EXPERIENCES OF GLOBAL ETHNIC MAJORITY STUDENTS IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION: EVALUATING MULTIPLE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS TO UNDERSTAND THE GLOBAL ETHNIC MAJORITY AWARDING GAP

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Abstract

An award gap between Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) and White students has been an issue in UK higher education (HE) since the 1990s and its persistence overtime has motivated a lot of research. Many studies, however, have focused on UK-domiciled GEM students thus creating a knowledge gap on GEM International students. Additionally, recent findings offer insight into only a part of the equation by attributing poor performance in GEM students to unmet psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy based on the principles of self-determination theory (SDT). In including GEM International students and evaluating multiple theoretical frameworks, this study not only addresses the literary gap but also delves deeper to ascertain the most accurate and reliable depiction of the root cause of this phenomenon. The methodology comprised 2 focus groups examining the experiences of 7 GEM students in different courses. Developed themes were based on the theories of cultural deficit, Pierre Bourdieu cultural capital deficit, community cultural wealth, critical race, educability perspective and functionalism perspective. The themes were evaluated against the principles of SDT. Findings revealed discrimination and segregation of GEM students by staff and students alike because of their race. This highlighted critical race theory as a powerful underlying influence over the theories of cultural capital, community wealth and education function. Racism has been ingrained into the society such that its manifestations are admissible in the guise of lack in the GEM individual. This study poses a challenge to education institutions to take responsibility in curtailing racism among its members and thereby ensure suitable learning conditions for GEM students that promote their performance and bridge the award gap.

Keywords: Global Ethnic Majority, Award gap, Critical Race Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Community Cultural Wealth, Pierre Bourdieu

1   INTRODUCTION

Following the issue of an awarding gap between GEM students and White students in HE in the UK; an issue that has been prominent since the 1990's [1], a lot of research has been done to scrutinize this phenomenon. According to [1], findings show that 78% of White students get a 'good grade', which is a big contrast in comparison to the 66% of GEM students that do (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA] 2014 cited in [1]. Sekhon states that this 12% disparity is concerning because it is presumable that at entry level into Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) these students had equal capabilities as would have been the prerequisite for their intake.

This endorsement motivated a lot of research investigating the reasons behind the award gap. Some findings attributed GEM students' poor academic performance to their negative attitudes and low aspirations [2], however, they were debunked in a movement rejecting the deficit model. Central to that movement is a study by [3] which analysed data collected from 210 faculty members and 943 first-year undergraduate students and uncovered that there is no significant difference between the Growth Mindsets and stereotypical thoughts of GEM and White students. The rejection of the deficit model directed research into focusing on external factors [4] rather than presumed deficiencies of ethnic majority students. The premise of this movement has its basis in theories that have been developed overtime to explain this phenomenon. They include Cultural Deficit Theory, Pierre Bourdieu Theory of

Cultural Capital Deficit, Community Cultural Wealth, Critical Race Theory, Educability Perspective, and Functionalism Perspective.

The Cultural Deficit theory is a modification of Darwin's theory of evolution which observes genetic differentiation in animal species following geographical adaptation. Originating in the 1800s, the assertion was that GEM students perform poorly compared to their White counterparts because of biological or genetic deficiencies due to their home environment ([5], [6], [7], [8]). The problem with this assumption, as [9] highlights, is that it propagates negative cultural profiling by distinguishing White ethnicity as the superior race, and in placing blame on the culture, it does not consider the impact of poverty on performance and hence the impact scholarships would have. Moreover, a study by [10] that placed the children of highly intelligent mothers in good foster care homes revealed that by the age of 12, these children were smarter than their mothers therefore concluding that the environment that a child grows up is responsible for cognitive development. [11] further discredited the notions of cultural or hereditary influence on IQ [12] in corroborating Skodak's discovery that the environmental conditions was a more significant influence.

