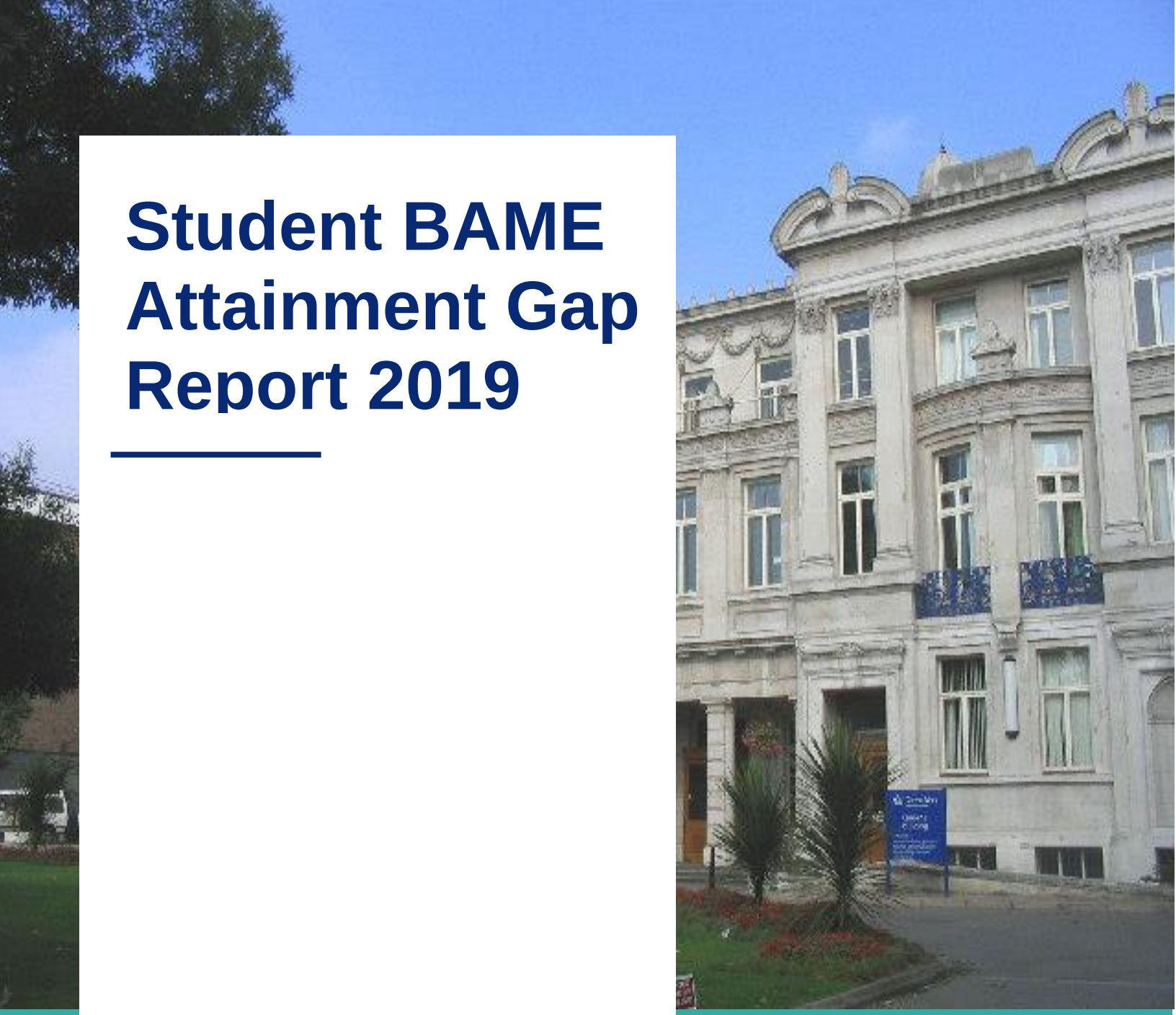

Student BAME Attainment Gap Report 2019

3 APRIL 2019

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Introduction

Initial presumptions

Our research group began in December 2018 and consisted of three students from different Queen Mary University of London faculties. This meant our research had a diverse reference point as we all had access to completely different learning experiences. From this, we were able to also access more students with varied backgrounds. This further aided our research as it meant we could contribute differing initial presumptions behind the gap.

> **"Some of our initial presumptions based on our experiences and knowledge at the time were that postgraduates experienced a larger BAME attainment gap and that the ethnic makeup of the QMUL staff body was causing a lack of engagement in the classroom."**

The key question behind our investigation was: what factors affect the BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) attainment gap. From previous research seen at the London School of Economics, the attainment gap at a post-graduate level had not been investigated as much as the undergraduate level, so this was an important consideration in our work. The substantive difference between the STEM subjects and humanities subjects was also worth noting, as it meant the 'teaching' had a different effect.

