

**Awarding Gap Project Report**



**November 2022**

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**Notes on terminology:**

*Following recent University advice on terminology describing minority ethnic communities, we use ‘ethnically diverse’, ‘ethnic minority’ or ‘minority ethnic’ to replace BAME in this report.*

*‘Awarding Gap’ is used instead of a more widely known ‘Attainment Gap’.*  *The former indicates that the gap is best understood as an outcome of structural factors, including institutional racism and ethnic bias. Conversely, the latter implies a student deficit model, whereby social and educational factors relating to individual students are the cause*.

# **Introduction**

The Black and Asian minority ethnic students awarding gap has been recognised for some time in higher education, with a significant disparity in the performance of ethnically diverse students compared to their white peers (Surridge, 2008; Singh, 2011; NUS, 2019). While the awarding gap is well documented, contributing factors are under-researched, with evidence often based on small-scale case studies (Thelamour et al, 2019; Chávez and Ramrakhiani, 2020). There is limited understanding of why ethnic minority students do not perform to their full potential or drop out of the university. Several factors have been identified in the literature. These include minority ethnic students feeling inadequately prepared for the conventions of university assessment; perceived unfairness in assessment, and insufficient transparency in marking procedures. High levels of assessment related anxiety amongst the students, especially those who are first in their family to attend university, is also reflected in the research.

Although imperative, assessment is not the only contributory factor. Academic achievement is a multi-dimensional concept, rooted in many variables. The literature cites compelling evidence that the barriers faced by many underrepresented or disadvantaged students reflect structural inequalities (Bamber and Tett, 2000; Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Gorard et al., 2007; NUS, 2019). Research shows that for these students, progression is not a linear developmental path through their degree courses. Capability is not fixed and stable and is strongly tied to feelings of belonging to the institution and fitting in (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003; Thomas, 2015; Burke et al., 2016).

Research also highlights distinct differences between minority ethnic groups in relation to factors that affect their engagement and attainment (Connor et al., 2004; Dhanda, 2010). Ensuring that the voice of these specific groups is heard is crucial to deepen institutional and sector understanding of the barriers to strong academic performance. It will also support the the development of policies, procedures and interventions that can support students from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

The awarding gap in Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) is significant and persistent, and seen across various demographic groups. Over the last 5-year period (2016/17 to 2021/22) the gap between Black and White students ranged from 19.4 to 31.2 percentage points (pp), with the most recent gap being 20.4 pp. The [LJMU Access and Participation plan](https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/~/media/files/ljmu/public-information-documents/student-regulations/guidance-policy-and-process/access-and-participation-plan-202021-to-202425.pdf?la=en) (APP) has specific targets related to the gap reduction. These targets are being revisited/refined in preparation for the next institutional APP plan to be submitted in summer 2023.

As Advance HE reported in 2017, the ‘degree attainment gap has persisted for at least the last decade’ across the sector. They acknowledge that issues and solutions will vary depending on the culture of each institution. Mountford-Zimdars et al (2017) also emphasised that institutions with successful practices in supporting students’ progression focus on “understanding their learners better and more holistically” (p.104).

To better understand the nature of the gap at LJMU, to develop recommendations related to resources and intervention strategies, a dedicated institutional project was launched in 2021-2022. The project, funded by LJMU Attainment Gap Council, responded to sector-wide findings, theoretical debate, and empirical institutional evidence by moving away from a deficit model that put responsibility for change on the individual student. Instead, it sought to identify where specific institutional practices need to change to provide ethnically diverse students with equal opportunities to achieve their best.

## Project objectives

The ‘awarding gap’ phenomenon was investigated from multiple perspectives by using mixed-method research design. The findings were triangulated to provide a comprehensive evidence base to inform institutional recommendations, resources and interventions.

 A distinctive feature of the project was participation of students from minority ethnic backgrounds as researchers and student mentors.

The project team consists of three project leaders: Dr Olatunde Durowoju, Prof Atif Waraich and Dr Elena Zaitseva, a project advisor, Dr Phil Carey and project researchers, Dr Emma Smith and Dr Faith Tissa. Student-researchers who contributed to the project were Reda Madroumi (PSY), Anna John (APS), Deshan Premasiri (BUE), Shivaan Ghaderi (PSY), Aleks Dimitrova (HEA), Mashal Safi (HEA), Mwaka Nanyangwe (PHI), Nina Pal (NAH), Loredana Frau (PSY), and Ana Galdamez Pesantes (PSY). More information is available [on the project site](https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/academic-registry/teaching-and-learning-academy/projects/bridge-the-gap).

# **Methodology**

The project consisted of three parts.

## 1. Statistical exploration of the awarding gap at LJMU

This interrogated institutional attainment data across levels four to six for all undergraduate, young, first degree, home students by ethnicity, considering grade point average (GPA) and type of assessment to identify factors that might contribute to awarding gap. Grade point average was used instead of degree classification to provide a more nuanced understanding of performance.

The data also considered confounding factors such as POLAR/IMD quintile, age, gender and being first in family. Data sets across the full lifecycle from three cohorts (graduating in 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21) were analysed.

1**.1 Sample, descriptive statistics and differences in mean**

Student records (n = 8953) included in the analysis were for young, UK domiciled students who completed their degree in 3 years. As such, sandwich year and integrated masters’ students were not included in the analysis. Demographic variables included ethnicity, sex, Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) quintile, First-in-Family, Young Participation of Local Areas (POLAR4) quintile and completion of integrated LJMU foundation year.

One-Way ANOVA using Games-Howell post-hoc tests were used to compare group differences where group sizes are vastly unequal the assumption of homogeneity of variances is violated.

UCAS points/grades on entry were not included in the analysis due to complexity of the internal data-recording processes.

**1.2 Regression analysis**

A multiple logistical regression model to predict GPA from Sex, Ethnicity (Arab, Asian, Black, Mixed Race, White), IMD, First-in-Family, and Foundation Route (LJMU integrated foundation course) was built using IBM SPSS v.28. The dataset consisted of 8898 records. Fifty-five student records were omitted from the model as they were domiciled in Wales, Northern Ireland, or Scotland and did not have an IMD quintile.

Outcome/independent variable was Grade Point Average (GPA), with the following independent variables:

* Sex: Dichotomous ‘Male/Female’ variable with ‘Female’ as the reference.
* First-in-Family: Dichotomous ‘Yes/No’ variable with ‘No’ as the reference.
* Foundation-route: Dichotomous ‘Yes/No’ variable with ‘No’ as the reference
* IMD set as scale variable.
* Ethnicity: Dummy variables were created for Arab, Asian, Black, Mixed, and ‘Other’ ethnicity with White omitted from the model as the reference variable.

## 2. Understanding ethnic minority students' lived experience and developing and piloting mentoring model

This part of the study focused on understanding the ‘lived’ experience of students at university. It explored the challenges they face in their day-to-day studies, as well as how the curriculum, university environment, teaching practice and assessment approaches affect their engagement and performance. An aim was to identify ‘critical’ points in the student life cycle that might exacerbate the awarding gap. Another aim was to develop a mentoring model that could enable student-mentors to better understand the issues that their fellow minority ethnic students are facing. This would allow them to better address these issues through peer-support and advice.

There were three components to this part of the research:

**2.1. Student survey on experience of assessment and feedback**

Assessment and associated factors (including perceptions of feedback [summative and formative], understanding of assessment criteria/standards, organisation and preparation for assignments, peer-support and personal tutor guidance) were explored via an institutional survey.

**2.2 Focus groups and interviews**

Three student focus groups and one in-depth interview were conducted by student-researchers and a project researcher. These covered a variety of topics, from experience of transition to university and interaction with peers and staff to usefulness of resources and advice to future students. Student-researchers were involved in the data analysis and developing recommendations.

**2.3 Mentoring programme**

Student-researchers were trained as mentors to help their fellow students to succeed in their studies. Mentor training and guidance on mentoring practice was based on a coaching approach to mentoring. 9 LJMU students signed up to be mentored; 3 students met at least 3 times; 2 met as a pair, twice; 1 for two sessions, 3 for one session.

## 3. Gathering staff perceptions on assessment approaches and strategies

Part three examined staff thoughts on the role of assessment and feedback in helping students demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. Academics were asked about the diversity of their cohorts, how they define and design inclusive assessment, and how students are supported with understanding marking criteria and assessment briefs. Finally, interviewees were asked what actions the University should take to address the awarding gap and improve the success rate of ethnically diverse students. Semi-structured interviews with 29 academics took place between May- and June 2022.

Ethics approval for all stages of the project was granted by LJMU Research Ethics and Governance (UREC reference: 21/TLA/002).

