

# **A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE HOLISTIC EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF AFRICAN DESCENT AT A POST-1992 UNIVERSITY IN ENGLAND**

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## **Abstract**

HE (Higher education) has the potential to break intergenerational poverty by bringing about social mobility and justice, thereby transforming the lives of many from disadvantaged backgrounds. In recent years, considerable progress has been made to widen the participation of black students in the UK HE sectors. It has been observed that candidates from black and minority ethnic groups go to university in good numbers, but they don't achieve as well as their white counterparts. In the past few years alone, the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement have shone a stark light on the racial inequalities that exist throughout all sections of UK society, including within HE. Key obstacles remain to building on and sustaining the progress that has been made, ensuring the participation and success of deprived groups and delivering fair access. These groups experience a higher risk of poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, and violence than the general population and their constant struggle to secure top positions in the UK economy. In this study, IPA (Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis) has been used to explore the holistic experiences of students of African descent attending a post-1992 University in England through the lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Pierre Bourdieu's tools. We evaluated their challenges and coping strategies to survive in largely white-dominated spaces. Findings reveal that students met a combination of psychological, academic, and financial difficulties relating to anxieties of adjusting to a new culture for international students, language difficulties, new ways of learning and assessment, and having to work alongside their studies. Moreover, substantial inequalities persist throughout their student lifecycle, exposing systemic discrimination and broader campus political, cultural, and social realities.

Keywords: Widening participation, African descent students, Post-1992 Universities, CRT, Bourdieu, IPA.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, it has been noticed that academic performance and employment outcomes differ between different groups of students. The relative underachievement of Black students has been a persistent problem facing most universities in the UK. Even though some good progress has been made in widening participation (WP) inclusion and social change, evidence suggests that inequality of access to university for socio-economically disadvantaged students remains a significant policy challenge [1], [2]. Successive governments in the UK have recognised the importance of improving and transforming the current state of higher education by implementing various recommendations made throughout the years on how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could improve the lives of minority groups and create a fairer society [3]. Key obstacles remain to build on and sustain the progress that has been made; to ensure the participation and success of deprived groups such as students of African descent and to deliver fair access. These groups experience a higher risk of poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, and violence than the general population, including but not limited to ethnic minorities and migrants. However, this research focuses on students of African descent for reasons linked to their lower performance compared to white middle-class HE students and their constant struggle to secure top positions in the UK economy [4]. This paper revisits the contested issue of ethnic minority access to higher education. It has been observed that candidates from black and minority ethnic groups attend university in good numbers following critical recommendations provided by the 1963 Lord Robbins report and the 1997 Lord Dearing report [5]. These students also tend to be concentrated in less prestigious institutions. Indeed, many WP students are either in post – 1992 universities or alternative HE providers (AP). [6] showed that the prior attainment of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), also referred to as Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) students, could not explain the lower rate of applications to high-profile institutions compared to their white counterparts. In particular, Black Caribbean, Black Other, and Mixed White applicants were more likely to target non-elite universities, suggesting a pattern of self-exclusion from elite institutions. Access to high-status institutions is essential for several reasons, not least because it is likely to affect candidates' following destinations and their ability to access elite professions.

The inequalities in higher education mirror those in wider UK society, and broader political and social realities are evident on campuses affecting the experiences and actions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, it may be necessary to understand better the experiences of African descent who can study at those universities, the challenges they face and the coping strategies they have adopted to survive in white-dominated environments. The rest of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 discusses the method and techniques used to collect the data. A detailed analysis of the findings is provided in Section 3, followed by a conclusion and future work in section 4.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This study on WP was concentrated on African descent students as an ethnic group. Both home and international students attending a post-1992 University in England were interviewed. We have explored individual students' experiences in social life areas and attempted to figure out the main challenges they faced and their coping strategies. The research was qualitative in nature, and the design was framed within a phenomenological approach whereby the research philosophy and methodology were defined as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). As phenomenologists Husserl and Heidegger highlighted, phenomenology is interested in the world as experienced by human beings in particular contexts, as opposed to abstract statements about the nature of the world. Husserl was interested in finding out a means where an individual could accurately know their own experience of a phenomenon with depth and rigour that might allow them to identify essential qualities of the given experience [7]. Heidegger saw the phenomenological approach as predominantly interpretive rather than the descriptive approach proposed by Husserl. IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience and the meaning of that experience as expressed by the individual in their terms, without any pre-defined categories [7]. IPA has mainly been used in psychological research. Therefore, its application to a business context provides some level of novelty. The researchers' ontological position is social constructionism, as the reality is socially constructed, and the epistemological position is interpretivism. A purposive sampling technique was adopted with a sample size of 14 participants; 9 were home students, and 5 were international students born in Africa or the Caribbean islands, paying overseas student fees to study at their institution. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate and postgraduate students. The findings were explained using the Critical Race Theory (CRT) see figure 1, and the thinking tools of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of Practice; see figure 2 (social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital) & community cultural wealth (CCW). The relevance of this educational research is that it enables the acquisition of in-depth cultural and academic insights into the holistic experiences of the research participants.