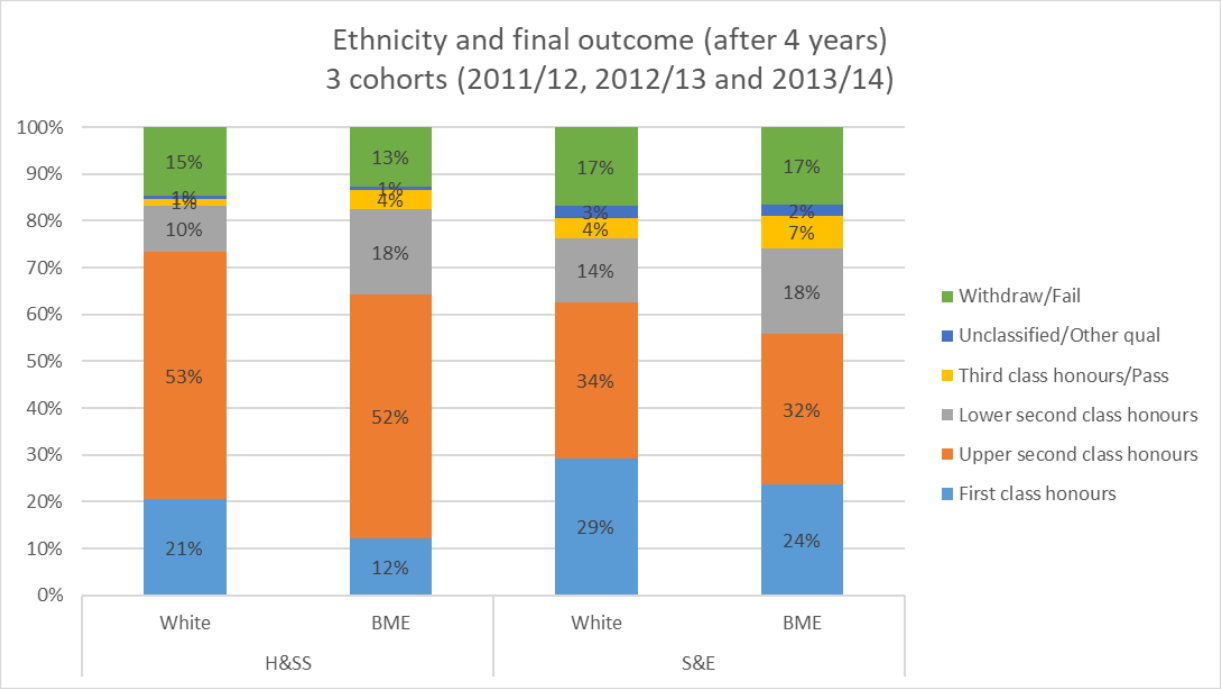
This report will summarise the various methods we used to gather our primary data, reflect on important secondary sources, observe the limitations of our work and list some recommendations for the university moving forward.

Existing data

With reference to prior research

Existing data on the BAME attainment gap came from the Engagement, Retention and Success (ERS) team, Queen Mary's Careers Service and the Strategic and Planning Office (SPO).

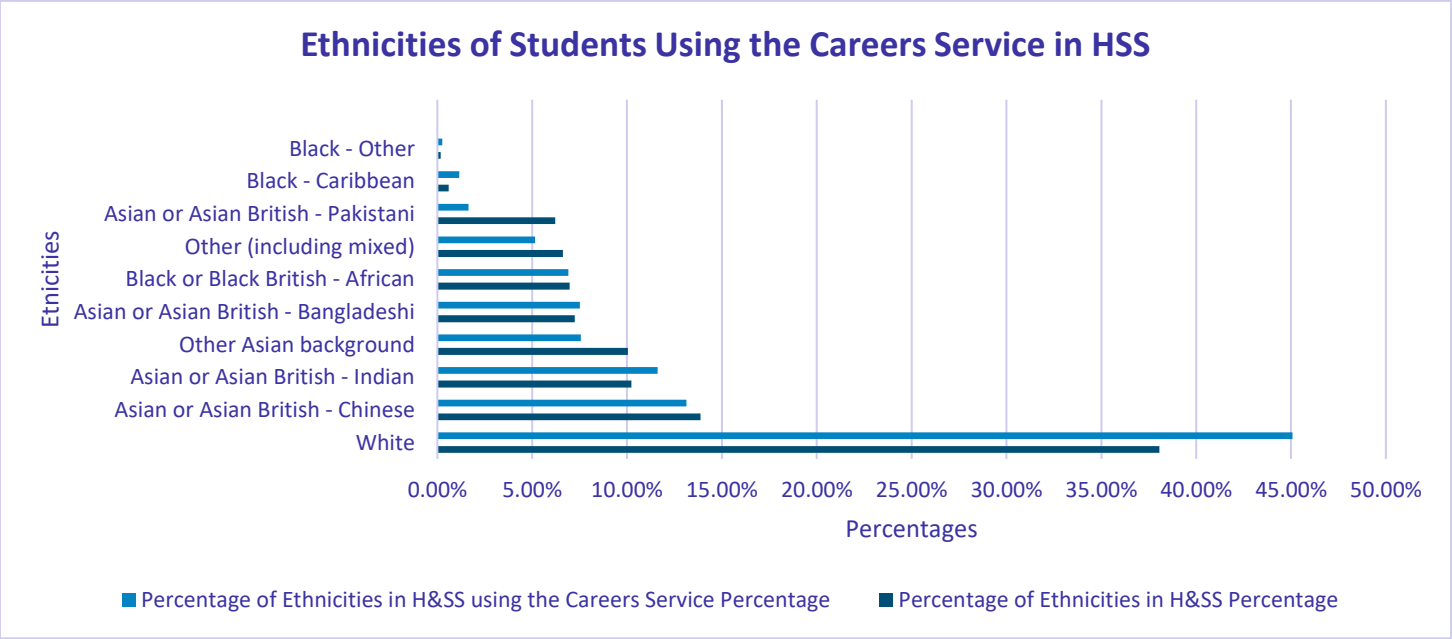
The ERS team provided us with the following graph [(1)], illustrating the breakdown in degree outcomes between White and BAME students. From this data three important conclusions were identified.

