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# Exploring the experiences of students originally from the EU newer member states in Eastern Europe in UK Higher Education

Research report  
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# Contents

<b>Executive summary</b>	3
<b>Introduction</b>	5
<b>Background</b>	5
<b>Research questions</b>	6
<b>Methodology</b>	7
<b>Approach</b>	7
<b>Ethical issues</b>	7
<b>Eligibility</b>	7
<b>Recruitment</b>	8
<b>Participant characteristics</b>	8
<b>Transcription and analysis</b>	9
<b>Findings</b>	9
<b>1. Structural and systemic issues</b>	9
<b>2. Student responses and coping strategies</b>	13
<b>3. The racial positioning of Eastern European home students</b>	15
<b>Recommendations</b>	16
<b>Conclusion</b>	17
<b>References</b>	19

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society for Research into Higher Education

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## Executive summary

This report provides findings and recommendations from an SRHE-funded project exploring the higher education experiences of first-generation migrants to the UK, who are originally from new European Union (EU) member states in Eastern Europe but have received some or all of their schooling in the UK. This group has long been invisible to universities, as they are recorded as domiciled in the UK and counted together with UK students. Twenty interviews were conducted with eligible participants.

### Research questions

- How does this group experience university life?
- How can HE policy and practice ensure that this group have an inclusive student experience?
- Can they be considered a racialised group?

### Findings

#### 1. Structural and systemic issues

- Eastern European countries and cultures were not represented in the curriculum studied by the participants.
- There was confusion, at some institutions, over whether this group should be classified as 'home' or 'international' students. Being mistakenly recorded as 'international' students led to lack of access, or temporary lack of access, to support such as student finance and Disabled Students' Allowance. Conversely, some also missed out on English language support, which was only offered to international students, presumably due to an assumption that 'home' students do not need it.
- Eastern Europe was often excluded from concepts of international, meaning that this group was sometimes excluded from cultural events focussing on diversity and globality.
- They experienced stereotyping and 'othering' in the form of essentialising comments and (alleged) jokes.

#### 2. Student responses and coping strategies

- When given an opportunity, students brought in references to their national or cultural background in the classroom or assessment, thus, challenging the narrowness of the curriculum.
- Relationships and connections were key to a positive student experience. Participants valued Eastern European societies, friends from similar, mixed heritage/cultural backgrounds, and staff of Eastern European heritage.

- Participants mentioned that being bilingual and bicultural was an advantage at university, but that this was not always appreciated by staff.

### **3. The racial positioning of Eastern European home students**

As a group, while they were very heterogeneous, they experienced several elements of racialisation: exclusion, stereotyping and 'othering'. Although they are white, similar to racialised groups, they were excluded from the full privilege of whiteness, which was reserved for those (perceived as being) monocultural and British.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. National policymaking and HE leadership**

- There is a need for more precise statistical categorisation and recording of this particular group, both nationally and at institutional level.
- Language support should be provided as an option for all, not just 'international' students.

### **2. Learning and Teaching in HE**

- Eastern Europe should be included in initiatives aimed at diversifying the curriculum.
- Programmes of study should incorporate opportunities for students to do their own research or choose their focus for assessments.

### **3. EDI, training, and campus culture**

- Staff understanding of 'home' and 'international' students, and the possible changed status of Eastern Europeans (and perhaps others), should be improved.
- There needs to be a recognition that white students are not all British, and can be pluricultural, and by extension, that not all students of colour are 'international'.
- European cultures should be included in the concepts of 'international' and 'diverse', and therefore in cultural events.
- Opportunities to bond with other Eastern Europeans should be enabled and supported.
- The benefits of biculturality and bilingualism should be recognised and valued.

## Introduction

This report provides the findings and recommendations from an SRHE-funded project exploring the higher education (HE) experiences of first-generation migrants to the UK, who are originally from new European Union (EU) member states in Eastern Europe but have received some or all of their schooling in the UK. The funding was received by the University of Derby for the period of January to December 2025. The research was led by the Principal Investigator - Professor Charlotte Chadderton, University of Derby, and Co-Investigator – Professor Agnieszka Bates, Bath Spa University, with the support of a research assistant (RA) – Dr Dominik Jackson-Cole, University of Derby.

