

Black Student Experience Project

Researching Black students' perceptions of their experience at Kingston University

Briefing Document

1. Background

One of the enabling themes in Kingston Students' Union Strategy for 2024-2027 is data and insight, where we strive to gather insight about our students to champion their needs. One way to do this is by conducting a research project every year on a topic that is important to students. The topic for the 2024/25 research project is the experience of Black students¹ at Kingston University.

The research project will seek to understand Black students' perceptions of their experience at Kingston University, which encompasses both their academic life and student life. With regards to their academic experience, this will be investigated in relation to the Black awarding gap at Kingston, which for the academic year 2021-22 was at 25.4 percentage points (pp). Regarding their student life, this will include their involvement with societies, sports clubs, and other student engagement activities at Kingston.

The purpose of this briefing document is to outline the main issues in Black student experience in higher education in the UK and in Kingston University, particularly in relation to the degree awarding gap.

2. Black student experience in higher education

In 2022-23, Black students made up 8.5 per cent of the undergraduate student population in England, while White students constituted 64.8 per cent, Asian students 18.2 per cent, Mixed students 6 per cent, and students from other ethnicities at 2.5 per cent.² In terms of continuation and completion of their studies at the university, in 2022-23 Black students had the lowest proportion who continued to the second year (82.6 per cent) and who completed their studies (81.4 per cent).

Additionally, there have been degree awarding gaps between White students and Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students. The National Union of Students (NUS) and Universities UK (UUK) define the awarding gap as the 'difference between the proportion of White UK domiciled students who are awarded a first or upper second class degree and the proportion of UK domiciled Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students who are awarded degrees in the same class.'³ Previously known as the 'attainment gap,' the

¹ For the purpose of this project, Black is defined as those whose self-identified ethnicity is Black, Black British, African, Caribbean or Mixed or Multiple ethnic group as per the UK government list of ethnic groups in England and Wales. 'List of ethnic groups,' Gov.uk, <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/style-guide/ethnic-groups/>, accessed 14 October 2024.

² Office for Students' Access and Participation Dashboard, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/data-dashboard/>, accessed 24 September 2024.

³ The National Union of Students and Universities UK, 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: #CLOSINGTHEGAP' (2019): p. 5, <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/bame-student-attainment.pdf>.

‘awarding gap’ is now more commonly used to acknowledge that ‘grade disparities are the result of institutional action or inaction, rather than being caused by Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students as individuals.’⁴

The BAME awarding gap in the UK in 2020-21 was 8.8pp, down from 13.2pp in 2017-18. While the overall gap has reduced, there was still a substantial gap between Black and White students in the UK: 18.4 pp.⁵ For England, the Office for Students’ Access and Participation Data Dashboard showed that in 2022-23, 58.7 per cent of Black students were awarded a first or upper second class degree, while for White students the proportion was 81.1 per cent – which means there was a gap of 22.4 percentage points. These data clearly highlight the disparities in the outcomes between Black students and students of other ethnicity backgrounds in higher education.

There have been various studies that looked specifically at the experience of Black students in higher education and the barriers and challenges they are facing, especially in relation with the degree awarding gap. A study of Black student experience in a university in England found that two main themes underpinned Black student experience at the university: first is recognising (non) diversity, which is about the shock in recognising the contrast between Black and White student experience.⁶ Second is Black bodies out of place, which is about the multiple ways Black students were ‘othered’ or ‘misrecognised’ in the university context and how this created a sense of non-belonging. In a similar vein, another study that looked at the experience of Black students in an undergraduate STEM programme at a university in England concluded that Black students frequently felt underrepresented or unwelcome at university, and that they would benefit from a wider variety of teaching and assessment methods, a shift away from traditional lectures, and an increased focus on small group teaching.⁷

The barriers and challenges faced by Black students at universities go beyond academic life. Unite Students’ Living Black at University report in 2022 revealed that Black students had a less positive experience than average in their accommodation in terms of sense of belonging, feeling comfortable in being themselves, and sense of safety and security. Black students also experienced racism and microaggressions in their accommodation and had low levels of trust in the processes of anti-racist strategies.⁸ Moreover, Pearson and Wonkhe study ‘Students’ perceptions of belonging and inclusion at university’ in 2022 found that there were differences between Black and White students in their perceptions of how they could be themselves and how they were being treated at university: 73 per cent of Black students agreed they could be themselves at university compared to 82 per cent of White students, and 77 per cent of Black students agreed they were treated respectfully

⁴ Universities UK, ‘Closing ethnicity degree awarding gaps: three years on #ClosingTheGap’ (2022), p. 3, <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Reports/closing-the-gap-three-years-on.pdf>.

