

Black Student Experiences in the Faculty of Environmental & Life Sciences

FACULTY OF ENVIRONMENTAL & LIFE SCIENCES

University of Southampton, September 2022





Introduction

This report presents key findings and key recommendations from a Faculty funded Latitude prize project that explored the Black Student Experiences in the Faculty of Environmental and Life Sciences (FELS) at the University of Southampton (project duration: February-July 2022). The Faculty consists of five Schools: Biological Sciences, Geography & Environmental Science, Health Sciences, Ocean & Earth Science, Psychology.

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Context

National figures demonstrate that White students are still over twice as likely as Black students to be awarded a first-class undergraduate degree. At Southampton, HESA data shows that 38% of White students obtained a first class degree, compared to only 18% of Black students (HESA, 2020). There are also significant issues when it comes to progressing from undergraduate to postgraduate research study, and then from this to an academic career. We wanted to understand what is causing this *'broken pipeline'* and what can be done about it.

Project aims

The aim of this research is to understand the Black student experience in our Faculty and how this relates to the awarding gap between White and Black students and the limited progression of Black students from undergraduate to postgraduate research degrees.



Research questions



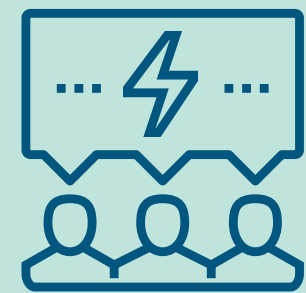
What is the student experience like for Black students across FELS as both undergraduates and postgraduates?



What elements of good practice are already in place to support Black students, and what areas still need improvement?



How can we take meaningful action to address the Black awarding gap in our Faculty?



How can we help tackle the *'broken pipeline'* for Black students entering PhD study?

The project has sought to open up these important and timely discussions in our Faculty, in order to help us draw up some clear proposals on what FELS can do to help better support Black students.

Methods

The project adopted a participatory action research (PAR) approach – where those who are being researched become active agents in shaping and designing the research project. As the research is focused on the experiences of Black and mixed-Black students, eight Black students became paid co-researchers and worked alongside staff as Junior Research Fellows (JRFs). They were a mixture of British and international students undertaking undergraduate, masters and PhD degrees.

Focus group discussions (FGD) were deemed the most suitable method of data collection. FGD can facilitate deeper discussion than interviews (Peek and Fothergill 2009) and we strived to create a safe group environment for participants to discuss potentially sensitive topics. By discussing topics in groups, participants develop and reflect on their own views providing a rich insight into participants' views and feelings. Hearing other participants discuss their own experiences and feelings can help participants remember their own experiences and can also provide a different view of the same topic.

Participants for the FGD were approached by email, social media and word of mouth and asked to participate in the study. Participants were provided with a participant information sheet (PIS), and if they were happy to proceed, provided with a consent form which they signed prior to data collection. In total 17 participants took part across three focus groups. Similarly to the research fellows, participants were a mixture of British and international students studying undergraduate, masters and PhD degrees. It must be noted that there were no Junior Research Fellows from the School of Ocean and Earth Science.

FGDs were closed spaces for Black/Black-mixed students only. The aim of the FGDs was twofold: i) to gather data for the purposes of our research; and ii) to provide a safe space for Black students to meet, share and network across Schools, programmes, levels of study and years. In addition, by bringing groups of students together we wanted to open-up engaging discussions and opportunities for peer-mentoring – with current Black postgraduate students being able to offer advice and inspiration to the current cohort of undergraduate students. All participants in the focus groups received a voucher for their time.

“Hearing other participants discuss their own experiences and feelings can help participants remember their own experiences and can also provide a different view of the same topic”

FGDs covered 4 key sections, although no strict questionnaire guide was followed to allow the discussion to be free-flowing. Firstly, everyday experiences of being a Black student in FELS were discussed which covered the demographics of courses, Black role-models, experiences of racism and microaggressions and any positive experiences. Participants were then introduced to the topic of the awarding gap, and asked to provide insight on why this exists with a focus on support, mentoring and barriers to studying. The ‘broken pipeline’ was then discussed by participants with a focus on the support, mentoring and information they may or may not have received regarding postgraduate study.

Finally, the focus group ended on a broader picture of what an equal University would look like and what initiatives would improve the Black student experience. FGDs were conducted face-to-face, with a small number of participants joining online. Notes were taken by a JRF in each FGD which were then typed up. To complement the notes, participants were asked to write key experiences on post-it notes to ensure they were captured properly. To ensure this was available for online participants an anonymous Padlet was also set up.