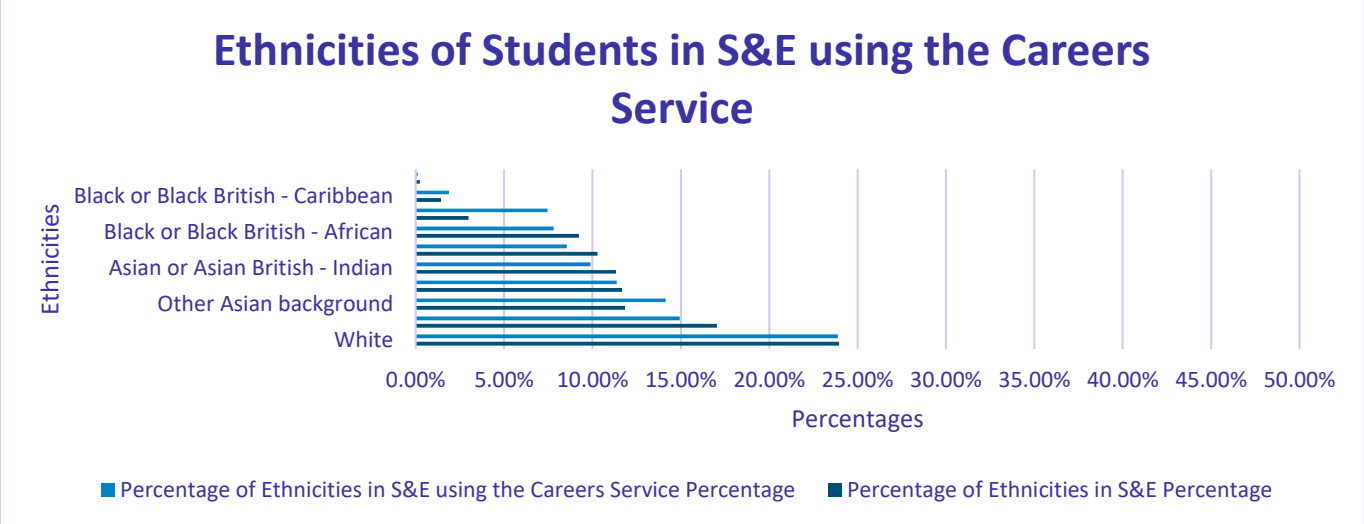


Firstly, most of the difference is in attaining a 1st class honours [(2)] degree, as evidenced by the HSS and S&E White versus BAME breakdown. The attainment gap is most prominent in the HSS faculty. It is also noticeable that there is a difference in lower second class and third class honours for BAME students in comparison to white students, however this is mainly as a result of the lower first class attainment for BAME students. The deficit approach of looking at attainment suggests BAME students lack knowledge, skills and/or aspirations, which causes their lower attainment. However, if this were accurate, a higher rate of withdrawals in BAME students would be apparent, which is not shown, raising questions towards this approach.

Existing data: Continued

Prior reading suggested that BAME students may not attain work placements at similar rates to White students[3] and that this may also have contributed to the attainment gap, as work placements improve students' performance in university[4] . This occurred in a general study into the BAME attainment gap at Leeds Beckett University and the report suggests this was not a field specific problem. This led us to investigate White versus BAME use of the Careers Service at QMUL to see if ethnicities used the service proportionately to their university population. This demonstrated that there is a significant difference between use of the Careers Service between White and BAME students in HSS but not S&E.





In 2017/2018, 3884 students came to the Careers Service from HSS and 2023 students came from S&E. As is shown by the first graph, White students and BAME students use the Careers Service approximately in line with their representation in S&E overall. However, BAME students in HSS use the Careers Service less than their representation in HSS overall. This was investigated later in this report.

Existing data: Continued

The Queen Mary Equality and Diversity Annual Report 2018 evidences data on academic staff at Queen Mary by ethnicity and role.

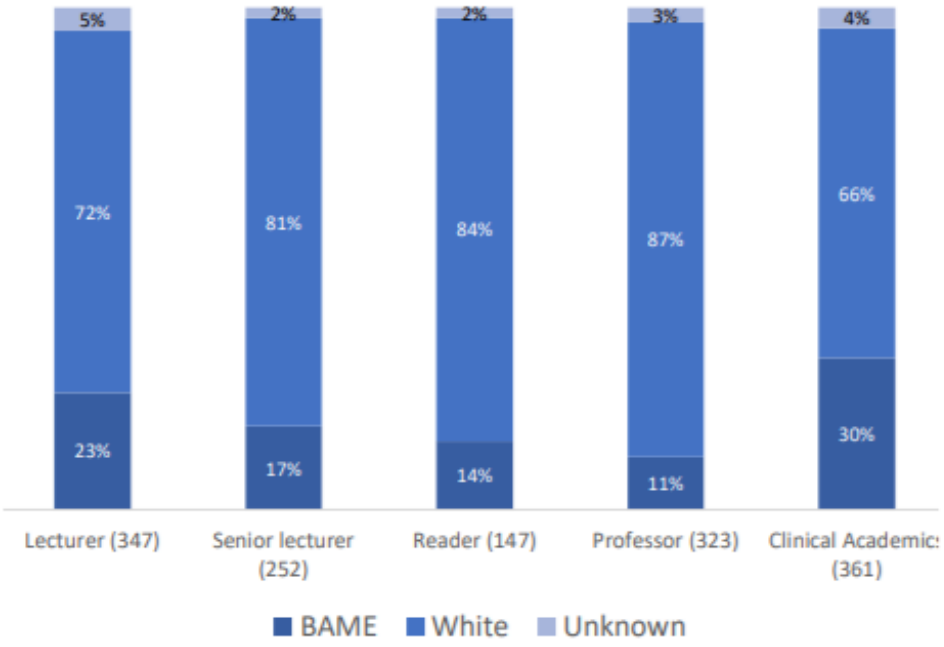


Figure 6.7 Queen Mary academic staff by ethnicity and roles in January 2018

The decrease in the percentage of BAME academic staff at higher levels of academic rank drove us to investigate why this may be the case later in this report.

Finally, in a report from the ERS team the following was found:
"New evidence from three schools (SEF, SPIR and SMS) shows an important correlation between behavioural variables (attendance and QMPLUS activity) and attainment. However, adding these engagement proxies to the analysis makes the effect of other variables such as ethnicity and gender disappear."[6]

This was a key result that drove us to look into engagement, and why students may struggle to engage with university.

Prior Reading

BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) is a broad term encompassing roughly 60% of the Queen Mary student population. An article from Advanced HE showed that the UK-wide BAME attainment gap is different depending on the specific ethnicity of the students.

- 72.2% of Chinese students were awarded a top degree (a degree attainment gap of 6.6 percentage points)
- 70.7% of Indian students (a gap of 8.1 percentage points)
- 61.8% of Pakistani students (a gap of 17.0 percentage points)
- 50.5% of Black Other students (a gap of 28.3 percentage points) [7]

Though many factors may apply to all BAME students, more specific work needs to be done addressing differences between the BAME students as well as attainment gaps between BAME students and White students.

