Designing for Hope: Black Students' Experiences and Mental Wellbeing in British Higher Education

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Working with students in higher education (HE) from racialized backgrounds, I was drawn to an underlying theme, considering the mental and emotional well-being of Black students attending higher education institutions (HEIs). This led to my current path, focusing my PhD research on the experiences and well-being of Black students. During my PhD journey, I have found that for staff and students from racialized backgrounds, that academia has the potential to be a profoundly positive, affirming experience. This does not alleviate, however, the inequalities present in HE and the inequalities related to mental health and broader society that detract from this journey.

The Office for Students (OfS), in 2019, highlighted that Black full-time students with a reported mental health condition had some of the lowest attainment, continuation and progres-

sion rates. In the same year, Universities UK drew attention to persisting inequalities in higher education, stressing a need for "whole-institution" approaches to addressing these complex disparities. At this present time, I still have a growing concern that without university-wide shifts in culture, Black students struggling with their mental health will slip through the cracks and continue to be failed throughout the student cycle.[38]

Change and positive action for Black students have become more visible in recent years, but this is only the beginning. There is a pressing need to continue listening openly to Black students' experiences and address challenges to ensure needs are met, change is sustainable, and action is not performative. In this short piece, I can only touch the surface of challenges facing Black students, sharing a few poignant matters

from my experience and knowledge gathered on my research journey regarding racial inequalities that manifest in adverse mental health and well-being outcomes.

For Black students and academics alike, permeating the experience is a sentiment of *working twice as hard for half as much*, myself included. A shared understanding is that as a Black person, you must work harder to prove your worth and gain half of the respect and recognition your peers do. You may go the extra mile to simply be noticed or considered average. Not often considered is the toll this may take on one's sense of self, acutely aware that the academic community at large has lower expectations of you or may disregard your achievements due to your race and ethnicity.[39]

As a Black woman in academia, I do not feel a kinship with the academic identity I see others embrace. I think I do not sound or look like an academic. I am a creative; I thrive in the worlds of design, arts and humanities. I am not oblivious that being Black and choosing a creative discipline negates my intelligence for some. I am acutely aware that I operate under this same stress and pressure to overachieve and continually prove that I have a place in the academy.

Some of this pressure for Black students is underlined by a visceral sensation of feeling both visible and invisible in academic spaces. It is an awareness that you are watched, and your every action is scrutinized, whilst you are simultaneously ignored and avoided by your peers and staff alike. On top of this, the spotlight may fall on Black students in a way that leaves them feeling tokenized, expected to represent or speak on behalf of their community in seminars, singled out and "pressed into service". This feeling that you stand out, yet are still invisible, creates a confusing multi-layered sensation that cuts through the academic experience, fostering a deep sense of isolation.[40]

This and other factors may lead many students to feel they must separate their identities, as the Black identity is perceived as incompatible with an academic one. It is difficult for students to feel they are on equal standing with their peers if their identity is predetermined as not having a place in higher education. I have concern for students beginning their academic journeys, potentially feeling a deep sense of

isolation and disconnect from academia from the start. I worry that students may be less inclined to pursue further qualifications such as masters and PhDs due to the isolating experience of being a Black face in HE, becoming the "perpetual outsider"[41].

In my own experience, I am aware I am surveilled. I know this manifests in multiple ways, from holding back language to curating my image to something that does not feel too "Black" for HE audiences. I have in the past been met with little empathy when I have shared this feeling. Instead, it was implied that I was surely just imagining the questioning eyes, and perhaps the micro-aggressive comments were harmless mis-understandings, as though it was all in my head.

In the Equalities and Human Rights Commission's report addressing racism at uni-versities, around 24% of students from an ethnic minority background said they had experienced racial harassment since starting university; of these, 30% had been physically attacked, and 56% had experienced racist name-calling, insults and jokes[42]. I would not have known where to go if I had a concern I wanted to discuss. I would have felt uncomfortable seeking help from an en-vironment that felt unwelcoming to me. Services did not then, and often do not now, have the l anguage, skills or resources to appropriately support Black students in a way that does not further impact students' mental health by avoid-ing or trivializing race[43].