Ethics

The project received approval from the Administrative Research Ethics & Quality Assurance Committee (AREQA) (for internal projects). Due to the sensitive nature of issues discussed, especially experiences of racism shared by students, the project team sought to minimise distress in a number of ways.

First, the FGDs and the networking event were closed spaces with the participation of Black/Black-mixed students only, or staff (for the networking and inspiration event), so that students felt safe to share and discuss these issues.

Second, the project staff prepared a safeguarding document which assured students of these safe spaces, and provided contact addresses for follow up if required. These documents were discussed with, and modified by, the JRFs. While peer-research can be a way to create an inclusive space, it also brings up some additional ethical issues. JRFs were trained and supported by staff, especially knowing where to turn to if something went wrong, or an issue arose that they did not know how to deal with. Project staff were always on hand on campus nearby if the JRFs needed anything or had a question.



Short testimonies from JRFs

This section presents short testimonies from some of the JRFs to highlight the significance of this experience for the project and for their professional development.

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Having grown up in a predominantly White area, I have never had a Black teacher or lecturer, and admittedly before I had the opportunity to partake in this research project, I was not aware of how common this experience is amongst Black students. But at the same time it was surprising how different my own experiences in academia had been compared to many other students. These differences highlight the importance of qualitative research projects such as this, as collating a vast array of experiences and viewpoints is essential in the pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of how the University can better support Black students and facilitate their progression into postgraduate studies and academic careers.

Personally, I was struck by how common the lack of Black representation was across the differing schools in the Faculty and how many other students, like me, had never had a Black lecturer, or were even aware of a single prominent Black academic in their respective fields. I also saw how even the simple act of sitting in a room with other Black students was almost therapeutic in and of itself and gave many students a safe space where they felt they could honestly share their experiences without fear of repercussions. As a postgraduate student myself, the financial support given to the junior research fellows was a crucial factor in my decision to take time out of my studies and contribute to this project, and I feel that this compensation gave many of my fellow JRFs confidence that the Faculty was serious about implementing changes, rather than engaging in a symbolic show of support intended to placate concerns. Additionally, the project provided a novel opportunity for us to run focus group discussions, a key research skill that I had not previously had the opportunity to acquire during my four years at the University.”

Black British Masters Student

“

As a JRF, the opportunity to develop skills through paid work was a great experience. I have undertaken my undergraduate and PhD in FELS so have my own experiences as a mixed-Black student and it was great to hear other Black students' experiences, viewpoints and feelings. This is a really important piece of work and we have identified areas that FELS need to improve on. Our focus groups found that Black and mixed-Black students need to work alongside their studies due to their households' financial position. So by paying JFRs, it has allowed me to develop relevant skills, whilst being paid, rather than doing another paid job that is not directly related to my career path. Through the project, I also met a Black female lecturer for the first time in my 7 years at the university. I hadn't realised that was important to me but meeting her was incredibly inspiring and has made me question whether I could stay in academia.”

Mixed Black British PhD student

By having paid student-researchers the labour and time they put into this project is recognised. This approach to any equalities work is vitally important in order to ensure students get credit and recognition for the important contribution they made to the project. It is also hoped that having paid peer-researchers would help avoid some of the hierarchies involved in researching marginalized groups.



Key findings

This section presents key themes that ran through the group discussions, in turn illustrated by case studies and quotes.

1. REPRESENTATION

Lack of representation amongst academic staff

Research participants identified extremely low representation amongst members of staff as a key barrier to positive experiences at University. There are low numbers of, or no, Black academic staff across all disciplines taught in FELS, especially at Professorial level. Others noted the only Black people they often see in their University spaces are the cleaners.

Students explained that representation is extremely important for a number of reasons.

- Seeing that they can fit in at the University.
- Relatability with staff and students due to shared lived experience.
- Ease and comfort to approach members of staff.
- Being mentored by staff and students who understand one's experiences and struggles.
- Relatability (without explanation) to raising professional and career aspirations.

The lack of Black representation in academia is an issue that reaches far beyond the University of Southampton. However, the enduring negative impact this has on Black students' confidence in their suitability for careers in academia was a common theme across all the Schools in the Faculty. Students commented on how the lack of Black representation in academia was not reflected by the demographic makeup of many professions. For example in nursing, there are many Black professionals but very few Black lecturers to whom Black students can look up to.