Advanced HE suggest that "If students have not had a positive experience of higher education, or feel that they have not been allowed or encouraged to fulfil their potential, they are less likely to want to become academics. This is at a time when UK higher education needs to increase the pool of minority ethnic UK academics."[8] This influenced us to investigate whether BAME students at Queen Mary had considered a career in academia, and why.

In a Guardian article by Coco Khan where Nona McDuff touches on the ratio of students to professors, "If you look at the ratio of white students to professors, it's 50:1. For black students, it's 2000:1. Early on, as a BAME student you're reminded the odds are stacked against you."[9] We were reminded about how important descriptive representation can be to pupils, and considered the effect of a lack of BAME lecturers within our survey, focus groups and interviews.

Methodology

When deciding how to conduct our research we based it around four main areas:

University Engagement and Representation

We wanted to know how students engage with university life both academically and socially and if there were barriers people had faced that made it harder for them to engage with certain aspects of university life. We also wanted to explore students' views towards the Student Union and if they felt it represented them and the wider student population. Additionally, we were interested in representation amongst staff and if this proved to be a barrier to education.

Family Life and Stability

We wanted to address some of the commonly known stereotypes concerning choice and access to education for BAME students: one of which is that students are pressured into going down certain career paths. We wanted to see to what extent this was true and explore the theme of stability in career choice. We also wanted to see how supported individuals were in their studies, financially, academically and pastorally and were particularly interested in how involved their family was during their university application and the support they gave leading up to it.

The undergraduate vs postgraduate experience

We are aware that there is a BAME attainment gap in certain faculties and Schools at QMUL but wanted to see if this was consistent across the board and if the barriers BAME students faced were the same for undergraduates and postgraduates. This was important as we felt that there was a large gap in the existing literature. We also wanted to explore the attitudes of undergraduate students towards postgraduate study and if BAME students faced additional barriers when accessing postgraduate education.

The home vs international student experience

Additionally, we wanted to contrast home students and international students to see if the attainment gap was consistent or if there was an institutional flaw with either the British or any international education system that played a role in creating these barriers.

Methods of research

- A questionnaire – separate for students and staff
- Focus groups – separate for staff and students
- 1 to 1 interviews

Questionnaire

We began our research by firstly distributing a questionnaire amongst students and staff at the university.

We used the online surveys platform www.onlinesurveys.com to distribute the questionnaire. The aim of our questionnaire was to get as many responses from a range of different schools by both staff and students. We were at a particular advantage as each of our team studied within one of the three main faculties of Queen Mary: The Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, The Faculty of Humanities and Social Science and The Faculty of Science and Engineering. This enabled us to distribute the questionnaire through various avenues such as social media, course group chats and societies allowing us to reach a large range of students and staff. This included student faculty reps and the student groups we were a part of.

From our questionnaire we received 232 unique valid student responses and 113 unique valid staff responses after our survey being open for one month. A valid response is one (from a Queen Mary staff or student.

The design of the questionnaires are below.

Student Questionnaire:

- Student ID number?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What gender do you identify as?
- Which category of student do you fall under? – Home, EU or international
- What academic school do you belong too?
- What is your current year of study?
- What grades have you attained in your previous years of your course?
- Are you surprised that a BAME attainment gap exists?
- Do you think having more BAME staff in leadership roles would affect the BAME attainment gap?
- Where does the responsibility of closing the BAME attainment gap lie? – Students, Staff, unsure/other
- Do you think that there is a different in learning type for BAME students in comparison to white students? If yes, why?

- How do you think your curriculum is structured? – Predominantly white authored / predominantly BAME authored / unsure
- Do you engage well with a predominantly white authored curriculum?
- Do you engage well with a predominantly BAME authored curriculum?
- Did you experience any pressure from your family to choose a particular degree? If yes, why?
- Do your parents / legal guardians encourage you to achieve your personal best at university?
- From your immediate family, which generation of university attendees do you belong to?
- Do you feel comfortable asking for help? E.G. applying for extenuating circumstances, visiting tutors, office hours, emailing further questions. Why?
- Which class do you most closely associate with?
- Do you work alongside university study? If so, how many hours do you work per week?
- How much of your income goes towards your family?
- Does your family live in London?
- Do you commute?
- How long is your commute?
- Was commuting your choice?
- Do you use the student support services? (e.g. Careers Service, Advice & Counselling Service, Student Enquiry Centre)
- Does diversity in staff at these services matter to you? (e.g. Extenuating Circumstances Board, Careers Service, Advice & Counselling Service)

Staff questionnaire:

- Which academic School do you belong to at Queen Mary?
- What gender do you identify with?
- Which of the following do you identify as? White / BAME / other
- Do you think that a BAME attainment gap exists at Queen Mary University of London?
- Do you think that there is a lack of ethnic representation within the academic staff body for your faculty?
- If yes, do you think that a low percentage of BAME academic staff affects BAME student attainment?
- Do you implement specific strategies to ensure all students are engaged and involved in your lectures?
- If yes, could you provide examples of how?
- Do you think that BAME students may find it difficult to engage with a predominantly white authored curriculum?
- Do you think that BAME students are more engaged with BAME parts of the curriculum?

Findings and data

Focus Groups

We also conducted our research through focus groups as we felt this would be an effective way of engaging with people in a semi-relaxed environment and would allow us to gain in-depth responses to our main focus areas. We aimed to hold three focus groups, one at the Whitechapel campus and two at the Mile End Campus, one for staff and one for students.

Prior to the focus groups we prepared focus group forms with the order of questions we wanted to ask and space to record what people said. In contrast to our questionnaire, our focus groups contained more open questions in the hopes of triggering discussions.

Focus group questions:

- What role do you think the percentage of BAME academic staff has on BAME attainment?
- Why do you think there is a low percentage of BAME academic staff?
- Do you think that your tutors adequately understand the perspectives of BAME students?
- Did you feel like you belong at university?
- Do you think the QM students' Union is ethnically representative of the university? Why /why not?
- Is an ethnically representative Students' Union necessary?
- Did you feel pressure from parents to go down a particular degree path? What kind of pressure?
- Did your parents support your studies?