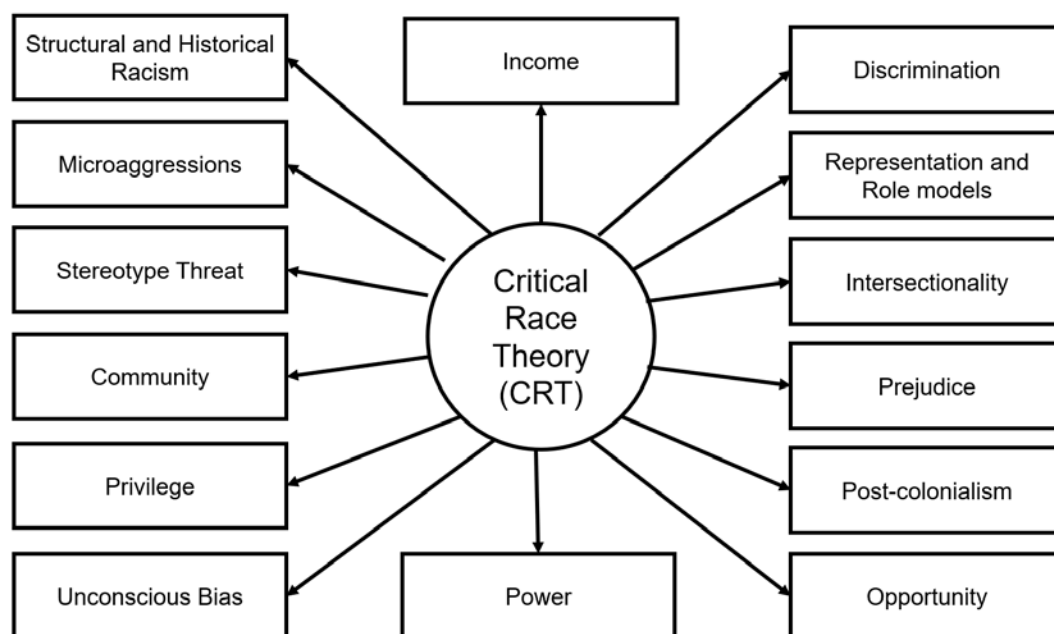


Figure 1. An Illustration of the key building blocks of the Critical Race Theory.

