



Understanding and Meeting the Needs of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Learners in West Yorkshire

Research Summary



Executive Summary

Cosmos Engagement Ltd was commissioned by Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) to complete a research investigation into the educational landscape and opportunities for progression into Higher Education (HE) for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) young people*, in order to understand how to better support those learners. Due to the timing of the project, we were also able to explore the impact of COVID-19 among BAME learners and the support that may be needed in this context.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative, primary and secondary research methodologies were used to investigate key questions around these objectives including; a review of existing background literature around the BAME Awarding Gap and challenges for BAME learners in education, analysis of UCAS, HESA and CFE data and a series of in-depth interviews and discussion groups with BAME learners and their parents.

Commentary on the inequalities experienced by children in education according to their ethnicity has existed for at least half a century, with some of the key themes in this area summarised in the literature review from page 6 of the report. Evidence suggests that inequalities arise throughout various stages of education, with the BAME Awarding Gap being perhaps one of the most widely discussed in recent years. While the BAME Awarding Gap refers to HE outcomes that may be beyond the reach of Uni Connect to address, this provides a useful context and clear measure of the different outcomes achieved by BAME learners in education compared to their White peers. What is within the reach of Uni Connect and GHWY, and central to the objectives of this research, is to understand and meet the needs of BAME learners before they reach higher education. This in turn can inform education providers to help ensure they give BAME learners the best support and preparation for HE, which could then improve their final outcomes and help them to achieve their highest potential.

*Note: In line with the objectives of this research and the common language used in related literature, this report uses the term BAME as a collective term for people of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. However, this term was not used to describe participants in our research discussions and is not a term that is necessarily used by them. Indeed, the use of this term is itself a question within the evaluation (p27).

Page references refer to the full research report.

UCAS and HESA data (p14 and p17) both show positive trends in recent years both in terms of offer rates and overall enrolment in HE from underrepresented students generally and from BAME groups specifically. However, it is suggested that the impacts of COVID-19 are yet to be fully revealed in the data, with students in years to come more likely to be negatively impacted by the disrupted education and support provision experienced since the pandemic. There are concerns that those from underrepresented backgrounds will be most negatively impacted, potentially reversing much of the progress that has been made in the area of Widening Participation in recent years. In this context, it is perhaps more important now than ever to understand and meet the needs of underrepresented young people, including those from BAME backgrounds, to ensure that the gaps don't grow any wider. This may be particularly the case for South Asian learners, who tend to be particularly inclined toward Medicine, Science and other professional subject areas and careers that are often especially competitive (p18 and p53).

CFE student survey data (p19) shows that BAME learners score higher than White learners across the majority of HE Knowledge, Attitude, Aspiration and Intention metrics. The notable exceptions to this trend – relatively low scores for BAME learners generally on knowledge of ‘the options of where to live while studying’ and ‘the costs of study’ and for South Asian learners on knowledge of ‘the financial support available’ – are in keeping with our qualitative discussions with these learners and should be an achievable area of focus for targeted support. Given their relative performance across the CFE metrics, the CFE data would not suggest that the BAME Awarding Gap at HE is due to any lack of knowledge, aspiration or positive attitude toward HE, as BAME learners in KS4 (Years 10-11) and FE (Further Education) score higher than White learners in all of these areas. This would suggest that other factors, once BAME learners reach HE, are needed to explain the Awarding Gap. Again, this points more so to failings at HE rather than earlier on, but again improving the support provided to BAME learners – and sharing knowledge and best practice around how best to support them – before they reach HE could go at least some way to addressing some of these issues.

Page references refer to the full research report.

Our primary research discussions (p25) demonstrate that BAME KS4 and FE learners are often highly engaged and hold strong motivation toward HE, often from an early age, but face a number of challenges in their educational journey; both in terms of general progression support (that also affect White learners) and more specific **race-related challenges**. Sadly, this latter category does include significant experiences of racism and discrimination, perpetrated by both students and staff, as well as a lack of positive representation among staff, the curriculum and progression content (including careers guidance and guest speakers).

Black Caribbean, Black African and Mixed Heritage participants in particular described frequent experiences of racism; ranging from overt racial slurs to more subtle, but nonetheless damaging microaggressions. Participants described a lack of support, systems and awareness in schools as to how to deal with these issues, feeling that they were normalised and something that learners had to learn to live with. These issues make school a challenging and isolating experience for many BAME learners at times; so much so that we may wonder how they continue to be so motivated and successful in their education and how much better they could do if these problems were alleviated.

