

Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) international postgraduate students on a Social Work programme: Support strategies towards bridging attainment gap

Cynthia Tuuli, University of Derby

ABSTRACT

There is evidence of a significant difference in students' attainment between Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students and their white counterparts in higher education Institutions (HEIs). This pilot study aimed to analyse the experiences of BME international postgraduate students on a Social Work programme and identified effective support strategies towards bridging the attainment gap. This pilot study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to interpret the teaching and learning experiences of students. Ten BME international postgraduate students were invited to join two focus group discussions over two months. The focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo software version 14. The coding resulted in three main themes (a) academic experiences, (b) personal experiences, (c) support strategies, with three sub-themes for each theme. These themes informed the development of the Three-Door Framework for enhancing BME students' academic experience and improving attainment. The Three-Door Framework can be applied to HEI policies/practices to reflect how student-tutor group sessions can be carried out. The importance of this research lies in its focus on understanding BME students' academic backgrounds through a holistic lens. By considering the personal and academic challenges they face, we can foster a sense of belonging, which in turn enhances their academic performance. Even though all students face similar issues, as BME international postgraduate students in HEIs there are additional issues around institutional inequalities and discrimination. Hence the primary outcome of this pilot study is the development of the Three-Door Framework, which when applied during tutorials or supervision session(s) creates a needed sense of belonging and engagement for BME students. Equally, the framework can be beneficial when used in the same vein for *all* or struggling students. Future research could explore experiences of postgraduate BME domiciled students and of academics and professionals who support BME students in HEIs.

Keywords: attainment, widening participation, ethnic minority, inclusivity, pedagogy

Introduction

There is evidence of a significant gap in attainment within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) between Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) home/domicile students and their white counterparts (McDuff et al., 2018; Universities UK, 2019). There is also evidence of disparity in attainment between BME international students and home BME students as international students perform less well than their BME home students (Morrison et al., 2005). This pilot study explored the lived experiences of BME international postgraduate students to understand the key issues of this disparity or low attainment and to develop strategies to bridge this gap. In this pilot study, BME international postgraduate students on a Social Work programme include students of Black African, Black Caribbean, Brown, and dual heritage backgrounds from outside the UK who came to study at institutions in the UK (His Majesty's Government, 2021; OfS, 2023).

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The attainment gap or achievement gap is defined as the difference between the proportion of white qualifiers who obtained first or upper second-class honours and the proportion of BME qualifiers who achieved at the same level (Jane, 2011).

Social Work programmes in HEIs in the UK include both theoretical and practical/placement sessions. The theoretical session follows guidelines from the regulator, Social Work England as well as other HEI courses such as research methods and dissertation (Carroll & Ryan, 2005a; Social Work England, 2023). The practical sessions include a placement element (200 days) out of which up to 30 days are for students to develop their skills. The placement element is supervised by a placement Practice Educators (PE) and/or Work-Based Supervisor (WBS) who give recommendations which contribute to the student's final degree attainment. Hence this article will explore how an overall postgraduate international student's academic experience impacts on their academic attainment.

From this backdrop, it is inherent to consider how certain frameworks or models inform BME postgraduate international students' experiences in HEIs. For example, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that to provide motivational foundation and academic engagement, *all* students irrespective of their backgrounds possess three psychological needs; relatedness, connectedness and autonomy (Deci et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relatedness refers to the innate desire to feel cared for, connectedness refers to the individual's ability and desire to perform to meet a desired outcome, while autonomy requires that one's actions and goals are initiated by self; all three psychological needs explain how students are motivated to achieve goals and for BME students these psychological needs link to their attainment. Bunce et al., (2021) applies a theoretical lens to understand the experiences of BME students and alludes to a conceptual model based on SDT, which asserts that the attainment of one's full learning potential is reliant on environments to provide a sense of relatedness, connectedness and autonomy. Though the understanding of these psychological needs exists, and though there have been studies in relation to BME students (Bunce et al., 2021; Bunce & King, 2019; Rana et al., 2022), there is still limited research on the experiences of BME international postgraduate students.