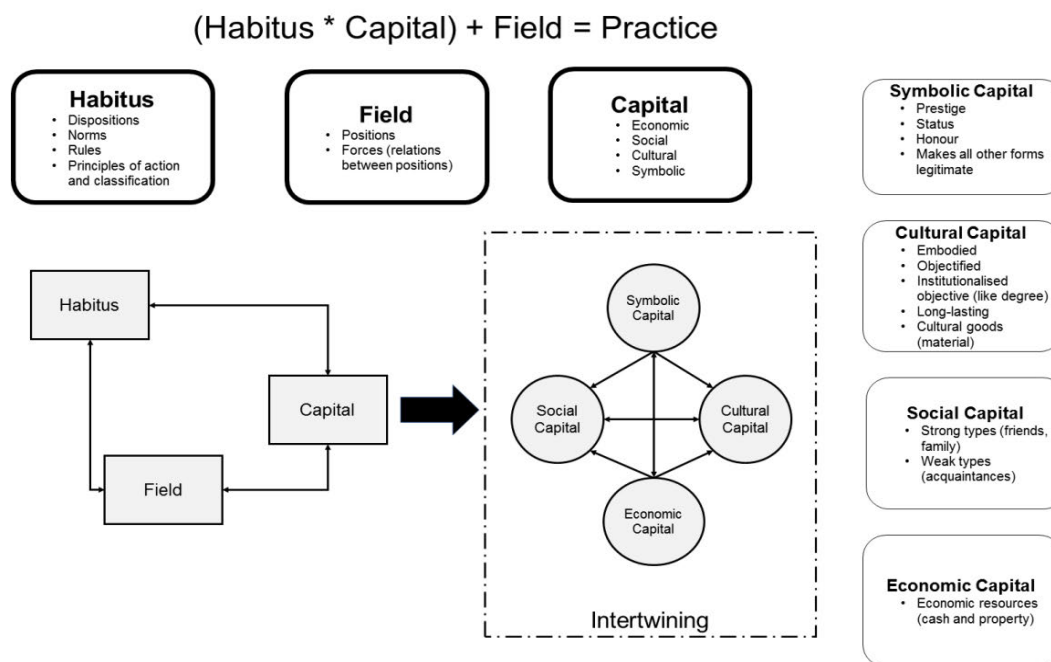


Figure 2. Pierre Bourdieu Key concepts.

### 3 RESULTS

In describing their lived experiences and involvement, the participants highlighted various issues and tensions between current educational policies and the actual institution practices. In highlighting these unequal treatments between them and the white students, participants' narratives reflected their personal experiences and represented similar experiences of peers at different levels of the Institution. Issues were identified around race, cultural identity, the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum and white privilege. While participants agreed that the unequal educational practices affecting students of African descent were due primarily to subtle racism, evidence of overt racism was not detected.

#### 3.1 Analysis of student's narratives

Analysing each participant's experiences separately enabled an in-depth understanding of the whole journey from an idiographic perspective. This is essentially the researchers' subjective interpretation, and it is recognised that other researchers interpreting the same data may have identified different themes in their analyses. No changes have been made to the verbatim extracts from the interviews. The quotes from participants are presented in italics.

During the study, it was evident that the African descent population in the UK was not a homogenous group. We have several subgroups of Black students at this institution. The first subgroup is the Black British students born in the UK; this could be 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup> Generation Black or mixed raced students with either African or Caribbean ancestry with first-generation parents or grandparents who migrated to study or to work (i.e. Windrush generation). This group has the highest proportion of its population that lives in crime-deprived neighbourhoods and has completed their primary and secondary education in the UK system. The second subgroups are the 1<sup>st</sup> Generation Black British and mixed races born either in Africa or in the west indies who came to the UK at a younger age either with their parents or as an adult who worked for several years, naturalised and later decided to carry on with their studies when their residential status changed to the home student. The last subgroup is international students who migrated from Africa, the west indies or another part of the world to study in the UK. Many come from privileged and wealthy families able to afford international student fees, other came here after winning bursaries from their home countries.

There are nine super-ordinate themes and 57 sub-ordinate themes that encompass their experiences. It was necessary to adopt a holistic view, so participants were carefully selected. During the selection process, it was necessary to have participants at all levels of the system, from undergraduate to doctoral level, including alumni students who have completed the whole process and completed their courses. Figure 3. below illustrates all superordinate themes.

