Empirical Article

'Race' and Academic Performance in International Higher Education: Black Africans in the U.K.

Solomon Zewolde

School of Education and Communities, University of East London, U.K.

Corresponding author: Email: szewolde@uel.ac.uk

School of Education and Communities, University of East London, University Way, London, England, E16 2RD

ABSTRACT

U.K. higher education research routinely pinpoints the racialized nature of academic performance, but it often fails to even consider if racism contributes to such a pervasive racial or ethnic disparity. While research in the area often focuses on comparing the attainment of home white and ethnic minority students, little attention is given to the experiences of black African international students (BAIS), particularly in U.K. higher education. Using semi-structured qualitative interviews, this study documents how "race" shapes academic performance and achievement by exploring the experiences of 21 BAIS undergraduates studying in ten universities in England. Factors identified, inter alia, include racism and discrimination, and the analysis challenges the narrative of assessment as neutral and objective technology that rewards merit, and lifts the voices of BAIS which are normally silent in the literature about international student experience. 'Race' and ethnicity jeopardize perception of BAIS's academic ability and judgment of their assessed work.

INTRODUCTION

Sociological work on the assessment experience of ethnic minority students in U.K. higher education routinely points out the perennial problem of ethnic differences in attainment, identifying ethnicity as a significant predictor of achievement, even when other contributory factors such as entry qualifications and socio-economic status are controlled (Broecke and Nicholls, 2006; Connor et al., 2004; ECU, 2020; Richardson, 2018; Richardson et al., 2020). Despite this, however, assessment in U.K. higher education is conceptualized as an objective, color-blind practice that rewards merit (Gillborn, 2008), and U.K. studies

continue to ignore the role of "race" and racism in the assessment experiences of black students (Smith, 2017; Sriprakash et al., 2019; Steventon et al., 2016). There seems to be a total silence, in particular, regarding research that explores how issues of race and ethnicity interact with the assessment experiences of black international students in U.K. higher education. This study is located in the tradition of research that explores the role of "race" and racism in the educational experiences of ethnic minority students (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Bunce et al., 2021; George Mwangi et al., 2019; Harper, 2012; Steventon et al., 2016), and it presents evidence that the pervasive attainment gap is also reflected in students' lived academic experiences by exploring the case of black African international undergraduates studying in ten English universities located in eight cities. The findings challenge the "unexplained gap" narrative in the literature (Broecke & Nicholls, 2006).

The study explored the following main research question:

1. To what extent, if any, have "race"/ethnicity and racism played a role in the lived academic experiences of black African international students (BAIS), in particular in their academic performance and achievement?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The paucity of research literature specifically on the assessment experiences of international students is surprising, considering the potential to produce evidence to guide the development of inclusive curriculum and assessment practices (Carroll, 2014). The limited research in the area looks at either international students' preferences between different assessment methods (Bartoli, 2011; De Vita, 2002; Kingston & Forland, 2008), or the attainment of international students (Iannelli & Huang, 2014; LSEU, 2017; Morrison et al., 2005).

Research on Preferences about Assessment Methods

Studies on preferences about assessment methods show contrasting results. While Kingston and Forland (2008) report that international students prefer what are collectively termed alternative forms of assessment (such as project work, coursework, and presentations), Bartoli (2011) reports preference for traditional forms of assessment, such as end-of-term written examinations. Kingston and Forland (2008), in a study of "gaps in expectation between teachers and East Asian international students," note that the large majority of these students preferred alternative forms of assessment to traditional examinations. The students argued that due to lack of proficiency in English, they preferred assessment methods that would not put them on the spot, and that would give them the opportunity for detailed written feedback from tutors, rather than just verbal feedback.

Research on Attainment

Research on attainment compared the performance of international and home students, and reported a mixed picture. While some earlier studies found no significant difference (Ackers, 2002; Marshall & Chilton, 1995), some reported that international students performed better (Pauley, 1988), and others discovered that U.K. home students performed better, measured by degree class awarded (Makepeace & Baxter, 1990). Later studies have all reported that international students were consistently awarded fewer "good" degrees (2:1 and first class) (Iannelli & Huang, 2014; LSEU, 2017; Morrison et al., 2005). Most of these studies focused on a limited number of universities and specific courses, and only quantitatively analyzed differences of pre-entry attributes such as age, sex, mode of study, discipline of study, and the highest qualification on entry; they did not look at what happens once students are in their universities. In a highly racialized educational space such as the U.K. higher education system (Bhopal, 2018; Crozier et al., 2016), it is particularly important to look critically at students' experiences at universities, as student identity such as "race" and ethnicity interact with academic practices such as assessment.