When conducting the focus groups we asked participants follow up questions in order to continue the flow of conversation and therefore did not necessarily stick to our original script. We designed a poster which we distributed on social media platforms as well as advertising print versions on university notice boards. Due to having to conduct our research in a short window of time, we were unable to advertise our focus groups early in advance and this was partly the reason for our low turnout. The only focus group we had attendees for was the student focus group in Mile End, which was relatively successful as we had representation from the three main faculties.

With regards to selection criteria, everyone was welcome to attend the focus group as long as they were a student or staff member of Queen Mary University of London. For the Mile End focus group, all three researchers were able to attend and acted as hosts by introducing the questions, and scribing. We were cautious not to share too much of our own experiences or to ask leading questions to avoid any bias.

Findings and data

One to One Interviews

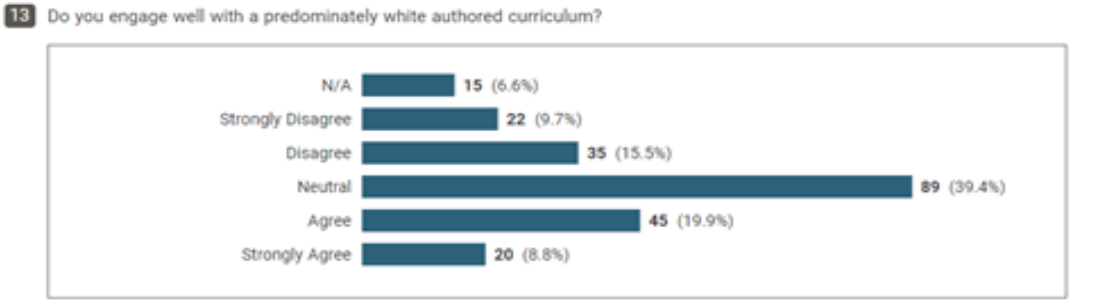
Due to the poor attendance at the focus groups, we deemed them a relatively unsuccessful way of gathering the student voice. We consequently used 1 to 1 interviews with people as we could use more flexible timings and instead of lasting 2 hours, the interviews could take only 20 minutes. We followed the same format as our focus groups and targeted both students and staff. However, we still encountered difficulty when collecting the staff voice due to staff not having the time to take part in our studies. Each student researcher collected responses from students and staff in our faculties, targeting a range of different ethnicities and courses in order to get a variety of responses.

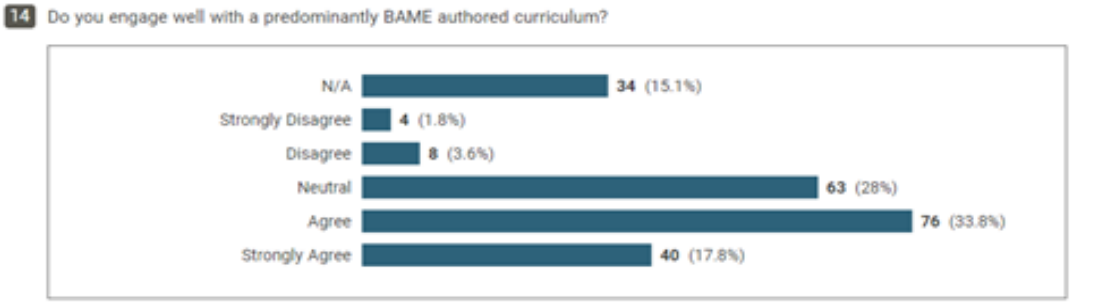
Focus Groups and Interviews and Questionnaire results of Students

Due to limited responses we are unable to comment on all the questions and focus areas we chose to investigate and therefore will only be referring to the statistics and responses that we are sufficiently able to draw conclusions for.

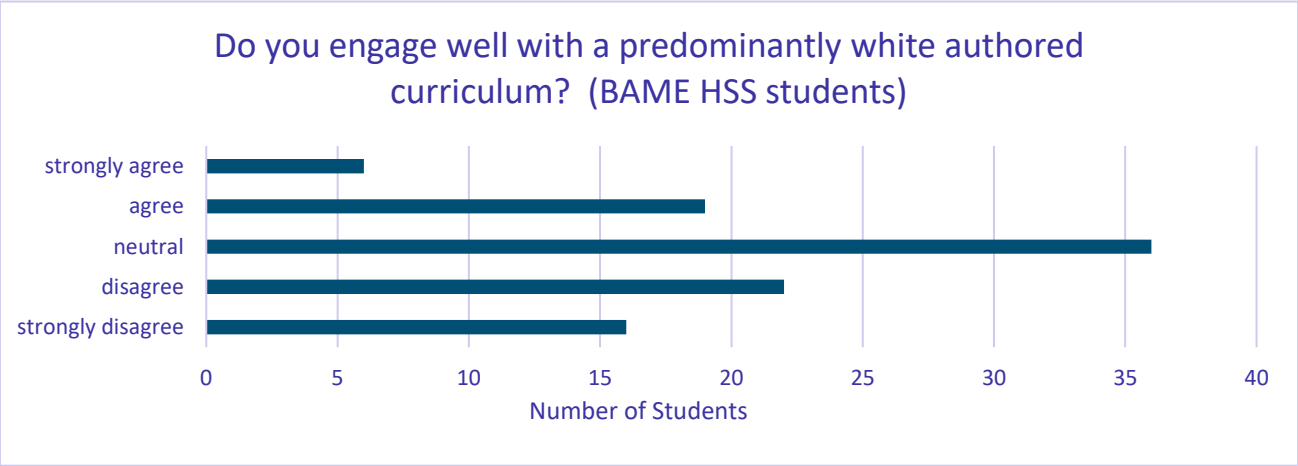
University engagement and Representation