This report outlines key findings and recommendations from the project. The executive summary provides a brief overview of the results from each part of the project. This is followed by detailed report of the findings. Links to full reports for each part of the research will be available [on the project site](https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/academic-registry/teaching-and-learning-academy/projects/bridge-the-gap) later in November.

# **Executive summary**

## 1. Statistical exploration of the awarding gap at LJMU

### 1.1 GPA predictors (regression model)

The regression model revealed significant differences in GPA for students from Black and Asian ethnic backgrounds, with Sex, IMD, first-in-family, and Foundation route also showing a statistically significant effect. All other conditions being equal, Black students had a much lower predicted grade point average (GPA) than White students. However, being Asian, male, first-in-family or a student from a lower socio-economic background were also significant drivers of lower predicted GPA.

While the regression model demonstrated significance, there was high variability around the model regression line. This indicates that GPA, and ultimately degree award, is still largely unexplained by the available demographic data of LJMU students. This is in line with the Office for Students characterisation that a large portion of the gap is ‘unexplained’.

Variables that were found to exert a significant effect on predicted GPA outcomes were further examined to understand the compounding effects of ethnicity, socio-economic background, sex, first-in-family, and completion of an integrated foundation year upon observed GPA.

### 1.2 Observed GPA (intersectionality of Ethnicity, IMD, Sex, First-in-Family)

For Black and Asian students from the lowest socioeconomic group (IMD Q1), GPA was significantly lower (60% and 61%, respectively) than for their White peers (63%). This significant difference was also extended to Black students from IMD Q2 (60% versus 64% comparing to White students). This was also true, and more pronounced, for Black male (58%) students compared to White male (64%) students.

White students received higher GPA marks than Black and Asian students across all socioeconomic quintile groupings and regardless of sex, first-in-family, and foundation-route.

GPA of Black (59%) and Asian (62%) students who were the first in their family to attend university was significantly lower than White students (64%). This was also true for Black (61%) and Asian (63%) students who were not first-in-family when compared to White students (65%).

### 1.3 Performance by assessment category

The following assessment categories were included in the analysis: Essay/Coursework/Report; Artefact/Tech/Practical; Exam, Test. Portfolio, Dissertation, Reflection and Presentation.

Average attainment data, split by level, was normalised to a 60% Good Honours benchmark (GHB) to understand which assessment types may contribute to lower GPA marks for Black and Asian students and the marks needed for a 2:1 or above.

At level 4, Exams have the greatest impact, with significantly lower marks received by Black and Asian students compared to White students. In addition, Black students’ Essay/Coursework/Report marks were below the GHB, significantly lower than their White peers.

At level 5, Exams continue have the greatest impact for Black and Asian students (both sig. lower than White students’ marks). Essay/Coursework/Report and Reflection marks for Black students were also significantly lower than White students. While Artefact/Tech/Practical marks were above the GHB for Black students, this was still significantly lower than for their White peers.

At level 6, both Black and Asian received significantly lower Exam marks than their White peers. While Essay/Coursework/Report marks were on or above GHB for Black and Asian students, White students received significantly higher marks.

For Dissertation, while Black and Asian students both received marks above the GHB, for Asian students this was significantly lower than their White peers. The presence of a significant difference between Asian and White but not Black and White students is likely due to the greater variability in mean difference between Black and White students.

### 1.4 Impact of integrated foundation year

The regression model indicated that, all other things being equal, completion of an integrated foundation year prior to progressing to a 3-year undergraduate degree had a significant effect on increasing predicted GPA.

When observed GPA was intersected for Black, Asian and White students by foundation-route, completing a foundation year appeared to have a ‘levelling’ effect for Black and Asian students.

For students who completed an integrated foundation year, no significant differences were seen between Black (65%), Asian (63%), and White (65%) students. However, for students who did not complete a foundation year, GPA was significantly lower for Black (60%), and Asian (62%) students compared to White students (64%).

## 2. Capturing ethnic minority students' lived experience and developing and piloting mentoring model

### 2.1 Student survey on experience of assessment and feedback

Satisfaction with the range of assessments offered on a programme varied between Black, Asian, and White students. Asian students were the most satisfied (80%), White (72%) students were less satisfied and Black students were the least satisfied (58%).

Black students are more likely to experience extreme and high anxiety when completing reports (33%) compared to Asian (26%) and White (20%) students. Both Black and Asian students reported extreme and high anxiety when completing Essays (39%) compared to White students (26%). A greater proportion of Black and Asian students felt extreme/high anxiety towards individual work (17% and 18% respectively) compared to White students (8%).

At the same time, Black students are less likely to experience extreme/high anxiety towards presentations (38%) compared to Asian (42%) and White (58%) students. Similarly, Black students were less anxious about group work (12%) compared to Asian (21%) and White (29%) students.

Asian students were more likely to agree that the feedback they received was useful for future assessments (81%), while agreement was less prominent among White students (68%). At the same time, only 48% of Black students thought it was useful.

Black students had the lowest proportion of agreement to the statement, ‘comments help me understand how to perform better in future assessments’ (59%), while a notably higher proportion of White (71%) students agreed that feedback was helpful. Asian students showed the highest proportion of agreement (86%).

More Black students chose to comment on issues related to unfair marking and perceived discrimination compared to other demographic groups. As least four respondents considered unfair marking as a contributory factor to the awarding gap.

Black students commented that feedback often did not explain what they had done wrong, did not clarify the grade given, did not show clearly how students lost marks, or failed to highlight specific areas for improvement. The lack of transparency in the feedback was directly associated with lack of fairness.

When asked if the mark was reflected in feedback, 69% of White students agreed. Agreement amongst Asian students was highest (78%), while Black students was among the lowest (55%).

More Black students thought that feedback was too critical and did not highlight what they had done well (41%), compared to a lower proportion of White (33%) and Asian (36%) students.

When asked if they agreed that assessment briefs helped them to understand what to address in the assessment, Black students had the lowest agreement rate (50%) compared to White (67%) and Asian (78%) students.

In line with quantitative findings, a relatively high number of comments across different ethnic minority groups suggested that assessment briefs often need further explanation. Black students commented on the need to have additional one-on-one time with lecturers/tutors, especially when it comes to coursework. The comments also indicated that Black students have difficulties contacting their tutors, especially in relation to their questions about assessment being answered.

When asked if they felt confident to ask a lecturer for help or clarification regarding assessment, over two thirds of Asian (73%) and White (71%) students agreed (73%). However, a lesser proportion of Black students (62%) felt this way.

Less than half Black and White students (45% and 46% respectively) feel confident to speak up if they perceived an issue with how their work was marked, with just over half of Asian students (55%) feeling confident. A greater proportion of Black students appeared to feel strongly about this (24%) compared to White (15%) and Asian (10%) students.

Black students were less likely to ask other students for support (46%) and were more likely to seek help from friends and family (38%) than Asian (49% and 23% respectively) and white (59% and 29% respectively)

International students particularly struggled to understand the LJMU assessment framework, criteria and procedures. Many ended up seeking guidance from alumni of their own ethnic background.

### 2.2. Student focus groups, interviews and mentoring

Making friends is a normal part of the university experience. However, some minority ethnic students find this difficult and report feeling lonely and isolated. These students acknowledged that when they made friends, they were mostly from a similar ethnic group. Students in white dominated faculties/schools tend to feel more socially excluded and saw this as detrimental to their academic performance.

Past and present experiences of racism and microaggression has made some minority ethnic students anxious, stressed and distrustful of the system. They admitted that these encounters had drastically reduced their agency, ability to participate, willingness to ask for help or approach their studies optimistically*.*

The focus group, interviews and mentoring sessions revealed that many ethnically diverse students are left behind in terms of their understanding of university systems, regulations, and requirements, as well as what students needs to do succeed in a specific assessment.

Groups also discussed how life and personal pressures undermines wellbeing and this can lead to reduced motivation and drive to achieve. They provided examples of friends who had dropped out of university as a consequence, whilst others simply ‘hobbled’ through the system to finish with an acceptable grade.

Students commented that it would be helpful to have more lecturers who are from the same background as them. This better represent cohorts, as well as providing access to tutors who may better understand and relate to their life experiences.

Training for staff to increase awareness of the bias and to create an inclusive environment for ethnically diverse students was also suggested.

## 3. Staff perceptions of inclusive assessment design and the reasons for the awarding gap

The general consideration of many staff in relation to assessment design focused on *meeting the learning outcomes of the module* or *adhering to the requirements of the accrediting body* for their course. Consideration of inclusivity was only reported by a minority. Those who this reported utilising at least one of the following: i) *use of open-ended questions*; ii) *student self-selection of tasks*, and iii) *less emphasis on referencing and grammar*.

