

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Unequal Uncertainties: The Differential Impact of the Coronavirus Lockdown on High-Potential BAME Students at a UK University

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: In the wake of Covid-19, university students from racially minoritised backgrounds have faced specific challenges and struggles. This longitudinal study identifies differential resource access on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students' development as independent learners indicating that pre-existing educational inequities have been exacerbated under lockdown conditions - more so for BTEC entrants, commuters, and students from a low-income background. Our longitudinal dataset maps comparative experiences of 19 BAME students out of 27 recipients of an academic achievement scholarship who entered university in 2019-2020. Data consists of pre and post March lockdown 2020 in-depth interviews and a questionnaire undertaken during the lockdown itself. Our research identifies the significance of students' loss of relatedness to university resources, newness to campus life, reduced sense of autonomy, competence and belongingness. This article highlights current nuanced effects of the coronavirus pandemic in addition to significant structural inequalities that impede BAME achievement in higher education.

Paper: Unequal uncertainties – the differential impact of the Coronavirus lockdown on high-potential BAME students at a UK university

Proposal

This article foregrounds the specific challenges and struggles faced by students of colour during the first coronavirus pandemic lockdown between March and June 2020. Drawing on a longitudinal study of 27 high-potential undergraduates of which 19 are Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority (BAME) students, we analyse their transition to online learning under extraordinary circumstances. The student participants entered university in the 2019-20 academic year and were all recipients of an

academic achievement scholarship. Data consists of in-depth interviews conducted before and after the first lockdown in March 2020, and a questionnaire undertaken during the lockdown itself.

This study explored the following questions; what are the challenges and barriers to independent learning? How has the university experience so far met your expectations? How has the pandemic impacted your learning? What are your future goals? Using a framing derived from self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), our research addresses the significance of students' loss of relatedness to university resources, reduced sense of autonomy and competence. For example, many reported struggling to maintain a productive or reliable study routine in an often busy and distracting home environment, some cited the direct impact of the pandemic on their mental health and wellbeing. Students showed an awareness that their academic performance had dropped under lockdown, especially for those who had personal and immediate experiences of serious illness and bereavement – especially given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on people of colour.

This research presents an exclusive insight into a generation of Covid-19 virtual learners. Online learning presented students with new challenges for operationalising independent learning, and this also revealed differences in students' resources for self-motivation. BTEC entrants in particular struggled with the relative lack of continuous personalised support under a modular system. This contrasted with their teacher relationships at BTEC level, where they would typically be able to redraft an assignment, but also the interpersonal nature of the relationship: students would feel recognised and understood, and teachers would be able to stimulate their motivation to succeed academically.

The experience of online learning in stage 2 made many of our interviewees more aware of the value and benefit of the in-person teaching they had experienced in stage 1. On the one hand, in-person classes were characterised as facilitating a more interactive environment, including opportunities for greater debate and discussion. On the other hand, they also appeared to instil a greater discipline than online seminars: students had to get up, get dressed, travel to campus, and be prepared enough to participate in group work or answer a seminar leader's question. Participation thus relied on certain *extrinsic* motivations: the fear of a bad attendance record, the embarrassment of not being able to answer a question in class.

In contrast, online learning was characterised as requiring less discipline because it has lowered the bar to seminar participation – or rather, that it had removed many of the 'risks' associated with non-participation. Students could attend class without having to leave their bedroom, and would be marked as 'present' simply by dint of being online and logged on for the seminar's duration. In other words, unlike in-person seminars they had greater freedom to participate on their own terms, which might involve switching their camera off, contributing only via text, or not at all.

Our research also foregrounds the significance of students' *social* adaptation to higher education and campus life in their first term of study. Many admitted to finding themselves in seminar groups with students they did not know from last year, as well as being taught by different staff members. The relative lack of social participation meant that online seminars felt like unfamiliar, unwelcoming spaces, with students missing the natural interactions that came from in-person teaching. However, those who had already established strong social and study networks in their first year were able to retain a sense of studenthood and belongingness under lockdown conditions, with shared houses and social networks providing academic and emotional support to compensate for the limited access

to campus. In contrast, those who commuted, or reported work and family commitments, found their pre-existing disconnectedness to campus was exacerbated.

In sum, this article brings to the fore the immediate and nuanced effects of the coronavirus pandemic as experienced by students of colour in addition to the significant structural inequities that continue to impede BAME achievement in higher education (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Bhopal, 2018; Gillborn, 2005).

References: References

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