In 1970, the theory of Cultural Capital Deficit was developed by Pierre Bourdieu whose ideas were influenced by Karl Max. This theory examines social class and power transfer, observing that social structures are maintained within a society, especially since education systems also propagate the need for cultural capital [13]. According to [14], cultural capital comprises familiarity with the dominant culture and the ability to understand and use 'educated' language. Thus, because GEM students do not possess the recognised cultural capital, they are unlikely to perform as well as White students. This theory reinforces the White ethnicity as the superior culture and similarly, it places blame on social disadvantage rather than the system that is discriminating against less privileged students.

The Critical Race Theory was also developed in the 1970s from the collation of studies by scholars and civil rights activists who wanted to bring about change in the dynamics of race, racism, and power. It provides critical insight into racism with Derrick Bell serving as its originator. [15] observe that racism is embedded within the economy such that it is no longer simply manifested in the intentional discrimination of one person by another, but rather it is the result of complex changes in social and institutional dynamics. [16] enlightens that this theory is composed of 4 main principles: 1) racism is regarded as an ordinary concept rather than an aberration since it is never acknowledged; 2) racism gives White dominant groups psychic and material leadership roles hence there is no incentive to eradicate it; 3) ethnic bias is the result of social thought and relations; and 4) racial profiling is done to create development concerns in an attempt to meet an ideology. Essentially, this theory provokes thoughts on racial influences in educational institutions and the impact on GEM students' performance.

The theories of Educability Perspective and Functionalism Perspective centre on education whereby Amartya Sen established the educability approach in the early 1980s while Emile Durkheim established the functionalism approach in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The educability perspective looks at a student's capability to learn and hence succeed in life because according to [17], education is an instrumental tool towards supporting livelihoods, generating income, and reducing human insecurity. [18] highlight, however, that there are conditions beyond a student's innate abilities that affect their performance for instance: family atmosphere, school setting – whether they are considerate of different learning pace among students, and teaching staff that trust students' academic capabilities. Functionalism Perspective on the other hand, examines education function. Two main functions identified by [19] are creating social solidarity and teaching specialist skills. Several studies concur with the principles of this theory with [20] expanding that education allocates students to the most appropriate jobs for their talents and in [20] that school prepares children for their roles as adults in the society where they will be judged on the same basis as other adults. This theory therefore presents education institutions with the responsibility to prepare students sufficiently for the society.

The rationale of this study is to be inclusive of international GEM students since previous research have focused on generational immigrant GEM students, yet this phenomenon is observed in GEM students from abroad as well. Also, it is to go beyond the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which expounds that poor performance in GEM students is due to unmet psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy [21]. This study aims to discover the root causes that influence the awarding of GEM students.

2   METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a mixed methods design to explore the experiences of students who identify as being from a GEM background. The sample was recruited through email invitations that were sent to eligible participants who met the inclusion criteria. In total, 7 GEM students from law, business, health and education, marketing, and media courses were selected to participate in two separate focus groups. The decision to form two groups was made to facilitate more in-depth discussions and to allow for diverse perspectives to emerge. Group A comprised four participants, while group B consisted of three participants. To ensure convenience and compliance with COVID-19 guidelines, the focus groups were conducted virtually using the Zoom platform, with each session lasting approximately 120 minutes. The research team leader administered the sessions in a rotation of equal time intervals to avoid bias. To gather data, a semi-structured interview guide was developed, with questions focused on the following themes: staff and student perceptions, social integration, racial discrimination, learning conditions, and higher education function. Sample questions included: "How well do you fit into your course; can you be yourself?" (Stereotyping); "What sort of educational or cultural adjustments did you have to make, if any, in your academic pursuit?" (Social integration); "What are your experiences at the university as a student of African descent?" (Racial discrimination); "Are you aware of academic support; have you accessed it, and if not, why?" (Learning conditions); and "Can you tell us about your views on education; what is your motivation to study and how it fits into your career progression?" (HE function). To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, follow-up questions were used to encourage students to elaborate on their responses. The sessions were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis. The data were coded into categories based on the themes identified in the interview guide, and relevant quotes were selected to support each category. The resulting themes were further analysed and discussed by the research team to identify patterns and relationships in the data.