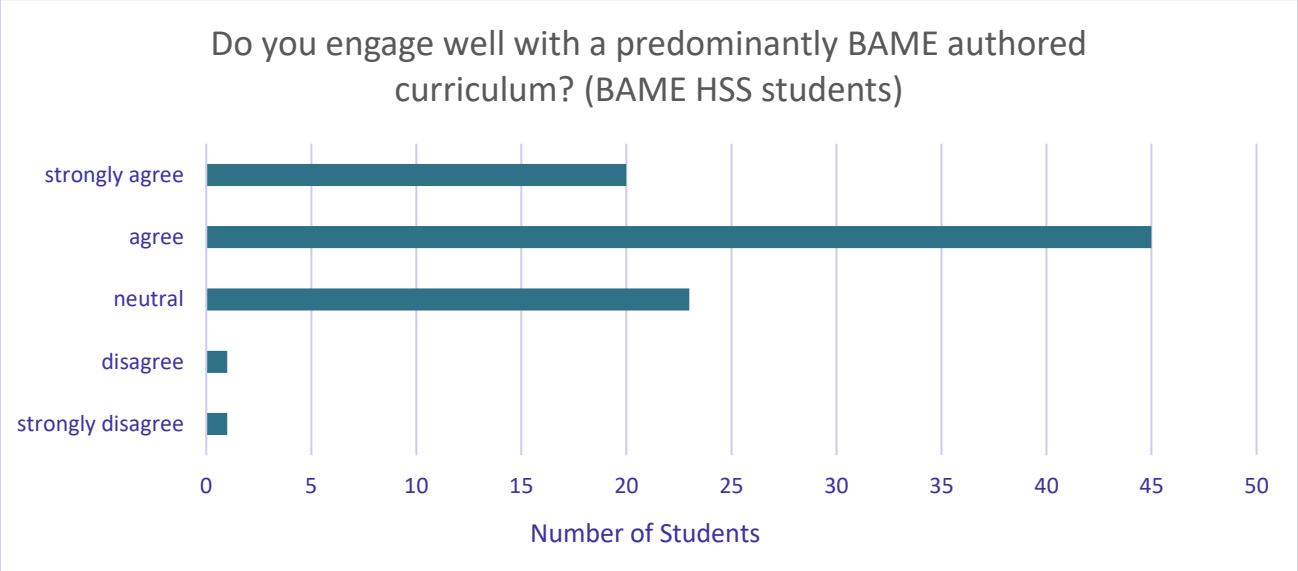
A key theme we were interested in exploring was BAME representation amongst staff and in the curriculum, particularly in the Humanities and Social Science faculty. With regards to the curriculum we asked about engagement with the curriculum, they responded as below:

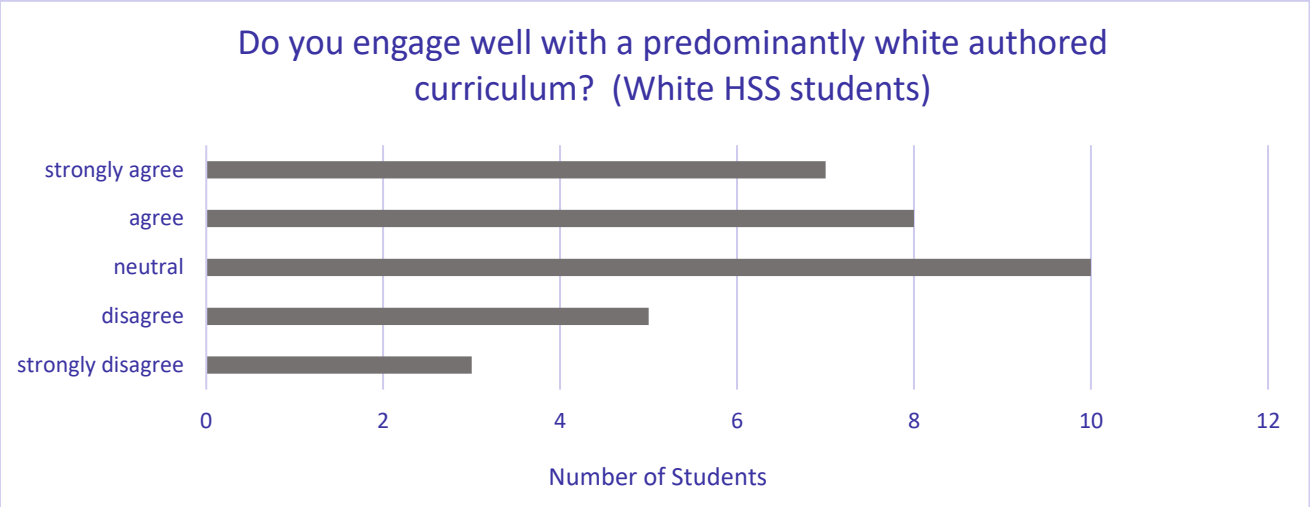


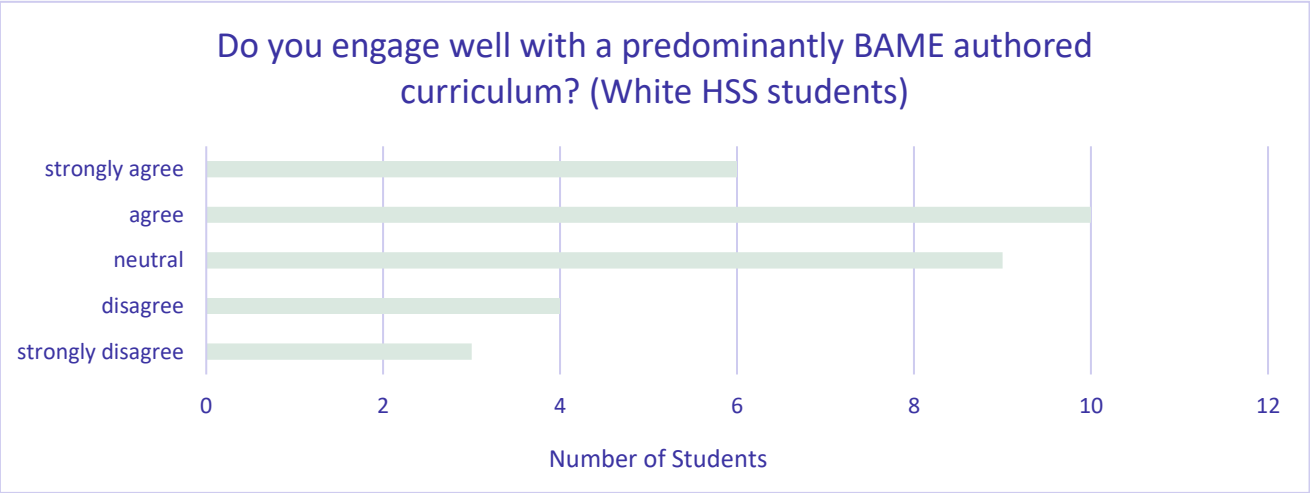


We then filtered the results to only show the results for the Humanities and Social Sciences faculty. This is because through data analysis and talking to students through focus groups and interviews, we found that issues regarding engaging to the curriculum were mainly from those studying humanities and social sciences subjects, as the contents of the SMD and S&E curriculum are seen as more objective.