## Background

Students from the EU newer member states are a diverse group about whose HE experiences very little is known. Although the group may be significant in size, there are no records of how many students in total it includes, since HESA keeps records of domiciles, and this group is recorded as domiciled in the UK and counted together with UK students. Government figures show that what is referred to for statistical categorisation purposes as ‘white other’ pupils make up 6.8% of school pupils in secondary schools (DfE, 2022), but this figure also includes non-Eastern Europeans.

On the one hand, as a group, these students are more or less ‘invisible’ to universities and to research in general. There has been almost no research on the experiences of HE students who fall into the statistical category of ‘white other’, and none on Eastern Europeans schooled in the UK specifically. Attention has been paid to EU HE staff and students in general following Brexit, and the case has been made that their contributions and ‘distinctive perspectives’ greatly benefit the UK (British Academy, 2021). However, the focus is on those coming from the EU, rather than those living in the UK. Equally there has been a significant amount of research on the experiences and outcomes of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) versus white British students and staff. This research shows that universities tend to reproduce racial inequality, privileging white, middle and upper class British students and staff and disadvantaging BAME and international students and staff (Arday, 2018; Mirza, 2018). BAME students are less likely to gain a good degree (Richardson, 2018) and experience stereotyping (Arday, 2018; Mirza, 2018). Curricula have been shown to be Eurocentric (Peters, 2018). Other research has focussed on Eastern Europeans in UK HE as ‘international students’, i.e., as students who have migrated to study, highlighting their plural identifications: national, European, migrant and student (De Genova, 2016) and mobility as a tool for competition (Marcu, 2015). Research has also explored the experiences of Eastern

European pupils in schools, suggesting they experience racial stereotyping (Tereshchenko et al., 2019).

On the other hand, Eastern Europeans are 'hyper-visible' politically in the post-Brexit context, in which EU migration has been a defining issue and the voice afforded to Euroscepticism has been amplified. There have been reports of EU citizens, so long relatively settled in British society, now being made to feel unsettled by Brexit and related processes (Sumption & Fernández-Reino, 2020; the3million, 2021).

Eastern Europeans in the UK are considered to belong to the 'white other' statistical category, which actually incorporates a very heterogeneous population. There are debates around sociological theories employed to understand the experiences and positioning of those classified this way. While some argue that white people cannot be viewed as racially disadvantaged as they occupy a more privileged position than BAME groups, others argue that certain groups of white people should be understood as racialised and experiencing forms of racism. For example, the concepts of 'non-colour coded racism' (Cole, 2016) and 'xeno-racism' (Fekete, 2001) have been developed to understand the experiences of (mostly) phenotypically white groups who are not British or perceived to be non-British, including individuals of Eastern European heritage. This type of racism emphasises the economic dimension of the group's social positioning, as it often includes migrant workers. These concepts have however not been used to understand the position of Eastern Europeans in education. Alternatively, the concept of 'marginal whiteness' (Tereshchenko et al., 2019) stemming from Critical Race Theory, has been employed to understand Eastern Europeans' position in schools, on the one hand perceived as lacking white British cultural capital and socially located outside white British middle classness, but on the other hand benefitting from some privileges of whiteness.

Exploring this group's experiences and perceptions of HE is intended to render them 'visible' as a group to policy, institutions and research, and contribute to the development of theory around their social position.

## Research questions

- How does this group experience university life?
- How can HE policy and practice ensure that this group have an inclusive student experience?
- Can they be considered a racialised group and how can their position be theorised?

# Methodology

## Approach

Twenty narrative interviews were conducted with eligible participants. This enabled the researchers to explore a number of issues in-depth. As this is a new area of research, it was exploratory and interpretive, with a focus on depth rather than breadth. Whilst therefore not aiming to be representative, this approach has enabled us to capture rich and detailed data which foregrounds some of the voices and experiences of students in this group and offer insights into diverse, particular experiences as well as enabling us to identify common themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Narrative interviews are particularly effective as they allow an insight into the experiences of others and enable a consideration of the relationship between individual experiences and wider social structures, “to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change [in order to] describe, understand and explain [...] the world” (Andrews et al., 2008, p. 3).

## Ethical issues

Ethical approval was gained from the University of Derby ethics committee on 31/01/2025 and complied with the guidelines set out by BERA (2018). Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the research via an information sheet and were required to sign a consent form. All individuals and institutions have been anonymised, and identifying information has been deleted prior to publication. Participants received a £20 voucher as a ‘thank you’ for their participation.

