



# DIVERSE ADVERSITIES:

How students from different ethnic backgrounds experience university differently

**#NEVEROK**

October 2021

Hertfordshire  
Students' Union

REPRESENTATIVE

STUDENT-FOCUSED

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"BETTER  
UNDERSTAND  
OUR STUDENT  
COMMUNITIES"

"BETTER

UNDERSTAND

OUR STUDENT

COMMUNITIES

REPRESENTATIVE

# ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study took a mixed-methods approach, utilising survey data and qualitative focus group data aiming to explore how the university experience differed for students from different ethnic backgrounds.

3 surveys focusing on wellbeing, academic experience and the awarding gap

We ran three surveys over the period of an academic year: one focusing on student wellbeing, one on students' academic experience, and one focusing on students knowledge of and opinions on the awarding/attainment gap. The surveys we open for all current students at the University of Hertfordshire and data was analysed by ethnicity and registration status (International and Home/UK). We received 2,616 survey responses in total.

2,616 survey responses

We ran two sets of focus groups: three focusing on students' wellbeing and three focusing on the academic experience. The discussion guides were informed by the results of the associated survey. 43 students took part in the focus groups.

534 of our responses were duplicates (took part in multiple types of data collection). In total, we heard from 2,125 unique students, which represents approximately 8.3% of the total student population.

43 focus group participants recruited via the surveys

This study was approved by The University of Hertfordshire Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Ethics Committee with Delegated Authority. The UH protocol number acHUM/SF/UH/04797(1).

2,125 unique students took part in the project

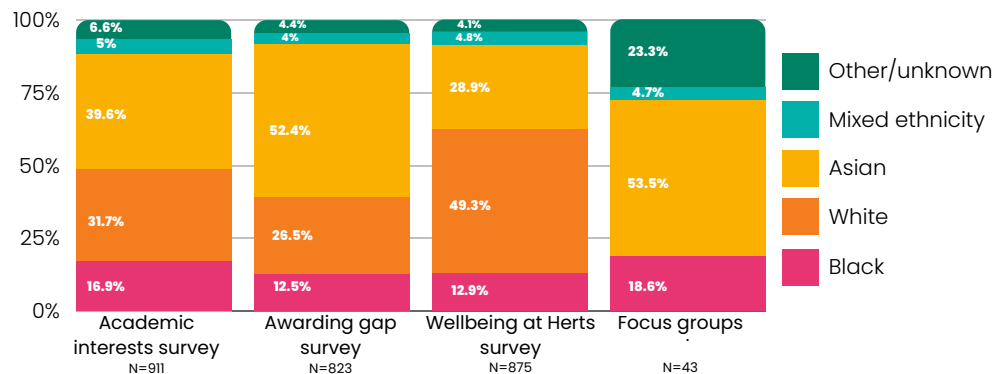
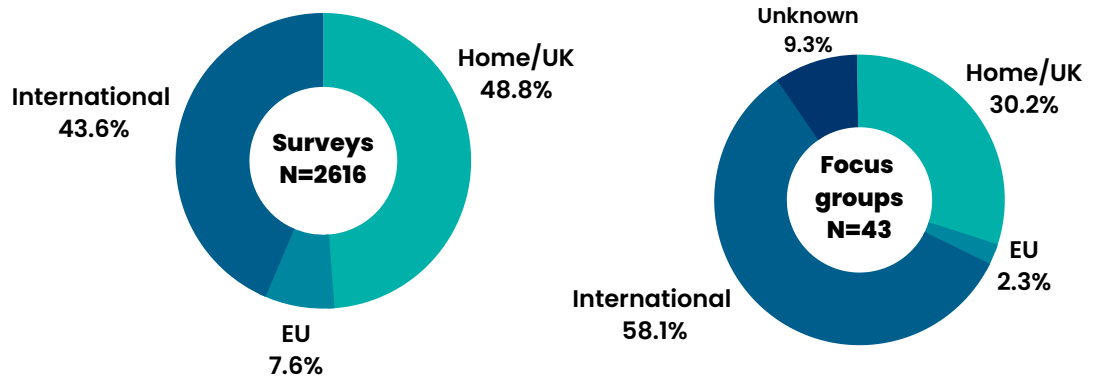


Figure 1. Bar graph showing the breakdown of participant ethnicity, by data collection type.



Figures 2 & 3. Pie charts showing the breakdown of participant registration status, by data collection type.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The barriers that BAME students face within their university journey are numerous and complex, and within the "BAME" grouping the student experience and the specific barriers students are facing varies hugely.

18% of BAME students have experienced racism at least once on campus. Asian students were most likely to report having experienced this, and in focus groups often discussed issues regarding anti-Asian racism from peers and a lack of cultural competence within the student and staff population. International BAME students highlighted forms of segregation based on ethnic and cultural groups on campus, and spoke about how whilst they had a strong sense of belonging within their own cultural and ethnic groups, their sense of belonging in the wider university community was poor.

Black students were the least likely to report that they recognise people like them teaching and supporting them at the university, and also that they have role models that they can relate to and look up to. They were also the least likely to report feeling like they belong within their group of classmates. As well as issues with representation and community, Black students reported feeling that their work was not marked fairly at significantly higher rates than other groups.

Financial hardship was identified by International BAME students as hindering them from reaching their academic targets. Students spoke about how they were unable to put as much effort into their course work as they would like, because they were worried about being able to afford to eat, or becoming homeless. High tuition fees, visa restrictions on jobs and the lack of financial support available from the university all exacerbated these issues. International BAME students often reported feeling that the university only cared about them for their tuition fees, and the result of this strained relationship was seen as students spoke about feeling that they were deliberated failed so that they would have to retake modules, and thus pay more in fees.