Given the paucity of research on BME international student attainment, it is remarkable to explore if the key contributing factors to low BME attainment in general from home BME students have a nexus with the low attainment from international students. These key contributing factors include students from poorly performing schools, lower socioeconomic communities and associated personal issues, all-inclusive assessment (an assessment which allows *all* students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in various ways fairly), level of support and marking styles in HEIs; and additionally learning styles (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Dhanda, 2009; Masocha, 2015). Even though critiques of learning styles suggest a lack of reliability and practicality in its application, there have been success stories in the use of learning styles in some HEIs in the UK and the USA (Reid, 2005; Robinson et al., 2022). Other researchers identified academic and non-academic stresses as factors contributing to low attainment. Evidently, there is some research on contributing factors to the attainment gap for home BME students (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Dhanda, 2009; Masocha, 2015). However, less is known about the attainment gap for international BME students.

Academic stresses

Communication (verbal and written)

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Many BME international postgraduate students who speak English as a second language can face challenges when expressing themselves in English professionally, compared to the everyday English they speak (Thomas et al., 2011). BME international postgraduate students on various programmes in the UK, not just Social Work, have reported experiencing communication issues (both verbal and written) while completing their studies (Grieve et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023).

As part of Social Work programmes, students are expected to use communication in both theoretical and practical assessments. Feedback from research on BME student placement experiences in the UK suggests that placement is a learning opportunity where students put theory into practice, yet students can experience challenges with the use of slang and in interpreting accents, a challenge similarly experienced by professionals who train students in practice (Rai, 2004).

Assessments and the curriculum

Students' attainment is ultimately informed by assessments in the form of presentations, essays, reports, coursework, case study analysis, practice portfolios or examinations inter alia. These are assessed during a formative session and subsequently during summative submissions. Despite its limited detail and focus on undergraduate BME students, research by Bartoli, (2011) sets the basis for the exploration of assessments of BME students on a Social Work programme in the University of Northampton. Bartoli revealed that African students' academic grades fared better when using assessments such as exams, however, using exams as a form of assessment is not the case on most Social Work programmes in the UK. BME students from African backgrounds have expressed familiarity with a more traditional form of closed book examination where they communicated and expressed their knowledge and they scored higher marks as opposed to assessments which required critical and deeper levels of thinking and writing (Bartoli, 2011; Carroll & Ryan, 2005b).

Subsequent research has shown that the academic learning environment, encompassing teaching methods and assessments, significantly impacts BME students' experiences and their academic progression (Anka, 2024; Thomas et al., 2011). This finding is closely linked to ongoing discussions about creating more inclusive spaces and decolonizing the curriculum (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015; Sangha, 2022; S. Smith, 2016; Stevenson, 2012). Other research concluded that there is an unchanged whiteness within the Social Work curriculum, limiting inclusivity which also impacts on the students' cultural and personal experiences and could potentially result in a lack of student participation and a lack of representation (Bernard et al., 2014; Hillen & Levy, 2015). The whiteness of the Social Work curriculum alludes to a Eurocentric, economic and structural inequality of both staff and student representation (Winter et al., 2024). Hence the curriculum delivered reflects characteristics of colonial inheritance and particular types of knowledge remain omitted in our curriculums, impacting engagement and inclusivity for BME students (Arday, 2021; Winter et al., 2024).

These academic stresses notwithstanding, understanding the difference in attainment has provided ongoing research with valuable recommendations. Similarly, there is no evidence to suggest that BME students spend less time studying or are more likely to miss lectures when compared to their white counterparts (Bunce & King, 2019; Rana et al., 2022), and it is therefore interesting that the attainment gap persists.

Non-academic stresses

Intersectionality

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The term intersectionality is a concept that enables us to recognise the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias (Gillborn, 2015). This concept has explored how student performance in higher education is influenced not only by a single focus on class, race or gender but by having a sophisticated look at intersectionality (McDuff et al., 2018). Brophy, (2024) argues that though the findings from his research on ethnic minority underachievement in higher education should be used with caution due to the categories used in its analysis, there is evidence that the interaction of ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status are likely influences on students' academic performance.

Staff representation/role models

BME students' sense of belonging and subsequent impact on their academic performance is positively correlated with the visibility of a diverse/BME academic staff who can be role models for BME students (Seuwou et al., 2024). This representation can although not necessarily, create a more inclusive space and a sense of belonging for BME students in a predominantly white institution (Camacho Felix Sara Maria, 2018) While Davies & Garrett, (2012) broadly emphasise the advantages of staff representation such as sharing experiences, learning from diverse cultures, and promoting wider participation, these benefits may not always be realized unless there are clear expectations set for the role model.