Research on BAIS's Experiences

Despite the presence of African students in British education since the eighteenth century (Daley, 1998), and 1 in 16 international students in the U.K. at present being from Africa, there is little research on the experiences of BAIS in the U.K. (Hyams-Ssekasi et al.,

2014). The few studies on black students' experiences in the U.K. reported poor academic experiences and outcomes (NUS, 2011; Van Dyke, 1998).

Van Dyke (1998) considers the progress and achievement of ethnic minority and white students in two London-based universities, finding considerable ethnic differences in both retention and graduation rates across the four courses investigated. They found that Eurocentric curricular content, low expectations due to teachers' stereotypical view of minorities, and limited contact with teachers outside of class also affected the academic achievement of ethnic minority students. Van Dyke (1998) further reports that the evidence "indicates that individual merit may not be the only defining variable that influences student progress and performance" (p. 132).

The African students in Van Dyke's (1998) study reported racist and discriminatory assessment experiences. The following quotations represent African students' voices on marking, the stereotypical views of staff about African students, and racist discrimination in marking. They provide evidence and insight that there is historically a palpable sense of being "Othered" and discriminated against, and also a sense of low trust pervading relations and/or interactions between African students and staff:

> On this particular course they have already chosen who will get the first class degree and it's a white person that I know … and the others will probably get 2.1s and the majority of black people, I feel, will get specially those who come from African continent, 2.2s or thirds and it seems like that [outcome] will be determined from the time you start your second year … And that's what I am finding with this particular college … But I do have a friend at another university that is experiencing a similar situation to this … And you know, there doesn't seem to be anything that you can do about it and you sort of go home in tears (Van Dyke, 1998, p. 130).

> So and so never gives black students above 55. I helped a white student with an assignment and when he got them back he asked me what I got. He got an A and I got a C. He couldn't believe it (Van Dyke, 1998, p. 121).

> One day I actually overheard X make racist comments about us to another lecturer. X said there were too many Africans in [the university] and that we were all dumb fools (Van Dyke, 1998, p. 131).

A study by the National Union of Students (NUS, 2011) reported that BAIS experienced specific difficulties, such as biased marking of their assignments, feelings of isolation and alienation with a direct bearing on their motivation and desire to stay on their courses, and low expectations both from teachers and their peers, which left them feeling that they were destined to fail or underachieve (NUS, 2011, pp. 5–6). Some African international students perceived their educational environment as exclusionary and discriminatory. One BAIS lamented, "[International] students (especially those of color) often feel like outsiders and are probably not paid as much attention to than other students [*sic*]. There is often the perception that they are going to fail at whatever they try and therefore they aren't encouraged" (NUS, 2011, p. 48). Another BAIS in the NUS study expressed the view that assessment practices in their university did not consider differences in styles of writing that they were socialized into in their prior education, for example, U.S. versus U.K. English. In a more recent study, LSEU (2017) looked at five years of degree awards (2009/10–2013/14), and found that black and ethnic minority students (home and international alike) are less likely to be awarded "good" degrees (first class and 2:1) than white students.

This review shows that there are ethnic differences in assessment experience and attainment, that many U.K. studies continue to homogenize international students, and that very few include BAIS in their sample – evidence that they continue to be overlooked.

The limited research work on the assessment experiences of black international students mainly identifies and describes the racialized nature of assessment outcomes, and usually suggests various forms of support and compensatory work to ameliorate the challenges that they experience. Critics argue that such research remains stuck in deficit thinking, and fails to look critically at both the universities and assessment practices in higher

education as a vehicle of cultural and social reproduction that legitimizes and reinforces existing racial differences (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Leathwood, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Most of this research is also atheoretical (Abdullah et al., 2014; Tight, 2004) and as result does not explain and theorize about the underlying causes of racial and/or ethnic differences in assessment in higher education. This study attempts to fill this lacuna by exploring BAIS's lived experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses critical race theory (CRT), which focuses on the effects of "race" and racism on the lived experiences of black people and ethnic minorities. Initially developed by critical legal scholars (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Matsuda, 1987), CRT has increasingly been utilized by educational researchers to foreground race and racism in studies that explore lived experiences of black students (Dixson et al., 2006; Doharty et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2016; Madriaga & McCaig, 2019).