The support services available at the university which would be able to help students tackle these barriers are often inaccessible to BAME students. Black students had very low levels of knowledge about the wellbeing services available at the university. 1 in 2 BAME students would not know where to report harassment or discrimination at university. Students instead reported that they would disclose to academic staff. Of those that did know about the services on offer, many spoke about issues accessing these services such as long waiting lists and issues with communication. Other students reported not reaching out for help because they were worried about not being listened to, or that their problems weren't serious enough.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are created with the acknowledgement that the APP, IAP and the REC jointly speak to a number of findings in the report, and that internal targets already exist to tackle the majority of the issues raised in this report. However, without clear oversight and direction the efforts to create a more inclusive community and to tackle the BAME awarding gap is disjointed and impact is limited as a result.

### INSTITUTION

- Currently, there are a number of different working groups, strategic groups and boards that oversee different aspects of EDI-related work at the university. Our concern is that this creates a disjointed process in which impact is limited. We recommend a review of the governance structures that oversee the work of the APP, IBAP, the REC and the work of the EDI team, the BAME Student Success Group, and WASS.
- For the 2025–2030 strategic plan to include appointing a Pro-Vice Chancellor of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, whose purview will include: tackling racism and discrimination at UH, closing the awarding gap, ensuring university services are inclusive and accessible.

### POLICY

- Creation of a zero-tolerance policy for harassment and discrimination, and an anti-racist policy, to be created by the EDI Board in consultation with the BAME Student Success working group and the Students' Union with input from external experts in the field and marginalised students.
- Specialised members of staff with relevant training, qualifications and experience must be appointed to run and oversee the disciplinary process and official reporting channels. This would include an experienced investigator and support service professionals (detailed below).
- For the non-academic disciplinary procedure to be reviewed against both the Office for Students' Statement of Expectations, and the 1752 Groups' sector guidance on addressing staff sexual misconduct in Higher Education which is recommended by the OFS (<https://1752group.com/sector-guidance/>).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### POLICY

- For the University to use the official Report and Support system, which would allow for annual publication of reports made through both Report and Support and the official disciplinary procedure. Including:
  - Number of reports
  - Type of reports
  - How many were investigated
  - How many led to formal action
  - What that action taken was
- The university in the above cases should also set out how they worked to restore the dignity of the student who experienced this, with the acknowledgment that justice is not just about consequences for the perpetrator but love and care for the victim. The university should develop a restorative justice process to ensure this.
- For an Equality Impact Assessment on the University's blended learning strategy/KPI3 to be completed no later than October 2022, and an EIA should be carried out for every new strategy the university implements.

### STAFF

- The implementation of specialist support staff:
  - Implementation of a BAME counsellor
  - To invest in the up-skilling of current staff with training related to trauma counselling and racial trauma, which is then clearly communicated to students.
  - Implementation of a harassment, assault and hate crime advisor (a specialist, dedicated member of staff – not as part of another role)
- Appropriate training:
  - Disclosure training and Active Bystander training for Personal Tutors and Module Leads to be mandatory by the 2022-2023 academic year.
  - For the above training to be delivered to all student-facing staff by the 2023-2024 academic year.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### STUDENTS

- Analysis to be carried out on student staff ratios compared to the ethnicity of the student body in each course, to ensure that BAME and International students are not being disproportionately impacted by issues in large cohort courses.
- For funding allocated to international student support services to increase in-line with student recruitment inflation.
- Mandatory consent training as part of Freshers induction, which includes information about violent coercion (such as spiking)
- Mandatory information session for students in their first year about inequality in Higher Education and at the university specifically
- Mandatory online induction course to be created for all students including information about key university services such as the wellbeing service, behavioural expectations for students and reporting mechanisms, and training in key academic skills such as referencing and academic integrity. Individual Schools to be responsible for delivering specialised in-person induction sessions for School-specific information.

### THE STUDENTS' UNION COMMITS TO....

- Training all of our Student Leaders, student staff and permeant staff in: Active Bystander Training, and Handling Disclosures training, as part of our usual induction training by October 2022. Training will also be given to third party suppliers, such as security.
- Adopting an anti-harassment policy and a zero-tolerance approach to harassment within our spaces and services, which includes a restorative justice process, including the addition of this to our Student Code of Conduct by July 2022.
- Developing an anti-harassment and anti-discrimination campaign called Never Ok, which includes an educational campaign informing students of acceptable behaviours on campus.
- To review our recruitment and selection process and create a plan which will enable us to increase our staff diversity, particularly from underrepresented groups.
- To lobby the university to the best of our efforts to agree to, and implement, the above recommendations in a timely manner.

## DIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY AT HERTS


The University of Hertfordshire is a diverse university: 58% of our students are from a BAME background. Of those, 28% are Asian, 17% are Black, and 5% are from a mixed ethnic background. We also have a large International student population, with 21% of our students International.

The diversity of our student community was spoken about positively by students across all surveys and focus groups, and students discussed how much they appreciated and benefitted from this diversity. BAME students, and particularly BAME International students, spoke about how they decided to come to Hertfordshire at least partly because of its reputation of being a diverse university, and a desire to meet people from different backgrounds and cultures.

BAME home students spoke about how their previous educational institutions were often white-dominated, and coming to Hertfordshire and seeing and meeting other students who looked like them, who had similar backgrounds and life experiences, had a positive impact on their wellbeing and belonging. It allowed them to feel more comfortable with various aspects of their identity and to feel 'at home' at the university; part of a strong community of staff and students.

Students clearly valued the community of staff and students at Hertfordshire, and the friendship groups they had been able to build. Courses and cohorts were often referred to as 'family', and societies were identified as a key arena in which friendships are built and maintained outside of their course.






"We just had a group of friends, and it was just a kind of crazy, diverse group. No two people are from the same country. It was crazy, how we just bonded. I never knew I could make friends that are a completely diverse group, which is really nice. It's the proper, you know, university thing you see on a TV show, a movie... We just have people of different colours and languages and everything. It was really nice and it was something I was looking forward to."