In a letter to former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Black Impact and Make Diversity Count

(supported by the National Union of Students) spoke to the growing presence of racism, day-to-day discrimination, and other disadvantages Black students face. An area they drew attention to in addressing these inequalities, as many have, is the lack of representation. In the UK, there are only 155 Black professors out of 22,810. There is low representation in critical roles such as counsellors and academic leadership across the UK HE sector. This lack of representation can harm students' sense of belonging and potential in academia and leave Black students without adequate mentors and support. It does not leave much hope for whole-institution approaches to change. It is unlikely we will see significant shifts in representation without addressing issues of racism and stereotyping for staff and

students alike.[44] It is not an attractive prospect for me to potentially put myself in harm's way by pursuing a path to academic senior leadership or professorship. I want to see representation, but not at a cost to my mental health and well-being.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was reignited in 2020, platforming a profound, worldwide response to systemic oppression and police brutality towards Black Americans, particularly the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd[45]. The feeling echoed worldwide, with many looking inwards at their own systematic inequalities and tragedies, asking for change at home. Here, at protests, the passionate refrain "the UK is not innocent" was not difficult to miss. As in the US, many British universities quickly "took part", participating online during this period of Black trauma as an opportunity to reflect and pause on what they can do in their institutions. For others, they may have been engaged, but it seemed from where I stood that not enough was done to reach out to students affected by such matters, on-top of dealing with the ongoing global pandemic. We must not see racism and structural inequalities as something that only happens in the US.

Where initiatives started and opportunities were created, I have some apprehension that without the pressure of BLM and the attraction of social media hashtags, the desire to continue to work on racial inequalities and listen to Black students' concerns is fading. I still struggle to point Black students in a genuine direction I can be confident in, where there is funding and space

to support them.

HEIs and connected services must spend more time actively listening with empathy. We will not progress if Black students and staff voice challenges that universities will not acknowledge. HEIs should not only be reacting to Black students' pain after the fact. They should strive to be already able to offer and approach students with support, leaving the door open when they need it. As more Black students attend university, and universities actively encourage them to participate, universities must look beyond Black student's socio-economic status, as seems to be the default, as studies and Black voices shout that there is more to attainment and retention than where we might come from, that the

experience of being Black in education plays a role in students' time at university.[46]

I see enormous potential in utilizing co-creation, creative research, co-design, participatory design, and other similar practices under this collaborative approach to addressing such matters. These approaches share a common value, keeping the human at the heart of any "thing" that is designed. This could be, for example, a new resource, an art piece, a service, or a course. Although I speak from design, this does not equate simply to being creative. It is considering more than just imagery, but the tone, language, emotion, format, accessibility, user needs and user experience of anything we want someone to interact with, from HEI websites to wellbeing programs.

With a co-design/design thinking mindset, we can seek to avoid assuming the needs of Black students, speaking to them rather than about them. We strive to avoid adding to the frustrations of those with lived experience, working with them to challenge imbalances in power. It encourages us to stay curious and embrace complexity and ambiguity, as we understand there is no one-size-fits-all approach to such multi-faceted issues. Designers have understood that although we can make or re-design things for people without any input, we often envision such things through our own eyes. This leaves room for misunderstanding and costly development of things that do not work for those they are intended for[47]. From this perspective, I think of well-intended schemes and efforts to approach Black

students that may have missed the mark or remain unheard as they have not been created in a way that connects with students.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the possibilities and value of co-production in addressing health and social matters (such as student mental health), particularly in marginalized communities where important issues can be left unaddressed due to inattention and a lack of resources[48]. I feel hopeful to see funding for programmes with the ingredients to have more suitable, long-term benefits that Black students can meaningfully feel. The OfS launched a mental health funding competition in 2021, aiming at projects supporting collaborative approaches to target student mental health. Amongst the

18 projects are these, that introduce themselves as "Proactive and Preventative Interventions for Black Students" from London South Bank University, "Mental health resources for hard-to-reach groups" from Coventry University and "Wellbeing for People Like Us: Racial and culturally competent wellbeing support" at the University of West London[49]. It gives me hope to see initiatives with funding behind them embrace co-creation and speak to the idea of opening doors for Black students, proactively inviting them to participate in their well-being rather than talking about them through attainment.