If we compare the results of White HSS students to BAME HSS students engaging with a White authored and BAME authored curriculum, there are significant differences. A key observation here is that HSS BAME students perceive that their engagement increases when moving from White authored to BAME authored curricula, but White students perceive that their engagement is similar regardless of the predominant authorship of the curriculum.

When talking to students, some perceived that their learning was challenged when topics relating to BAME issues or BAME history were taught by white members of staff.

An Asian 3rd year HSS student was quoted saying:

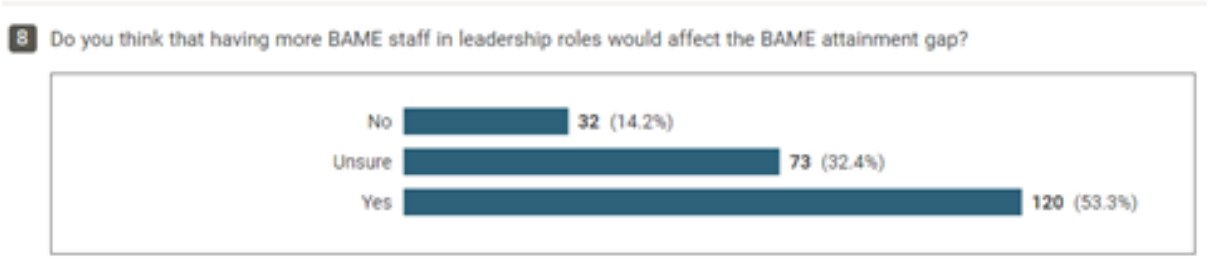
'For people who want to go into academia they may be discouraged because of tutors e.g. a module [dealing with issues of race] is taught by a white [person], no matter how well taught, it's discouraging for people who want to join. Also they're not teaching a lived experience – the stuff isn't taught authentically.'

Similarly a Black 2nd year HSS student was quoted as saying:

'The vast majority of modules on my course are eurocentric. I don't think they understand or care, nor do they emphasize issues that had affected black people in the past for example, slavery. There is no room for these issues to be touched on other than factual.'

A 2nd year Black HSS student reiterated this point:

'In [the student's] course we have a module based around [issues of race] which is taught by a white lecturer. Now being a black [student] I'm already a minority in my course and having to sit through a module like this from the prospective of a white tutor can be extremely uncomfortable and cringey'



In our survey, 54% of participants felt increased representation of BAME staff in leadership roles would affect the attainment gap. In addition, the issue surrounding representation amongst staff was repeated in conversations with students.

A White 3rd year HSS Student said:

'There is very little representation in my school. Little BAME staff in leadership positions results in fewer BAME staff due to institutional racism. If all the authorities at the top are white, they are going to hire all their white friends. If it's a case of lower numbers of people working in academia then the reason behind that is our ideas of academia are centered around white ideals, so BAME people aren't engaging.'

A point was given by a 2nd year Asian S&E student:

'I don't think the percentage of BAME academic staff really affects attainment as it is all factual and by the numbers'

A Contrasting point was given by a 3rd year Asian SMD Student:
'Amongst the staff teaching body there is absolutely loads of diversity which in my opinion is amazing. Although it doesn't directly affect the contents of my course its motivating to see people like you teaching you. It shows you that its possible for someone from your background to achieve the aims you set out to do and it's great to have a wide range of role models for us to aspire to.'

A similar point was given by a 3rd year SMD Student who gave the example of one of their lecturers:
'There is one specific tutor that we have who comes from an almost identical background as my own. A lady [of the student's background] who comes from a large family like my own. She is not only a lecturer, but a pioneer in her field. When you see how good she is at what she does it really motivates you to want to do well. In my own family and community there are very very few women that have pursued any sorts of career and so seeing someone like me in a career I want to pursue is extremely uplifting and motivating.'

Some responses eluded to the breakdown of staff not having an effect on the BAME attainment gap but rather the quality and content of the teaching.

Yet, a 3rd year Asian HSS student said:
'The background of the tutor doesn't demotivate me, nor does the curriculum.'

From these findings, it shows that in general, many HSS students feel as if there are many benefits for increasing diversity amongst staff. This includes a more inclusive curriculum that engages more students, by providing role models for students to aspire to be like. If students saw more people of colour in academic and teaching roles than perhaps it would change the attitude of students towards roles like these and motivate them to pursue these routes, thereby increasing diversity in the future.

Another issue that arose is students feeling hesitant to voice their thoughts and opinions relating to BAME specific issues or to complain about the lack of diversity in the curriculum out of fear of non-BAME people not understanding.

The theme of 'belonging' at QMUL whether that is socially or academically was also explored.

During our focus group, there was agreement that doing well socially at university was as important, if not more important than doing well academically at university. They agreed that securing a degree was at the heart of the reason they decided to attend university. However, since attending, have spent time advancing their social lives as they felt doing well socially, and being well connected allowed you to do well academically through a healthy work: life balance and also by creating a network of people doing the same course who can help you.

Some people also mentioned how belonging was much easier to find socially than academically due to the large amount of diversity at QMUL resulting in a large chance of students finding people with common interests and backgrounds that they can connect with. Yet this wasn't considered as easy when connecting with people on their course.