"I probably have one or two Muslim friends, but that's still more than before. Most of my friends, they might not be Muslim, but it's because we have the same interests and stuff. So like the other day we had a barbecue and they went out of their way to find some halal meat for me. And I find that really touching, that all my friends are so kind."

"When I joined Herts, I was absolutely delighted to see that there was a society there for Nepalese students. When I did my bachelor's [at another university], I had to start my own society because there was no representation. No one knew what Nepalese people were, what they ate, what they spoke, where they came from. So I was really pleased that there was a society [at Herts] and I felt really represented."



## BARRIERS TO OUR DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Whilst BAME students spoke in-depth about their love for our diverse community and the positive benefit that has brought to their university experience, they also spoke about the barriers and adversities that they have faced at the university.

### "I JUST WALK AS FAST AS MY LEGS COULD CARRY ME"

#### Safety on Campus and Experiences of Discrimination, Harassment and Assault

43% (N=264/616) of all students have experienced some form of discrimination or harassment at least once on campus. White students most commonly reported experiencing sexism and harassment (including sexual harassment) on campus, whereas students from a BAME background were more likely to report having experienced racism.

Analysis revealed that many students who had experienced scenarios that fall under the legal definition of sexual harassment whilst at university did not identify as having experienced harassment. 7% (N=8/107) of Black students, for example, agreed that they had experienced harassment (including sexual harassment) on campus at least once. However, when presented with a list of scenarios that fall under the legal definition of sexual harassment, 16% (N=18/113) had actually experienced this. The largest disparity was seen for Asian students and students of mixed ethnicity. Whilst 6% (N=15/242) of Asian students reported that they had experienced harassment, 23% (N=58/253) had actually experienced the scenarios presented, a statistically significant increase of 17% ( $p = < .0001$ ). Ensuring that students understand what behaviour is unacceptable, and what constitutes as harassment and discrimination, is vital both for preventing harassment and discrimination and to ensure that students access support when necessary.

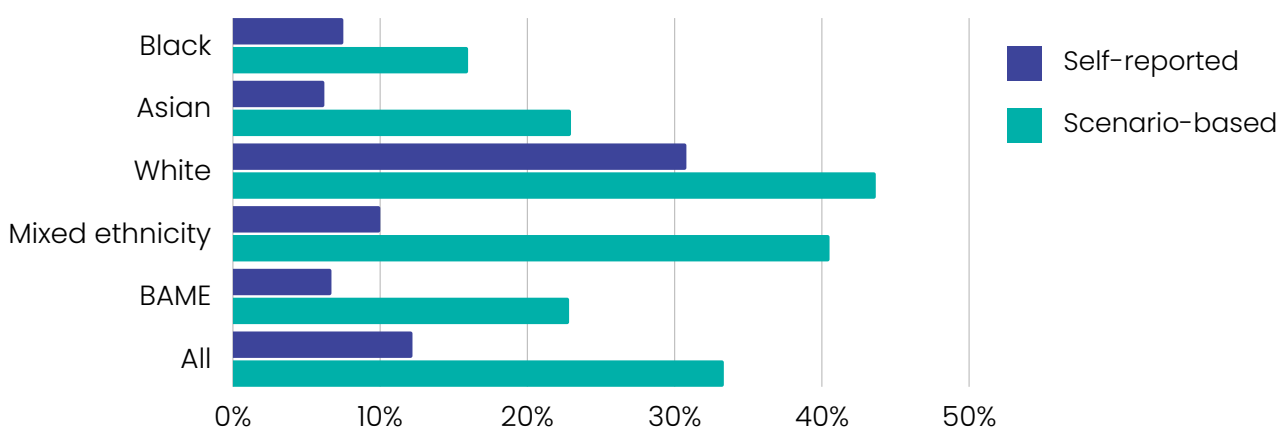


Figure 4. Bar graph showing % of respondents self-reporting experiencing 'harassment (including sexual harassment)' (blue bar, "Self-reported"), and the % of respondents agreeing that they had experienced at least one of the scenarios that fall under the legal definition of sexual harassment (green bar, "Scenario-based") whilst at university, by ethnicity.

## Experiences of Racism on Campus

1 in 10 (10%, N=41/393) BAME students have experienced racism on campus once, and 8 in 10 (8%, N=30/393) more than once. This was highest for Asian students, of whom 12% (N=29/242) had experienced racism once and 7% (N=29/242) more than once, although this was not statistically significant. 11% (N=61/569) of students from a BAME background have been singled out in class because of their race. Again, this was highest for Asian students at 13% (N=55/419).

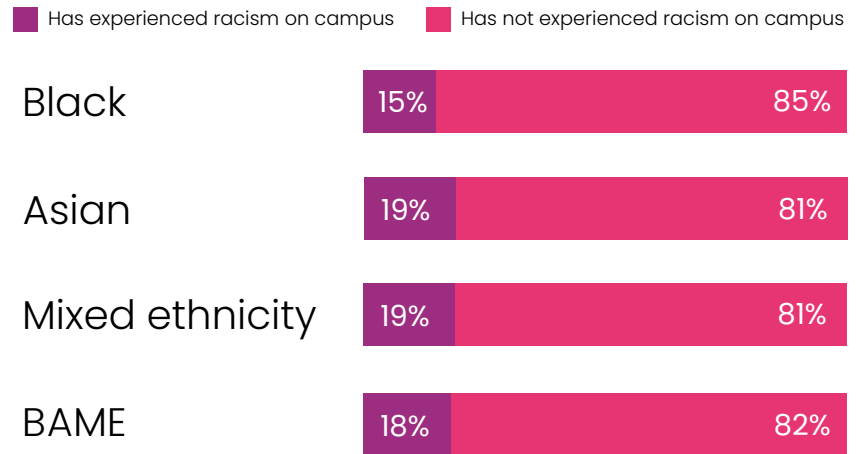



Figure 5. Stacked bar graph showing % of respondents who have experienced racism on campus at least once, by ethnicity.