3   RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the data collected from the focus groups yielded a total of 16 codes that were representative of the experiences of Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) students before and during their Higher Education (HE) studies. These codes were identified based on the themes that were suggested by the theoretical frameworks and elaborated upon during the interviews. The five main themes were stereotyping, social integration, racial discrimination, learning conditions, and education function. The codes under the theme of stereotyping included experiences of being labelled, judged, or underestimated due to one's ethnicity or cultural background. The social integration theme encompassed codes related to feelings of isolation, difficulties in forming friendships, and lack of opportunities for cultural expression. The theme of racial discrimination included codes related to experiencing racism or prejudice based on ethnicity. The learning conditions theme included codes related to academic challenges, lack of academic support, and the impact of these factors on academic performance. Finally, the education function theme included codes related to students' motivations for pursuing higher education and their perceived value of their academic experiences. Each of these themes was further analysed and discussed by the research team, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of GEM students in higher education. The themes and codes were found to be interrelated, highlighting the complex and multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by GEM students in higher education. The findings of this study have implications for educational institutions, policymakers, and practitioners in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education.

3.1   Stereotyping

The findings on this theme challenge the Cultural Deficit theory assertion that GEM students perform poorly due to biological deficiencies. It is in fact observed that the students were stereotyped by teaching staff at the onset before they even had the chance to 'prove' themselves which has been confirmed to be a significant demotivating factor [21].

> … one of the barriers for me to achieve my full potential, I guess I'll say the preconception that they have of black students, from my experience. They already think we are going to be a certain type of way whereas with white students, whether subconsciously or on purpose or not, they are allowed to just come and show who they are and they're accepted that way, whereas with us it's you have to prove to them that you are worth their time. (P2)

Additionally, the cultural profiling was not only limited to the staff mindsets, but it also transferred to their marking of GEM students' assessments.

> … other white groups have large groups of friends as well and they didn't label them as noisy or as rebels or something like that. But for us that was the term. […] I thought the narrative would have changed in college but […] they treated ourselves - myself and a lot of other students completely differently and you could definitely see that in the way they were marking our work at the time. […] They just crossed our work completely and never gave us any feedback whereas someone else, they would give them feedback, which we found unfair. (P6)

This further served to discourage engagement from the students hence it is evident that the non-conducive environment is more responsible for poor performance than the students' culture.

> A lot of my friends, that's their stance where they don't go to lectures, 'They don't care about me anyway', that kind of thing. (P5)

3.2   Social Integration

This theme addresses Pierre Bourdieu's theory of Cultural Capital Deficit. The results verify the assertions of this theory as true. The education system upholds cultural capital and as a result, GEM students are disadvantaged. Lacking in familiarity with the White culture and 'proper' linguistic capabilities, they often experience rejection.

> I just try to engage with everyone even though sometimes I don't get a response much, it's still okay. (P7)

> being an international student […] I had to pretty much change my accent, adapt my accent. That was something that I came to terms with early on. It is what it is. (P1)

Similarly, the community perpetuates this segregation. The participants reported an unaccommodating attitude within the White society. Ultimately, all participants endorsed feelings of a lack of belonging.

> I've been to a few of the towns in the UK but there really isn't any African or Afro-Caribbean dedicated historical or even market place or anything. The most we get here are the shops and one or two restaurants, there's no real imprint. So even if there was a place where you could just have a safe space for even volunteering or […] charity or something, there's none of that around here. (P1)

Not only are the GEM students isolated within the White society, but they are also punished with bad grades by education systems for not being in possession of the accepted cultural capital. This highlights a discriminatory nature of education systems in the UK rather than favourable conditions for cultural diversity.