Lack of representation in teaching materials and bias

Students also noted a lack of representation in learning and teaching materials. For instance, in medical books, there are hardly any pictures of Black patients or guidance on how to recognise symptoms in Black people who are ill or need care. Moreover, there is often bias in healthcare institutions towards Black patients (e.g. experiences of pain).



CASE STUDY 1: NURSING AND REPRESENTATION

There were several participants from nursing who said that although there are plenty of Black nurses and quite a few Black nursing students, they do not see any Black nursing lecturers. One participant noted that they are taught about the additional risks Black women face during pregnancy by a White woman, despite there being plenty of Black nurses working. The participant questioned why Black people are not taking up lecturing roles.



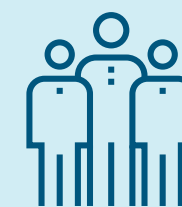
CASE STUDY 2: PSYCHOLOGY

When asked about whether they were aware of any prominent Black psychologists, none of the Psychology students were able to provide a single name. In fact, when made aware of the existence of a Black faculty member in the department, one student remarked...

“I have been at this University for three years and I didn't even know

that there were any Black staff in the Psychology department... I wish I knew about her earlier...”

This member of staff was invited to speak about her experiences at the networking event for this project, and upon learning this, the Psychology students in one FGD wanted to attend the event with the hopes of meeting her. This highlights how the presence of even one Black staff member was a source of inspiration for many Black students.



CASE STUDY 3: BIAS AND LACK OF REPRESENTATION IN TEACHING

Participants in Health Sciences and Psychology in particular said there was very little teaching on ethnic differences regarding healthcare treatment, risk and outcomes. One participant said they have witnessed bias whilst on placement, with nurses treating a Black child differently to a White child with the same condition. The participant questioned why there was no bias training for nursing and healthcare professionals.



Key findings (continued)

2. Facing racism alone

Research participants reported a range of experiences, from microaggressions to racism, from both staff and students, that they had endured personally or been witness to. However, they felt unsupported by the University and were not convinced the institution was willing to address racism.

Lack of willingness or training from staff to challenge stereotypes

The perceived indifference of the University to incidents of racism and racial bias was depicted in everyday experiences interacting with other students and staff members. One student recalled how alienated she felt following an incident that took place during a Psychology seminar:



I remember how during my first week here I was in a tutorial and a White student said that Black people don't do well in school and at uni because they all smoke cannabis. Of course I pointed out to him how ignorant that statement was and tried to explain why his statement was racist, but my tutor did nothing. Absolutely nothing. She just stood there and didn't tell him how wrong and hurtful his statement was, I felt like her silence only emboldened him.”

No clear pathway on how to report issues of racism

Research participants felt there was no clear pathway or support for reporting experiences of racism through the institutional structures. They were not aware of the recent 'Report & Support' service the University offers. Nor were they aware of their School Equality, Diversity & Inclusion groups and student equalities reps.

Even when students became aware, there appears to be no clear and transparent way from the University to communicate to Black students about how reporting such instances of racism and discrimination are handled,

who handles what, and what are potential outcomes? (especially 'Report & Support' which participants felt was not transparent on these issues)

Lack of trust in the University

Students expressed a lack of confidence in the University's commitment to addressing issues of racism. Not only were they unaware of how the University dealt with such issues, but many students had experiences with racial bias, arising from interactions with both students and staff, that they either felt too uncomfortable to report for fear of repercussions, or felt that it would be a futile endeavour. This lack of confidence was in part due to their own experiences, but in one FGD every student cited a particular incident as evidence that supported their perception of the University's indifference to addressing racism. The most prominent one of this was the incident that took place in October 2019 when Southampton University students chanted racist slurs on the bus. One student, who joined the University in 2021, two years after the incident took place, said:



Why should I believe that they will do anything if I reported racism? Remember that bus incident? All they did was launch an investigation. I don't even know what happened to those students, but it doesn't really matter, I learnt about the [incident] during my first week here... If the University doesn't seem to care why should the students?”

Someone to talk to

Some students said that when issues are seen as not serious enough for official reporting, such as microaggressions and everyday racisms, students might just want to talk to someone supportive instead of going through the reporting portal. Again, they were not aware such support was available at the University or if it was, how to access it.

Key findings (continued)

3. Awarding gap & progression

The ‘awarding gap’ and the ‘broken pipeline’ of progression remain key issues Black students face in our University. Several reasons were brought up during the group discussions some of which are noted in the following.