## Eligibility

To be eligible, participants had to:

- have been born in one of the newer Eastern European EU member states (Bulgaria, Czechia, Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania);
- have moved to the UK no later than at 15 years of age;
- have done all or some of their schooling in the UK, including having taken GCSEs/ equivalent;
- identify as white/ white other;
- be a current student or a recent graduate (graduated in the last five years) from a UK university.

## Recruitment

Participants were recruited via LinkedIn using the approved advert (via public posts and direct messages within the network of the RA). Additionally, using the Google search engine, the RA found and contacted relevant clubs and societies at 33 UK universities, including: 33 Polish Societies, 16 Czech-Slovak Societies, three Romanian societies, two Eastern European Societies, and one of each: Estonian, Hungarian, and Lithuanian societies. The RA also contacted the Polish Cultural Institute and the Federation of Polish Students in the UK.

LinkedIn advertising resulted in opportunists trying to impersonate eligible students to receive the £20 'Thank you' vouchers, with 368 such emails being received and rejected. The RA, PI and Co-I also used their personal contacts to recruit participants.

Interviews were conducted mostly by the RA, but also two by the PI and two by the Co-I.

## Participant characteristics

Pseudonym (*chosen by researchers)	Gender/sex (self-declared)	Age moved to the UK (years)	Nationality	Course details		
				Level	Subject	Status
Artur	Male	7	Polish	UG	Photography	completed
Ed	Male	5	Lithuanian	UG	Fashion Marketing	completed
Light	Male	7	Polish	PGR	Risk Management	current
Kai	Female	9	Polish	UG	Education	current
Maya	Female	5	Polish	UG	Medicine	current
Lia	Female	2	Polish	UG	Criminology	current
Maria	Female	11	Latvia	UG	Business	current
Andrzej	Male	0	Polish	UG	Aerospace engineering	current
Kas	Male	8	Polish	UG	Aerospace engineering	current
Mariola	Female	2	Polish	UG	Zoology	current
Przemek	Male	1	Polish	UG	Computer Science	current
Mushrooms	Female	6	Polish	UG	Medicine	current
Nina	Female	11	Romanian	UG	Law	current
Helena	Female	10	Polish	UG	Illustration	completed
Lini	Trans/ female	7	Polish	UG	Computer Science	current

Pseudonym (*chosen by researchers)	Gender/sex (self-declared)	Age moved to the UK (years)	Nationality	Course details		
				Level	Subject	Status
Phil	Male	14	Hungary	UG	Chemistry	current
Luna	Female	2	Polish	Law	Law	current
Mark	Male	4	Polish	UG	Computer Science	completed
Alice*	Female	15	Romanian	UG	Mathematics	completed
Dara*	Female	1	Lithuanian	UG	Law	completed

Participants included eight cis-men, 11 cis-women, and one trans-woman. In terms of national background, there were 14 Poles, two Lithuanians, two Romanians, one Latvian and one Hungarian. Several participants (also) possessed British citizenship. There were 15 current students and 5 recent graduates from 11 English universities, representing a variety of disciplines. Participants attended/had attended both lower tariff and higher tariff institutions.

### Transcription and analysis

All interviews took place via MS Teams, where they were auto-transcribed. They were then proofread and corrected to improve the accuracy of the auto-transcription. A thematic analysis of the data was conducted. Some emerging themes were identified during the interview process. Next, all the team members coded the interviews using NVivo and hand-coding and agreed the themes collaboratively.

## Findings

The findings are divided into three groups:

- structural and systemic issues
- student responses and coping mechanisms
- racial positioning of participants.

### 1. Structural and systemic issues

The analysis revealed four main issues impacting the student experience of this group which can be considered 'structural' or 'systemic'. 'Structural' or 'systemic' refers here to issues which are embedded in institutional practices and culture, often without deliberate individual intent.

### Curriculum

Participants pointed out that Eastern European countries and cultures were not represented in the curriculum. This was rather surprising, given the contribution of Eastern Europeans to

wider European and British cultural and economic life, especially since the fall of the Soviet Union. This exclusion was generally felt to be a negative.