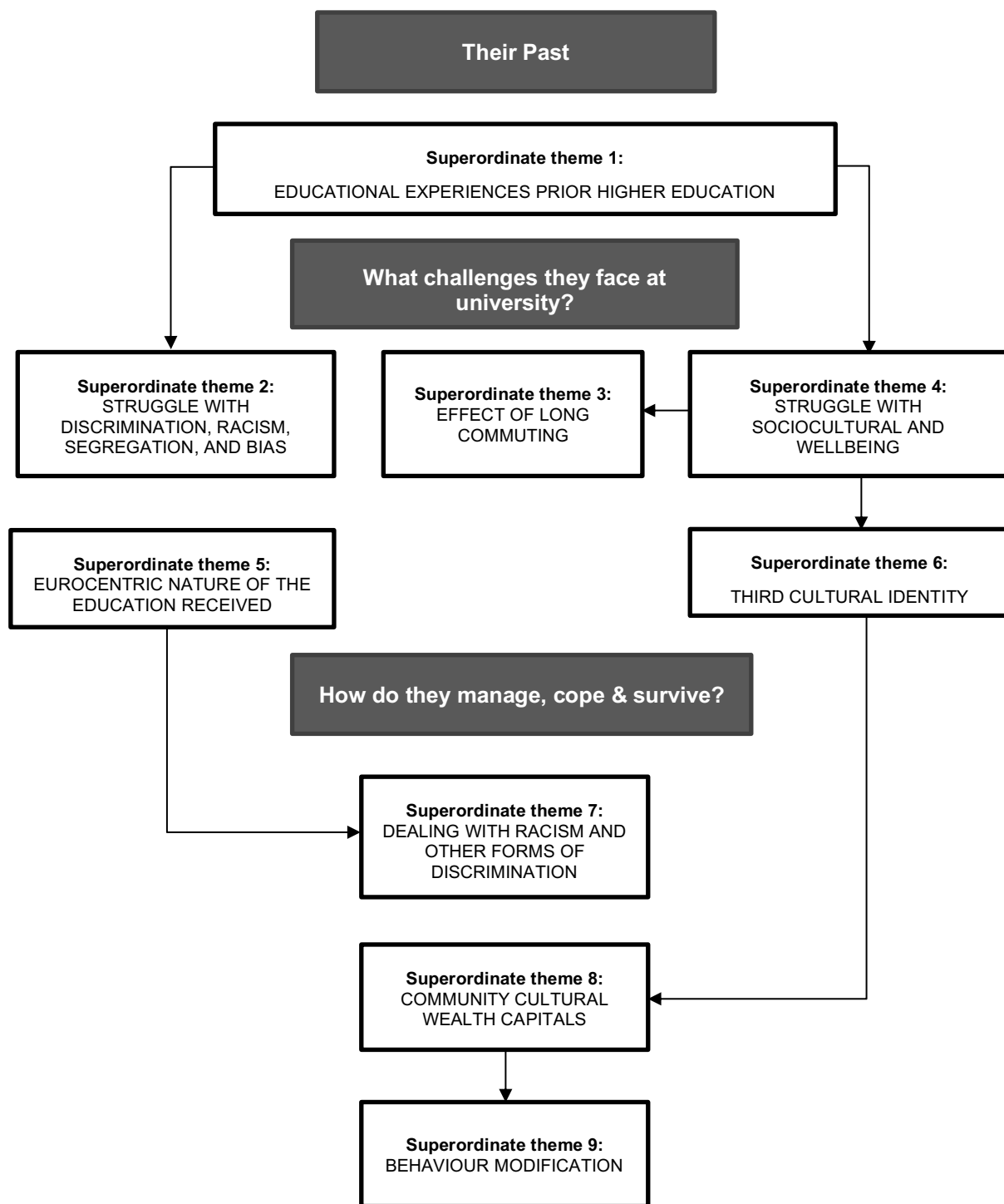


Figure 3. Taxonomy of superordinate themes (in upper case) organised in a “logical sequence” based on participants’ lived experiences from early school years to university. Note. Lowercase (Gray boxes) demonstrates the interrogative questioning of the of the data to help form the “logical sequence” of the superordinate themes.

### 3.1.1 Theme 1: Educational experience Prior Higher Education: The value of Education for African descent students

For various reasons, the participants who grew up in the UK and went through the education system in the UK didn’t always have the same aspirations or view education the same way. Some students have significant influence from their 1st generation parents and achieve good grades within the education system and in their adult lives; others have different values and perceptions of the benefits of education and the purpose of their existence. This could be explained by challenges they experienced as pupils

growing up in white-dominated schools, experiencing problems such as racism, prejudice, exclusion, and multiple forms of discrimination and abuses, as generally articulated by critical race theorists.

*"It's essential in the Caribbean as well, yes. Your parents will push you. They will do everything. They will make sacrifices just for you to achieve the best quality of education."*

*~ Black British Caribbean Female, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation*

*"Education was considered to be core in my family. My father and mother had to work hard a lot; they had to start working early to support their families because there was no one else to support them. And so by that as well, I know the value of money, the value of hard-earned money, the things that I had to go through to come here and finish my degree"*  
*(~Alumni Male International student)*

### **Emerging sub-ordinate themes**

- Negative learning experience pre-University
- Not academically challenged enough compared to white students
- Low expectations of their academic abilities
- Low aspiration
- Lack of role models (Black staff)

#### **3.1.2 Theme 2: Struggle with Discrimination, Racism, segregation, and Bias**

*"Aggressive Stigma; the angry black girl: I don't think I come across threatening, I don't think I ever show that kind of attitude, but many stigmas around black people is that they are aggressive and we will lash out. So, I got excluded for three days. It was internal exclusion, but I had to be chaperoned around all day, and the other student wasn't black, but she was the person who would 'bully me, so I was the victim!'" ~Black British female*

*"To be fair, they were actual groups; there would be groups. I would notice a group; we see these: the white students stay in their little pack, and the black students stay in their little box [...]~ African British 1<sup>st</sup> generation.*

Many international students do not always recognise racist behaviour when they see it; some tend to ignore it and avoid people who make them feel bad. It was interesting to notice that international students from Africa commented about the issues of **"Tribalism"** they grew up with in their countries. They have developed some capabilities to become immune to its manifestation.