In particular, students spoke about experiencing racism from academic staff, and being marked down in their assignments based on their ethnicity. One student said that "my friends have faced some problems with a lecturer. And it was because of her ethnicity, the lecturer won't give her the grade marks, even though she did well in the module and she tried working hard and stuff. And she [felt like she did not] get good marks because of herself".


Throughout the focus groups there was a reluctance from BAME students to label experiences they had as racism, often highlighting that they did not feel it was purposeful or malicious and therefore they were unsure if it "counted" as racist behaviour. One Asian student spoke about their experience of "insensitive" behaviour from white friends: "You realise that people have different sense of humour than you, like some kind of things that they found to be funny might actually be inappropriate to other people or their experience. And the other group might not be aware that it is actually insensitive to do so. For example, I have friends that made jokes about the Asian culture of dog eating. So that is a little bit iffy, but it is not supposed to be ill intent, I suppose. So trying to work out with them and say that, hey, that's crossed your line - that will require some effort, trying to confront it".



"It [racism] is very much there but subtle. You don't get cursed out to your face, but you can see the disgust and attitude towards you. A few UNO bus white drivers are also very guilty of this. But you can clearly see the difference when it's a white person."

"Because I'm a Black female, I'm automatically seen and labelled as aggressive. I'm forced to bite my tongue as I know if things were to escalate that it would be my word against a non-Black [person]. The other person would be believed even if they were the aggressor."

"If a BAME student has a concern listen to them and don't disregard it. What you won't see as racism, we do. Racism can be subtle and takes place within institutions. Your experiences as a white male or female doesn't give you the ability to suss out subtle racism the way we can because we've been going through it since birth."



In one focus group, a student recounted in detail a member of academic staff being racist towards them during class. The student said:

“The lecturer herself was white... she’d just refused to help my friends that were obviously all BAME as well. I was in her practical for the first time and I asked for help, like two or three times and she ignored me. Then I called her assistant, and she [the lecturer] made a point of coming with him and saying ‘don’t worry, she can just follow the guide’. [...] She ignored me, walked straight past me and continued to help the three British girls. [...] I ended up walking out of the practical. It was an exam, so I ended up having to do my exam again. But I was not staying in there while I was being refused any assistance”.

The student stated that they submitted a complaint to a more senior member of staff, and was informed that multiple other students had complained about racist treatment from this lecturer. However, the student was never informed of any action taken against this lecturer. The student spoke about how they had recently found out that the lecturer was going to be teaching them again next year, and the anxiety this has caused. The student said, “I feel like I messed that up [by making a complaint]. I feel like I’m going to have to work to get a good enough relationship with her. [...] If I have any issues, I’d have to go to [the lecturer] and I don’t feel comfortable with that”.

## **Perceptions of Safety on Campus**

Generally, BAME students felt safe on campus during the day, and felt quite comfortable walking to lectures, using the campus facilities and socialising. However, this was not the case at night, and safety within halls of residence was a common theme.

Students from BAME backgrounds spoke about living in fear in student accommodation, after a number of incidences on campus occurred such as knife violence, illegal fireworks, break-ins and fights between students. As well as these larger incidences on campus, BAME students reported regular or even daily antisocial behaviour such as drug use, disturbances from intoxicated students, arguments between students and theft on campus. One student spoke about how “I just walk as fast as my legs could carry me” through campus at night, and another student spoke about their experiencing living in university accommodation, saying that “accommodation, it does have an unsafe side where security will come and the police get involved sometimes, obviously nothing to do with me, but flatmates [often] had something happening, whether it was fights, arguments, drug use, like anything”.




# "SYMPATHY IS DIFFERENT TO EMPATHY"

## Student Perceptions and Importance of Staff Diversity

Whilst the student population at Herts is diverse – with more than half of students from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background – this is not replicated in the staff body. Only 19% of staff at the University of Hertfordshire are from a BAME background.

The lack of diversity within university staff, and the impact that has on students, was clearly reflected within our survey data: only 25% (N=144/569) of BAME students agree that they have role models that they can relate to and look up to at the university, significantly ( $p < .0001$ ) lower than white students (43%, 93/217). This was lowest for Black students at only 17% (N=17/102). Furthermore, when asked what the university could do to become a more inclusive place, one of the most common recommendations was to diversify the staff body, particularly academic and teaching staff. A lack of Black staff members came through strongly with comments such as "I feel there are not enough Black women in influential or more senior positions in the university", and "I think the university could [do] more in the recruitment of more Black lecturers. [...] We only have one Black male lecturer".


The benefits of having access to diverse staff members and role models were highlighted in our focus groups. Students who had not had the experience of being taught by someone with a similar background or identity to them spoke about how they wished they had, and how sometimes they do not feel comfortable expressing themselves and their opinions fully with staff who they feel do not understand them. Students who had been taught by staff that they felt they could relate to spoke about the positive impact it had on them both academically and pastorally: if they encountered issues, they felt more comfortable to raise them, and felt when raised their issues and concerns were dealt with more empathetically and taken more seriously.



"It is beneficial to see somebody who looks like you and thinks like you or has come from a similar background. It helps you feel like you can approach them better. [...] At school I never had any lectures of the same background as me or any teachers, and at university I have about four. When I look at how we interact with each other, it kind of comes from a place of understanding which I didn't have growing up. It's not to say that you can't empathise with other people, but I think sympathy is different to empathy. And when you go through similar things, it's easier to ask for help. It's easier to ask for guidance."

"I needed an extension... someone in my family passed away, and because [the lecturer is] the same religion as me she understands the process of how long it is and the rituals that we have to do. She gave me an extension that another white lecturer wouldn't give to me. She just completely understood. Not only could she do it because she's a module lead, I feel like she did it because she understands as well."

"I used to get a lot of students thinking I'm a Chinese man. The first maybe six or seven times it didn't bother me. But after a dozen times it started getting really annoying. I'd say the teachers lack... I mean, I don't expect them to know everything about me, but perhaps an understanding of where someone might come from. Differentiating between an Asian person and a Pakistani person, [...] between a Nepalese man and a Chinese man or a Japanese man would be really important. If the teachers were aware of that, then I think that would make me feel much more comfortable."