*I think I would like to have it reflected and [it] never really obviously gets brought up (Kai)*

*It's very much UK based, especially all the assignments that we have to do in the handbook. [...] there's sometimes references in the US. I think once they mentioned Norway, Finland, Australia, but not really Poland (Lia)*

*But important issues like positionality which are vital for research and in terms of several social sciences, so pivotal to fully getting, you know, an understanding of how the researcher plays a role in the research, they are excluded and are limited very greatly and so it's very difficult to get that voice piece to express yourself more in terms of your culture identity. (Light)*

Other research has identified HE curricula as Eurocentric (e.g., Arday et al., 2021), however, our research revealed more nuance. Namely, the curricula were not inclusive of Eastern European knowledge and experiences, and seemed to be narrowly Western-centric rather than Eurocentric.

Some participants suggested that where there was (rare) evidence of a more diverse curriculum, it seemed to exclude Eastern Europeans:

*Polishness didn't really come up that much. It was more like race, like different people, like ethnic minorities, but not us, I guess (Luna)*

However, not all participants felt that the lack of representation was a negative:

*I think it's completely irrelevant, to be honest. I can't think of the single example where it would be. (Liny)*

### **Home vs international status**

The data shows that there was confusion, at some institutions, over whether this group should be classified as 'home' or 'international students'. Brexit means that Eastern Europeans who are UK residents without British passports, have to apply for 'settled status', which is supposed to guarantee that they are treated the same as British ('home') students at university. However, our data showed this was not always the case:

*I applied for, it was physics and then mechanical engineering, and for one of them I got classified as a home student and I provided the same information. I'm not sure why, for one of them I was classified as an international student. (Kas)*

*They first sent me to like 'international students', they told me I had to pay the international fees. Then I had a huge problem with student finance. I had to send in my passport. I had to get the exact date that I came to the UK for them. (Maya)*

This confusion meant some students being denied access (at least initially) to support, such as student finance and Disabled Students' Allowance:

*I tried to apply for the DSA for like 2 years in a row and it didn't work because each time I'll get a message back saying you're not eligible because you're European, you're not from UK [...] I've had both GCSE and A-Levels in UK and still been told, 'Oh, you can't apply for this because you're European'. (Alice)*

*[...] because I have a Polish passport, they assumed I came from Poland, so I had to go through a visa check. But I have a settlement status. (Lia)*

*So, when I was renting a student house with my friends, all they had to do was just get their guarantor to sign it and send the deposit. But then I had to jump a few extra hoops just to prove that I'm here legally. I'm not an international student. And the same thing when I was registering for university because I only have a Polish passport. (Maya)*

Conversely, a lack of recognition by institutions that those classified as 'home' might need English as a second language support, usually given to international students, also meant that some missed out on support:

*Obviously people like myself, I did do GCSEs, I did do college, but I don't feel like in the school environment there was a structure to learning English. [...] I don't know if university could implement any like, not mandatory, but even like optional opportunities in the first year (Maria)*

This suggests a need for more sophisticated systems of allocating support to students.

### **Cultural exclusion**

Participants in our study reported feeling culturally excluded from events designed to celebrate 'diversity' and 'international' groups and cultures:

*Flags everywhere, which is like, I don't know, Nigerian flag and Brazilian flag and Italian flag. I remember whenever I see like all these flags up, I looked for Romanian flag, it's never there. Like, oh, of course, yeah they missed Romania again because people don't really know about it because they talk about like these big countries*

*Brazil, Italy, Spain, Nigeria, India, Japan all of that but not about like Ukraine and Romania and Bulgaria.[...] I remember like the Union of Students, we had like an international event and we were making badges with different countries. There was no Romanian country, had to ask to have printed some. (Alice)*

*So, the university hasn't done anything for Polish people, but they always host events for other nationalities. (Maya)*

These different forms of exclusion made them feel invisible at the university:

*But it sometimes feels like there's a lack of emphasis of seeing people within the university, at least being acknowledged. For example, from my nationality. (Kai)*

*We're a bit invisible. Like we don't really exist, which is a bit sad. (Mariola)*

A further implication is that international students appear to be portrayed as students of colour, and 'diverse', and home students are understood as white, and monocultural. In turn, this implies that students of colour may be excluded from understandings of home students, and Eastern Europeans are invisible.

