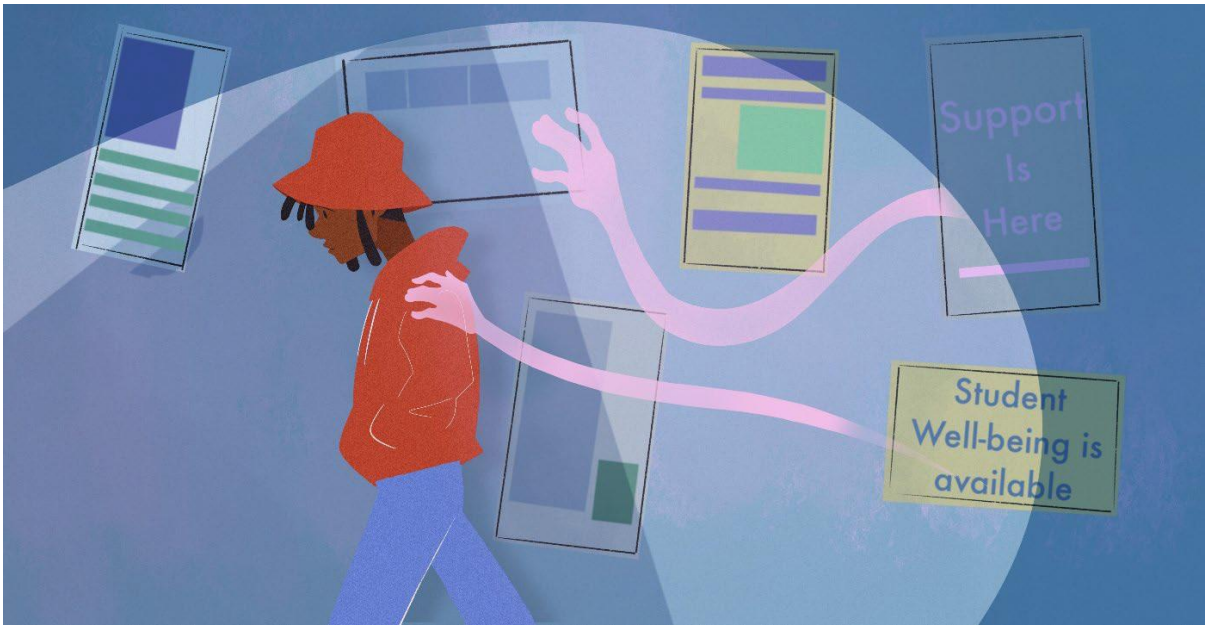
Tuhiwai Smith, Ps., (2012) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd edition. Zed Books. London.

Appendix M. Images designed for composite character stories to be used in staff training video






Let's go to the same uni
has some lit parties
Let's check it out


Support Is Here
Student Well-being is available



[Images created by Tiana Rawlins, Afro Chopsticks: https://tianarawlins.wixsite.com/afro-chopsticks]

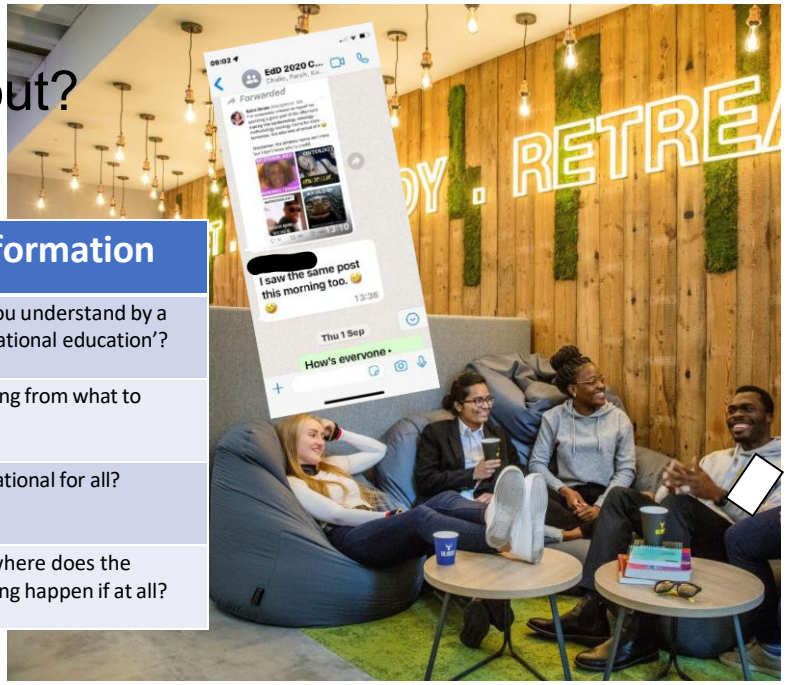
Appendix N. Slides for Use in Recruiting Participants



[image from Londonshire Asset Library]

What's it all about?

Belonging	Transformation
How, where and when do we experience 'belonging'?	What do you understand by a 'transformational education'?
What enables us to belong at university?	Transforming from what to what?
What makes us feel like we don't belong?	Transformational for all?
Who belongs and who doesn't?	How and where does the transforming happen if at all?



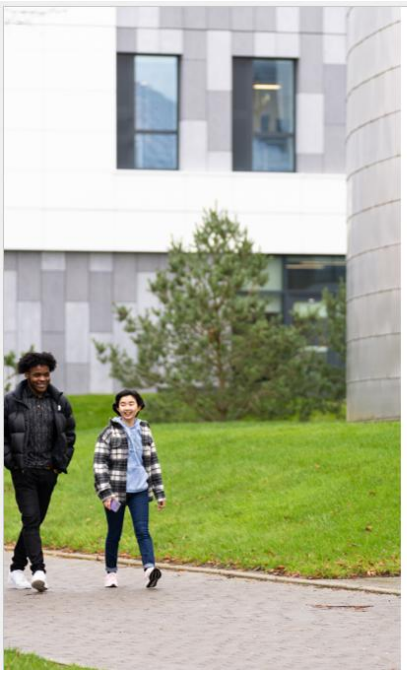
[image from Londonshire Asset Library]



Is there a connection between belonging and transforming at university?