In terms of **general progression support**, participants described a mixed bag of experiences. BAME learners do not always have the best relationships with teachers and staff, at least in part due to some of the experiences of racism described above, and are often more inclined to seek advice from their family than from school. While there are, of course, some positive experiences of support from teachers and staff in schools these appear to be inconsistent and not always easily accessible or engaging. Careers fairs, presentations and similar events were also said to vary in their impact, with a common criticism from participants being a lack of diversity among such support, both in terms of content and presenters. By far the most consistently positive-impacting support or activity described by participants was visits to HE campuses. These were described as having helped participants gain an insight into university life, to help with their choice of HE provider and /or course and to have helped them feel more confident and / or comfortable about going to university. This is a key vehicle of progression support that has, of course, been lacking in the last year due to COVID-19.

Page references refer to the full research report.

Please note that any differences described between ethnicities are indicative based on our qualitative discussions with a relatively small sample of learners and are not intended to be a quantifiable or absolute comparison.

Following these findings, which are discussed in more depth throughout this report, we outline a number of **recommended actions and support** (p80) to help address the needs of BAME learners, in terms of **general progression support** such as HE campus visits, financial support and support with accommodation and living arrangements – that may vary in their importance to specific BAME segments, as well as **race-related support** including the need for positive representation and role models for learners of BAME backgrounds, support for parents in their crucial role in influencing learners and the need for racial and cultural education for students and staff in schools.

While the specific form these modes of support will take is still to be determined and should undoubtedly evolve with time and practice (many of which are already under way to varying extents), it is hoped that the insights and recommendations from this research will help to bring the needs of BAME learners into clearer focus and provide some direction as to how to address them. As BAME learners we spoke to suggested themselves, the first step towards addressing their needs is understanding their perspectives.

Page references refer to the full research report.

“ *I don't think that we should be separated and supported because of our race. I'm hoping that we're all being treated equally, and we shouldn't have to need that support just to feel understood and accepted, and obviously respected.* ”

Mixed Heritage FE learner

Key Findings

BAME learners we spoke to expressed **high levels of motivation and engagement** with education, but are impacted by negative experiences around discrimination, racism, and (a lack of) representation. Black Caribbean, Black African, and Mixed Heritage participants were the most frequent victims of these negative experiences.

There is often a tendency towards **self-segregation** or grouping of learners of similar ethnic backgrounds who feel a connection with one another. This can be challenging for Mixed Heritage learners, who often find it difficult to fit in with other ethnically-homogenous groups.

Relationships with teachers are mixed, however Black and Mixed Heritage learners often reported being victims of **unfair stereotyping, labelling and punishment**. Black African learners we spoke to were unlikely to seek progression support from teachers, depending instead on advice from their parents.

Learners reported experiencing **racism in a variety of forms from staff and students**, ranging from subtle microaggressions to overt racist slurs. There appears to be little in the way of consistent processes for addressing incidences of racism, for disciplining and educating perpetrators or for supporting victims, meaning that BAME learners are often left to “live with” such incidents as a “normal” part of their education.

BAME learners we spoke to typically pointed to a **lack of positive representation** of their ethnicity in the media and education. South Asian participants suggested that others may hold some positive perceptions of their educational abilities, but that they also had to deal with other negative stereotypes around terrorism and repressed women. However, South Asian learners we spoke to generally attended relatively ethnically diverse and or high-proportion South Asian schools, where they didn't feel as much of a “minority” as participants from other ethnicity segments we spoke to.

Diversity of staff was something that BAME participants consistently said was lacking in their schools and something that they wanted more of. BAME learners want to be able to see and seek advice from **role models** from similar backgrounds that they can relate to.

Similarly, participants pointed to a lack of **diversity of content** when it came to **progression support** (e.g. the subjects and pathways promoted to them) as well as in the **curriculum** itself. Again this relates to a lack of positive representation of BAME people in different careers and sectors as well as the history, literature and other academic content taught in schools.

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Parents can be a significant influence in BAME learners' education, as described by participants in our primary research. While they don't necessarily choose their children's options and pathways, they often have considerable influence; particularly among Black African and South Asian communities – where academic success and professional careers were described as being highly valued.

Parents may not necessarily be fully informed about the structure and options in education in the UK (this was particularly mentioned by Polish participants), particularly those who have moved from overseas and or experience language barriers, and should ideally be informed and on board with any progression support provided to learners.

In spite of many challenges experienced, BAME learners we spoke to typically held positive perceptions and intentions toward Higher Education (university specifically). They were typically motivated by academic and career progress as well as pursuing a range of subjects of interest (although South Asian participants expressed an inclination toward professional careers that may be highly regarded by their families). They were often inclined to go to “diverse” universities with students of similar backgrounds.