⁵ Universities UK, ‘Closing ethnicity degree awarding gaps: three years on #ClosingTheGap,’ p. 3.

⁶ Latesha Osbourne, Julie Barnett, and Leda Blackwood, “‘You never feel so Black as when you’re contrasted against a White background’”: Black students’ experiences at a predominantly White institution in the UK,’ *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 31/Issue 4 (2021): pp. 383-395.

⁷ Racheal Greaves et al., ‘The Black Student Experience: Comparing STEM Undergraduate Student Experiences at Higher Education Institutions of Varying Student Demographic,’ *Journal of Chemical Education*, Vol. 99 (2022): pp. 58-70.

⁸ Halpin and Unite Students, ‘Living Black at University: Research into the experiences of Black students in UK student accommodation’ (2022), https://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Living-Black-at-University-Report_FINAL.pdf.

compared to 86 per cent of White students.⁹ Another study in a UK university that had two per cent of Black student population found that racism is ubiquitously experienced by Black students.¹⁰ The study also found that the burden of racism is carried by the victims – it is the Black students who must try to find ways to navigate the racist campus culture.

These studies show that there are unique, and heavy, challenges faced by Black students in university in both their academic and non-academic life, which likely contribute to the degree awarding gap. Pallavi Banerjee's systematic review of factors linking contextual indicators, institutional culture and degree awarding gaps revealed that degree awarding gaps in UK universities are influenced by various factors that are interconnected: unconscious bias, limited student engagement opportunities with academic staff, institutional racism, inadequate support systems, and scarcity of social and cultural capital.¹¹ Similarly, a study that investigated Black students' perceived reasons for the awarding gap concluded that the reasons for the ethnicity awarding gap were marked by 'signals of unbelonging', which were felt in experiences such as: having non Black tutors (and lecturers) and extracurricular activities they could not relate to, frustrations around Black history month, and facing unfavourable racial stereotypes and microaggressions.¹² In other words, Black students perceived the awarding gap as partially caused by lack of fulfilment of the need for belonging.

To reduce the degree awarding gaps, Universities UK recommended the following approaches:¹³

- Providing strong leadership, which is marked by commitments from university leaders to removing degree awarding gaps, working together with the students.
- Having conversations about race and changing the culture, through which universities and students co-produce initiatives and approaches to removing the degree awarding gaps.
- Developing racially diverse and inclusive communities, including improving staff diversity and improving the diversity of academic pipelines, such as by encouraging BAME students into postgraduate study.
- Getting the evidence and analysing the data, including making data related to awarding gaps accessible to staff and students.
- Understanding what works, which involves having continuous evaluation to build institutional understanding of what works to remove degree awarding gaps.

In a 2021 study, Access HE engaged with students and staff of higher education institutions in London, and gathered their views of what could be done to address the ethnicity awarding gaps:

- According to students:

⁹ Pearson and Wonkhe, 'Students' perceptions of belonging and inclusion at university' (2022), <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Belonging-and-inclusion-survey-Wonkhe-Pearson-Feb-22.pdf>.

¹⁰ Lateesha Osbourne, Julie Barnett, and Leda Blackwood, 'Black students' experiences of "acceptable" racism at a UK university,' *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 33/Issue 1 (2023): pp. 43-55.

¹¹ Pallavi Banerjee, 'Connecting the dots: a systematic review of explanatory factors linking contextual indicators, institutional culture and degree awarding gaps,' *Higher Education Evaluation and Development*, Vol. 18/No. 1 (2024): p. 31.

¹² Blessing N. Marandure, Jess Hall, and Saima Noreen, "... They're talking to you as if they're kind of dumbing it down": A thematic analysis of Black students' perceived reasons for the university awarding gap,' *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 50 (2024): p. 1178.

¹³ Universities UK, 'Closing ethnicity degree awarding gaps: three years on #ClosingTheGap.'

- Listening to students and creating inclusive environments.
- Making financial support more accessible.
- Promoting events and engagements on race via students.
- Enabling lecturing staff to strengthen their pastoral roles.
- According to staff:
 - Making senior leaders responsible.
 - Changing pedagogy and curriculum.
 - Intersectionality and working with students.
 - Examining institutional culture.