## "PEOPLE ARE NOT READY TO MINGLE"

### Campus Segregation by Ethnic and Cultural Student Groups

Segregation on campus based on ethnic and cultural groups was a common theme throughout all focus groups and surveys, and heavily shaped BAME students' perceptions of belonging, both in the university community more widely and within their course. BAME students reported feeling a strong sense of belonging within their cultural or ethnic group(s). Cultural and faith societies were often cited as arenas in which students were able to meet peers with similar backgrounds to them and form strong friendship groups. However, there was a common perception that friendship groups were heavily segregated by ethnic and cultural background, and students felt a poor sense of belonging outside of those groups.

Students reported that they felt unable to make friends with students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, that students gravitated towards students with similar backgrounds to their own and that if they tried to socialise with a different group they were made to feel unwelcome. Students, especially International students, reported that they had chosen Herts as a university to be able to meet people from different backgrounds and countries, and so this was especially disappointing for them.

Further exploration of this theme indicated that this may partly be due to students finding it difficult to relate to other students from different backgrounds. International BAME students spoke about finding it difficult to relate to the educational experiences of home students. A lack of cultural competence within the student body was also cited as contributing to this. Asian students in particular often spoke about how other students had very poor knowledge of different Asian cultures, nationalities and ethnicities. For example, one student said that "I noticed that people weren't as educated about other races and ethnic backgrounds. When they would meet us they would be shocked. They assume because of our colour we are from the same background. Most people think the Asian community is just Chinese, so they would be shocked if they say you are Asian". Essentially, students grouped themselves by cultural and ethnic groups because those were the arenas in which they felt understood.

Segregation within cultural and ethnic groups seemed to be exacerbated by COVID-19 and the resulting increase in online-only interaction. Students spoke about how they felt other students came to university with various cultural and racial stereotypes that would have been broken down if given the chance to interact with a diverse range of other students face-to-face. This, however, was rarely possible due to COVID, and students felt that the lack of in-person interaction, and how easy it is for tone and humour to be lost or misinterpreted over online messages, meant that instead these stereotypes and biases that students came to university with were further entrenched and caused a division between different ethnic and cultural groups of students on their course.

"I discovered that among my peers we had intense culture clashes. Sometimes when you don't get an opportunity to meet, it reinforces certain stereotypes that people might have against each other, because you never get an opportunity to really see someone and to come to an understanding about who they are and how their cultures will affect the way they can be themselves. I found that during our interactions in the [online] group a lot of people started to disagree a lot even on small things. People would just get irritated so easily with each other. I don't even know how we're going to come together now. COVID has created this atmosphere where it has reinforced people's fears about others."

## BARRIERS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS

BAME students reported experiencing a range of barriers to their academic success at university. Most commonly, students discussed that financial pressures and perceived unfair marking all negatively impacted on their ability to focus on their studies, achieve their desired grades and maintain good wellbeing.

### "OTHER PEOPLE JUST ZOOM AHEAD"

#### Financial Hardship and the Impact on Academic Achievement and Wellbeing

47% (N=190/404) of BAME students reported that their financial situation negatively impacts on their wellbeing at university, and 36% (N=44/122) of BAME students who have a job whilst at university report that this has a negative impact as well. BAME students reported struggling to afford basic and educational-related costs such as tuition, food, accommodation and bills, and course-related costs such as materials and equipment. Home BAME students were most likely to report struggling to afford their accommodation and bills and course-related costs, whereas International BAME students more commonly reported struggling to afford tuition.

Students commonly identified, both within open comment questions in surveys and in focus groups, that their financial situation was a barrier to their academic success and wellbeing. This was particularly pertinent for International BAME students, who not only pay higher tuition and are often self-funded, but are also limited in the number of hours a week that they can legally work.

Students drew particular connections between financial difficulties and the awarding gap. One student said that:

"I really liked how much the university stresses how there might be gaps between some people reaching a certain goal and other people getting there faster because they're more privileged. And it makes sense because as an International student on a visa, it hinders me from reaching my goal. There's so many more obstacles that I have to take care of, and there's so many things I have to think about while other people just zoom ahead".

When asked within one of our surveys if anything surprised them about the existence of an awarding gap between BAME and white students, one student responded saying that "It isn't surprising at all. Particularly the attainment gap for international students. A lot of Asian and African countries do not offer students loans. If you're lucky, a bank will offer you one. Which is why BAME students, particularly international students, are more likely to prioritise paying their bills, because they'll be homeless otherwise, instead of putting in more effort towards a first or a 2:1". Students also spoke about how academic staff do not always understand this added pressure, expecting students to spend all or most of their time on studying which is not feasible for students who need to also work.

## "IF WE AREN'T TOLD HOW WE'RE DOING THINGS WRONG, WE CAN'T DO IT RIGHT"

### Transparency, Understanding and Bias in Assignment Marking

57% (N=325/569) of BAME students disagree that their work is marked fairly. White students were significantly ( $p = .0001$ ) less likely to report this, with only 29% (N=62/217) disagreeing to this question. Black students were most likely to be concerned about the fairness of marking, with more than 3 in 5 (62%, N=63/102) Black students disagreeing to this question. Some International BAME students reported feeling that lecturers deliberately marked them down to force them to have to retake the course, and thus spend more in course fees to the university. Students spoke about how being marked unfairly not only impacted them academically, but also had a large negative impact on their wellbeing.