Learners reported a range of experiences around progression support, to varying degrees of benefit. Careers and progression support was generally described as being available but not always accessible or engaging. HE campus visits were the most consistently positive-impacting form of support experienced by participants, helping them in their decisions and feelings of preparedness around their future HE choices. BAME learners can have strong intentions toward HE and would benefit from more specific guidance around application processes and pathways to future careers.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on BAME learners (among others) and their experiences in education over the last year, with virtual learning consistently seen as inferior to normal in-person schooling. Learners are now experiencing increased workloads and pressure as they seek to catch up and maintain performance throughout their (potentially grade-deciding) ongoing assessments. While most participants retained similar intentions to progress to university, many were concerned about their preparations for this next and most challenging step, as well as the impacts of the continuing COVID-19 situation around their student (social) experience and living arrangements.

While BAME learners we spoke to did not typically express any specific or additional concerns around COVID-19 (that wouldn't affect other students), it is fair to assume that any challenges that BAME learners experience in education are unlikely to have improved over the past year and that any 'gaps' between BAME learners and the rest of the population are unlikely to have decreased and may well increase as a result of these impacts.

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Recommendations – Summary

Research discussions with BAME learners highlight the following needs for support. Note that our recommendations do not imply that efforts to address these support needs are not already under way, nor specify who may be responsible. These recommendations simply highlight the most important needs for BAME learners as identified through our research and suggest that these be in central focus. These recommendations are discussed in depth from page 80 of the full report.

General Progression Support



HE Campus Visits are by far the most consistently positive-impacting support or activity described by learners in their experience so far, which has been notably lacking for many learners during the past year of COVID-19 and would be of significant benefit to learners when possible.



Support with University Applications & Personal Statements that can often be a cause for stress and confusion. Learners can benefit from general application advice and instructions presented to them as a group but also often need one-to-one support to help them through what is a varied individual process.



Financial Support & Information can be a common barrier for many learners from underrepresented (e.g. Uni Connect) locations and backgrounds and was most commonly mentioned by South Asian learners.



Accommodation & Living Arrangements are a key area of university life that learners may have questions around, increasingly so in the wake of COVID-19. BAME learners, and particularly South Asian learners, may be more inclined to stay at home whilst studying, or to study at a university close to home.



Careers Support may overlap with but may not be necessarily specific to Higher Education progression support. Learners who have a particular career in mind tend to be more inclined toward Higher Education. Black African learners, in particular, who often have strong intentions toward Higher Education from a young age, would like to know more about specific career pathways.



Life Skills & Guidance – including CV writing, applying for jobs and support with work experience – were topics that learners felt were generally lacking in their experiences in education and that they would like more support around.



Diversity of Content, Subjects & Pathways was a consistent request from learners regarding the support and activities they had received or would like to – in terms of content as well as presenters/providers. Many learners pointed to a lack of variety among the subject and careers content presented at careers events or by guest speakers, with a focus on “conventional” subjects or careers that might not appeal to students and a lack of “modern” or “creative” subjects.

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Race-Related Support



Diversity among Teachers, Staff & Guests is clearly lacking in BAME learners' experiences in education. While the lack of BAME staff in education may not be quickly overturned, institutions should be encouraged to facilitate existing BAME staff to support learners from similar backgrounds and/or to involve and represent positive role models for BAME learners from outside the institution.



Diversity of Curriculum appears to be lacking in History, English Literature as well as range of subjects and conversations in education. Learners would benefit from more considered, consistent and positive representations of different ethnicities and cultures within educational content.



Support & Processes for Dealing with Racism appear to be lacking for many learners who experience such issues. Learners express the need for more robust systems to report and address incidents of racism in schools, and support and guidance as to how to deal with such incidents if and when they occur.



Support with Language may be important for many BAME learners who move to the UK and learn English as a second language, for whom any language gap can impact negatively on confidence throughout education, including going on to HE.



Supporting & Engaging Parents is necessary to ensure that parents, who hold significant influence in BAME learners' decisions, are informed and in-line with progression support and guidance offered to their children by schools/colleges.



Racial and Cultural Education – for Students & Staff – is perhaps the most important and frequent need expressed by BAME learners, affecting many aspects of their education. Institutions should seek to deliver consistent, genuine and open conversations and education about race and related topics, drawing on the perspectives of those who are affected by them.



From a White person's perspective, it might not be a big deal, but being able to speak on something that I've lived through every single day of my life is a big deal. The problem with microaggressions is you don't realise you're doing it because they're so normalised. Especially in the UK, racism is – I don't want to say it's normal, but it's not seen as a problem here because it's a regular thing in our society.

Mixed Heritage KS4 participant





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