3. Initiatives and programmes to support Black students at universities and students' unions

Universities and students' union have implemented various initiatives and programmes to support Black students at their institutions. Below are some examples:

- University of Kent published 'Black Students Guide to Kent', a student guide created specifically for Black students to navigate their university life.¹⁴ This guide includes products and local services that are relevant to Black students, such as Black hair and beauty salons, Black hair products, and restaurants that serve Afro Caribbean cuisines. In 2023, funded by the university, Kent Students' Union conducted the Black Student Voices project, which sought to create a list of recommendations and actions for the University of Kent and the Union to improve the experience of Black students.¹⁵ In 2024, Kent Students' Union together with Canterbury Christ Church Students' Union launched a campaign against racism, which is centred around a two-part film series featuring eight student athletes from racially and ethnically marginalised background who shared how their experiences have been shaped by racial discrimination and prejudice.¹⁶
- University of Southampton's Awarding Gap Project fosters collaboration between students and the university to develop projects to support students and close the awarding gap.¹⁷ Black undergraduate students are involved in the project as members of the Awarding Gap Project Panel who oversee the activities and interventions targeted at Black students. Part of the Project is the 'Black Freshers' Guide 2024/25,' which includes information on student services and support, local Black owned businesses, and places of worship.
- The Black Sport Collective at the University of Nottingham brings together Black students who are interested in sport and provides support for them to excel.¹⁸ This includes celebrating and highlighting achievements of Black students in sport, and

¹⁴ 'A Black Student's Guide to Kent,' University of Kent, <https://student.kent.ac.uk/life/the-black-student-guide-to-kent>, accessed 9 October 2024.

¹⁵ 'Black Student Voices,' Kent Students' Union, <https://ksu.co.uk/student-voice/black-student-voices>, accessed 14 October 2024.

¹⁶ 'A Black Student's Guide to Kent,' University of Kent.

¹⁷ 'Awarding Gap Project,' University of Southampton, <https://www.southampton.ac.uk/studentservices/support-and-wellbeing/awarding-gap-project.page>, accessed 9 October 2024.

¹⁸ 'Black Sport Collective,' University of Nottingham, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/sport/get-active/inclusive-sport/our-campaigns/black-sport-collective.aspx>, accessed 9 October 2024.

creating partnerships with organisations to offer opportunities through sport for Black students.

- The Open University's Black Students' Support Fund provides scholarships for students from a Black background, with a maximum of £25,000 per student.¹⁹
- The University of Manchester's Manchester 10/10 programme provides tailored events and opportunities for Black students to find community and build belonging.²⁰ The programme was designed by the university in collaboration with Black heritage students.

4. Black student experience at Kingston University

Kingston University has a diverse student population. In 2023-24, of the total 18,862 students, the largest proportion was students of Asian background (36.3 per cent), followed by White (29.5 per cent), Black (19.6 per cent), and Other, including Mixed (12.4 per cent).²¹ For comparison, on the national level, in 2022-23, 8 per cent of students were of Black backgrounds, 13 per cent were of Asian backgrounds, and 7 per cent were of Other, including Mixed backgrounds (see Chart 1 below).²²

Student Population by Ethnicity (%)

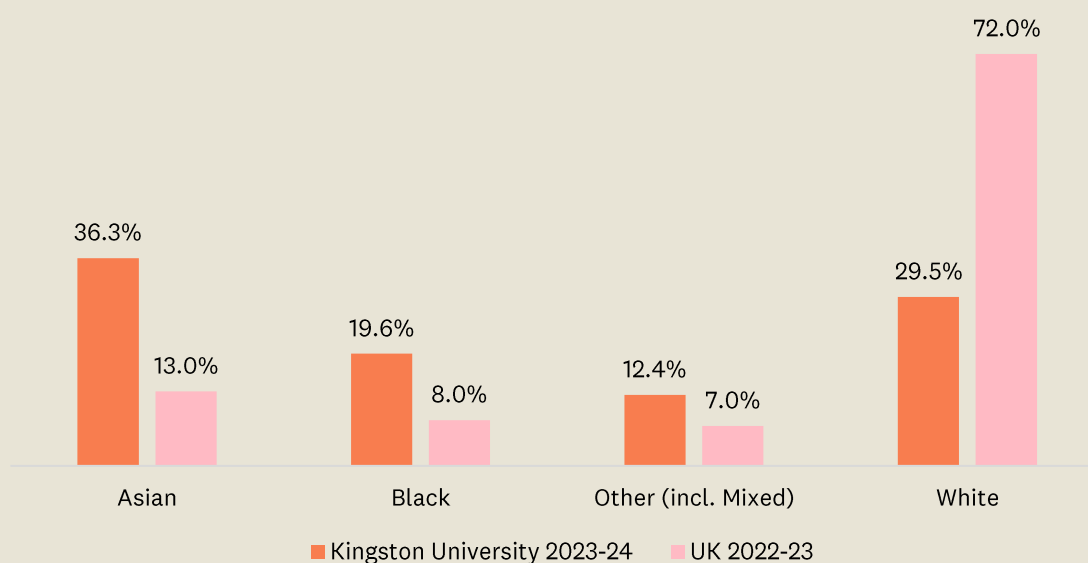


Chart 1. Student Population by Ethnicity (%), Kingston University 2023-24 and UK 2022-23.