[images from Londonshire Asset Library]



What would I be doing?

1. **Photo-elicitation campus walk** you take pictures throughout one academic week of anything, anywhere, anytime around campus which resonates with a sense of **belonging** or **not belonging**, and with **transforming** or **not transforming**.

2. **Open-structured interview** - you bring your phone to talk with me about the pictures you have taken. You do not have to share the photos with me.

3. **Focus Group Activity** - at a later time you may be invited to join a group discussion with other participants who have done the same.



[images from Londonshire Asset Library and researcher's own photo]



Who is researching this and why?

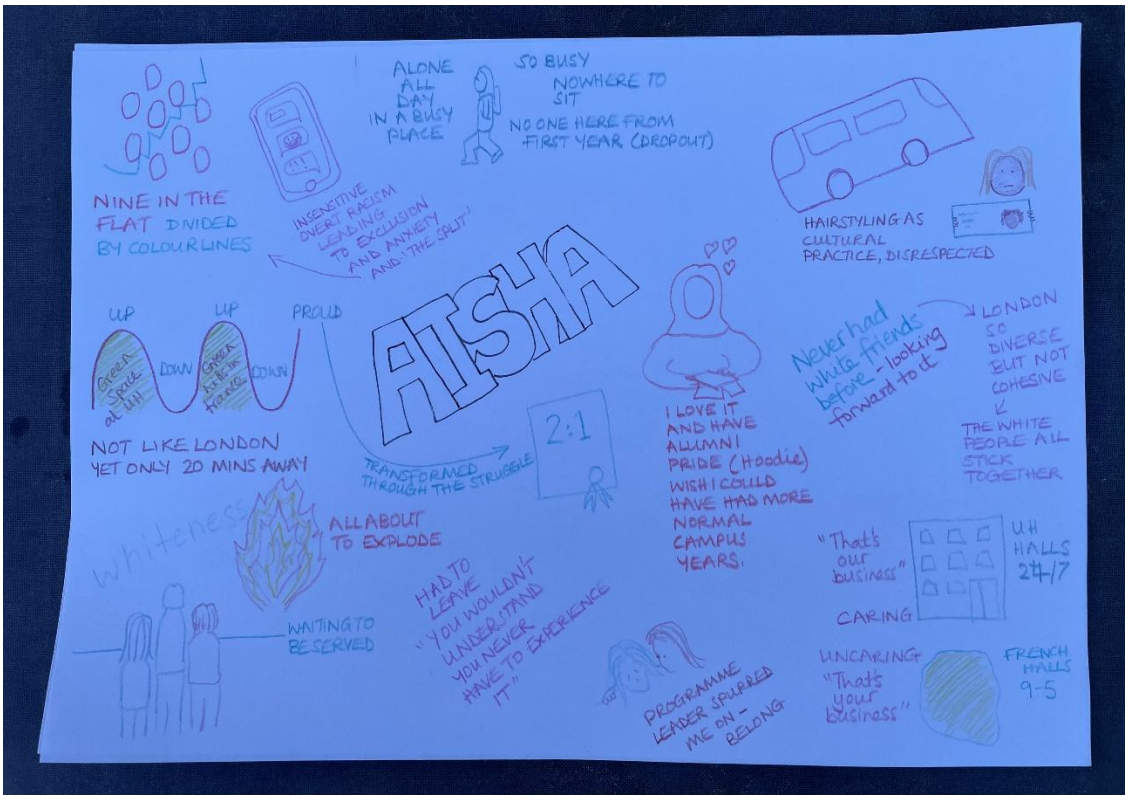
- Sara de Sousa, studying for a Doctorate in Education
- Student Success Lead for Londonshire Business School I oversee projects to eliminate gaps in outcomes for students from different groups and backgrounds (prior qualifications/ gender/ ethnicity etc)
- Contributed to NUS and UUK 'Closing the Gap' report in 2019; Black Careers Matter report (ISE) in 2021
- I oversee Black History Month in Londonshire Business School
- Academic link for the BAME Student Advocate (inclusive curriculum)
- I aim to enable the Business School to learn from the reflections and insights of Black, Asian and minority ethnic students so we can improve the provision for our 64% BAME student community