### **Emerging sub-ordinate themes**

- White Privilege
- Less favourable treatment due to ethnicity
- Segregation
- Racial prejudice and stereotypes
- Racial microaggressions (micro assault, microinsult, microinvalidation)
- White students and staff talking over them
- Self-doubt and lack of confidence
- Academic misconduct
- Lack of support

#### **3.1.3 Theme 3: Effect of long commuting**

According to the latest British census, the most prominent Black communities are concentrated mainly in England, particularly in South London. There are several reasons why they prefer to commute rather than move to the cities where their universities are located. Some of the reasons may be family related, they have to take care of siblings or elderly parents, they have to work, they can't afford to rent by themselves due to financial difficulties, and they live in single parents' households with various responsibilities. So, although they may prefer to leave London and live closer to the University, escaping all problems related to Gang and postcode systems in London, they may have no choice except to commute. Commuting may be cheaper, but it also comes with its challenges. This could be lateness,

being branded as a non-serious student by lecturers, missing essential parts of the teaching taking place in the classroom, and being always tired because of long trips.

#### **Emerging sub-ordinate themes**

- The issues of accommodation
- Tardiness
- The cost of transportation
- Uncovered syllabus
- Tiredness
- Issues with the timetable
- Poor academic performance
- Dropout

#### **3.1.4 Theme 4: Struggle with Sociocultural health and wellbeing**

*“As a black British in Britain, No. We’re just here; what is the word to describe this? We’re not accepted; we are tolerated, just tolerated, that’s how I see it. That’s my answer. – Black British Caribbean female*

Four of the nine home students interviewed during this study came from broken families with a single mum and meagre household income (low economic capital). The international students came from relatively comfortable families. Some international students, particularly those coming from Africa, had family pressure to succeed, find a good job and later take care of their families. The home students expressed their anger towards the mainstream media, always portraying the negative side of Black communities. There is a focus on violence, crime, and gang life. Some expressed the few opportunities they had when growing up in the UK, not accepted but tolerated, a sort of 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizen. The international students said the challenges of finding accommodation in the town and imposter syndrome feeling. It was interesting to observe the place of mental health in Black culture.

#### **Emerging sub-ordinate themes**

- Students with caring responsibilities
- Economic capital
- Family Pressure
- The Black tax
- The negative mainstream media narratives
- Deficit model
- Sense of belonging and imposter syndrome
- Anxiety and Mental health
- Access to academic support services
- Engaging in part-time employment

#### **3.1.5 Theme 5: Eurocentric Nature of the education received**

*“One assignment I did in my first year was to draw a comparison between the Jamaican curriculum versus the UK curriculum, and I was told to stick mainly to the UK. I think it needs to be broader and not focused on just what happens in the UK or whiteness. It needs to be more diverse. ~ Black British Caribbean Female, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation*

Based on the students’ narratives, the university curriculum appears to be largely Eurocentric, partly because most academics teaching on campus are White. The participants are calling for decolonisation and internationalisation of their curriculum. This could be implemented by introducing more case studies from other countries outside Europe and the US and more robust processes to ensure that the marking is fair and consistent. Several participants expressed their challenges during the lectures, learning modules with topics they didn’t relate to. Stories are always told from a European lens.

### Emerging sub-ordinate themes

- The British curriculum (Decolonisation and internationalisation, colonial legacy of the UK)
- Difficulties to relate with the course
- Experiencing dissatisfaction with the module and course content
- The Marking processes
- Academic misconduct
- Coursework Vs Exams

#### 3.1.6 Theme 6: Third Cultural Identity

*"When I go back to Jamaica, I am not Jamaican. I am British. That's what they call me. I am now 41 years old, so I have spent most of my life in England, so they don't identify me as Jamaican. They say I don't sound Jamaican; I don't look Jamaican; I don't talk Jamaican. So, they call me British [...]." ~ Black British Caribbean Female, 1<sup>st</sup> Generation*

In this study, it was interesting to notice the confusion from most participants on the topic of cultural identity. Some participants identified as Black British (some 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> generations participants), others as Africans, others as the Caribbean, and others as individuals. They all highlighted the importance of **code-switching** in their daily lives. When dealing with friends and families abroad, 1<sup>st</sup> generation parents, siblings, and their white friends. They reflected on the influence of their family members on their education and future aspiration.