When asked specifically about designing inclusive assessment for a diverse student population, staff mentioned allowance for the language skills of students who do not have English as first language. Some respondents also stated that they consider religious and cultural matters and/or have diversified reading lists. A number of staff mentioned treating everyone the same or equally. A sizeable number of respondents reported not thinking about how to help diverse students do well specifically when designing assessment.

Many staff do not use formative assessment and reported low student engagement as a reason for this. Additional factors were concern over increasing student anxiety or adding to the heavy workload of academic staff.

When asked about accessible assessment briefs and marking criteria, staff mentioned dedicated workshops, seminars, lectures and one-to-one sessions. Some also offered assignment clinics. Participants also mentioned that they provided clear rubrics and marking schemes. In the context of this, some respondents reported low student engagement with these opportunities.

When asked about reasons for the awarding gap, some interviewees commented that they were unsure what the reasons where. Identified factors can be grouped into race and socio-economic issues, as well as environmental and cultural features. Only a few participants considered the role and influence of teaching and assessment practices.

Staff recommendations included: changing the mindset; engaging students in identifying solutions; acknowledging the issue and training staff in inclusive assessment design; encouraging authentic student voice through providing routes for anonymous student feedback, and more societies for students to feel included.

Many LJMU staff wanted to know how to factor diversity considerations into their teaching and assessment practices. Some reflected on how they had attended the interview to talk through and get ideas on what they can do.

# **Recommendations**

Any initiatives or actions emerging as a result of this project are likely to take time to have any significant impact. Interventions need to be embedded across all departments, outcomes monitored, and actions adjusted if/when needed. Taking a long-term, holistic institutional approach is important. The institution needs to commit to resourcing staff development and student support and invest in evaluation of the interventions.

Students must be at the centre of any actions that are taken. They should be partners in addressing the gap and involved in the discussions and action planning from the beginning.

The project findings indicate that reducing the awarding gap requires a variety of different initiatives and approaches to address entrenched racial inequalities. The recommendations outlined below are based on triangulation of data and analysis from the three sub-projects that contributed to Awarding Gap Project. These are divided into two sections:

* The first set of recommendations explicitly focus on issues pertaining to ethnic minority students and, as such, offer much more assertive action to close the awarding gap.
* The second deals with enhanced processes to support students’ sense of belonging and understanding of assessment conventions. It is acknowledged that these are not specifically aimed at students from ethnic minority backgrounds. However, the data clearly indicates that they will be of value. Arguably, the intersection between ethnicity and other forms of disadvantage may be that enhanced activity in this area will have a positive impact on these groups.

## Activity specifically aimed at supporting students from ethnic minorities.

1. Conduct further research on the impact that Foundation Year has in reducing awarding gap for minority Ethnic students. This can test the hypothesis that the foundation year provides the opportunity to develop university-appropriate study skills or other self-regulatory factors that benefit the student in the long run. It can also identify how these opportunities can be fast-tracked in Level 4 for the sake of direct entrants.
2. In line with Race Equality Charter recommendations, revise staff recruitment processes to encourage a more ethnically diverse staff profile across the organisation.
3. Target school and community outreach to encourage recruitment of students from diverse backgrounds.
4. Provide staff training in anti-racist assessment processes as part of a diversified curriculum so that student from ethnic minorities can connect content and assessment to their lived experience.
5. Train students as EDI champions to ensure that the student voice is clear and present in institutional discussions associated with addressing the awarding gaps.
6. Maintain dialogue with students on the themes unearthed by this research and ensure that the perspectives of students from minority ethnic groups are heard.
7. Consider how Equality Impact Assessment across all university functions can address how the organisation activity supports students from minority backgrounds.
8. Develop a wider LJMU mentoring/buddying scheme for students from minority backgrounds to provide a point of contact and listening ear. Support this with bespoke resources. Consider mechanisms to pay student mentors or reward their efforts through micro-accreditation, award of academic credit or targeted employability interventions.
9. Provide bespoke resources for international students to help them understand UK university processes and feel integrated into the LJMU student community.
10. Develop mechanisms for more effective sharing of successful approaches and strategies that can be supported with data from APP dashboard.
11. Expand on Diversity in the Workplace training for both staff and students to address issues associated with ethnicity, racism, allyship and microaggressions.
12. Invite role models from minority ethnic communities as guest speakers and subject experts.
13. Explore how support services scan reach out to minority ethic students, bearing in mind that the existing literature provides cautions against targeted interventions that suggest that students from minority background lack self-determination and need extra support.

## Enhanced processes to support students’ sense of belonging and understanding of assessment conventions.

1. Assessment literacy
2. Support assessment literacy from induction through information and activity that helps students to understand university requirements and common conventions associated with assessment. Revisit and reinforce this in extended induction or reinduction later in Semester 1 to strengthen key messages. Identify key transition points and ensure that assessment literacy is addressed in those so that students will understand increasing levels of expectation.
3. Provide assessment skills sessions to help with preparation for exams, essays, coursework and report writing. A range of exemplar assessments will help students to understand what is expected of them. Provision of a single example is discouraged as it will provide a ‘model answer’.
4. Feedback Literacy
5. Support feedback literacy by explaining how student should ‘read’ feedback, identifying core feedback terminology and clarifying the internal and external moderation process to increase confidence in the fairness of assessment. This will address students’ perceptions of unfairness in marking.
6. Develop accessible and inclusive assignment briefs by clarifying assessment requirements, using variety of formats/media, avoiding dry academic language, and making sure its content enables students from all backgrounds to demonstrate their ability and engage with the task.
7. Design accessible feedback by increasing usability and ‘actionability’ of the feedback, making it clear to students where marks were lost and how to perform better in future assignments.
8. Provide marking ‘surgeries’ where students can engage in marking to help them understand the process of self-assessment.
9. Belonging
	1. Use pre-enrolment activities to support the development of close and trusting relationships between students and staff prior to starting the course. In line with this, provide opportunities for social interaction between students in pre-induction and during transition.

# **Detailed Findings**

## 1**.** Statistical Analysis of Attainment Data

The aim of the statistical analysis was to investigate the influence of ethnicity and other intersecting demographic variables, such as socioeconomic background and sex, on degree outcome using grade point average (GPA).

An institutional data set consisting of 8,953 student records from three cohorts of young (under 21 at enrolment), full-time, home students, who completed their degree in three years and received an award (First class, 2:1, 2:2, or 3rd). Three cohorts were students who graduated in in 2018/19 (cohort 1), 2019/20 (cohort 2), and 2020/21 (cohort 3).

LJMU is a predominantly White institution. In 2020/21, 87.23% of UK 25,029 domiciled (home) students were from a White ethnic background with far fewer ethnically diverse students (4.54% Asian, 2.86% Black, and 3.44% Mixed-race students). Less than 1% of students were from an Arab, Chinese, or 'Other' ethnic background, and Gypsy or Traveller students are particularly underrepresented with often single student admissions per academic year. Fewer than 1% of students refuse to share their ethnic background (LJMU Composition of the Student Body report, 2021/22).

The ethnic composition of students used in the analysis across the three cohorts (Table 1) was close to the composition of the 2020/21 student body, and so is felt to be representative of the target student population. The proportions of ethnically diverse students were relatively stable across the three cohorts and so data was pooled for subsequent analysis to increase statistical power.

| Ethnicity | 1617\_1819 | 1718\_1920 | 1819\_2021 | Total | 1617\_1819 | 1718\_1920 | 1819\_2021 | Total |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **n** | **n** | **n** | **n** | **%** | **%** | **%** | **%** |
| Arab | 18 | 25 | 16 | 59 | 0.6% | 0.8% | 0.5% | 0.7% |
| Asian | 108 | 115 | 99 | 322 | 3.9% | 3.7% | 3.3% | 3.6% |
| Black | 47 | 72 | 52 | 171 | 1.7% | 2.3% | 1.7% | 1.9% |
| Chinese | 7 | 6 | 14 | 27 | 0.3% | 0.2% | 0.5% | 0.3% |
| Gypsy or Traveller |  | 1 | 1 | 2 |  | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% |
| Information refused |  |  | 3 | 3 |  |  | 0.1% | 0.0% |
| Mixed | 98 | 107 | 123 | 328 | 3.5% | 3.4% | 4.1% | 3.7% |
| Other | 7 | 7 | 9 | 23 | 0.3% | 0.2% | 0.3% | 0.3% |
| White | 2501 | 2801 | 2716 | 8018 | 89.8% | 89.4% | 89.5% | 89.6% |
| Total cohort | 2786 | 3134 | 3033 | 8953 |  |  |  |  |

Table 1. Summary of student population (n) by Ethnicity and Cohort. Column percent (%) shows proportion of students by Ethnic group and cohort.

### Demographics

Female students across the three combined cohorts were over-represented for those from Mixed (60.1%) and White (58.5%) ethnic backgrounds, with Arab (54.2%), Chinese (51.9%), Black (50.9%) and Asian (50.6%) students being relatively equal.