Lack of resources & financial support

Many Black students often come from backgrounds where they are the first generation going to University, which presents them with financial pressures and they often need to work alongside their studies. Similarly, Black students had limited connections in academia and industry (due to limited inter-generational experience of higher education) when compared to many White middle-class students.



for many Black students it feels like having a supportive member of staff is like a lottery”

Support from faculty is like lottery

Alongside the financial situation, for many Black students it feels like having a supportive member of staff is like a lottery: some students reported good support from their Personal Academic Tutor, supervisor or lecturer, while others had been neglected. It is these members of staff who often push or encourage students to achieve a 1st class degree or go to Postgraduate study. The research participants asked the question of how many talented Black students slip through this system?

Moreover, having no role models amongst staff, as noted earlier, or in the Postgraduate community, is deeply discouraging ‘no one that looks like me/can be a role model’.



‘Pressures of being Black’ – barriers to accessing support when needed

Students reported low levels of asking for extensions or special considerations for their course assignments, as well as asking for other support, such as extra advice or supervision.

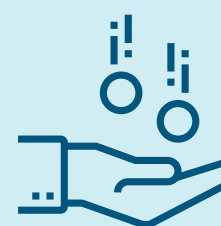
Black students reported that they are apprehensive to ask for help. There is often pressure to not appear to be struggling, or there is a perceived need for self-reliance. Moreover, students also expressed having doubts of whether they deserved something (like an extension to coursework, for example), or indeed that their lecturer thought they were deserving.

Students attributed this to a ‘pressure of being Black’, in other words, the burden of having to be the best reflection of Black people, and of not wanting to be ‘another statistic’ academically failing Black student. At other times, students also felt that they settled for less as they didn’t want any further pressure, or felt that their lecturers might think they are not deserving of it if they ask for extensions.



CASE STUDY 1

One Black PhD student said she knew when she was applying that she would be the only Black PhD student in the programme/School, but she kept in touch with the Black female lecturer she knew who supported her. She said that although there are more Black women in her field more broadly, she feels alone at this University.



CASE STUDY 2

A participant questioned why they would want to stay on into postgraduate study. They had not been supported by staff in their undergraduate studies and they hadn’t been encouraged by staff to pursue a Master’s so wasn’t sure what the benefit is. The participant’s family had not been to University, so they also couldn’t provide any support. The participant also said the Master’s loan is not large enough, so unless you come from a family background that has the finances to support you, it’s difficult.



CASE STUDY 3

One Black nursing student said that Black people don’t want to be seen as struggling or needing help. The participant said they always put on their best version of themselves because they want to be the best reflection of Black people. However, the participant would be more inclined to open-up to Black lecturers, students and personal tutors, as they feel they wouldn’t be judged. (Other participants strongly agreed with this participant’s comments which were echoed in other FGDs.)

Key Recommendations

This section presents key recommendations/actions that we make to the Faculty, and University, in light of the findings of this research. These propose things that can be addressed at School/Faculty level, alongside some bigger suggestions for the University as a whole. We have also thought about things we can do in the short-term to make a difference, alongside longer term wider structural change.

1. Equity, equality and justice

Recognition that we need schemes such as this with a focus on equity rather than equality to address injustice (e.g. Black specific events, training, support, and a focus on structural barriers to equity).

1.1 Now

Setting up and promoting the 'Black in FELS' student network

- Sharing stories and finding mutual support with peers have been key parts of this project. It is vital that the momentum built from this project continues. The JRFs have set up a Teams site for all Black students in FELS, this was sent to all School Equalities leads to cover at student induction.
- That the Faculty puts together a small pot of money to pay 2 students to keep up the 'Black in FELS' student network, and costs for events (1-2 meetings per semester, a mix of no-agenda sessions, alongside more tailored support, including a panel and workshop for Black UG students wanting to find out more about PG study and scholarships (such as the FELS Black Futures PhD Scholarship).
- Include annual welcome events as part of induction, followed by career / PG study event near the end of Semester 1.