### Emerging sub-ordinate themes

- The nature of Cultural identity
- Black culture
- Family Influences
- International students' behaviour
- Home students

#### 3.1.7 Theme 7: Dealing with Racism and other forms of discrimination

*"But the main thing for me is I'm comfortable with myself, so if I don't feel - if I feel that maybe someone is not welcoming, I don't feel bad about it, I just mind my business. So that is how I see it. I believe that once you are comfortable with yourself, you should be able to move along with anybody. But so far, I don't think I've had any major issues- So that's maybe - I may be wrong, but that you are white does not make you better than me in any way, [...] Sorry, one more thing. I try to enjoy myself. Anybody that is not [co-operating], I shut them out." ~ Black African Female, a doctoral student*

Various African descent subgroups behave differently when they face racism or other forms of discrimination. In Africa, Tribalism could be defined as the behaviour and attitudes that stem from strong loyalty to one's tribe or social group. The international students who grew up in Africa or the first generation who had some experience of African societies and cultures are generally familiar with this notion. It is a form of discrimination based on your social group. Some students tend to treat Racism the same way to avoid being depressed. Some other groups interact mainly with people who look like them or with similar backgrounds and circles to prevent problems. Some others will try to be more assertive and fight back to ensure their views are respected and considered like any other students.

### Emerging sub-ordinate themes

- African students' approach (Tribalism)
- Caribbean students' approach
- British students' approach

#### 3.1.8 Theme 8: Community Cultural Wealth capitals

In analysing the participant's narratives, it is evident that there are some excellent aspects of African descent powers. Public higher education is relatively expensive, particularly for foreigners coming from Africa. Students who can do an undergraduate course paying hefty university fees are likely to come

from well-off families. Since the mass closure of private colleges in the UK, there has been a fall in the number of Africans at the undergraduate level; many international students come for masters and doctoral studies. They come with good work experience and are very well educated. The usual route for the home students going to university is to apply for a student loan for their undergraduate studies. Both groups have identified some strengths they all share. This could be family related in terms of their aspiration, their ability to speak more than one language, to seize opportunities when they come with their great aspiration (particularly the African students). Some of the home students do not always have bold ambitions. But both groups demonstrate the ability to position themselves in British society.

#### **Emerging sub-ordinate themes**

- Familial capital
- Aspirational capital
- Linguistic capital
- Perspective capital
- Economic capital
- Social capital
- Cultural capital

#### **3.1.9 Theme 9: Behaviour modification**

*“Yes. With regards to Nigeria, I probably have to tone down my accent a little bit, just so I’m able to interact with average, day-to-day Nigerians because when I speak like my normal self, I’m either speaking too fast or I’m using bigger words that I have to explain more. And regarding the UK, I think it’s natural to speak to someone I know who is fully British; the accent just tries to adapt to theirs. I don’t know how that sounds, but do you get what I mean? Yes, my accent tends to get a bit ‘better’ [laughs] when I’m speaking [...] with a white person; my accent usually tries and matches theirs. It’s just a natural thing, I guess.” Black British African*

Code-switching is a fundamental concept practised by several communities worldwide from ethnic and culturally diverse backgrounds. This could be identified amongst the Black communities in the US (African American Vernacular English). In Britain, we can also identify similar behaviour amongst Black British students who regularly change their accents depending on the context. The general impression for most European is that Black people’s names are challenging to pronounce. Students from parents who migrated from Africa have names very different from the familiar British names. Even when born in the UK, they still inherit their families’ names. So many have to shorten their names and change their terms to make the pronunciation easier for their other white friends and lecturers. On the other hand, many Caribbean students have European or American-sounding names with some rare exceptions. This can be traced back to slavery when enslavers would strip the enslaved of their African names and give them new names that were easier to pronounce. The enslaved names could change if they were sold to a different family.