3.3   Racial Discrimination

The results of this study are congruent with the principles of Critical Race Theory see figure 1. Several forms of racial discrimination were experienced by the GEM students – racial profiling and stereotyping, segregation, and microaggression – in such a way that has been normalised that it is not recognised as a transgression.
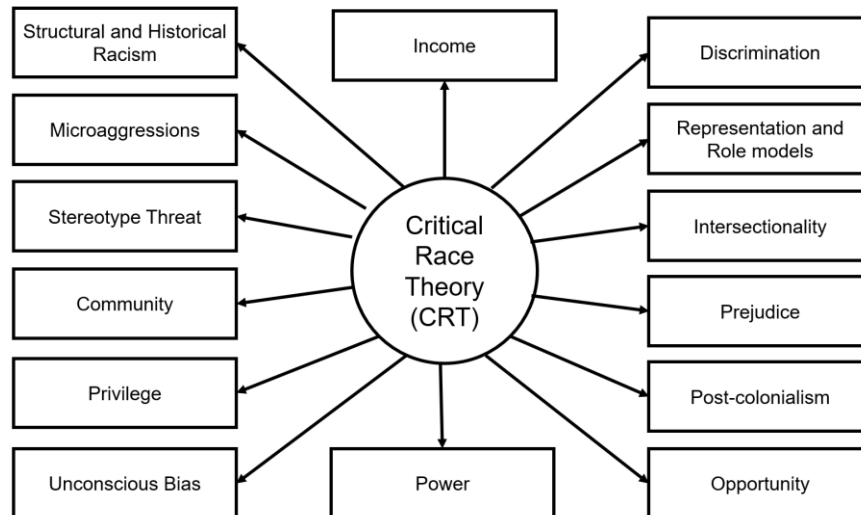
Figure 1. An Illustration of the key building blocks of the Critical Race Theory [22].

This was the most impactful theme as it was encompassed in all the other themes and it was treated with significant sensitivity.

> … another one that was directed at me was I was in a lecture. As you probably know now, black people probably sit at a table together, white people sit on another table. We were sitting there talking, like everybody else, yet the lecturer would always come and have an issue with us that apparently we were too loud. I remember me and my friend were just like, 'This person on the other table is literally talking the same level, why do you keep on coming to us?' I'd had enough. It was a three hour session and it was three times that we were being too loud or we were going off tangent. And we were not; we were actually doing everything that was there. It makes you think, sometimes you feel wrong for thinking., 'That's because I'm black', but realistically what other reason is there? […] what other factor is it, especially if it's a white lecturer? (P5)

In a compliment made to one of the participants, it was observed that racism is so ingrained that conforming to the White race is grounds for a compliment.

> […] the people have been nicer. […] you get the off-chance comments that say, 'Oh you speak well for an international student', but I personally don't count that as racist. (P1)

The students also expressed a fear of raising issues on racism reasoning that it would affect their grades further.

> So the way I've coped with racism and discrimination has definitely been just ignoring it and supressing the way I feel because at the same time you can't help to think that if I take this up a notch, if I actually go ahead and take this further, talk to someone else, like another lecturer about it or something like that, I can't help to think that my grade could be at risk. (P6)

3.4   Learning Conditions

This theme examined the learning environment of the students to ascertain, in association with the Educability Perspective, external factors that influence their awarding of a poorer grade. The students accounted that the race of the teaching staff influenced their engagement in that they felt it would be easier to approach someone that looked like them and that it would be inspiring to see staff representative of GEM in positions of power.

majority of the lecturers that I have, they are all basically white and they treat all black people the same […] I just try and turn a blind eye to it, the same what all the other black people turn a blind eye to it and don't speak about it.

Whereas if we have another black person I feel like they would tell us how it is. If we're not doing well they are not going to sugar coat it, they are going to tell you, you aren't to doing too well, you need to get this done, or something like that. (P6)

Another factor that was revealed was the different education system in the university compared to their previous education. The students noted the lack of sufficient guidance in transitioning whereby some expressed a lack of awareness of available resources whereas for those that were aware, the unapproachability of White staff influenced their decisions in seeking academic support.

