A Visual Ethnographic Study Exploring Awarding Gaps for Black British Students at University

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Degree awarding gaps for Black British students is an ongoing issue in UK HE and continues to perpetuate social injustices and inequalities within education. Whilst there is a growing body of qualitative exploring educational experiences that Black students face, and how these affect educational outcomes, there is still more research needed to unpack the experiences and voices of students to help better understand awarding gaps. This study adopts a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens to explore Black British students' educational experiences from a range of disciplinary areas, including their experiences of curriculum content, design, delivery, and assessment. The novel visual ethnographic methodology, using a Student-Staff Partnership approach, hopes to gather direct lived experiences from the students themselves. It is hoped that conveying their contextual, embodied, sensory, and affective experiences may bring Black British students' experiences to life and delve further into the relationship of these experiences with their educational outcomes.

Full paper

Introduction

One of the widest degree awarding gaps in UK Higher Education yet to be addressed is for Black British students. Data shows that the awarding gap remains at around 18.4% (AY 2020/21) between white and Black students (Universities UK, 2024). Despite many universities alleging commitment to addressing awarding gaps through EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusive) initiatives and pledges for social justice as articulated in their educational strategies, policy statements, and marketing materials – arguably these pledges do not translate to enough positive action to address these gaps or this 'wicked problem' (Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting 2022). However, there is a growing body of qualitative research exploring why awarding gaps exist and how to tackle them (e.g. see: Arday, Branchu, and Boliver 2022). Research exploring students' experiences suggest that issues often relate broadly to unbelonging, including stereotyping and micro-agressions as well as issues relating to conforming to white norms, relational experiences and expectations, and interactions with teaching staff (Marandure, Hall, and Noreen, 2024).

Building on the invaluable work and literature in this area, this research aims to explore Black British students' educational experiences from a range of disciplinary areas, paying specific attention to their experiences of curriculum content, design, delivery, and assessment as four key areas that may affect

their educational experiences and outcomes. This study applies Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995), taking the view that racial issues are systemic within society and HE institutions, and that CRT is a tool that can be used for understanding inequities that Black British students face in their learning experiences and outcomes. This study adopts a novel methodological approach to exploring Black British students' educational experiences and outcomes. Firstly, the study is ethnographic, prioritising the lived experiences and voices of the participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Moreover, it adopts a Student-Staff Partnership approach (Bovill 2019) that brings the students centrally into research design, data collection and analysis in the ethnographic approach. Secondly, this study uses visual ethnographic approaches (Pink, 2021) (e.g. visual artefacts such as images, video etc.) to layer in contextual, embodied, sensory, and affective experiences to further convey students' voices and experiences. It is hoped that this methodological approach can offer valuable contributions to conveying Black British students' educational experiences.

Methodology

Six Black British students were recruited from different disciplinary areas (Law; Chemistry; Psychology; Computer Science) at one University in dual roles as Co-Researchers and Research Participants. As Co-Researchers, the students shaped the research by: contributing to research design; conducting research interviews with a peer; and discussing tentative findings at the end of the data collection period. As Research Participants they took part in formal and informal ethnographic interviews, and collected visual data about their educational experiences. Five additional students (at the time of writing) took part in formal interviews as research participants, conducted by the Student Co-Researchers. Data collection took place between March and May 2024 and produced 11 formally recorded (audio/video) interviews with the Co-Researchers and additional Research Participants; 6 additional informal ethnographic interviews with the Student Co-Researchers and their visual ethnographic material. As the Principal Researcher I engaged in recording ethnographic fieldnotes and conducted my own visual ethnographic data collection, forming data for this study.

This study received ethical approval from the University (REF: CENT 23-24 001 EGA). However, the ethical considerations underpinning this study were complex and negotiated with the Co-Researchers and Participants throughout the study. Key areas of consideration centred around: (1) adopting an authentic Student-Staff Partnership; (2) positionality and ongoing reflexivity of Co-Researchers and Participants as Black and the Principal Investigator as white; (3) dealing with the sensitive nature of racial discussions in the research.

Findings and Discussion

At the time of writing, the empirical data collection for the study is ending. Therefore, the data has not been fully transcribed, organised or analysed. However, due to the ethnographic nature of the study, there has been an ongoing process of tentative thematic analysis of the data namely by the Principal Researcher which built subsequent areas to explore in the fieldwork interviews and data collection (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Once the full data analysis is complete, the empirical findings will be presented in the conference presentation. It is hoped that these findings will offer valuable

contributions to our current understanding of educational experiences that Black British students encounter in Higher Education, and offer ideas as to how these findings might contribute towards a critical discussion of the educational inequities they face and how they can be addressed by HEIs going forwards.

References

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