Research questions

While several studies have explored the experiences of undergraduate ethnic minority students in HEIs in general, the evidence of how the experiences of BME international postgraduate students influence or impacts their attainment is however limited. International BME students' academic experiences include teaching and learning experiences, while their personal experiences revolve around the students' individual unique encounters they may have gone through in their life, for example, financial, cultural, family, belief and perceptions. This pilot study will therefore address the following questions:

1. How do the academic experiences of BME international postgraduate students influence attainment?
2. How do the personal experiences of BME international postgraduate students impact attainment?
3. How can the difference in attainment between BME international postgraduate students and their white counterparts be bridged.

Method

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to understand the experiences of BME international postgraduate students on the Social Work programme. IPA was used because it is a phenomenological epistemological approach which allows the participant to make sense of their experiences while the researcher tries to make sense of their experiences (double hermeneutic) (Love et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022; Tomkins & Eatough, 2010). IPA allows researchers to develop a true understanding of the lived experiences with their participants through focus group discussions and to

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develop common themes, allowing the researcher to put themselves in the shoes of the participants for a true understanding of their lived experience (Alase, 2017).

This pilot study used a focus group approach to ensure that the purpose of the research was met. The focus group discussion focused on three areas:

1. In what way does the students' academic experiences (teaching, assessment and placement) impact attainment.
2. How do BME international postgraduate personal experiences impact attainment.
3. What support strategies can bridge the attainment gap.

Recruitment strategy

BME international postgraduate students on a two-year full-time Social Work programme were invited to take part in the study by their module and programme leaders through an announcement on Blackboard, a teaching and learning virtual platform. Students were invited to volunteer to join a focus group discussion about their university experience. The focus group discussions were conducted over a 2-month period from April to May 2024.

Data collection

Prior to the data collection, ethical approval of the study was obtained from the College Research Ethics Committee (Ethics application number ETH2324-1911). Two face-to-face group discussions were conducted with students to give students options to join different discussion sessions and each discussion lasted for about forty-five minutes. Participants were made up of year one international postgraduate students (n=6), and year two international postgraduate students (n=4). Smith et al., (2021) argues that there is no right size when it comes to sample size for focus groups as there are factors that may impact the size of the study. Subsequently, focus group study is known to yield best with small sample sizes as it allows for detailed examination of convergence and divergence discussions in detail.

Data analysis

The discussions were recorded on Panopto and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data was analysed using Nvivo software version 14 where it was coded and analysed to identify common themes. Thematic analysis was used because it allows for identifying patterns and reporting themes from participants lived experiences in detail. It also involves searching across a data set (interviews or focus group) to find repeated patterns. From this perspective, thematic analysis was conducted after transcription using the following phases: 1. Familiarity with the data, 2. Generating initial codes, 3. Searching for themes, 4. Reviewing themes, 5. Defining and naming themes, 6. Producing the report (Braun et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Theme 1: Academic experiences

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Sub-theme a: teaching and assessments

Students compared experiences between their current teaching and assessments to how they studied in their home countries and how that impacted their attainment: “... just like she said, we are coming from a place of different education, different degrees of life, culture and...back home we are very descriptive in our assignment” (Student 16).

Sub-theme b: reading resources

A student discussed how the source/authors of the reading resources might influence their academic attainment at the end of their programme:

application of Social Work theories whether it's written by a black person or not wouldn't have any impact on my learning but if it's about an experience I would like to read from a black person as I can relate with it (Student 8)

Sub-theme c: placement

Students expressed having different experiences from placement and how these impacted on their learning experiences.

... I feel at my placement there is this superiority competition between white and black staff in a way, they won't say it, but we are adults, so we know. When you are voicing your opinion some of them will brush what you are saying off (Student 11).

my practice educator told me that in this country you have hype yourself, we black people we are conscious to not self-praise, we would rather let someone praise us, and this can sometimes be reflected in our writing where we think that we are writing too much (Student 9).