Definitely could do better, did better in Second Year. But it's a bit difficult for me because the way my educational background was very centred on exams […] I grew up taking exams my whole life and didn't really have essays that counted for 50% and now I think the essays bring me down […] (Did you receive support) No, not from the University to be honest. I devoted some time to making my essays, to developing an essay style and that was literally from YouTube […]. (P1)

The students similarly shared a concern regarding finances. Regarding tuition fees, there was mention of being burdened by worry about their families' sacrifice due to the steep price and consequently, they had to have part-time jobs to afford their living expenses. Thus, they could not dedicate all their time to their studies.

[…] I feel that I do have to engage in making more money elsewhere. Even with good money management sometimes it's still hard.   You can't do certain things because you have to prioritise paying for all this stuff […]. (P2)

Mental health was also acknowledged as an issue, however, it was observed that there was stigma associated with it among the students. They indicated that they depend on friends and family as opposed to the dominantly White staff but that it is not a welcome aspect with GEM background.

I know a lot of black students struggle with mental health. They don't speak a lot about it, it's like - Even African households, it's taboo for you to speak about mental health. You can't tell your Mum, 'I'm depressed', your Mum is just going to be like, 'You are not depressed, you are fine'. […] I know that there is support being provided but at the same time I feel like you can't - I don't know if there's people there that can relate to the black students that are there […] I feel like all you can do as a student is really just have a strong support system and just basically make sure that you speak to your friends. And if your family is open, speak to your family as well, that's all you can really do. (P6)

3.5   Education Function

This theme examined the relevance and how well an education institution prepare GEM students for success post-studies. While some students found education important for their future careers, many felt it was irrelevant since they have seen other people in their fields 'make it' without higher education.

[…] I know the end goal so for me personally I would want to go into teaching, that is my main motivation when it comes to education and I respect education because that's a line of work I want to be in anyway. I guess my motivation comes from different things so mainly just wanting to do well for myself but also to make my parents proud and to make my family proud as well, so I would say that is my motivation. (P5)

[…] from young it's always been installed in me to go into school, work hard for my parents and my sisters, my older siblings, just seeing that. But personally I've always had a love/hate relationship with education. I liked it, I was good at it but sometimes it just felt like do I really

need this to succeed? Even with uni I didn't know whether I wanted to go or not but I decided to go to better my skills and stuff like that. (P2)

Notably, some expressed that network in the job industry rather than education is what ensured successful attainment of a job and that unlike White students, they did not have 'connections' in their desired careers. They all concurred that they are in HE because it was important to their families. It is thus arguable whether HE in the UK provides GEM students with a conducive environment that inspires social solidarity, and it is observed that the students are dubious of its relevance in enabling them to secure relevant jobs.

A lot of students of African descent don't actually have family members that work in, let's say […] if that's what they want to do. Whereas in terms of, let's say […], a lot of the students I come [...] with in assessment centres, their parents, or they have an Uncle or their Dad had (connections) at these big companies who are coming in and helping them. (P1)

4   CONCLUSIONS

Based on the thematic analysis of the data collected in this study, it can be concluded that Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides the most valid framework for understanding the experiences of Global Ethnic Majority (GEM) students in higher education. The findings suggest that the under-representation and awarding gap of GEM students is not due to deficiencies in their cultural capital, abilities, or motivation, but rather to the presence of unfavourable learning conditions, such as stereotyping, segregation, and microaggression, that are based on their race or ethnicity. Despite the small sample size in this study, the findings have important implications for educational institutions. The results emphasize the need for immediate action to address the structural racism that exists within the higher education system. Education institutions must work towards creating a conducive and inclusive academic environment that facilitates the erasure of the awarding gap. This can be achieved by implementing strategies that address the underlying causes of the unfavourable learning conditions identified in this study. Some of these strategies may include the promotion of diversity and inclusion in recruitment and admissions processes, the provision of academic and social support to GEM students, the inclusion of diverse perspectives and experiences in the curriculum, and the training of staff and faculty on the impact of racism and microaggressions on GEM students. In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight the urgent need for education institutions to take action to address the awarding gap and structural racism that exists within higher education. By implementing strategies that are informed by CRT and other critical frameworks, education institutions can work towards creating an academic environment that is conducive to the success of all students, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

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