#### **Emerging sub-ordinate themes**

- Code-switching
- Changing names to integrate
- Developing a confident attitude to feel accepted
- Upskilling

### **3.2 Policy recommendations on Widening participation**

This study has direct implications for practice, and as a result, this section considers the practice recommendations. The findings show that the students face various challenges, some of which arise directly from the learning environment. In addition, certain good practices should be maintained and benefit all local and international students.

#### **★ Recommendation 1:**

Provide a complete support system to capture students’ experience at all three stages (Before they start their courses, during their studies, and upon completion of their degree programme (Undergraduate & Postgraduate levels). Accommodation/jobs connection with industry.



★ Recommendation 2:

Develop mentoring programmes for staff and students (Reverse mentoring & Reciprocal mentoring). This will help the senior management team to better experience and understand the issues. Black students may be facing this at their institution.

★ Recommendation 3:

Support the creation of various societies for various ethnic groups (Vietnam, black African, Caribbean, Chinese, Nepal, Indian etc. ...)

★ Recommendation 4:

Celebrate diversity at the university, may be recognised events from all the countries represented (independence days, various events [i.e., Chinese New Year; Kwanzaa celebration of African heritage, Diwali celebration...])

★ Recommendation 5:

Departments should hire at least one staff member per department to work specifically on issues about the decolonisation of their department; and establish channels for discussion between students and faculty – for example, through working groups or student internships. Decolonising holds the potential to revamp tired courses, inspire disillusioned staff and equip students with the knowledge they need to face the modern world.

★ Recommendation 6:

- Book clubs promoting difficult conversations
- Cultural Integration workshop/ Cultural Awareness workshop
- We should avoid the traditional 'deficit' approach, which views Ethnic minority students' lower attainment as a consequence of their failure to adjust or adapt, or a lack of ability
- Personal development/ Ongoing Face 2 Face training on equality, diversity, and inclusion/ Unconscious bias programme to change the culture (Not just online courses).
- Enforce anonymous marking
- Develop a support scheme to help students who commit academic misconduct.

★ Recommendation 7:

- More Ethnic minority role models/staff - through teaching fellow/ student success mentor programmes
- Voluntary work and the University in various sectors for work experience for students
- Set EDI-related KPIs with achievable targets
- Universities gaining the Race Equality Charter Mark

★ Recommendation 8:

Have a system allowing victims to report discrimination, hostility, unconscious bias, racism or any form of unequal treatment-experienced, with a Zero tolerance policy.

★ Recommendation 9:

Deal with classroom and accommodation segregation

★ Recommendation 10:

Provide more funding pots for ethnic minorities support programs to attract more culturally diverse students to higher degree programmes.

- More awareness of mental health support
- Develop interventions to support weaker students
- The food in the canteen should be more diverse
- Develop a robust personal tutor available to students at all levels with buddy systems

Generally, participants in this study expressed their concerns regarding the number of Black staff or ethnic minority staff members interacting with them in various departments, including the admission, recruitment, academic, librarian and other support staff influencing their experiences. They all want Black representation at all levels, including senior management level. They would like to be treated like other white students, given a similar level of support, not being guilty until proven innocent. They need to understand why they are regularly flagged for academic misconduct disproportionately compared to white students. They want their diversity also to be celebrated through events organised at the University. International students struggle with accommodation when they arrive in the country, and there are limited systems to welcome them to the UK.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

This study has not only shed light on some of the problematic issues related to the experiences of African descent students in higher education, but it has also confirmed the complexity of these students' journeys and reiterated the resilience of these students in ensuring successful completion. Moreover, it highlighted the numerous ways whiteness asserts itself at a post-1992 HE institution in England. It can make for a painful experience for students on the receiving end of racism and other discrimination. However, this paper offers a glimpse into the complex ways in which students from ethnic minorities and culturally diverse backgrounds can navigate the system to achieve success in higher education. While universities must take more responsibility for creating environments where all students, regardless of location, have equal opportunities for success, they struggle with conceptualising how this could be achieved. This research indicates specific steps institutions can undertake to start dismantling whiteness. The widening participation policy, designed to improve the access and success of diverse students in higher education to improve social mobility, remains ineffective and highly needed in a divided Britain. This study helps identify how WP should be re-conceptualised to deliver its promises. An extension of this study could be exploring the experiences of bespoke groups of students in private higher education institutions (alternative HE providers), as the original research took place in a public sector university.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The University of Northampton funded this study, and we would like to thank the students who took part in the interviews for being so candid with us.

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