Theme 2: Personal challenges

Sub-theme a: accommodation

Though personal challenge in higher education is a challenge for all students, BME international postgraduate students encounter added challenges triggered by racial, social and institutional racism and discrimination (Bunce et al., 2021; Rai, 2004). With these challenges, students discussed how their search for accommodation when lectures had begun impacted on their academic experience: “...accommodation played a vital role; it was really a struggle...I would be in class, and I will be checking my phone and thinking will this agent reply...I am not even listening to what is happening...” (Student 14).

Sub-theme b: parenting and jobs

Students shared their experiences in parenting and job search while undertaking their programmes and how this impacted academic work: “I feel that for international students we have a lot of other worries ...work generally, if I wasn't working while on placement, I would be less stressed...” (Student 11).

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I will speak for myself, what I have seen is that the little spare time we have we are always trying to work to pay fees and look after family, because our fees are almost twice the local students ... I believe the time we are mostly supposed to spend studying most of us are always out there working and then we get exhausted ... (Student 9)

Sub-theme c: communication and culture shock

Students also discussed how communication and culture shock impacted their experiences.

my major challenge is the communication gap between us and our white students, e.g. if you (researcher) are teaching I can hear you clearly every bit you say, I understand you clearly, but if I have a white teacher, most of the time you don't get the details of what they say and that affects my learning. In practice, the same thing happens... (Student 8)

...when I first came here during one of our classes they said 'pub' in one of the scenarios we were meant to analyse I don't know what pub meant I was trying to ask, I could see that most of the students already got most of what was said, and the person teaching did not tell us what it meant. I was just playing along, just let me say trying to understand the teaching process so it's a challenge for us...(Student 5)

Theme 3: Support strategies

Sub-theme a: buddy/reverse mentoring

While students discussed and acknowledged the existence of academic and personal challenges, they also discussed support strategies which could give them a more positive academic experience and improve attainment. For most of the students who took part in this discussion, having a buddy system/reverse mentoring who can also support them academically would be very beneficial.

Sincerely speaking, when we came, referencing for our assessment was a big deal and so we just needed that support on referencing, I can tell you...I only have a relationship with one past student and what she tells me is what is send to my classmates (Student 10)

Sub-theme b: intermittent workshops

Some students who missed university and programme induction echoed the benefits of having intermittent workshops: "I would say, intermittently there should be a workshop for international students let's say monthly with focused topics..." (Student 15); "... apart from the student's union, the university should narrow the workshops down to each course" (Student 14).

Sub-theme c: employment disadvantage at the end of the programme

Employment retention at the end of placement was a concern for international postgraduate students because of visa acquisition by the employer. This impacts attainment in that there is the tendency for students to focus on job searching rather than engagement with modules and attendance becomes less.

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Student 14 commented: "I feel it's quite unfair for some of us international students, because I don't think we can be retained at our placement..." and Student 17 echoed this: "with placement, the local students are at an advantage since they can be retained in their placement".

Discussion

This pilot study explored how BME international postgraduate students' experiences impacted their degree attainment. Theme one from this pilot study answered research question one, by exploring how BME international postgraduate students' academic experiences impact on attainment. Though the sub-themes identified are applicable to all students, there is evidence that BME international postgraduate students face additional barriers and as such, if higher education is to be as inclusive as it wants to be, the difference in students' academic experiences and how that difference could impact on student attainment, could be assessed through inclusive teaching and learning practices (Bunce & King, 2019; McDuff et al., 2018).

Inclusive teaching and learning practices recognise effective ways of responding to learner diversity and promote meaningful, relevant and accessible pedagogy, curricula and assessment for students (Hockings, 2010). Inclusive teaching and approaches also recognise student circumstances and needs, enabling success and minimising barriers (Thompson & Brewster, 2023). Although Thompson & Brewster (2023) explored how factors such as disability, ill-health or work-related responsibilities can impact student placement, the article discusses students' experiences and an inclusive approach, similar to the experiences of BME international postgraduate students discussed during the focus group session for this pilot study.

Seuwou et al. (2024) contend that the lack of connectedness to what is taught on a module can for some students result in surface learning practices and limited absorption. Similarly, Mahmud & Gagnon, (2023) posit that, for the dissemination of knowledge, decolonising the curriculum should not only be done by including BME names to the reading list, but holistically through pedagogy, student and staff recruitment, and senior management. This supports student 8's assertion of her relatedness to the experience of an author from a BME background.