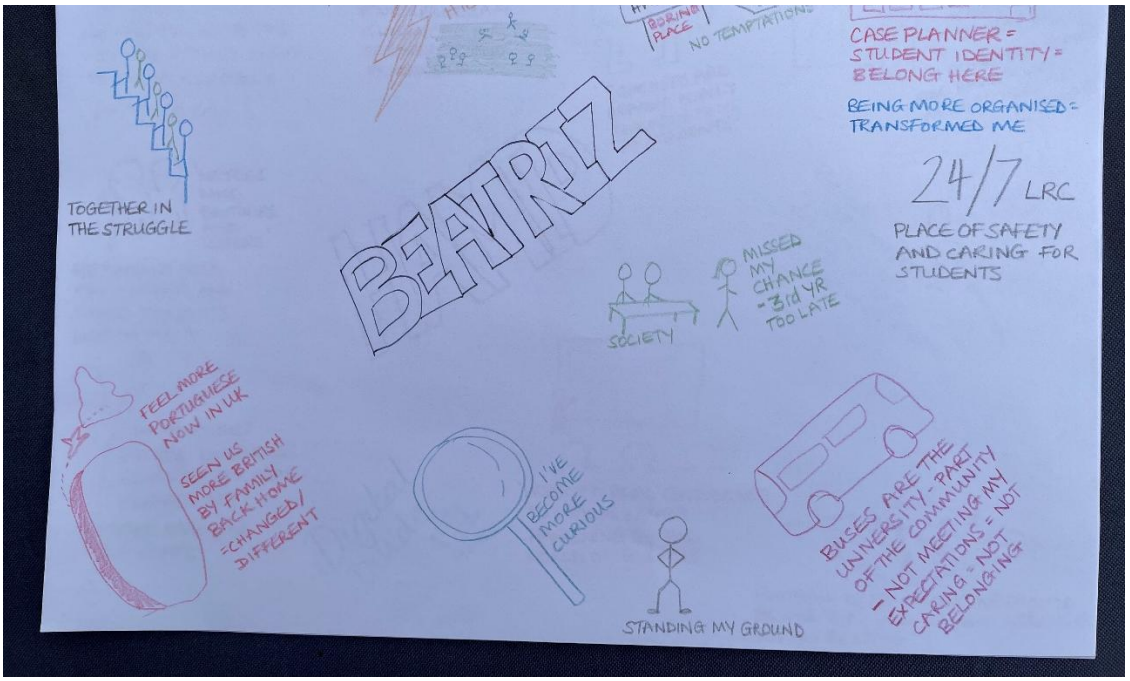


[image from Londonshire Asset Library]

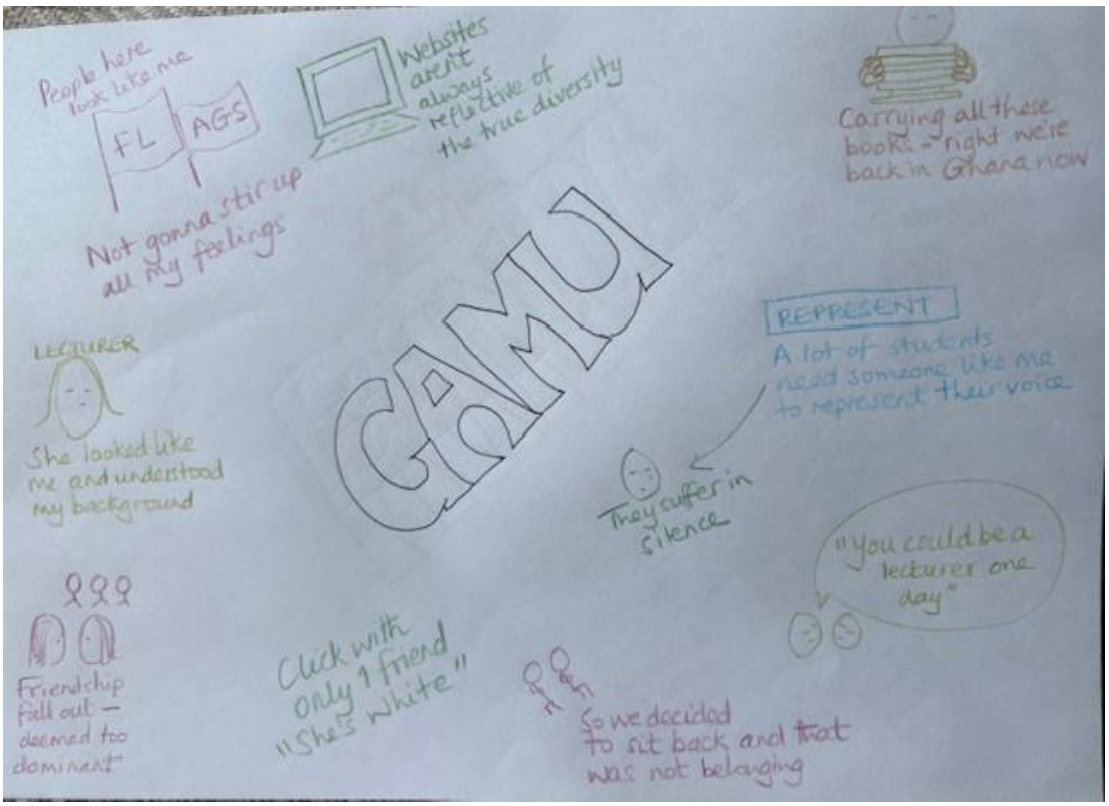
Help us understand Black, Asian and minority ethnic students' experiences of belonging and transformation at Londonshire Business School. Sign up to find out more – no commitment at this stage:

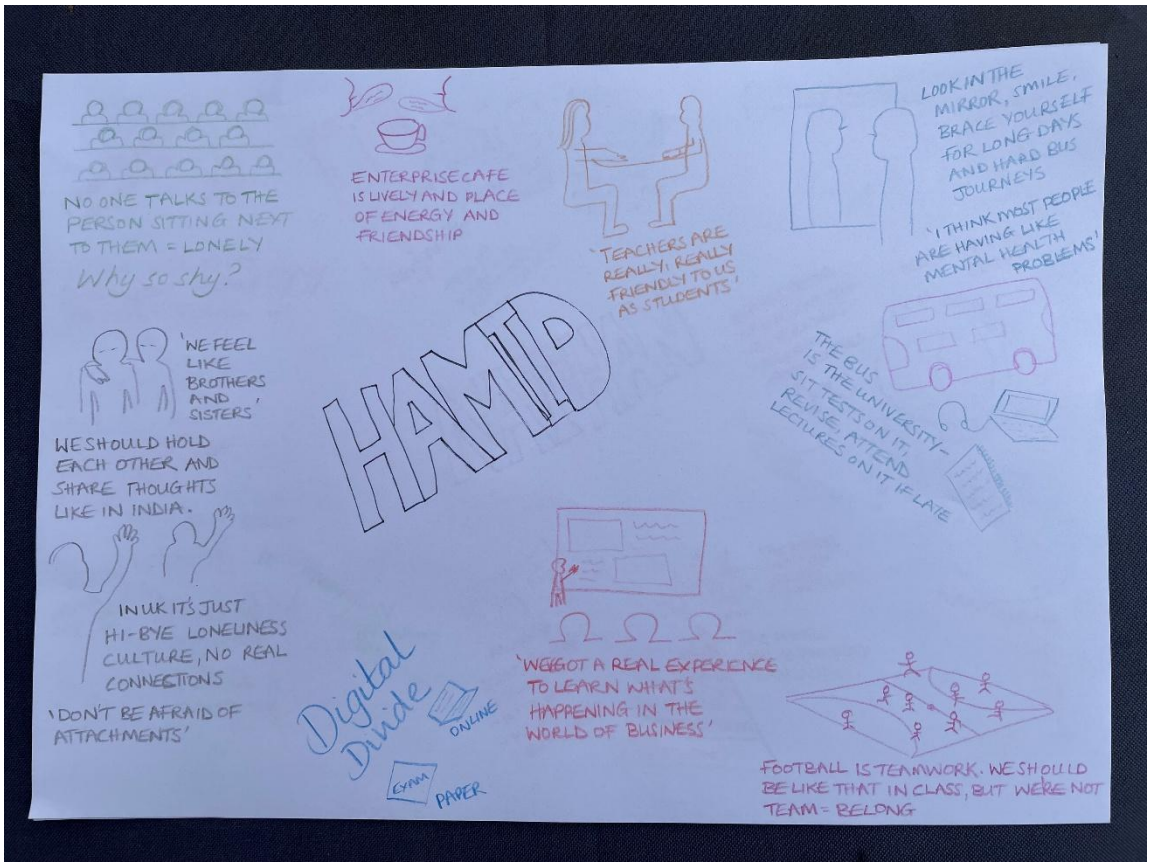
Appendix O. Researcher's Visualisations of the Transcripts – 'sitting with the data' phase