CRT has five basic tenets which would help to unbury taken-for-granted assumptions, practices, and operations in educational institutions that perpetuate educational inequities: the permanence of racism, the centrality of experiential knowledge, the challenge to dominant ideology, the commitment to social justice, and the transdisciplinary perspective (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Thus, CRT asserts that "race" and racism are permanent and not aberrant in society, and acknowledges the experiential knowledge of people of color as a legitimate and valid knowledge base. CRT challenges claims of "objectivity", "meritocracy", "color blindness", and "race neutrality" made by institutions and dominant research paradigms that silence and ignore the voices of black and ethnic minority people. CRT is committed to social justice, and it offers methods and analysis that promote radical and transformative change. To explore how "race" and racism operate in education, CRT draws on many methods and analytic frameworks, and it transcends disciplinary boundaries (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

This study draws on the experiential knowledge of BAIS, explores the factors that they believe affect their academic performance, and generates narratives that challenge claims of a "post-racial" and meritocratic assessment practice in U.K. higher education. Predominantly white policy-makers in the sector often use a color-blind ideology to downplay or reject altogether critical examination of their policies and practices that are responsible for racialized assessment experiences and outcomes. A CRT-informed analysis of BAIS's assessment experiences in this study enables them to name their reality and lift their voices, which are normally silent in the literature.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was designed as a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) with a constructionist stance that views lived experience as multiple and contested versions of reality (Schwandt, 1994).

DATA COLLECTION

A qualitative semi-structured in-depth interview research design was used to explore factors that affect the academic performance of BAIS. In-depth interviews provide researchers with the opportunity to listen to interviewees for longer, and to probe further and ask follow-up questions for clarification. Qualitative interviews allow the generation of stories that capture the complexities of BAIS's lived realities, and produce powerful data providing valuable insights into how they understand and make sense of their assessment experiences at university. However, traditional qualitative research in education is criticized for "epiphenomenizing or de-emphasizing race" (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 13). I therefore used qualitative interviews in conjunction with a CRT framework to foreground race and racism in my methods and analysis, since BAIS study in a culturally constructed (Crozier et al., 2016) and racialized (Bhopal, 2018) U.K. higher education field.

Questions were loosely structured, allowing greater freedom for interviewees to impose their own structure. The interview schedule included introductory icebreaker questions, some background questions, questions about motives for choosing to study in the U.K., academic experiences in their current universities, experiences of being an international student, and

experiences of racism and discrimination. The interview questions addressed in this article are "What would you say are the factors that affect your academic performance or achievement at your university?", with the probes "Who do you think does well and who does less well?" and "To what extent, if any, have 'race' and racism played a role in your assessment experience?". In most cases, however, interviewees raised experiences of racism and discrimination in their assessment experiences before the probe questions were asked.

The Participants

The study participants were 21 BAIS (12 males and 9 females) from four sub-Saharan-African countries, who were studying on five different undergraduate courses at ten English universities located in eight cities (Table 1). The participants were recruited through emailing personal connections and a "call for research participants" advertisement. The call made no mention of "race" or experience of racism to avoid the tendency of recruiting only participants who have experienced racism. It simply asked if they were a BAIS and if they were willing to share their views about "what it is like for them to study at their current university."

Table 1: Participants' Profiles

Participant	Nationality	Gender	Age	University	Course and Year of Study
Tibu	Nigerian	Male	18	Canal	Accounting and finance, 2nd year
Bena	Nigerian	Female	19	Canal	Business management, 2nd year
Poni	Nigerian	Female	19	Canal	Law, 2nd year
Jaka	Kenyan	Male	20	Castle	Finance, 2nd year
Beku	Kenyan	Male	21	Castle	Philosophy, politics and economics, 2nd year
Astu	Kenyan	Female	21	Castle	Law, 3rd year
Baso	Serra-Leonean	Male	28	Downtown	Law (Hons), 2nd year
Domu	Serra-Leonean	Male	29	Chapel	Law, 3rd year
Rosa	Nigerian	Female	19	Hillside	Law, 3rd year
Lara	Nigerian	Female	19	Song	Law, 2nd year
Ruth	Nigerian	Female	19	Hillside	Law, 3rd year
Wasa	Nigerian	Male	22	Port	Biomedical sciences, 3rd year
Yomi	Nigerian	Female	19	Port	Biomedical sciences, 3rd year
Demba	Nigerian	Male	20	Woods	Aerospace engineering, 3rd year
Olu	Nigerian	Female	20	Woods	Bioengineering, 3rd year
Katu	Nigerian	Female	22	Canal-Great	Law, 3rd year
Pala	Serra-Leonean	Male	36	Canal-Great	Law, 3rd year
Mufti	Nigerian	Male	24	Canal-Great	Economics, 2nd year
Arno	South African	Male	26	Canal-Great	Acting, 3rd year
Ade	Nigerian	Male	19	Canal-Great	Law with criminology, 2nd year
Wanja	Kenyan	Male	31	Parkside, Business	Management, 3rd year

DATA ANALYSIS

After verbatim transcription of the interviews, I produced "thick descriptions" (Ponterotto, 2006) – a description of the demographic and other background information, along with a summary of the transcribed data for each participant. The process of producing the thick descriptions helped me to be even more familiar with individual data and, most importantly, helped me to organize and categorize my data in preparation for further analysis. I then transferred the verbatim transcriptions of all interview data into NVivo qualitative data analysis software (Version 11) for ease of retrieval, organizing and reorganizing, and multiple coding and recoding. I used the following procedure to identify a theme or themes from the transcribed data:

 a) Indexing, which involves thoroughly reading the data set and identifying extracts that correspond to a particular category.
 b) This was followed by creating brief memos stating my understanding and interpretations of the indexed data.
 c) Further in-depth engagement with data and generating more robust analytic categories, looking across the data set for patterns and an overarching theme.