The placement element on the Social Work programme contributes to students' degree classification and attainment. For example, in the university where the study was conducted, the placement module is 20 credits in year one and 20 credits in year two at the postgraduate level. As such, PE's support for BME international postgraduate students is paramount to BME students' success on placement (Furness, 2012). Though Furness (2012) interviewed Social Work PEs, it also explains that students of Asian or Black ethnicity are more likely to fail than other students due to factors such as attitude to learning and dealing with personal issues or experiences. Furness further describes the attitude to learning to include, but not limited to, defensive attitude towards constructive criticism, difficulty sharing personal matters and anxiety, and lack of understanding among others.

Theme two addressed research question two by considering students' personal circumstances. Dhanda, (2009) claims that factors such as parental income, term-time working, and education can impact students' learning. Black and Minority Ethnic students who study for the first time in the UK tend to work mostly part-time to support themselves and their families and this can be challenging in many ways. Bunce et al. (2021) then attest that a student's personal tutor whose role is generally to discuss student issues/successes and wellbeing, when utilised correctly, can impact positively on students' attainment. The

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tutor builds rapport, establishes trust and can identify when a student is failing academically due to reasons such as personal issues, and offers needed support.

Theme three addressed research question three by exploring strategies from students to mitigate the attainment gap. This approach was key from the perspective of involving participants in developing strategies that impact on their own lives; a concept perceived as ‘nothing about us, without us’ (Charlton, 1998; Duddington et al., 2023). Students recommended the use of a buddy system or reverse mentoring as an overarching practice to support students; research indicates that this action contributes to skills and knowledge enhancement (Campbell, 2015; Loos & Kim, 2017). As a form of collaborative learning, a buddy system can foster a great sense of responsibility, promote networking and where a staff member is involved as an academic advisor or tutor, offer a sense of belonging as the student identifies fully with the university (Seery et al., 2021).

Black and Minority Ethnic international postgraduate students are also of the view that having intermittent workshops for students who missed induction due to visa and travel issues would be useful. Although it may be argued that these services are already available, navigating the university’s website, particularly for students who have been out of academia for some time, can be challenging. Hence the use of a personal tutor could be reinforced to signpost students to these workshops and ensure that there are regular interactions with students (Furness, 2012). Furness, (2012) further demonstrates that tutors can identify early signs of a student’s failure or difficulty and can alleviate the situation by drawing up action plans to support the failing student.

The Three-Door Framework for enhancing BME student experience

The themes identified from this research were used to develop the ‘Three-Door Framework’ which conceptualises the idea of identifying the key contributing factors to low attainment and how to support students to achieve their highest academic ability and improve attainment (see Figure 1). This Framework emerged from a holistic view of the three themes, from the focus group discussions, and in consolidation with the three psychological needs initiated by SDT (Deci et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This framework can be used during a tutorial session (academic session) and placement supervision (practical session), to assist the tutor/professionals to relate and connect with the student. Door one assesses where the student has come from (academic background), focusing on their academic backgrounds and how this might impact on their academic journey. This Door explores areas such as the students’ writing and communication skills, referencing and presentation. Understanding the students’ academic background minimises the impact of the academic challenges sometimes faced by BME students (Jessop & Williams, 2009; Rana et al., 2022). This Door also allows the tutor/professional to understand where the students’ academic shortfalls are and allows for provisions to meet the students’ learning needs and provide autonomy. Door two assesses where the student is (current situation) in their academic journey, in terms of assignments, preparing for placement, support from ‘*buddys*’ or mentors. With the different teaching and learning styles for most international postgraduate students, Door two explores how the student has settled and connected with their programmes. Door three is about the next steps and how to support the student academically, and this could include signposting students to, for example, library resources, tutorials, or peer support. For BME international postgraduate students, it is important that there is a strong support network from

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academics and student peers and for HEIs to create an awareness and an understanding of the issues affecting BME students in HEIs (Winter et al., 2024).