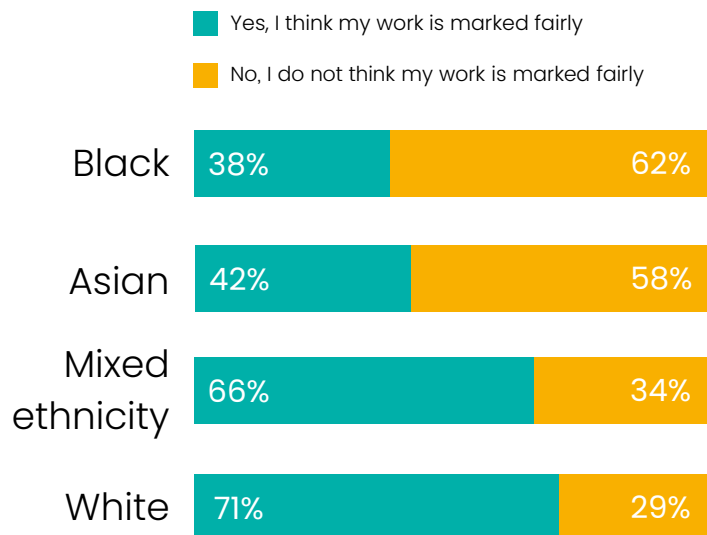


Figure 6. Stacked bar graph showing % of respondents who agreed to the question "I think my work is marked fairly", by ethnicity.

**"The aspect that actually just brings me down is the fact that they just mark people down, and it's a whole lot of money that people spend to come here, and I don't think they put that into consideration. I just feel that they don't think about the fact that this is a whole lot of money coming in here. Do they want people to keep repeating or repeating the course or paying a thousand pounds for each course?"**

When presented with data on the awarding gap at UH and asked what, if anything, surprised them, one student wrote about how they feel claims of plagiarism are made against BAME International students unfairly. "It [the awarding gap data] kind of makes things clear for me because I have heard of students from BAME getting accused for plagiarism in university course work. Lecturers might not believe students with English as their second language could produce better work than those who has English as their first language".

International BAME students reported feeling that academic misconduct cases, and particularly plagiarism, were unfair against International students for whom English may not be their first language and academic norms such as citation, referencing and essay writing may have been completely different in their previous educational institutions. Students reported feeling punished for not understanding the academic norms, whilst never having being taught them in the first place, stating that they were expected to teach themselves to reference properly and then face misconduct cases when they get it wrong.



Perceptions of being marked unfairly may have been contributed to by a lack of transparency and detailed feedback regarding marking and assignments. A dominant theme across all groups was confusion regarding their marks, getting their lowest marks in assignments they had worked hardest on, and receiving little or no clarification on how marks are awarded and why they received the score they did.

**"I would see my marks on the portal and then there would be absolutely no comments. They would be randomly marked and there would be no explanation or no comments on how they actually come up with those marks. I would send them out a detailed emails saying this is how I feel about this, and can you please give me comments on what I did wrong? And they literally take weeks to get back to me. Until then, maybe two or three more assignments would have passed and it would be the same case with them as well".**

Students spoke about how this not only caused confusion and distrust over how assignments were marked, but also meant that they could not improve their future work.

**"On the feedback section of Canvas, it would just be like comments like, 'Good, but why?' or this sort of stuff. It wasn't very directional. And even if you did want to speak to your tutor or that specific module lead about it, they were always hesitant to provide too much guidance. For example, when we had resits we didn't have a lot of guidance as to where we went wrong. I think for a lot of students, it was quite frustrating because it felt like if we aren't told how we're doing things wrong, we can't do it right".**

## ACADEMIC AND PASTORAL SUPPORT

The additional barriers that students from a BAME background face in university were numerous and clear. From experiences of racism, discrimination and harassment on campus, to perceptions of bias in marking and financial difficulties, navigating and succeeding in university life for BAME students is complicated and challenging.

When exploring with students the support services available at the university, it was clear that the very support services students would need to help address these barriers, both academically and pastorally, were often inaccessible to BAME students. 33% (N=190/569) of BAME students disagree that there is sufficient information, advice and support available that is relevant to them within the university. This is highest for Black students, with 2 in 5 (39%, N=40/102) disagreeing to this question, significantly ( $p = .05$ ) higher than white students (25%, N=54/217).

### "IT FELT LIKE DROWNING"

#### Experiences of Academic Support for Students from a BAME Background

The level of academic support that students received, and their experience of that support, varied hugely. Some students spoke about experiencing a positive community of staff and students and having members of academic staff who would go out of their way to support them in their learning journey. For those that did have a good experience of academic support it was clearly formative to their enjoyment of their course. One student said that "It was one of the reasons I chose Herts because of how well, when they promote themselves, they advertise the help services. And in general, the lecturers when I met them at the open day seemed really supportive. To see that not only are there good support services, but within the faculty the lecturers are also quite helpful, I really appreciated that".

However, the majority of BAME students reported various issues with the academic support they received such as not having enough contact opportunities with staff, not knowing who to go to for academic help, and either not having a personal tutor or not feeling that they received adequate support from their personal tutor.

In theory, all students at the university should have access to a personal tutor. More than half (55%, N=305/554) of BAME students reported not having access to a personal tutor. White students were significantly (45%, N=128/284;  $p < .01$ ) less likely to report not having access to a personal tutor than BAME students. Students that did have access to a personal tutor but did not have a positive experience reported that this made them hesitant to reach out for academic help, both because they did not know who to go to and because they experienced anxiety around asking for help from staff.

Slow responses to emails was one of the most common themes throughout the focus groups, and students identified that this had been worsened during the pandemic when they could not drop in to see lecturers and staff in person if they had an issue or a query. Students regularly identified this as not necessarily being the staff members fault or because of a lack of the staff member wanting to help, but because they felt there were not enough staff members to support all the students, particularly in courses with large cohorts. One student said that "I wish our lectures had more assistance, because they would take forever replying emails and you'll be needing to get prepared for something or [help] on how to do a specific task. Maybe they would take like three to four days to reply your email. Unfortunately, it seemed like they were also overwhelmed. They were having to respond to all these emails and they didn't have much assistance. And it really did affect us academically". Another student wrote about the difficulties of large cohort courses, saying that "There needs to be more spaced out smaller groups where there can be more one to one teaching sessions. In my course there are currently up to 300 students, so it's hard to get any sort of help and it's possible to feel so neglected. When I'm stuck it's hard to get adequate amount of support when you have 300 students emailing 2 tutors".