### **Stereotyping and 'othering'**

Many participants experienced stereotyping while at university:

*I would say it's gone down a lot [since before university]. I mean, I get the occasional stereotype like, oh, you're Polish. I know a word 'kurwa' [...] and I know it's just a joke, but after, like the 50th or 100th time, it does get pretty annoying. (Andrzej)*

*There's a lot of quite racist jokes where, like, because of Poland is like Hitler jokes. (Mariola)*

*It was a lot of like, 'Oh, yeah, you're Polish you can drink so much'. Like 'you can handle it' and stuff like that. (Artur)*

*There are quite a few famous Hungarian scientists and some people in the department who, if I tell them, they associate that, that there's a famous Hungarian scientist [...] It's both a good thing and a bad thing. [...] they can they think of Nobel Prize winners. Then they kind of implicitly expect you to be a genius. It's a weird thing to do, right? So, say someone's smartness is associated with where they're from. [...] At the same time, it's a nice thing that someone knows something about your country. (Phil)*

The above quotes, while describing events of seemingly different nature, can be interpreted as examples of essentialising, when one's nationality becomes synonymous with only the most known or extreme references. This is a form of stereotyping.

Many students also reported experiencing 'othering' at university:

*I've grown up here, but I have had a couple of professors where they tentatively asked if I've been educated here or not. So, they're like 'oh, so back home. Where is home?' And I'm like 'London'. And then you can tell that's not what they were asking. (Dara)*

*I think a lot of Polish people, well, my age, can relate that we've probably been like, made to feel different, even though we're literally just the same. (Luna)*

While the students themselves felt culturally integrated into British society, they were reminded by others of their difference, or made to feel like they did not belong.

## 2. Student responses and coping strategies

Participants reported developing a range of techniques to cope with or resist the exclusion and 'othering' they faced at university.

### Curriculum and assessment

When given an opportunity, students would often bring in references to their national or cultural background in the classroom or assessment, thus challenging the narrowness of the curriculum:

*So, during my dissertation. I did, basically, how social media and, like, basically image-making impacts politics. So, part of it was like AIDS pandemic, like social media and then part of it was how this one photographer tackled through social media like, there in Poland, the LGBT free zones<sup>1</sup>. (Artur)*

### Relationships and connections

Relationships and connections were key to a positive student experience. Firstly, many respondents mentioned the importance of clubs and societies which reflected their cultural and linguistic heritage and enabled them to network with others from similar backgrounds:

*I think the societies here, they do....They do connect, like The Polish Society that you, there's like Eastern European societies. So, like those connect us quite well. (Kas)*

*I started off going to Polish Society as a way to deepen my connections with Poland, with Polish culture, with Polishness and it's certainly as part of a goal of meeting new*

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<sup>1</sup> LGBT free zones – were non-legally binding, mostly symbolic, declarations by several local Polish municipalities established during the government of an extreme right party, Law and Order (2015-2023), stipulating that such localities were opposed to equality for LGBTQ+ people.

*Polish people and improving my Polish language skills. Which I very much did as soon as I got to that, I felt that especially the Polish Society here at [university] was very, very accepting at the time and very, very open and warm. (Mark)*

Secondly, many participants displayed a similar pattern of making diverse friendship groups while at university:

*I think they're similar to me in that sort of sense. So [university city] is a very diverse place as it is. So I have one, one of them is I think, from Africa, but they've lived here their whole lives. One of them is from India, but she's lived here her whole life as well. And I think one of them is from the Cayman Islands. And she lived there for a while in her childhood and then moved here. And I think primary school. So, I guess same sort of vibe, but not exactly the same. (Luna)*

*Most of them are same situation. They grew up, at least they grew up a little bit of time outside of the UK and then they moved to the UK when they were roughly about my age (Liny)*

Luna and Liny's stories were typical for this group: their friends were people with a migrant background, which did not necessarily fully match theirs, but they were in similar situations: born in one country, mostly raised in the UK.

Thirdly, some students mentioned good relationships with lecturers who were Eastern European:

*One of my lecturers was actually Romanian himself, so that was quite nice. Having, like you know, someone from home. [...] When it comes to belong like, it kind of gave me that.[...] Comfort and ease that, like I'm not the only international person and the fact that people liked him and appreciated him, made me like feel like actually made me feel nice that he got appreciate it because he wasn't seeing us bad or weird or odd for not being British. (Alice)*

Alice pointed out that having lecturers from the same/ similar background helped her feel like she belonged.