A Black 2nd year HSS student said:
I didn't think that [the student's subject] would be such a white dominated course. At first, I was really worried about the social side, especially as someone who had moved away from home. Meeting people from other degrees and joining societies I feel like I'm doing fine socially but definitely don't feel like I belong on my course. I have modules where I was the only black person on my course which can sometimes be quite isolating and therefore haven't felt a strong sense of belonging.'

The idea of doing well socially was contrasted by a student who was studying an SMD programme as a graduate:
'For me, the sole reason I am here is to do well in my degree. As someone who has done an undergraduate elsewhere I felt as if I've had my time have fun and having to fork out my own pocket to fund my degree has added extra pressure to make sure I'm on track academically.'

This opinion was shared with a 2nd year graduate entry SMD student who said:
'For me belonging goes beyond fitting in socially. I do appreciate the mix of people on my course and perhaps really take that for granted but belonging for me is knowing that I'm appreciated as a student and the university is working with me to help me attain my goals.'

To summarise, most students felt that a sense of belonging at university was crucial to doing well academically. What it means to belong differed from student to student. Some felt it meant doing well socially, making friends and engaging in societies. Some felt that it meant seeing people with similar backgrounds on your course and others felt it meant being appreciated by the staff and supported in your ambitions.

Staff

- 73.3% of staff think there is a lack of ethnic representation in their academic body
- SMD Yes- 9 No-14 Unsure-2
- S&E Yes-10 No-1 Unsure -0
- HSS Yes-62 No-10 Unsure 3

These are generally consistent with the thoughts of students, as SMD students noted there was sufficient representation amongst the staff; whereas HSS students reported a lack of representation. This is further supported by several HSS students reporting they had never been taught by a non-white lecturer during their time at university.

When staff were asked whether increased representation would affect the BAME student attainment there was a range of responses.
A HSS staff member responded to our questionnaire saying:
'I would see it as an institutional responsibility which is not quite the same as saying staff'

Another HSS staff member said:
It is an institutional and structural issue. Students are awarded places at QMUL equally, on the basis on academic merit and it's the job of the staff as a whole to produce an environment in which all students have an equal chance to flourish and learn.
This coincided with the thought of students where changing the learning environment would allow them to feel free to express their point of view unapologetically and feel appreciated.

When teaching staff were questioned about what they do to engage students an S&E lecturer responded that he implemented no specific techniques to engage with students.
"I see most of my role as passing information on. And obviously you hope people engage with it"

This reflects a negative mentality, showing it must be reinforced to teaching staff how much of a role they play in student's lives, especially in STEM subjects where the knowledge is more objective. It may seem like it is just providing information, but the way this is done can severely alter a student's learning experience. In this sense, staff underestimate how much they can increase a student's attainment. If a learning experience is provided in a student-focused way, students will be more likely to engage with the subject, subjective or not. As opposed to viewing the teaching experience as the student's responsibility to engage with the information shared, the experience is focused on making sure the students can learn effectively.

Problems faced in the project

The limitations of time

This project is very important, and the use of student interns was an effective and useful tool to gain insightful research. However, this in itself led to multiple problems.

1. *Only three interns:* This meant that we were limited in flexibility as we all had very different timetables. This led to situations where we were doing group work, individually. Individual work is always expected, however in a subjective subject such as this, more opinions can lead to more objectivity when conducting research.
2. *Only four hours per week*: This limited work time frame was problematic as it meant if we conducted two, two hour focus groups in one week, we couldn't do any extra work.
3. *The length of the research*: Working from December to March was too short a time frame, to lead to a vast amount of primary research. This is reflected in further research questions which we would like to explore, such as Eastern European academic success compared to that of Western Europeans.
4. *Second semester start-date*: The majority of our work began in the second semester which from an academic perspective is the busiest. For more flexibility, a first semester start date would be better and would allow for forward planning if the research was to continue into second semester.
5. *No postgraduates*: A key area missing in our research is postgraduates, however in not having a member from that cohort in our team, it was harder to get them to engage. This meant our research pool was too small to be analytically effective.

"In any research project, more time will always lead to more accurate work"

Conclusion and recommendations

More student led research

To conclude, our research has reinforced but also questioned existing assumptions relating to the BAME attainment gap. There are no quick solutions to this problem.

In light of our data limitations, more time is needed to fully expand on the issues raised in this report. Our main recommendation is that another student internship group is run again, but beginning earlier in the following academic year to allow for greater planning. These groups need to be expanded to include targeted research area participants such as postgraduates.

The face-to-face responses reflecting a need to identify with academic teachers via background or race, shows the staffing representation issue is also a pressing concern. Moreover, the repeated concern of non-white and non-western reading materials being utilised in humanities courses is another point. Within this, an ethnically diverse board which reviews the 'white curricula' could also lead to improvements for both these problems. As these solutions involve hiring and school specific module readings, they may be difficult to implement in the short term. However, another research group may after building upon our research be able to offer a more problem-specific faster solution. Nonetheless, we have a list of recommendations which may be implemented whilst more research is completed.

Conclusion and recommendations

Short-term implementations

1. *Uniformity:* Greater cohesion between all university affiliated groups researching this issue would be more effective. The ability to share information validates our research and also expands our pool of participants. Moreover, a minimum standard of data uniformity across departments would allow for more effective data analysis.
2. *Safe spaces:* Students responses show they feel a disconnect in comfort when discussing race, thus a safe space to engage in these issues may lead to an increase in engagement, and thus attainment.
3. *Pre-entry activities:* During the fresher's fair and first semester of every year, in the Humanities and Social Sciences department, more activities that consciously foster engagement with BAME students could be implemented.
4. *Postgraduate focus:* A conscious requirement for every department to emphasis the link between job success and work experience, so students are more mindful of the importance of internships as well as other opportunities outside of the degree.
5. *BAME Alumni Network:* This would be an optional message to join sent out to all BAME third years from this year and continuing on in future years. In this networking group, the university could offer first, second and third year students the option to connect with BAME alumni, in a mentoring-type scheme. This could foster more industry-minded students, which could increase their attainment and knowledge of ways to participate in university and in graduate-level employment.

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