Even though *all* students might face similar issues in their academic journeys, it is worth emphasising that in addition to these issues (academic and personal challenges) BME students, either local or international, postgraduate or undergraduate, are also faced with navigating institutional and racial discrimination within UK HEIs (Bunce et al., 2021; Dhanda, 2009; Mahmud & Gagnon, 2023). These compounding issues impact significantly on their degree attainment when compared with their white counterparts. Hence, the Three-Door Framework hopes to create awareness and understanding of the BME international postgraduate students' experiences both at the module level and pastoral/tutoring and how to apply support strategies to improve BME student attainment.

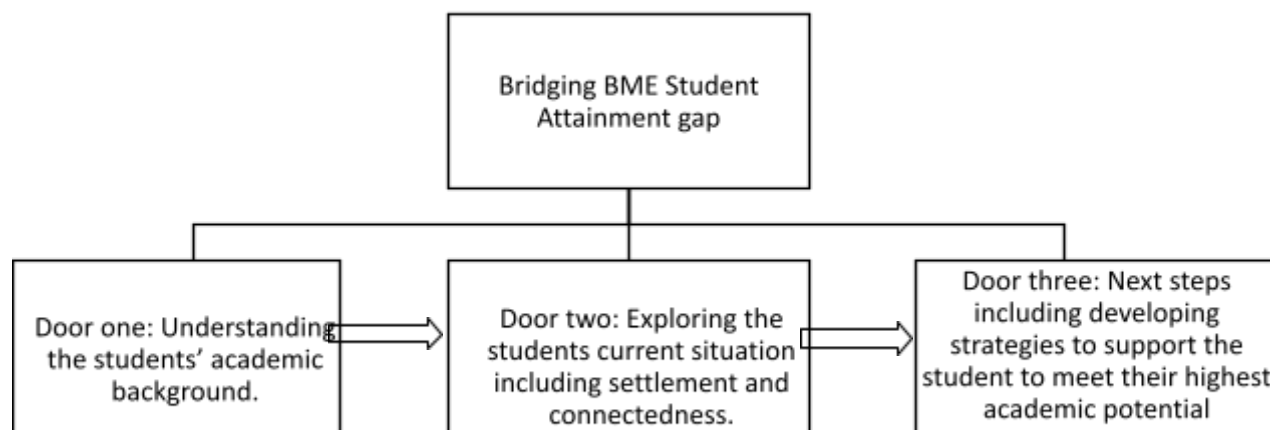


Figure 1: A representation of the Three-Door Framework for enhancing BME student experience.

Conclusion and implications for practice

The implications/impact of this research allows for the integration of the Three-Door Framework in Personal Academic Tutorial sessions or supervision to produce an effective collaborative work between BME international postgraduate and academics and/or professionals. The primary aim of this pilot study was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of BME international postgraduate students and how these experiences influence their academic achievement. The outcome of this pilot is key to improving BME international postgraduate student performance in HEIs and provides guidelines to bridge the attainment gap through the application of the Three-Door Framework. The development of the Three-Door Framework which can be used by tutors/academics to ascertain how the students' academic background can impact on their current academic experience and subsequently their degree attainment. Although this approach may be perceived as exhaustive, it is crucial for bridging the attainment gap in HEIs

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and it is more so essential to integrate the Three-Door framework within tutorial sessions and institutional policies.

From a placement perspective, there is evidence that supervising international postgraduate students on placement can be challenging and different from domestic BME postgraduate students due to differences in culture, understanding local systems relevant to social work practice, language and communication (Ross et al., 2019, 2020). Ross et al. (2019) further alludes to the importance of Practice Educators' understanding of other social work systems across countries as such knowledge will support students. With this backdrop, the use of the Three-Door Framework during placement supervision sessions will create a holistic teaching and learning environment for both students and their PEs.

It is recognised that the outcome and the development of the Three-Door Framework is informed by both empirical data and literature, however the research is limited due to the small sample size, number of focus group sessions and research timings. This limited sample size, however, sets a baseline for future studies on a broad scale. Future research could explore experiences of postgraduate BME domiciled student experiences and the impact of their experiences on their attainment within HEIs.

To conclude, the findings from this study indicate that when academics and professionals take a holistic approach in understanding the BME international postgraduate students' academic background and their current situation, it sets the basis for enhancing students' performance and bridging the attainment gap.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the author.

Biography

Cynthia Tuuli is a social work lecturer at the University of Derby. Her research interests are around minority student's experiences in higher education and the attainment gap and in understanding the lived experiences of peri- and menopausal women.

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