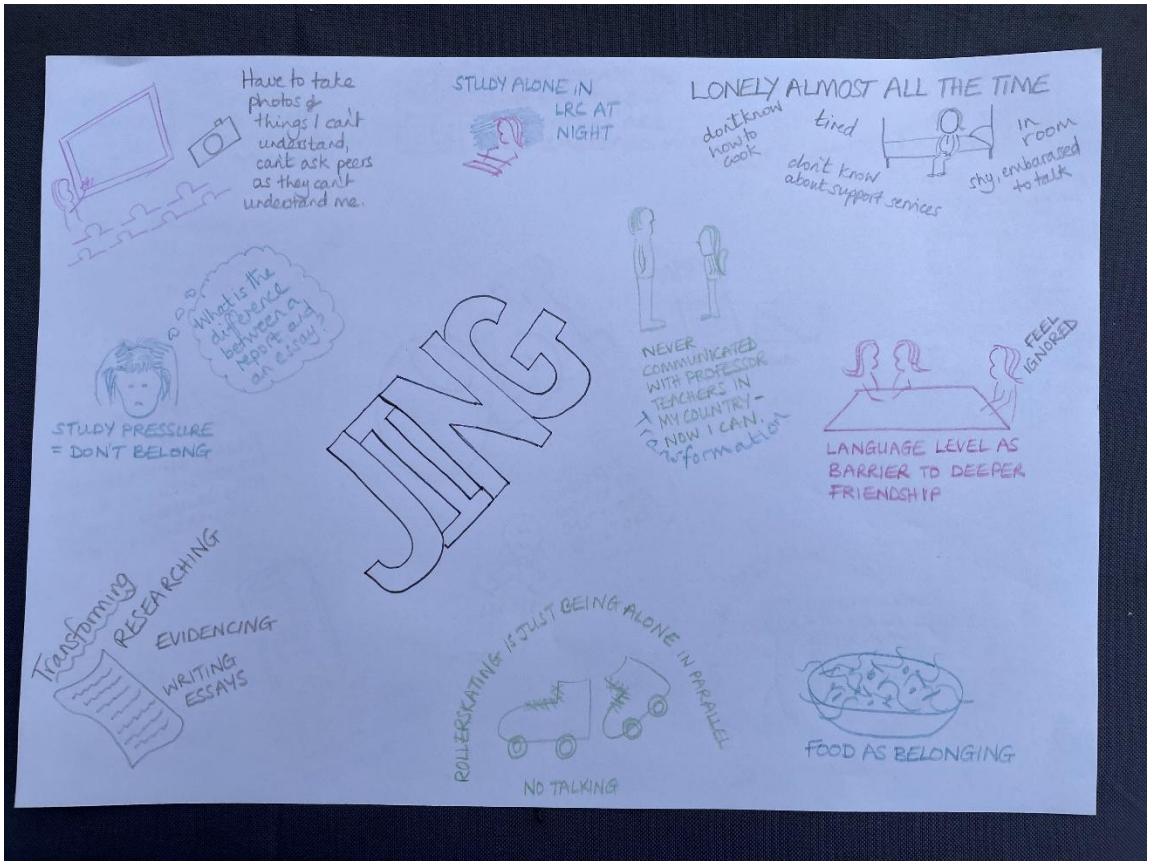


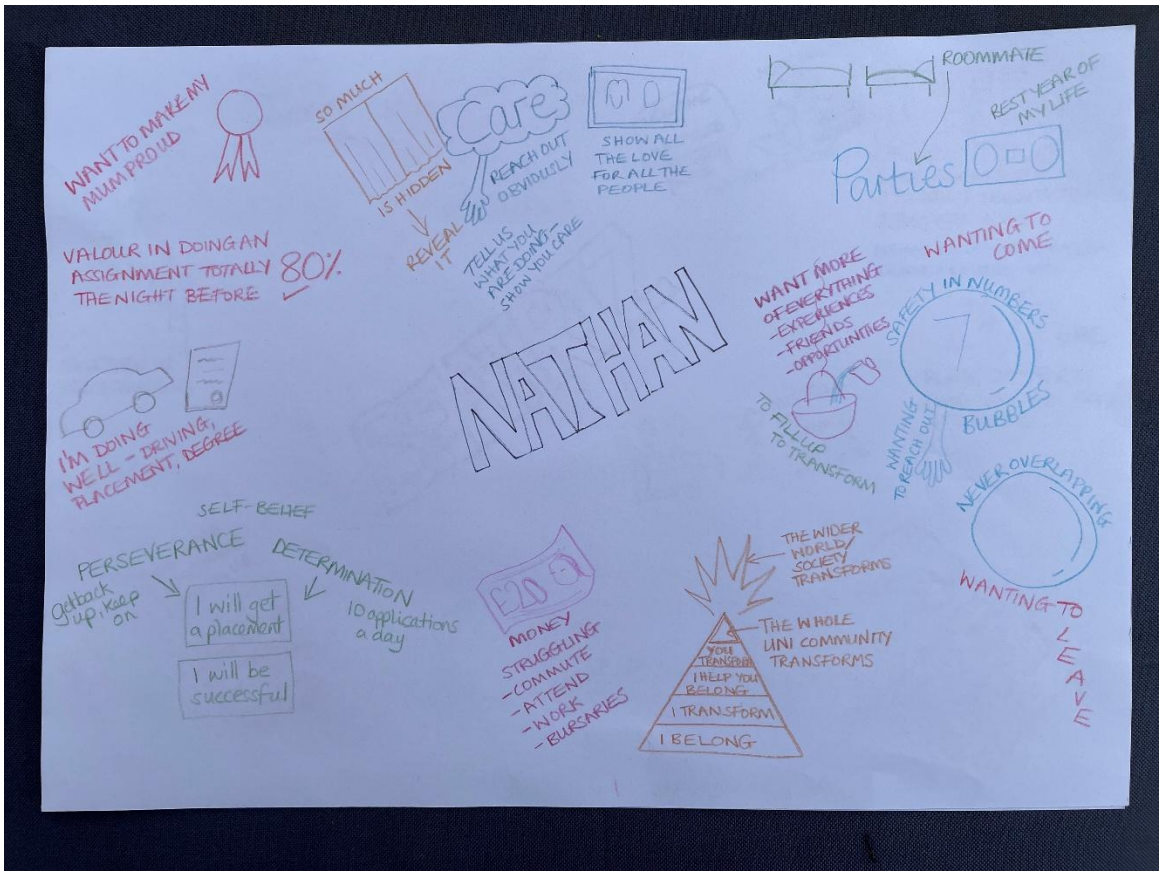


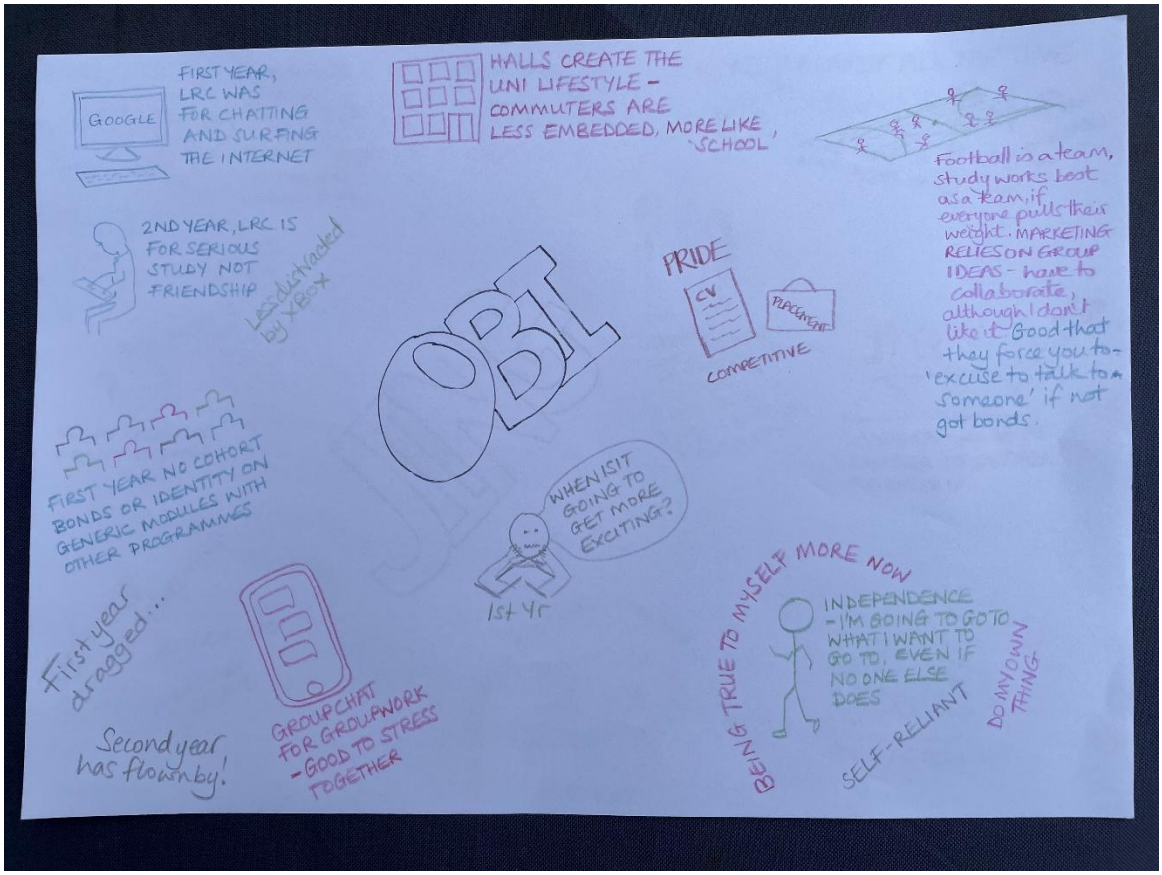

BARNIA
I'm an ethnic minority there too
Why does your daughter wear a bikini and have tattoos?
She's like our mum, she cares a lot
We're like the mafia, making plans
Alumni badge of honour
I can hear them talking behind my back
We were always getting stared at
BRITISH ENCLAVE
There were only 3 Black boys and I was friends with all of them
MARKET
Made friends with the market sellers
I was always getting fullfilled home in Spain
I overlived my life there
They seem not to understand the way I speak English