However, in terms of student engagement, data from both sports clubs and societies at Kingston University shows that there is space for improvement in Black student

¹⁹ 'Black Students' Support Fund,' The Open University, <https://giving.open.ac.uk/blackstudentsupport#:~:text=The%20Black%20Students'%20Support%20Fund,transform%20the%20lives%20through%20education>, accessed 10 October 2024.

²⁰ 'Manchester 10/10,' The University of Manchester, <https://www.manchester.ac.uk/about/social-responsibility/social-inclusion/widening-participation/manchester-10-10/>, accessed 10 October 2024.

²¹ Kingston University's Data Insight, per 7 October 2024.

²² 'HE student enrolments by personal characteristics,' Higher Education Statistics Agency, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he#characteristics>, accessed 10 October 2024.

engagement with student groups at Kingston. In 2023-24, of 608 students with a sports membership, 96 were Black students, 12.3 per cent of which were committee members. In societies, of the 270 committee members, 42 were Black students (22.9 per cent).

In terms of degree awarding gap, the gap between Black and White students at Kingston University has been quite large – 29pp for the academic year 2022-23. The University’s Access and Participation Plan (APP) for 2024-25 to 2027-28 sets out that the target for Black and White awarding gap for 2029-30 is 4pp. It is essential to highlight that the awarding gap was also a target of the previous APP; however, instead of improving, there has been a rise of the Black and White students awarding gap since 2020-21, as shown in Table 1 below.

Ethnicity	Degree awarding gaps at Kingston University			
	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Black	18.7	17.5	25.4	29.0
Asian	9.8	7.4	13.9	16.1
Mixed	13.6	6.9	6.8	9.1
Other	6.7	19.0	16.5	10.9

Table 1. Degree awarding gaps at Kingston University, 2019-20 to 2022-23.²³

Kingston University’s APP highlights issues that contribute to the awarding gap, such as insufficient academic, personal, and mental health support, insufficient institutional policies and practices, insufficient learning and teaching practices and student engagement mechanisms, and student services that are not sufficiently inclusive and responsive to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

Additionally, the advice team at KSU has received anecdotal evidence that racial issues have impacted placement, deadlines, and grades, which may have affected students’ academic experience.

The objectives of Kingston University’s APP related to Black student experience are as follows:

- Kingston University will reduce the completion gap between White and Black students from 8.8pp to 1.7pp by 2029-30, reaching 4.1pp by the end of 2027-28.
- Kingston University will reduce the degree awarding gap between students of White and Black ethnicity from 25.4pp to 4.0pp by 2029-30, reaching 11.1pp by the end of 2027-28.

Programmes that are currently in place at Kingston University related to Black student experience include:

- Elevate: a programme to increase employability outcomes for students from Black African and Black Caribbean heritage.
- The International Black Scholarship Programme: international mobility programme for black students (15 students per year) to empower students to critically debate contemporary global issues such as climate change and antiracism.

²³ Office for Students Access and Participation Dashboard, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/data-dashboard/>, accessed 25 September 2024.

- Head Start: A pre-entry programme for 400+ Firm undergraduate offer holders. Open to undergraduate students, with specific targeting to students from underrepresented groups.
- Inclusive curriculum framework and staff training: increased staff training around inclusive teaching practice.
- Inclusive curriculum consultant programme: partnership between students and staff to support embedding of inclusion within the curriculum; promote student engagement and voice in the development of curricula; support course reviews and course enhancement activities.

It is important to note that we acknowledge intersectionality – that Black students' identity is not shaped just by their ethnicity; their lived experiences and sense of self are shaped by their multiple social identities: as parents or carers, as disabled students, as mature students, as holders of religious faith, and so forth. Consequently, the experience of a Black Christian student, for example, could be very different to that of a Black Muslim, and the experience of a Black student parent could be very different to a Black student who is not a parent. This research strives to move towards understanding these complex, intersectional experiences.

5. Conclusion

The ethnicity degree awarding gap is a complex issue which involves many interlinking factors. This research project aims to contribute towards reducing the awarding gaps at Kingston University by first understanding the perceptions of Black students, which currently has the largest awarding gap with White students.

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