Over three-quarters of Arab (79.7%) and Black (76.6%) students were from the most deprived areas (IMD Q1 & Q2) with over half of Asian (68.3%) and Chinese (59.3%) students being from the most deprived areas. Less than half of Mixed race (46%) students were from the most deprived areas, as were a notably lesser proportion of White (29.9%) students.

Almost all Chinese (92.6%) students were the first in their family to attend university. A notably lesser proportion, yet still over half of Asian (67.1%), Arab (61%), White (59.3%) and Mixed race (57.9%) students were first-in-family, whereas less than half of Black (42.7%) students were the first to attend university.

Over half of Black (64.9%), Arab (64.4%) and Chinese (59.3%) students were from areas of lower participation in HE (POLAR4 Q1 & Q2), whereas less than half Mixed-race (40.9%), Asian (38.2%) and White (35.9%) students were from POLAR4 Q1 & Q2.

A greater proportion of Black (12.9%), Chinese (11.1%), Asian (7.1%), Arab (6.8%) and Mixed-race (6.1%) students who completed a 3-year undergraduate programme **completed a foundation year** at LJMU, compared to 4% of White students.

### Regression model

A multiple regression model used independent variables of Sex, Ethnicity Arab, Asian, Black, Mixed Race, White), IMD, First-in-Family, and Foundation Route (LJMU integrated foundation course) to predict the outcome variable of grade point average (GPA).

Young participation by area (POLAR) quintile data was omitted from the model due to co-correlation with IMD quintile data. UCAS points/grades on entry were not included in the analysis due to complexity the internal data-recording processes.

The regression model significantly (p < 0.001) predicted GPA based upon the independent variables. While this indicates that dependent variables in the model have a significant effect upon the outcome variable (GPA), a low *R2* value (0.39) represents high variability (scatter) around the model regression line. This suggests that GPA, and ultimately degree award, is largely unexplained by the available demographic data. Whilst acknowledging these limitations in the predictive power of the regression model, several significant and important trends still emerged:

The model indicated that, with all other variables being equal, average predicted GPA was 3.7 percentage points (pp) lower for Black students and 1.8 pp lower for Asian students compared to White students. At the same time, male students’ GPA was predicted to be 1.6 pp lower compared to female students, and 0.7 pp lower for those who were the first in their family to attend university.

For IMD, an increase of one quintile (e.g., Q1 to Q2, Q2 to Q3) was significantly associated with a 0.48 pp increase in GPA. As such, the difference in predicted average GPA for students from the most deprived area (Q1) compared to the least deprived area (Q5) was 2.39 pp.

At the same time, students who completed a foundation year prior to progressing onto an undergraduate programme were predicted a GPA of 1.7 pp above their peers.

In summary, all other things being equal, our findings confirmed that Black students appear to be most impacted by the largest decrease in GPA, with Asian, male, first-in-family, and lower socio-economic students also being significantly affected by lower predicted GPA. At the same time, the completion of a n integrated foundation year had a significant effect on predicted increase in GPA.

### Intersectionality for Black and Asian students

While the regression model shows the influence of each independent variable whilst controlling for intersectionality, demographic data shows that a greater proportion of Black and Asian students are male, are from the most deprived areas, and have completed a foundation year when compared to their White peers. To understand the compounding effect of variables that had a significant effect on GPA outcome, One-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate differences in mean GPA marks, and data was visualised using box plots. Notably, White students received higher GPA marks than Black and Asian students across all socioeconomic quintile groupings, and regardless of Sex, first-in-family, and foundation-route.

For Black and Asian students from the lowest socioeconomic group (IMD Q1; Figure 1), GPA was significantly (*p* < 0.005) lower (60% and 61%, respectively) than their White peers (63%). This significant (*p* < 0.005) difference also extended to Black students from IMD Q2 (60% versus 64% comparing to White students). No significant differences were detected for Quintiles 3 to 5; however this may be due to low numbers for Black students, especially for Q4 (*n* = 5) and Q5 (*n* = 9).

Figure 1. Boxplot of Grade Point Average (GPA) by IMD for Black, Asian, and White students. Internal box plot line indicates the median, with X indicating the mean. Whiskers indicate minimum and maximum values. Dots show outliers.



Black and Asian female (62%; Figure 2) students received significantly (*p* < 0.05) lower marks than White female (65%) students. This was also true, and more pronounced, for Black male (58%) students compared to White male (64%) students.



Figure 2. Boxplot of Grade Point Average (GPA) by Sex for Black, Asian, and White students. Internal box plot line indicates the median, with X indicating the mean. Whiskers indicate minimum and maximum values. Dots show outliers.

GPA for Black (59%) and Asian (62%) students who were the first in their family (Figure 3) to attend university was significantly (*p* < 0.001) lower than White students (64%). This was also true for Black (61%) and Asian (63%) students who were not first-in-family when compared to White (65%) students.

Figure 3. Boxplot of Grade Point Average (GPA) by First-in-Family for Black, Asian, and White students. Internal box plot line indicates the median, with X indicating the mean. Whiskers indicate minimum and maximum values. Dots show outliers.



For students who completed an integrated foundation year (Figure 4) before progressing to a 3-year undergraduate degree, no significant differences were seen between Black (65%), Asian (63%), and White (65%) students. However, for students who did not complete a foundation year, GPA was significantly (*p* < 0.001) lower for Black (60%), and Asian (62%) students compared to White students (64%).

Figure 4. Boxplot of Grade Point Average (GPA) by Foundation Route for Black, Asian, and White students. Internal box plot line indicates the median, with X indicating the mean. Whiskers indicate minimum and maximum values. Dots show outliers.



### Attainment by assessment type

Average grade data (%) for Black, Asian, and White students was normalised to a 60% Good Honours benchmark (GHB) and split by level to highlight if particular assessment types act as a pinch-point or critical challenge for Black and Asian students (Figure 5). Anomalous reflection grades at level 4 can be attributed to the World-of-Work module at level 4 where all completing students received ~

Figure 5. Attainment data by level and assessment type for Black, Asian, and White students by Level. One-way ANOVA with Games-Howell post-hoc identified significant differences in mean attainment values for Arab, Asian, Black and Mixed Race compared to White students (\*p < 0.005; \*\*p < 0.05).

At level 4 (Figure 5.a), Exam grades appear to present the greatest challenge with significantly (*p* < 0.005) lower grades being received by Black (-6 pp) and Asian (-3 pp) students compared to White students (0 pp). Black students’ marks for Essay/Coursework/Report were 2 pp below the GHB and were significantly (*p* < 0.05) lower than their White peers.

At level 5 (Figure 5.b), Exam marks continue to be significantly (*p* < 0.005) lower than White students for Black (-8 pp) and Asian (-5 pp) students. Essay/Coursework/Report and Reflection marks for Black students (-1 pp) were also significantly (*p* < 0.05) lower than White students. While Artefact/Tech/Practical marks were 5 pp above the GHB for Black students, this was still significantly (*p* < 0.05) lower than their White peers.

At level 6 (Figure 5.c) Black students’ average exam mark was 1 pp below the GHB and both Black and Asian students receiving significantly (*p* < 0.005) lower marks than their White peers. While Essay/Coursework/Report marks were on or above GHB for Black and Asian students, mean marks were significantly (*p* < 0.005) lower than White students. For Dissertation, while Black and Asian marks were above the GHB, Asian students received significantly (*p* < 0.05) lower marks than their White peers.

## 2. Exploring ethnic minority students lived experience and developing and piloting mentoring model

### Student Survey on Experience of Assessment and Feedback

All undergraduate LJMU students were invited to take part in the survey. Out of 699 responses, 687 valid responses were returned. Almost twice as many female students responded compared to males (64% versus 33%). 85% of responses were from home (UK) students, and 15% from international (including EU) students. Majority of responses were from white background students (71%), followed by students from Asian background (12%) and Black students (6%). Mixed race and ‘Other’ contributed to 9% of all responses. Representation of all minority ethnic groups in the survey was higher than the University average (Table 2). [a link to the full version of the survey]

Table 2. Survey population by demographics

|  Ethnicity | Survey (% of population) | LJMU average (2020/2021) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Black | 6% | 3% |
| Asian | 12% | 7% |
| Mixed race | 5% | 3% |
| Other  | 4% | 4% |
| White | 71% | 83% |
| Prefer not to say | 2% | 0.4% |

### Perception of assessment methods

When asked if the range of assessment methods on their programme allows them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, **77%** of LJMU students agreed with the statement. **71%** were satisfied with the range of assessments and **70%** were happy with the number of assessments per module. **69%** agreed that feedback they received had been generally useful for later assessments.