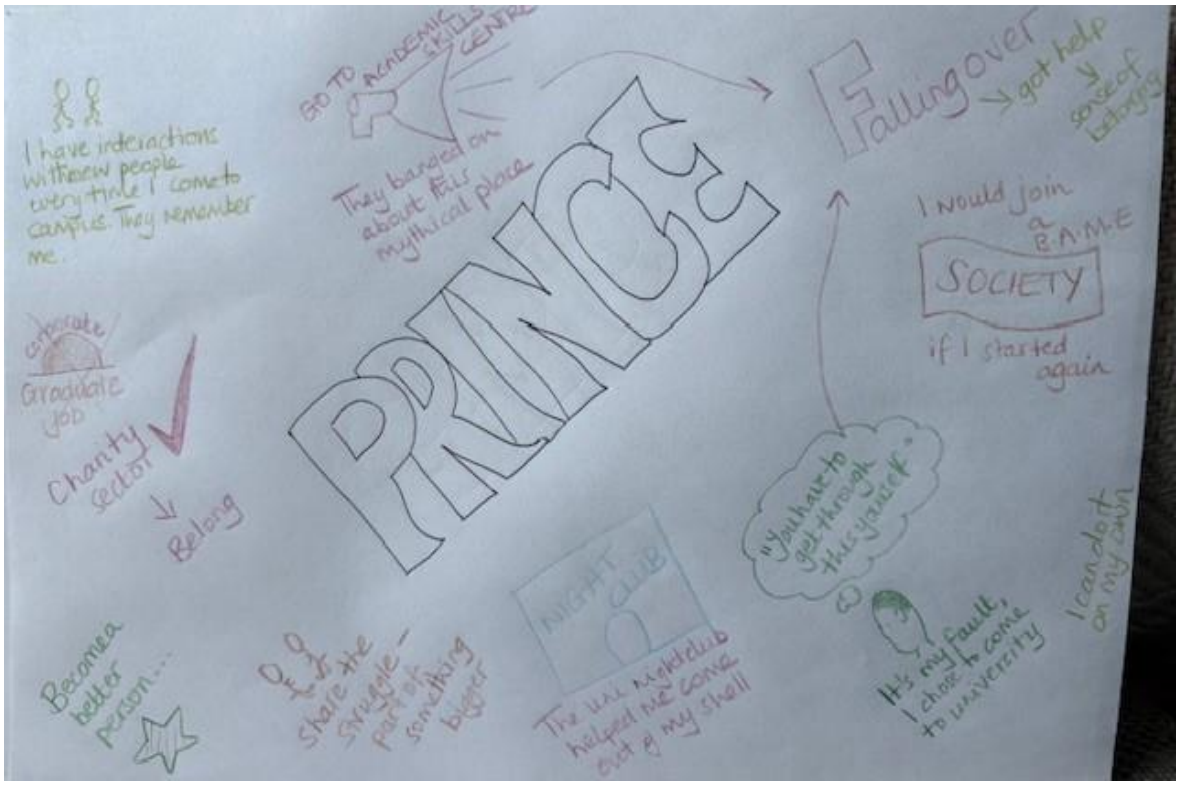

People here look like me
FL
AGS
Not gonna stir up all my feelings
Websites aren't always reflective of the true diversity
Carrying all these books - right we're back in Ghana now
GAMU
REPRESENT
A lot of students need someone like me to represent their voice
LECTURER
She looked like me and understood my background
They suffer in silence
"You could be a lecturer one day"
Friendship fall out — deemed too dominant
Click with only 1 friend "She's white"
So we decided to sit back and that was not belonging