Set up clear structures of support within the Faculty and University

Currently, receiving support from staff is almost like a lottery. Whether a PAT or supervisor is doing a good job / is approachable / understands these issues is pure luck. We suggest:

- Senior Tutors to meet to discuss the patchy support for Black students across the PAT system, particularly around the awarding gap/'broken pipeline' to PG study;
- Sharing good practice, and identifying steps to address any gaps in support;
- The University needs to not shy away from talking about racial inequalities /racism in HE—may be offering specific training to help Senior Tutors feel more proficient in these issues might be one way to address this;
- Training against bias for all members of staff, and specific awareness training for those supervising Black PhD researchers, or who have Black tutees in their tutor groups.
- Ensure School / Faculty induction covers issues of harassment and discrimination, and makes clear to students the lines of support.
 - Many students were not aware of their School Equality, Diversity & Inclusion groups for example. Some had heard of 'Report and Support' but did not trust the process and would prefer to talk to someone in person. All Schools need to ensure that students at all levels know who to contact.

1.2 Medium-long-term goal

Southampton's Masters Scholarships are poor compared to others. It only offers scholarships of (£2000-£3000) which are based on undergraduate results. It was noted that competitor institutions have great Masters Scholarships that aim to widen participation and are given based on ethnic background, financial circumstances, where the student grew up, being in care etc. rather than academic achievement (which we have identified as suffering from inequalities). FELS or the University should strongly consider this, especially as the Student Finance Masters Loan barely covers tuition fees.

2. How University deals with racism

This is linked to KR1, but in addition to supporting Black students, it is about fostering a culture of zero tolerance against racism within University spaces and communities. This can be done in a number of ways, including the training for staff as outlined earlier, but also by strengthening the reporting mechanisms and enhancing transparency around reporting racism.

- Raising awareness about the 'Report & Support' services, School Equalities groups, and how to access support when encountering racism.
- Improving transparency about how the University handles reports of racism and the actions it takes to address the issues raised. Considering the lack of confidence, or even awareness in many cases, that many students expressed regarding

the effectiveness of the University's system for reporting issues of racism, it is crucial that the University makes visible efforts to demonstrate their commitment to ensuring the University is an inclusive environment.

- Raising awareness amongst members of staff on how to better deal with racism if it occurs (noting that this is often not just overt racism, but subtle microaggressions— these often go under the radar).
- More training of staff on how to react in situations of racial incidents, in light of student reports of staff who handle incidents of racial bias in a manner that further alienates Black students. The University environment and the challenges faced by lecturers are unique, and the University may desire to use the incidents of racism reported by students as case studies and real-life examples to inform racial sensitivity training, as this may assist staff in their efforts to tackle issues of racism and highlight the impact of their actions, or inaction, on the experiences of Black students.
- Concrete actions so students know it is not performative or just about culture change, but structural change. The University needs to report on how it is doing in terms of hiring more Black staff, promoting them to higher levels, closing the ethnicity pay gap, supporting students throughout their degree, scholarships, etc.



Key Recommendations (continued)

3. More role models and representation in staff and curriculum

Students want to be tutored and taught by more Black staff and there is a perception that Schools are failing to appoint Black staff.

3.1. Medium-long-term goal

Hire more Black/Black-mixed staff and offer better support for the promotion of those already here, especially to higher/Professorial levels.

- Needs clearly addressing in future staffing plans.
- Engage more with Black students when recruiting staff (e.g. PGRs to be invited to job talks, and have ways to feed-back, paid student reps on job panels).

3.2. What can be done in the meantime?

- Schools may want to consider bringing in paid Black guest lecturers.
- Schools to have a steer to bring in more Black speakers for seminar series / guest lectures / careers events (existing Black staff can feel stretched trying to do this work)
- Consider pipelines / retainment for Black ECRs, and progression to higher levels.
- Ensure Black PGRs have sufficient paid teaching opportunities: many UGs spoke of how inspirational it can be to be taught by a Black PGR when studying in a predominantly White School.



- Faculty Graduate School to nurture and create specific opportunities for Black PGRs who are potentially considering an academic career. Many in the FGDs were uncertain about staying within academia. We suggest setting up a Faculty-wide biannual event, bringing in external speakers, and current Black PGR students to network and discuss future academic careers.
- Offer specific ring-fenced opportunities for Black PGRs to progress to post-doctoral study (e.g. via University-wide Anniversary fellowships scheme)

Curriculum review

Courses encouraged to include the Black experience in core modules where possible (for example in Nursing: rashes on Black skin in textbooks, bias; in Physio: ethnic differences in treatment; in Geology: mining and exploitation; in Biology: Henrietta Lacks and cancer; in Geography: colonisation, intersectionality; in Psychology: racism and mental health)

- better utilise existing online materials produced by Black colleagues at other institutions.

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Photography

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