Asian students were most satisfied with how assessment methods allow them to demonstrate knowledge and skills (84%), followed by mixed race (79%) students (Figure 6). Students who indicated ‘Other’ ethnicity, and those who preferred not to say were least satisfied (67% and 64% respectively).

Figure 6.

When satisfaction with the range of assessments was broken down by ethnicity, Asian students were the most satisfied group (80%), while students from who preferred not to say and Black students were least satisfied (36% and 58% respectively). Statistical significance test demonstrates that difference between **Asian** and Black, **white** and **Black**, and **white** and **Other** demographic groups was statistically significant.

### Perception of usefulness of feedback

Asian students and those who preferred not to say were more likely to agree that feedback they received was useful for future assessments (81% and 82% respectively). At the same time, only 48% of Black students thought it was useful. 10% of Black students choose strongly disagree (highest percent among all demographic groups) (Figure 7)

Figure 7.

Black students had the highest proportion of disagree and strongly disagree responses in response to the statement, ‘comments help me understand how to perform better in future assessments’ (22%) (Figure 8).

When asked if the mark was reflected in the feedback, 68% of LJMU students agreed (Figure Y). Agreement amongst Asian and mixed-race students was highest (78%), while Black students were most likely to be strongly disagree compared to other groups (10%).

Differences between Asian and other groups of students in ‘comments help me understand how to perform...’ was statistically significant.

More Other and Black students think that feedback was too critical and did not highlight what they have done well (45% and 42% respectively) compared to institutional average of 34% .

Figure 8.

Figure 9.

### Assessment related anxiety

The most anxiety provoking method of assessment for all LJMU students was examination, with 65% reporting either extreme or high levels of anxiety (Table 3). This was followed by presentation (53%). The least anxiety provoking method was a reflective account, with only 9% of students reporting heightened levels of anxiety.

Black and Other ethnicity students are more likely to be anxious, compared to the LJMU average, when doing tests and reports.

For presentatio**n**, there was statistically significant differences between white and three other groups (Asian, Black and ‘Prefer not to say’), with white students having a significantly higher level of anxiety.

Black students appeared to be less anxious about practical/experimental assignments and group work.

Table 3. Level of anxiety associated with assessment methods

| Assessment method  | Extreme or high anxiety  | No anxiety | Notes on results by ethnicity group |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Examination | 65% | 3% | Students from ‘Other’ ethnicity demonstrated the highest level of anxiety (82%) |
| Presentation | 53% | 7% | Black students and those who ‘preferred not to say’ were less likely to be anxious (38% and 27% respectively) |
| Essay | 28% | 11% | Black and Asian students appeared to be more anxious than students from other ethnicity groups (39% each)  |
| Report | 23% | 12% | Black and Other ethnicity students were more likely to be anxious, comparing to average LJMU student (33% and 37% respectively) |
| Test | 20% | 16% | Black students and Other ethnicity students were more likely to be anxious (24% and 36% respectively) |
| Practical/Experiment | 13% | 20% | Other ethnicity students were more likely to be anxious (21%), while Black students were less likely (8%). |
| Reflective account | 9% | 20% | Black students were more likely to be anxious (17%) |
| Group work | 27% | 16% | Black students were less likely to be anxious (12%) |
| Individual work | 10% | 28% | Black (17%), Asian (18%), and other ethnicity (24%) students were more likely to be anxious |

### Perceptions of assessment briefs

When asked if they agreed that assessment briefs helped them to understand what to cover in the assessment, 67% of LJMU students agreed and 22% disagreed (Table C). Black students had the lowest agreement rate after those who ‘preferred not to say’ (50% and 45% respectively).

While 67% of LJMU students also agreed that they understood from the briefs how to do well in the assessment, those who preferred not to indicate their ethnicity, expressed most disagreement (63%), followed by Black students (29%).

Table 4: Clarity of assessments briefs: areas to cover by ethnicity

| Ethnicity | Agree | Neutral | Disagree |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Black | 50% | 12% | 38% |
| Asian | 78% | 9% | 13% |
| White | 67% | 11% | 22% |
| Mixed | 66% | 9% | 25% |
| Other | 67% | 20% | 13% |
| Prefer not to say | 45% | 0% | 55% |
| LJMU Total | 67% | 11% | 22% |

### Confidence of asking staff for clarification and seeking support

When asked if they felt confident to ask a lecturer for help or clarification regarding assessment, Asian and mixed-race student felt most confident (73% and 81% respectively) (Figure 10). Other, those who ‘preferred not to say’ and Black students felt least confident, with Black students having the highest level of strongly disagree responses (7%).

Figure 10.

Less than half LJMU students (48%) feel confident to speak up if they feel there has been an issue with how their work was marked (Figure 11). The confidence is lowest among those who preferred not to say, Other, Black and White students.

Figure 11.

Over 30% of Black, Asian and Other students often (i.e., combined ‘always- very often- often’) seek additional support from lecturers. This is in contrast with white students, who are less likely to ask lecturers for help (20%). The difference between white and Black and White and Asian students is significant.

Personal tutor support is used most frequently by students from Other and Asian background (Figure 12).

Support from other students is most frequently sought by Other and mixed-race students. Black students are least likely to ask other students for support.

At the same time Black students were more likely to seek help from friends and family than the LJMU average (38% versus 28%). They are also more likely to go to ‘other ‘sources of support.

Figure `12.

### External pressures or challenges impacting on completing assessment tasks

A high percent of Black and ‘Other’ ethnicity students said that family care responsibilities **always** create external pressure (20% and 21% respectively).

Table 5. External pressures or challenges impacting on completing assessment tasks by ethnicity

| Survey question | Ethnicity | Always | Very often | Often | Sometimes | Rarely | Very rarely | Never |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Part-time work responsibilities | **Black** | 21% | 12% | 14% | 21% | 9% | 5% | 19% |
| **Asian** | 12% | 10% | 15% | 23% | 12% | 9% | 20% |
| **White** | 17% | 14% | 18% | 15% | 7% | 7% | 23% |
| **Mixed** | 22% | 13% | 16% | 9% | 0% | 6% | 34% |
| **Other** | 14% | 14% | 25% | 21% | 0% | 7% | 18% |
| **Prefer not to say** | 36% | 9% | 18% | 18% | 0% | 0% | 18% |
| Family care responsibilities | **Black** | 20% | 8% | 13% | 30% | 8% | 0% | 23% |
| **Asian** | 13% | 6% | 10% | 28% | 13% | 9% | 23% |
| **White** | 8% | 8% | 9% | 18% | 12% | 11% | 35% |
| **Mixed** | 13% | 3% | 19% | 19% | 13% | 6% | 28% |
| **Other** | 21% | 17% | 17% | 17% | 10% | 3% | 14% |
| **Prefer not to say** | 18% | 9% | 27% | 18% | 9% | 0% | 18% |
| Reduced privacy and space to work at home | **Black** | 10% | 10% | 13% | 15% | 18% | 8% | 26% |
| **Asian** | 6% | 5% | 19% | 23% | 13% | 14% | 21% |
| **White** | 9% | 8% | 15% | 21% | 11% | 11% | 25% |
| **Mixed** | 3% | 10% | 13% | 13% | 10% | 10% | 42% |
| **Other** | 7% | 24% | 10% | 10% | 7% | 21% | 21% |
| **Prefer not to say** | 27% | 9% | 27% | 18% | 9% | 0% | 9% |
| Reduced availability or access to IT resources | **Black** | 5% | 3% | 5% | 21% | 15% | 18% | 33% |
| **Asian** | 3% | 4% | 5% | 18% | 23% | 13% | 35% |
| **White** | 3% | 3% | 5% | 12% | 15% | 17% | 46% |
| **Mixed** | 3% | 0% | 3% | 13% | 19% | 28% | 34% |
| **Other** | 3% | 17% | 7% | 24% | 3% | 14% | 31% |
| **Prefer not to say** | 0% | 9% | 9% | 55% | 0% | 0% | 27% |
| Other personal issues | **Black** | 15% | 15% | 18% | 24% | 15% | 6% | 6% |
| **Asian** | 11% | 16% | 9% | 21% | 12% | 12% | 20% |
| **White** | 12% | 10% | 19% | 26% | 9% | 6% | 18% |
| **Mixed** | 10% | 13% | 16% | 32% | 3% | 7% | 19% |
| **Other** | 16% | 32% | 16% | 20% | 8% | 0% | 8% |
| **Prefer not to say** | 33% | 11% | 33% | 11% | 0% | 0% | 11% |

### Themes from comments

Students were asked to provide free text comments on how their experience of assessment could be improved. The comments were thematically analysed by the project researchers (student and staff). Several prominent themes emerged from the students’ feedback.