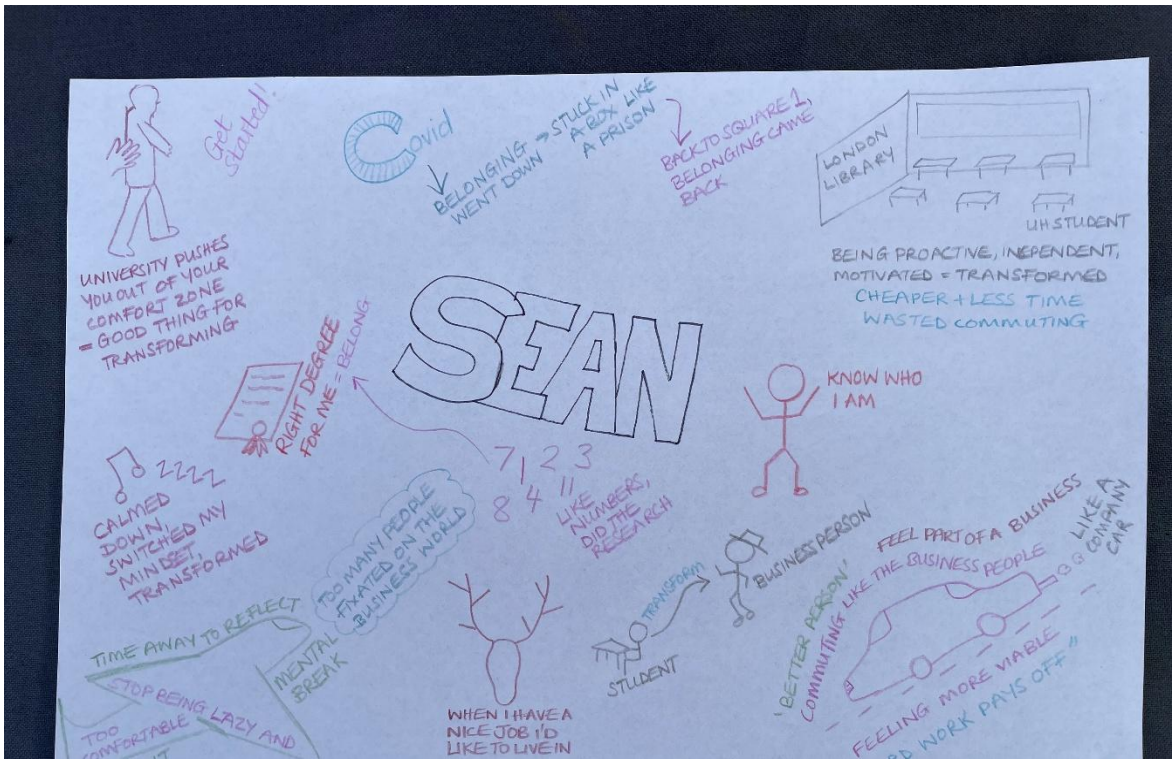

NO ONE TALKS TO THE PERSON SITTING NEXT TO THEM = LONELY
Why so shy?
ENTERPRISE CAFE IS LIVELY AND PLACE OF ENERGY AND FRIENDSHIP
'TEACHERS ARE REALLY, REALLY FRIENDLY TO US AS STUDENTS'
LOOK IN THE MIRROR, SMILE, BRACE YOURSELF FOR LONG DAYS AND HARD BUS JOURNEYS
'I THINK MOST PEOPLE ARE HAVING LIKE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS'
HAMP
'WE FEEL LIKE BROTHERS AND SISTERS'
WE SHOULD HOLD EACH OTHER AND SHARE THOUGHTS LIKE IN INDIA.
IN UK IT'S JUST HI-BYE LONELINESS CULTURE, NO REAL CONNECTIONS
'DON'T BE AFRAID OF ATTACHMENTS'
THE BUS IS THE UNIVERSITY - SIT TESTS ON IT, REVISE, ATTEND LECTURES ON IT IF LATE
Digital Divide
ONLINE
EXAM
PAPER
'WE GOT A REAL EXPERIENCE TO LEARN WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE WORLD OF BUSINESS'
FOOTBALL IS TEAMWORK. WE SHOULD BE LIKE THAT IN CLASS, BUT WE'RE NOT TEAM = BELONG