### **Coping with stereotyping**

When asked how students reacted to instances of stereotyping, they responded that they mostly brushed it off or treated it as a joke:

*Interviewer: And how do you cope with those stereotypes?*

*Artur: Just by making jokes about it, I guess just in a way, going with it. 'cause. It wasn't like a malicious joke stereotype, but...*

### **Making the most of being bilingual and bicultural**

Several participants mentioned that being bilingual and bicultural was, in fact, an advantage at university, which they valued:

*And it's actually come in useful with my current degree because when I see patients sometimes they can't speak English and they can speak Polish. So, I'll be like a translator. So that's been helpful. And I find that co-workers like that. So maybe it's an asset to be able to speak two languages (Mushrooms)*

*I think we bring different perspectives that sometimes aren't considered. [...] There were times I think in conversations, especially seminar conversations, that we were able to provide some extra content from our side of our own experiences. [...] I have family here, like, in a different country and they do this which is relevant topic. So, I think being able to add that into the conversation was quite useful. (Ed)*

They did, however, point out that this was not necessarily noticed by staff:

*And also I'm doing some research at the moment and like if a patient is hesitant but then I like speak to them in Polish. I've noticed they're more likely to agree because like...it's like an extra level of trust that patients have in me, I think. [...] My supervisor, I don't think he even knows what's going on. (Maya)*

### **3. The racial positioning of Eastern European home students**

Our final research question asks whether this group can be considered racialised. Our research shows that as a group, while they are very heterogeneous, participants experienced several elements of racialisation: the exclusion of their experiences and identities from the curriculum, invisibility, in the form of being excluded from categorisations of home students, as well as some understandings of 'international'; cultural exclusion, and stereotyping and 'othering' based on essentialised notions of their nationality and/or culture. Although they are white, they are excluded from the full privilege of whiteness, which is reserved for those (perceived as being) monocultural British. This fits with a theorisation of being white but not white enough (Narkowicz, 2023).

The concept of racist nativism (Lippard, 2011; Smith, 2016, 2021), which denotes the link between race and immigration status and the interaction between racism and nativism (Lippard, 2011), is also useful to understand the complex positioning and experiences of this group in universities. While racism and nativism are different, 'the goal of nativism is to justify and reward the superiority of the "native" and racism's goal is to reinforce "White" superiority' (Lippard, 2011, p. 595), they often occur together. It describes the positioning of the native as white, and the non-native as raced, as well as white people as native and racialised

minorities as non-native, which is precisely what we have found in this research. Racist nativism 'recognises the simultaneous racialisation of immigrants (where one's immigration status is ascribed a place in a racial hierarchy based on assumed biological or cultural differences and evaluated against the presumed superiority of whiteness) and nativist assumptions of race/ethnicity (where non-whites are designated as non-natives)' (Smith, 2021, p. 3), which describes accurately the process by which this group are excluded and made invisible: despite being white, they are racialised via immigration status and assumed cultural difference.

## Recommendations

The research enables us to make recommendations in the following three areas:

1. National policymaking and HE leadership
2. Learning and teaching in HE
3. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and campus culture.

### National policymaking and HE leadership

- There is a need for more precise statistical categorisation and recording of this particular group, both nationally and at HEI level.
- Language support should be provided as an option for all, not just 'international' students.

### Learning and Teaching in HE

- Eastern Europe should be included in initiatives aimed at diversifying the curriculum.
- Programmes of study should incorporate opportunities for students to do their own research or choose their focus for assessments.

### EDI, training, and campus culture

- Staff understanding of 'home' and 'international' students, and the possible changed status of Eastern Europeans (and perhaps others), should be improved.
- There needs to be a recognition that white students are not all British, and can be pluricultural and by extension, that not all students of colour are international.
- European cultures should be included in concepts of 'international' and 'diverse' and therefore in cultural events.
- Opportunities to bond with other Eastern Europeans should be enabled and supported.
- The benefits of biculturality and bilingualism should be recognised and valued.

## Conclusion

This research offers some much-needed visibility for a group which was previously mostly invisible to policy, practice and research. It also shines a light on some wider issues which impact the student experience more broadly, such as the wider misunderstanding of who is classified as 'home' and 'international' in HE, conceptualisations of 'diversity', and the value of biculturalism and bilingualism. It has provided some useful recommendations for HEIs and policy makers.

Further research might focus on other, less visible groups, or examine some of the issues raised in more detail.



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