Those who commented on positive experience of assessment (majority of them were from white background), believed they were assessed fairly and were able to ask for clarification on a mark, when needed. Some suggested emphasising more what was done well, so that it could encourage/motivate them in future assignments.

#### Need for better assessment briefs, more evenly spaced deadlines, and increased academic and assessment related support

Students across all demographic groups wanted assignments to be well-spaced across the semester and provided with more time to complete them. Black students often used term ‘reduce pressure’.

*Space out assignments and assessments. I currently have multiple assignments due this*  *December as well as assessments in January but before this I had weeks of nothing or only 1*  *assignment and everything* *feels bunched up and very stressful at the moment (1st year*  *Asian female, home)*

In line with quantitative findings, a relatively high number of comments across different ethnic minority groups suggested that assessment briefs often need further explanation. Black students in particular commented on the need to have additional one-on-one time with lecturers/tutors, especially when it comes to assessments like coursework. The comments also demonstrated that Black students have difficulties connecting with their tutors, especially in relation to their questions about assessment being answered.

*The lecturers need to be more open to providing examples that make assignments clearer, in*  *the form of practical assistance. And not deriding or evading student questions… if they*  [lecturers] *do not understand the information (2nd yr. Black female, UK).*

*More opportunities for longer one-on-one interaction with lecturers to gain clarifications beyond the 15-30 mins allowed on booking via myljmu (2nd year Black male, international)*

*Lectures about assessments should be a vital component to help prepare students and*  *should be prioritised (1st year Asian male, UK)*

*...looking at example essays, going through assessment brief in more detail (4th yr. Asian*  *female, UK).*

International students in particular were struggling to understand LJMU assessment framework, criteria and procedures. Many ended up seeking guidance from one of the alumni of their own ethnic background.

Students had various suggestions on how they wanted to be helped by tutors. Mixed-race participants asked for more clarity on content of essays and general assessment support, especially in foundation year. Having accessible assignment briefs (e.g., re-wording briefs written in a dry academic language) and to considering needs of students who are at different level (e.g., need more support) were also mentioned. Several students from Asian background suggested that they should be given an opportunity to choose what assessments will carry the most weight in terms of their overall grade.

*Provide more than one option to tackle a module assessment for example provide an option*  *on choosing whether an individual prefers to do an essay or oral presentation for the same*  *module rather than doing just one restrictive assessment type. (3rd year Asian male, UK)*

#### Perceived unfair marking practices and limited feedback as contributory factors to attainment gap

More Black students choose to comment on issues related to unfair marking and perceived discrimination, compared to other demographic groups. As least four respondents considered unfair marking as a contributory factor to the attainment gap.

Students commented that tutors often did not explain in the feedback what they had done wrong, did not clarify the grade given, did not show clearly how students lost marks, or failed to highlight specific areas for improvement. The lack of transparency in the feedback was directly associated with lack of fairness.

*Ensuring that when we get feedback on the assignment it tells me what I did well, what I can*  *improve and where to find the resources. I think it would be helpful as well if the person who*  *marked the work could give us the option of having a zoom with them and go through* *my*  *work so I can fully understand where I went wrong and how to improve on it because the*  *comments they leave are quite vague and confusing and I don’t know what they mean (2nd*  *year Black female, UK).*

*Give more feedback on assessments so I can see weaknesses that can be improve and*  *strengths (1st yr. Black male, UK)*

 It appeared that many minority ethnic students distrust their tutors in terms of grading them fairly compared to their white counterparts. One student called for diverse assessors to review and mark exams, and another student commented that they had been deliberately given very unfair feedback and marks. Another respondent claimed that students with ethnic surnames receive lower grades as a result of bias.

*Blind marking as I have found students with similar standards of work with English names*  *seem to attain higher marks. (1st yr., Black male, home).*

*If there is a way for markers not to see our surnames or full name so their marking is more*  *impartial because since being here it’s clear that there is a strong preference towards the*  *white students, and I don’t feel comfortable here at all. And I don’t trust that all my markers*  *of any assessment I take will be 100%. I’ve already experienced the racial discrimination from*  *a teacher during my core skill days as part of my course. (1st yr., Black female home)*

Students’ comments about fair marking show that they either do not know about the second marking policy or they do not trust that it works.

Perceived discrimination as a theme was evident mostly among the Black and mixed-race home student groups. Some of the students believed that they were treated with less preference or have seen how other ethnic minority students were treated differently to white students.

Overall, many students across the BAME group agreed that they often received incomplete, unhelpful and confusing feedback, linking it to possibility of ongoing marking bias. Training for staff to increase awareness of the bias and to create an inclusive environment for ethnically diverse students was also suggested.

*I think the most important is to create more training for staff as being the minority due to*  *ethnicity indirectly am treated a different way even though staff don't want to admit it and*  *for this from my name right down to face-to-face interaction there is a perception, they*  *create making them not approachable as they struggle to create an all-inclusive environment*  *for someone like me to learn and tap into their full potential. Hopefully in the near future we*  *will be included as I think if I was not strong enough to take charge, create opportunities for*  *myself and demand help it would not have been provided for me. Thank you. (3rd year Black*  *female home student)*

#### Concerns related to English writing and speaking ability and its impact on assessment performance

A relatively high number of Asian students, both home and international, were concerned about their English language abilities affecting their grades. They believed that they were left behind or treated unfairly because their English language standard is insufficient compared to their peers.

#### More practice-based assessments to enhance student employability

Students commented on need to have more practice-based assessments and lab assignments to gain a practical experience and gain employability skills. This was particularly prominent in comments of white home students.

Other, less frequent topics included allowing all exams to be open book to assess understanding and knowledge instead of being a memory test. White students were more likely to comments on problems arising in group work assignments and inability to raise issues.

### Student focus groups and interviews

16 minority ethnic students took part in three focus groups and one interview (nine were home students and six international students; nine students were male and six female).

The questions asked about students’ experience of settling in into their first year, interaction with academic staff (tutors), what encourages and what challenges them when it comes to academic activities; use of resources (academic and student support related), if there was a time when they wanted to quit university; whether they feel free to be themselves in the university environment, and some other questions.

#### Settling in and interacting with other students

Many participants commented on how crucial was first year in their university life. Anxiety of settling into the university was a common theme, as well as induction/orientation week being overwhelming for many.

A relatively high number of the students interviewed noted that it was hard making friends when they started at university. While this is a normal part of the university experience, for some ethnic minority students it appears to be more difficult, and they commented on feeling lonely and isolated. Those participants who said they did not have difficulties with social interaction, either had family nearby or previous social connections in Liverpool.

Ethnic minority students acknowledged that if/when they made friends, these friends were mostly with people of similar ethnic group. At least one student commented that he has only made friends with other diverse students in his church outside of his course. Two international Black students also mentioned that they have only made friends with other students from various ethnic backgrounds.

The students hinted that they often struggle and feel isolated, especially if they find themselves as one of the few ethnic minority students in a white students’ dominated class. Some participants have just accepted this feeling of being alone in their group.

However, two Asian students argued that it is the responsibility of ethnic minority students to make an effort, take initiative and reach out to other students.

The participants noted that issues like the accent of ethnic minority students, the cultural differences and low confidence level of these students further complicated interaction between ethnic minority and white groups at university.

#### Microaggression and racism

Some students gave examples of microaggression experienced, including during placements or in other university related encounters.

Few students commented that they received racist abuse regularly from classmates at school or 6th form college. Some have accepted it as part of life, while other students continue to be anxious about it. Past and present encounters with racism and microaggressions left these students with stress and distrust of the system. Even in cases where they are not being marginalised, they continue to *remain on edge*. Ethnic minority students are more likely to isolate themselves and even though they do not completely disengage, they may have limiting beliefs which drastically reduce their agency, ability to participate, ask for help or approach their studies optimistically*.*

#### Relationships with tutors

Many participants responded that their tutors are helpful and approachable. Students described experiences where tutors have gone above and beyond to help them. Only three out of the 16 students interviewed had a mixed experience with tutors, including negative incidents. Students commented that it would be helpful to have more lecturers who are from the same background as them. This would be beneficial for representation as well as having tutors who understand and can relate to their life experiences.

At least one student commented that white tutors may be worried about political or cultural correctness and as a result they may become anxious or fail to engage when minority ethnic students report their concerns to them.

#### Understanding how to succeed at university

The focus group and interviews reveal that many students are left behind in terms of their understanding of the university system, regulation, requirements, and what students needs to do to pass or be successful.

Students commented that lecturers expect students to know and follow the requirements, while many are not often clued-in on these expectations. Being socially isolated or lacking the required academic ‘know how’ continue to keep them out of the loop and receiving lower grades. Limited feedback comments such as 'this essay lacks structure’, do not help students to do better in their next essay. Those students who are the first-generation university students, are often left behind because they are not well equipped with understanding the requirements from the beginning of their study.