**"It felt like we didn't have a lot of support. Obviously at universities, independent learning to a certain extent, you kind of have to do what you have to do anyway. But we were in a position where it felt like drowning a little bit, if that's the best way to describe it."**

**"I had to ask my supervisor over and over again to schedule meetings. And those were literally just, I think in my whole master's project of four months, I had four meetings with my supervisor and I felt isolated. I felt like I was left on my own to figure it out on my own and do it on my own. "**

## "CAN PEOPLE ACTUALLY OFFER THE KIND OF HELP YOU NEED?"

### Barriers to Accessing Wellbeing Support for BAME Students

Knowledge of the wellbeing provisions available at the university was particularly low for BAME students. Only 61% (N=248/405) of BAME students reported that they knew how to access university wellbeing support, significantly (74%, N=331/431;  $p = < .0001$ ) lower than white students. Awareness and knowledge of wellbeing services was particularly low for Black students, of whom 55% (N=62/113) did not know how to access these services. Focus groups revealed that most students could not name any of the wellbeing-related service that the university provides and would not know how to access support if needed.

Of those that did report knowledge of a university wellbeing service, they had all experienced barriers in accessing this support. Students reported being scared that they would not be listened to or taken seriously; this was a particular concern for students who had not accessed counselling prior to university, especially international BAME students for whom wellbeing support was not offered at their previous educational institutions.

**"I would just be worried if a person is really going to listen to me because I have a really tough time asking for help, so if I make up my mind and decide to ask someone from the university to help me and they ignore me, I would feel really, really bad. That's why I didn't end up contacting the mental health support centre, or asking for help somewhere... It would be the first time I'd tried to ask someone to help me in that sense. We didn't have that kind of support back home, at least not in the kind of schools I've gone to. It's just being scared of not being listened to."**

Students also cited feeling that their issues were not serious enough to seek help as a major barrier to reaching out.

Of the few students that had tried to access wellbeing provisions, they spoke about not being able to get an appointment, either due to long waitlists or simply not being replied to. One student said that “I’ve actually tried to [access the university wellbeing service] quite a few times and they haven’t come back to me. I filled out the same form about three or four times. I still haven’t been approached or messaged regarding it. So, I’ve just left it at that point”.

Students who were struggling but were met with long wait times or had to chase the service for appointments were unlikely to try and access the service again, and report also being less likely to try and access other services such as external NHS services. Critically, students did not identify this as being a result of additional strain placed on the service during the pandemic. Students that had been at Hertfordshire for multiple years reported the same issues accessing the service pre-pandemic.

BAME students also expressed concern about the type of support available at the university, and whether it was appropriate for their needs. Some students expressed that they would just want someone to listen to them and a safe space to express their emotions and experiences, whereas others expressed a need for more practical support. It was clear that for a number of students, they wanted the university to instead focus on tackling the root cause of their wellbeing issues – such as experiencing racial discrimination on campus, unmanageable workloads, and a perceived lack of academic support – rather than accessing wellbeing support. One student asked, “The truth of the matter is a lot of people might want to help but aren’t really willing to offer you the help that you want. Fine, you are there. The School is there. They want to offer help. But it’s not just about talking and talking. Can people actually offer the kind of help you need? That’s really what causes depression. And because people may just want to listen to your problem, but are they really willing to offer the help that you want?”.

When asked what the university or the Students’ Union could do to improve their wellbeing, the most common responses from students were to increase the number of counsellors and counselling sessions to reduce wait times for appointments, to better publicise the support services available, increased financial support and to provide more specialist services for particularly vulnerable student groups.

The implementation of BAME counsellors – counsellors from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background with specific training in trauma-informed care and expertise in supporting people who have experienced racism and racial trauma – was unanimously popular amongst BAME students. Many expressed that they would feel more comfortable seeking help if they felt the staff member would better understand them through shared life experiences and backgrounds, and that they just could not find that with a white counsellor. Some students expressed that the ethnicity of a counsellor would not matter to them personally, but all thought it was an important option for students to have, particularly for students who may wish to seek counselling about racism and discrimination.



## SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION OR HARASSMENT ON CAMPUS

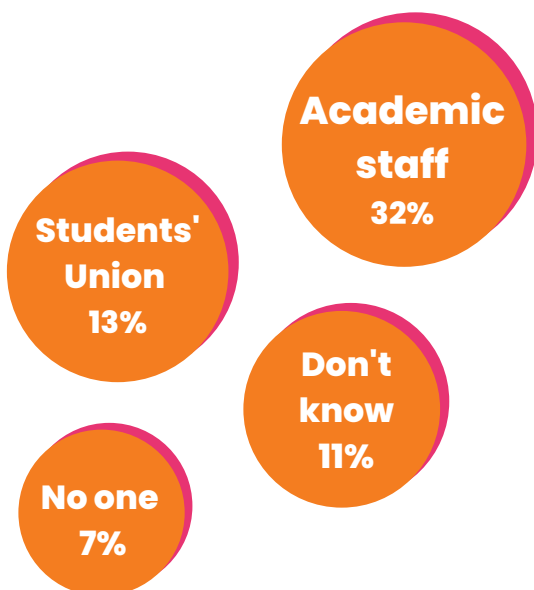
The university has a number of formalised processes that students can access to report and receive support for experiences of racism, discrimination and harassment on campus. Students can report anonymously through the Speak Out online tool. Students can also report formally and informally through the Dean of Students' Office and the wellbeing service within that. Furthermore, the Students' Union Advice and Support centre is a hate crime reporting centre.