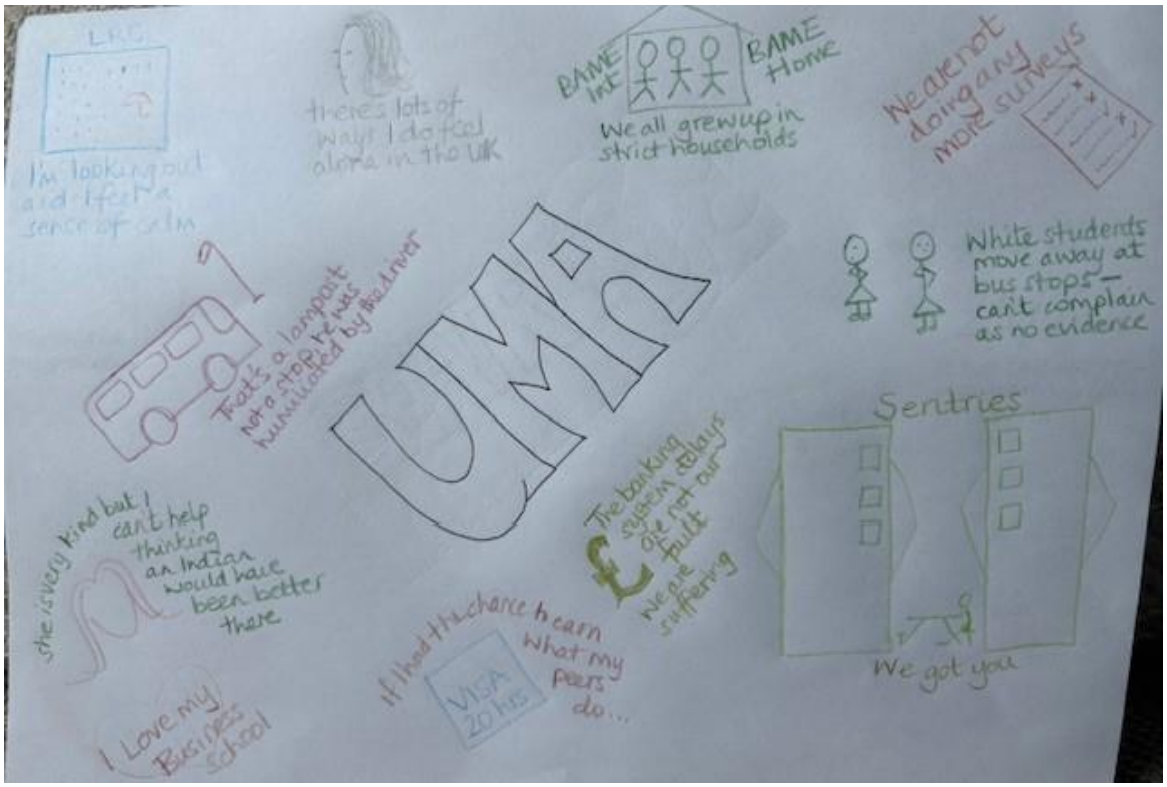

Have to take photos of things I can't understand, can't ask peers as they can't understand me.
STUDY ALONE IN LRC AT NIGHT
LONELY ALMOST ALL THE TIME
don't know how to cook
tired
in room
don't know about support services
shy, embarrassed to talk
What is the difference between a report and an essay?
STUDY PRESSURE = DON'T BELONG
JING
NEVER COMMUNICATED WITH PROFESSOR TEACHERS IN MY COUNTRY - NOW I CAN. ↑ information
FEEL IGNORED
LANGUAGE LEVEL AS BARRIER TO DEEPER FRIENDSHIP
Transforming
RESEARCHING
EVIDENCING
WRITING ESSAYS
ROLLERSKATING IS JUST BEING ALONE IN PARALLEL
NO TALKING
FOOD AS BELONGING


WANT TO MAKE MY MUM PROUD
SO MUCH
IS HIDDEN
Care
REACH OUT DEVIOUSLY
REVEAL IT
TELL US WHAT YOU ARE DOING SHOW YOU CARE
SHOW ALL THE LOVE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE
ROOMMATE
REST YEAR OF MY LIFE
Parties
VALOUR IN DOING AN ASSIGNMENT TOTALLY THE NIGHT BEFORE
80%
NATHAN
WANT MORE OF EVERYTHING -EXPERIENCES -FRIENDS -OPPORTUNITIES
TO FILL UP TO TRANSFORM
WANTING TO COME
SAFETY IN NUMBERS
7
BUBBLES
WANTING TO REACH OUT
NEVER OVERLAPPING
WANTING TO LEAVE
I'M DOING WELL - DRIVING, PLACEMENT, DEGREE
SELF-BELIEF
PERSEVERANCE
Get back up, keep on
DETERMINATION
I will get a placement
I will be successful
10 applications a day
MONEY
STRUGGLING -COMMUTE -ATTEND -WORK -BURSARIES
THE WIDER WORLD/ SOCIETY TRANSFORMS
THE WHOLE UNI COMMUNITY TRANSFORMS
YOU TRANSFORM
I HELP YOU BELONG
I TRANSFORM
I BELONG


GOOGLE
FIRST YEAR, LRC WAS FOR CHATTING AND SURFING THE INTERNET
HALLS CREATE THE UNI LIFESTYLE - COMMUTERS ARE LESS EMBEDDED, MORE LIKE 'SCHOOL'
Football is a team, study works best as a team, if everyone pulls their weight. MARKETING RELIES ON GROUP IDEAS - have to collaborate, although I don't like it. Good that they force you to 'excuse to talk to someone' if not got bonds.
2ND YEAR, LRC IS FOR SERIOUS STUDY NOT FRIENDSHIP
Less distracted by XBox
OBL
PRIDE
CV
PLACEMENT
COMPETITIVE
FIRST YEAR NO COHORT BONDS OR IDENTITY ON GENERIC MODULES WITH OTHER PROGRAMMES
WHEN IS IT GOING TO GET MORE EXCITING?
1st Yr
First year dragged...
Second year has flown by!
GROUP CHAT FOR GROUPWORK -GOOD TO STRESS TOGETHER
BEING TRUE TO MYSELF MORE NOW
INDEPENDENCE - I'M GOING TO GO TO WHAT I WANT TO GO TO, EVEN IF NO ONE ELSE DOES
SELF-RELIANT
DO MY OWN THING


PRINCE
I have interactions with new people every time I come to campus. They remember me.
GO TO ACADEMIC SKILLS CENTRE
They banged on about this mythical place
Falling over → got help → sense of belonging
I would join a BAME SOCIETY if I started again
graduate job
Charity sector
Belong
"You have to get through this year!"
NIGHT CLUB
The uni nightclub helped me come out of my shell
It's my fault, I chose to come to university
I can do it on my own
Become a better person...
If I share the struggle - part of something bigger


SEAN
Get started!
Covid
BELONGING WENT DOWN → STUCK IN A BOX LIKE A PRISON
BACK TO SQUARE 1, BELONGING GAME BACK
LONDON LIBRARY
UH STUDENT
BEING PROACTIVE, INDEPENDENT, MOTIVATED = TRANSFORMED
CHEAPER + LESS TIME WASTED COMMUTING
UNIVERSITY PUSHES YOU OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE = GOOD THING FOR TRANSFORMING
RIGHT DEGREE FOR ME = BELONG
KNOW WHO I AM
7 1 2 3 8 4 11
LIKE NUMBERS, DID THE RESEARCH
CALMED DOWN, SWITCHED MY MINDSET, TRANSFORMED
TOO MANY PEOPLE FIXATED ON THE BUSINESS WORLD
TIME AWAY TO REFLECT
MENTAL BREAK
STOP BEING LAZY AND
WHEN I HAVE A NICE JOB I'D LIKE TO LIVE IN
TRANSFORM
STUDENT
BUSINESS PERSON
'BETTER PERSON' COMMUTING
FEEL PART OF A BUSINESS LIKE THE BUSINESS PEOPLE
LIKE A COMPANY CAR
FEELING MORE VIABLE
WORK PAYS OFF"


LRG
I'm looking out and I feel a sense of calm
there's lots of ways I do feel alone in the UK
BAME Int
BAME Home
We all grew up in strict households
We aren't doing any more surveys
White students move away at bus stops— can't complain as no evidence
UMA
That's a lamp post not a stop it was humiliated by the driver
Sentries
We got you
The banking system & all ours are not our fault We are suffering
she is very kind but I can't help thinking an Indian would have been better there
If I had the chance I'd earn what my peers do...
VISA 20 hrs
I Love my Business school