Ethnically diverse students in white dominated faculties tend to feel more socially excluded, and this impacts their academic performance. When these students do not have a strong social network outside university, their academic achievement capability is further slashed.

It was also evident that sometimes minority ethnic students do not realise they need support. The cost of exclusion from the system is that they have blind spots in terms of where they need help and need to improve.

#### Financial and other life pressures

Financial pressure was mentioned by some focus group participants who have to work while studying at university. One student described a limited financial support from the student loan during foundation year: his financial struggle led to him failing the foundation course.

Struggling mentally due to life and personal pressures often leads to reduced motivation and drive to achieve. While some drop out entirely (examples of friends were given), other simply ‘hobble’ through the system to finish with an acceptable grade.

*... you can see from my marks how they dropped as well because I was like... I'm not at this*  *point. I don't even... I just want to be done. I don't really care about the result anymore*  *(Black Home Female).*

*I think... a lack of desire. Obviously, losing people [friends at home] as well obviously just had*  *to get in the right mind frame as well... (Black Home Male).*

#### Limited and unhelpful feedback

Unhelpful and conflicting feedback has featured as a topic in the focus groups as well. This was cited as one of the factors that de-motivates and disengages minority ethnic students in terms of academic activities. Some students commented that they often received late feedback from lectures when they ask for help.

### Mentoring sessions

Out of nine mentees recruited as part of the project, five mentees were international, and four were home students from a variety of minority ethnic backgrounds. The mentoring sessions were unstructured and invited mentees to bring any queries related to their studies, share issues or concerns, or ask for advice.

Student-mentors were asked to reflect on the sessions and broadly outline problems experienced by their mentees, while student-mentees were asked to provide feedback on usefulness of the sessions. Key findings from thematic analysis are listed below, in order of the most recurring to the least recurring. Majority of themes from mentoring sessions reinforced the findings from the questionnaire and focus groups.

#### Lack of connection and a low sense of belonging

One of the frequent themes discussed at the mentoring sessions was lack or limited connection to other students, staff or the university, and impact it had on student engagement, awareness of the university processes, and general sense of belonging.

Feeling of isolation was discussed by many mentees. Ethnically diverse students were forming groups comprised only of other minority ethnic students. A few mentees alleviated their feelings of isolation by deepening their engagement with JMSU, e.g., becoming a course rep or society officer, but this was not the case for others, less confident students.

International students were reflecting on ‘culture shock’ and problems with adapting to the UK education system with language barrier leading to a lack of capacity to engage and confidence to speak out. Some international mentees commented that they prefer a groupwork, however, language is seen as a barrier to be able to contribute to the best of their ability. Overcoming home sickness was a challenge for minority ethnic students who were from other areas of the UK or other countries, sometimes leading to mental health struggles.

#### Variability in accessing student support and staff-student interaction

In general, mentees felt that they were supported well by both tutors and peers, and on occasions when their queries were not answered, this was not felt to be discriminatory.

Those who reflected on difficulties of engaging with staff or seeking additional support mentioned that when communication and interaction was largely online, general guidance and support from academic staff or student services were limited and often ineffective.

Majority of student- mentees did not feel comfortable asking direct questions during lecture time, commenting that staff ‘give most support to their ‘*favourites’* students – those who are confident to ask for support at a lecture or a seminar. Even though some students said that they can approach staff one-on-one for help with their assessments, others were much more likely to seek out peer support over staff support.

One mentor commented:

*the cultural background in which [ethnically diverse] students are raised affects [my mentees] ability and willingness to ask for help especially to a particular support service.*

#### Internalised microaggression and impact on student self-belief

One of the themes that was coming from the mentoring sessions is that many ethnic minority students believe that if they are receiving unsatisfactory treatment, there is something that they themselves must be doing wrong so they push themselves to work harder. This was often unproductive and resulting in disappointment with the marks received.

As one of the mentors reflected:

*... one lecturer does not fully explain things when [my mentee] does not understand... tone in the email feels like [the lecturer] does not want to be bothered and that stops [my mentee] from asking further questions. When I asked if [my mentee] has had a word with [the lecturer] about it, [they] said [they] would rather get on with it than ask [the lecturer].*

#### Other pressures affecting access to resources

Students who work part-time along-side their studies felt an increase of pressure, and a pinch on their available study time. However, for some, work allows a respite from academic life. Sometimes coursework pressure and multiple deadlines could be a barrier to engaging with careers services and finding internship opportunities. It was also clear that time could also be a limitation on accessing resources on Canvas.

*[My mentee] ... did not have time to check on critical writing resources... I encouraged him to log in to his Canvas page during the meeting and take through how to find the resources. [My mentee] was glad to see the resources and ... was also interested in looking up other resources that can help with dealing with stress or improving confidence.*

*I signposted [my mentee] to Academic Achievement which he said he was aware of but could not find time to attend.*

A lack of time was also a barrier to accessing wellbeing services**.** However, when students were able to engage with support, they found it invaluable.

#### Relatedness to staff

Some mentees mentioned that they get inspiration and willingness to learn from ethnically diverse lecturers. Staff cultural/ethnic background for some students can influence their ability and willingness to seek support.

*[my mentee] also expressed that he was happy with the guidance provided for the assignment as the module was run by on his favourite lecturers (from a Black ethnic background) and that he was really inspired by his work and ways of teaching.*

### Benefits of mentoring

The main themes emerging from mentees’ comments relating to the benefits of mentoring were around allyship, improved use of feedback, confidence to approach teaching staff for extensions, and an increased awareness of and engagement with academic support services. Students' attitude to the mentoring program showed that it gave them someone on their side, someone who listens. This appears to help alleviate their feeling of isolation or lack or belonging.

Where mentors shared their own experiences, especially around utilising feedback, this motivated mentees to revisit previous feedback and use it to inform their future assessments. When the student did this, it helped them to prepare for their coming assignment. Mentors encouraged students to approach staff and ask for extension, this reduced assessment related stress. Relieving time-pressure allowed the student to feel more confident about the task ahead.

Mentoring sessions provided a focus and protected time for mentee’s engagement with academic support resources when time-pressures presented a barrier to do this. For students who were not aware of the range of support services available, sessions helped to signpost them. Mentoring sessions helped international students reaching out to wider university support services.

Mentor reflections:

*I shared my experience of how I used to ask for more feedback clarification even if my grades were good. I explained to him that it helped me identify my strengths... before starting my assignments. He felt inspired by such an idea and decided to revisit a previous assignment that is very similar to the one he will be submitting this week to see if he can take any key points from it.*

*We previously talked about how he can ask for an extension to relieve the pressure he was feeling from having too many assignments... When reaching out to his course leader, this was taken into consideration, and they allowed him more time to complete his assignment.*

*I can see that this made him less stressed compared to our first meeting and he was feeling more confident about how to approach his assignment.*

*[my mentee] said she had learned a lot from me especially the academic achievement that she did not know about because she has improved her writing skills.*

Two mentors were asked to reflect on their personal journey during this project. A clear message that comes through from both reflections is the value of their personal development as mentors and guides, and a sense of personal satisfaction and enhanced belonging from being able to assist their fellow students.

[Mentor 1]

*Through my experience as a student mentor, I have been fortunate enough to meet and support students from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds... I learned a lot about the challenges which students face coming to a new environment and culture, something which I feel has been extremely valuable learning for me. I am an international student too and this probably allowed me to empathize and practise more active listening with students.*

*My mentoring experience also gave me the opportunity to know about students' experiences and challenges in several areas, including language barriers, academic studies, social and cultural differences, discrimination, financial stressors, and mental health concerns. These are not easy problems to overcome, and there is so much we all can do to help.*

*We also discussed about some issues related to the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to university life worldwide. The disruption to social systems and networks created widespread support needs across the student population, with the direct physical, mental and emotional impact of the pandemic, coupled with changes to traditional processes of teaching, changes to help-seeking, students spending more time working in isolation and with less opportunities for collaborative working. These circumstances highlighted the importance of students engaging in processes such as student mentoring, where students could have a …peer to seek support and advice on academic, professional, and personal issues.*

*Support always works in both directions, and I have been humbled and educated by the resilience of each student I have met. I feel that having the opportunity to connect with a student mentor lets students from diverse ethnic background feel they are not alone in the struggles that they are experiencing.*

*I would really encourage students who feel they would benefit from a bit of extra support to contact a peer mentor. We have all been through our own challenges in these last years and reaching out to someone really can go a long way.*

[Mentor 2]