More than half (52%, N=450/861) of all students said that they did not know where to report instances of bullying, harassment or discrimination within the university. This was highest for Black students, with only 42% (N=47/112) saying that they would know where to report. Knowledge of the Speak Out system specifically was even lower, with only just over 1 in 4 (27%, N=232/866) of all students reporting that they were aware of the reporting system and would know how to access it. In line with knowledge of general wellbeing services, awareness was lowest within the Black student population.

When asked who they would report experiences of racism or discrimination on campus to, students most commonly said that they would inform members of academic staff such as module leads, personal tutors, or a lecturer they were close to. Crucially, "I don't know" and "No one" featured higher than any of the official reporting services available at the university. Similarly, when asked if there might be any support available at the university the most common answer was "I don't know", and this response was more than twice as common as the university wellbeing service.

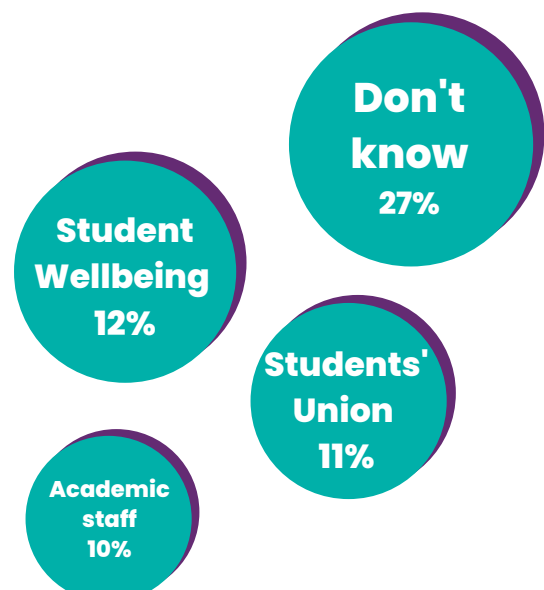
### "Is there any support you could get from the university? Where might you find this?"

Student responses - top 4



### "Who would you inform if you encountered racism or discrimination on campus?"

Student responses - top 4



The majority (77%, N=664/863) of students did indicate that if they had the knowledge of how to report, they would trust the university to handle that report with sensitivity and for the result to be proportionate to the event(s). Trust in the university was higher for BAME students at 84% (N=333/397) agreement, driven largely by high agreement rates within Asian (86%, N=210/245) and Black (86%, N=94/110) student populations. White students and students of mixed ethnicity were the least likely to report trusting the university, at 72% (N=307/428) and 69% (N=29/42) respectively. Furthermore, of those that had successfully reached out to and received support from the wellbeing team, the majority (66%, N=155/234) were satisfied with the support they received.

However, open comments revealed that a number of BAME students felt there was more the university could do to tackle issues of discrimination and harassment on campus. BAME students expressed wanting the university to regularly report the results and actions taken from reports made in order to build trust in the process, and to more clearly communicate a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment, sexism and racism. BAME students reported feeling that the university security team were ineffective, describing the team as “gaslighting” them when they tried to make reports and “brushing off student’s complaints again and again”. Furthermore, there was a perception amongst BAME students that the university routinely tried to “ignore” issues on campus or “pretend they do not exist”. One student expressed that they felt that the universities focus was on “keeping students at [the university], regardless of crimes committed or danger to others, often at the expense of the victims”. The student went on to say that “there is no real accountability, and students are discouraged from going to the police when they should be supported”. It was clear from both the surveys and focus groups that there are issues both regarding communication of services to BAME students, and trust between BAME students and the university and the services it provides.

REPRESENTATIVE

STUDENT-FOCUSED

STUDENT-FOCUSED

"BETTER  
UNDERSTAND  
OUR STUDENT  
COMMUNITIES"

"BETTER

UNDERSTAND

OUR STUDENT

COMMUNITIES

REPRESENTATIVE

## NOTE FROM THE RESEARCHER

This project was born in summer 2020. I was new to the role, and it was my first meeting with Hertfordshire Students' Union CEO, Rebecca Hobbs. Rebecca made it clear this was to be my priority going forward. She said, we have a very diverse student population, and our insight needs to reflect that. We need to know more about the complex and varied lives of our diverse membership.

For the next year and a half – through lockdowns, online Freshers fairs, and endless Zoom meetings – I had the privilege of attempting to dive into the lived experience of our students. Three surveys, approximately ten hours of focus groups and hundreds of hours of analysis later, I hope I've managed to do justice to the students who were so open, honest and frank with me during this project.

Firstly, I'd like to thank the 43 focus group participants who trusted me with their experiences of joy, friendship, stress, loneliness and discrimination that moulded their university experience. It truly was a privilege to be able to run those groups. I would also like to thank Daniel Akinbosedo, who was instrumental in the finalising of the recommendations from this report.

I'd also like to situate this research in its context, which was itself one of harassment. During our first survey, focusing on wellbeing and experiences of discrimination and harassment on campus, we received nearly two thousand responses over night. Unfortunately, all of these responses were some kind of organised 'trolling'. All of the multiple choice questions were answered in the same way, except for the open-box question at the end, which was full of vile, abusive language. I found out that this wasn't uncommon for researchers focusing on controversial or sensitive research topics. As Stein and Appel<sup>1</sup> wrote, "social scientists may sometimes find themselves thrust into the very conflicts they were hoping to examine from a neutral perspective". The aim of these organised troll responses are often to disrupt research. Thankfully, we were able to identify and remove all non-authentic responses, and there was minimal impact on the project itself apart from to reinforce to us that it was a very necessary piece of work.

In the case of this project, even as a privileged, white researcher, the very act of posing questions about racism, harassment and discrimination in itself enticed a harassing response. Whilst it is of no comparison to the experiences of the students I spoke with, I share this as a reminder of the importance of asking the hard questions, and, where we can, using our privilege to centre the voices of our marginalised students.

Hertfordshire  
Students' Union

**#NEVEROK**

**Diverse Adversities**

*October 2021*

Danielle Bradford

Hertfordshire Students' Union