*Mentoring has been a great experience for me personally. Having to act as a mentor is very self-fulfilling, I am a person who likes to share knowledge and provide support for others who are in situations I have been in before… My experience with the project “Bridge the Gap” at LJMU has been positive and helped me to reflect on my role as a student. To be more specific, I felt like I was able to make a change within my environment by being there for my mentee and guiding him to explore solutions that can help him overcome his challenges.*

*Unlike my previous mentoring experience, “Bridge the Gap” was a project that made believe that making a difference is possible. The main reason behind this is that the project used research to identify issues ethnic minority students face at university. This enabled me to deepen my understanding of the issue, reflect on it as someone who is from an ethnic minority and faced the same issues reported by other students. This process made me understand the rationale the project leaders of “Bridge the Gap” used to address the issues reported by students. Thus, make me combine personal experience and research-based knowledge to support my mentee.*

*… I was able to see that using this process with my mentee was helpful as it makes the student feel supported and most importantly understood. In a way this also helped my mentee to reflect on the fact that his challenges were shared by many students who are in a similar position. As a result, avoid any internal attributions to why they may face more challenges compared to other students.*

### Staff interviews

One of the project aims was to understand the extent to which academic staff embed inclusivity in their assessment strategy, design and student assessment support. Conducting semi structured interviews with 29 academic staff across LJMU generated valuable insights into how module leaders perceive inclusivity and the extent to which their assessment practices are inclusive. Academics were able to reflect on factors they consider when designing their assessments and the ways they support students in completing assessment tasks.

### How diverse is your typical student cohort?

Many staff are aware of the ethnic makeup of their cohort. It was clear that some courses lend themselves to what is described as ‘typical’ subject composition. For example, Science, Computing, and Health Care courses tend to have a higher proportion of ethnically diverse student groups except for core Science courses like Chemistry. At LJMU, Arts, Humanities and Sociology courses have fewer ME students. Overall, 20 out of the 29 interviewed reported that their course had relatively low numbers of ME students, which indicates that many courses need to increase their school and community outreach to improve the diversity of the student cohorts.

Several staff commented that diversity on their course is mainly driven by international ethnic minority students compared to home/UK students.

### What do you consider when designing assessment and what do you do to help students and diverse students do well?

### General assessment design considerations

The factors that academic staff consider when designing assessments are varied. The project team wanted to capture the extent to which inclusivity is an important consideration when designing assessments. Despite the wealth of inclusivity literature and the overwhelming call for inclusivity within HE, it appears this issue is still not a priority for many staff at LJMU. Those who consider inclusivity when designing their assessments were in the minority. The general consideration reported by many staff was around *meeting the learning outcomes of the module* or *adhering to the requirements of the accrediting body* for their course. At the pedagogy level, reported considerations in assessment design include i) *clarity and comprehensiveness*; ii) *the level of study*; iii) *desire to test and improve certain skills (such as employability skills) and spark some interest in students*. Staff also mentioned activities aiming at improving student independent study skills, maintaining an open-door policy and opportunity for one-to-one tutorials. Some commented that they focus on good teaching and providing accessible course content rather than on assessment per se.

However, a few staff mentioned inclusivity as a general consideration; they reported utilising at least one of the following: i) *use of open-ended questions*; ii) *student self-selection of task subjects*, and iii) *assigning lower weights to referencing and grammar*.

One interviewee reflected on challenges of designing inclusive assessment: … *we don't know what the student population will be until they are in front of us, and assessment design takes place before programme start date.*

### Ensuring students do well

It was important to understand the extent to which staff consider the factors that contribute to better student performance in their assessment design.

While some staff admitted to not considering that in their modules, many reported a number of practices to help students perform better in the modules, such as i) *dedicated/additional tutorial sessions or assessment workshops (sometimes on-to-one)*; ii) *reading students’ early draft and feeding back*; iii) *signposting students to library resources*; iv) *diversifying assessments*; v) *granting extensions for struggling students*; vi) *using open-door policy*; vii) *providing past papers*; viii) *making informative videos on assessment criteria and marking rubric*.

When asked specifically about designing inclusive assessment for diverse student population, staff mentioned consideration of the language skills of students who do not have English as first language. About five respondents stated that they sometimes include religious and cultural considerations and have added diversity to the reading list. Some mention treating everyone the same or equally. A sizeable number of respondents do not think of how to help diverse students do well specifically when designing assessment.

Respondents also mentioned that low attendance and low engagement (e.g., not asking for help) leads to poor student performance. As one participant states *“I can only point them in the right direction, but they have to move…”*

### Perception of the qualities of an effective assessment

The project explored the general perception of staff on the qualities an assessment should possess for it to be effective. The perceived qualities listed were the following:

* *Clear and unambiguous*
* *Somewhat challenging and engaging for students*
* *Cover the learning outcome, have real world application and improve student abilities and employability skills*
* *‘Discriminatory’ (i.e., distinguish between good and poor students)*
* *Include a variety of methods and styles*
* *Matches students’ level*

### ‘Ideal’ assessment strategy

To understand staff preferences within their assessment strategy, it was important to capture their attitude towards the use of formative assessment, the ideal number of summative assessments per module, and the use of group vs individual assessments.

Many staff do not use formative assessment owing to i) *students’ lack of engagement with it*; ii) *not wanting to increase student anxiety of assessment by using more formative assessment*; iii) *staff’s heavy workload*. Those few who use formative assessments often use online quizzes and usually from the Sciences. One respondent recommends disguising formative assessments in seminars and workshops. Some staff mentioned they are cautious with group work because of the conflicts involved in group assessment. While some academics still use group work and assess students individually, others do not use group work at all.

### How do you ensure the language of instruction is inclusive?

When asked how they ensure inclusivity of language, some staff admitted that they often do not think about it. However, they try to use what they term as ‘clear language.’ This means that the language is not too technical, easily understandable, having less jargon and ambiguity.

One respondent explains that she ensures that the brief is in plain English (e.g., no colloquialisms or idioms, instructions clear to ESL students and key information is presented in bold font).

### How do you help students understand the assessment brief and marking criteria?

When asked about accessible assessment briefs and marking criteria, staff mentioned dedicated workshop and seminars, assignment clinic, dedicated lectures and one to one sessions. Participants also mentioned that they provide a clear rubric document. Feedback highlights criteria and where they have gained/lost marks with clear steps on how to improve for next time. The video rubric mentioned by one participant appears to be an affective practice, it means students have one less thing to read.

Low engagement of students with opportunities on offer was mentioned on several occasions, such as discussion board on Canvas never used or zoom drop-in sessions being poorly attended.

### Reasons for the awarding gap

When asked what they think might be the reasons for awarding gap, some interviewees commented that the reasons are complex and other admitted they are unsure. However, they acknowledge that possible contributing factors can be grouped into the race and socio-economic issues, environmental and cultural factors. Only a few participants fully considered the role and influence of teaching and assessment practices.

Race related issues mentioned were students feeling isolation and not fitting in; difficulty making friends and not feeling supported. Previous discrimination experiences within and outside campus impacting students, and potential discrimination from staff were also cited. Deficiency in perception of minority ethnic students, lack of understanding of their journey and unconscious bias in marking were listed among the possible reasons as well.

Socioeconomic issues included potential ‘classism’ in universities, staff from more privileged background disconnected from minority ethnic students who are usually from lower socio-economic backgrounds; digital poverty, being first generation students to attend university, and less time available to some students who have other responsibilities e.g., caring for family, working, and studying at the same time.

Environmental factors mentionedincluded ethnic minority students impacted by a white dominated university; adjusting to a new culture and surmounting cultural barriers and beliefs for international students and the weather.

### Observations, recommendation and solutions

Staff recommendations included, among others, changing mindsets, engage students in identifying solutions, acknowledge the issue and train staff in diversity and inclusion of assessment design, encourage authentic student voice through anonymous feedback and more societies for students to feel included.

Many LJMU staff want to know how to factor diversity considerations into their teaching and assessment practices. Some attended the interview to talk through and get ideas on what they can do.

LJMU is a white dominated space. It can be argued that lesser number of ethnically diverse students and staff means less experience within the institution in terms of how to practice inclusivity for diversity. Home ethnic minority students seem to disappear into the background as lecturers are more aware of international students and the issues they face. It can be argued that lecturers assume that home ethnic minority students are just like any other white students who know the system. They may assume that home students do not need as much help compared to international students.

In terms of assessment practices, respondents apply what they see as best practices and offer help to students. They have expectations of students to ask for help and become independent learners. Academics recognise that student disengagement leads to poor performance. The explanation for minority ethnic student disengagement shows strong links to the themes observed in student focus groups.

When staff members refer to clear language, this may not necessarily translate to clear language for students as lectures and students have different levels of experience.

Throughout the interviews staff rarely allude to possible personal bias in assessment and pastoral support of minority ethnic students. This highlights a point of disconnection as students report it exists.

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