I used two methods of coding: a priori codes derived from my theoretical framework to create initial categories reflecting issues I was interested to explore, and data-driven coding to make connections across the participants' stories and to merge themes into final codes for analysis (Silverman, 2020). This research was conducted within UCL/IOE's ethical standards and guidelines, and ethical clearance was sought and obtained before commencing all research activities, including pilot work.

FINDINGS

This section presents the data and analysis from the interviews that demonstrate how the racialized context of the higher education sector produces misgivings, and negative perceptions of BAIS. I acknowledge that realities can be plural, and no claim is made that my participants' experiences represent the only truth. There can be multiple versions of lived experiences of BAIS, depending on context and individual differences. The study participants also identified other factors affecting their academic performance, such as level of academic preparedness and unfamiliarity with newer assessment methods. However, over half of the 21 BAIS mentioned racism and discrimination as a factor affecting their academic performance and/or achievement while studying at their universities.

Analysis of BAIS's responses shows that there seem to be two main ways in which "race"/ethnicity mediate their academic performance and/or achievement. Their "race" and/or ethnicity as markers of their racial identity and cultural background jeopardize the perception of their academic ability or competence as legitimate and valid, and they believe that they could be marked down or harshly graded because of who they are. As their accounts below show, they could confront being marked down harshly, but they find being questioned, doubted, and unwelcome to be insidious and harder to dismantle.

Being Doubted, Questioned, and Feeling Unwelcome

A number of BAIS describe how daily experiences of racism could affect academic performance, as BAIS feel uncomfortable and hence disempowered:

> When you are not settled and you don't feel comfortable, or you just feel targeted, yes it could affect your academic performance. When you don't feel welcome, it just makes it difficult to perform at your best (Lara, female, 19, Song).

> In a learning environment, you want to feel welcome, you want to feel comfortable, but if every day or every two days, you are experiencing one racist comment or you are being discriminated by your lecturer or by your fellow students, definitely, it's going to thwart your chances of finishing with a better grade or finishing with a good result, because it is obviously going to affect you; so, yeah, I think discrimination would have an effect on someone's academic performance at this university (Ade, male, 19, Canal-Great).

Both Lara and Ade highlight that experiences of everyday racism (Essed, 1991) could have insidious effects and could "thwart … chances of finishing with a better grade" or make "it difficult to perform at your best." They believe that experiences of racism are part of the fabric of their university campuses, and that this affects BAIS's academic performance.

Arno, from the same university as Ade, believes that he needs to work a little bit harder because he is a black African:

> Definitely! It does affect my achievement. It just means that I have to work a little bit harder to get first [class], I have to do a little bit extra; that's what it is. I wouldn't have come to this country [if I didn't accept that]. It just means that on that basis I should be able to put myself on a par where I could be seen as black British. It's a big thing being black, especially African as well, there's accent, culture, that's, I mean [important] … (Arno, male, 26, Canal-Great).

Arno alludes to the often quoted American aphorism "You have got to work twice as hard …" to lament his racial disadvantage and that he needs to put in extra effort to get good grades. In a recent study, DeSante (2013) provides empirical evidence that supports this aphorism. Arno also appears to suggest a racial hierarchy between black British and black Africans, when he comments "I should be able to put myself on a par where I could be seen as black British." This is very important, as any racial categorization has meanings and is a manifestation of power relationships. As such, Arno says, "it's a big thing being black, especially African as well, there's accent, culture … ," indicating that he may be subject to greater oppression and marginalization as a black African than a black British person would be. Critical race theory expounds that there are intricate layers of racism and discrimination that a black person could experience, based not just on skin color, but also on accent, immigration status, surname, and phenotype (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). BAIS also suffer racism from black British people – and "race" as an organizing principle gets complicated across national lines.

Beku from Castle concedes that racial discrimination affects academic performance, but he sees it as an individual problem, rather an institutional one:

> Obviously, when you are being discriminated against, you feel less empowered. It's just the same feelings you get when you are being put down, so especially if a department puts you down, then you know that's obviously going to affect your performance, but I think the university has so many measures against institutional racism. When teachers are marking your paper, they don't have to know your name, they just know your student number, so there's really no way for them to discriminate. So it's [racism] not a systemic thing, it's not a systematized agent of oppression; it's very much individually biased, so you have, like, maybe one rotten administrator that would make things harder for you than the others, so it's not rampant and it's very individually skewed (Beku, male, 21, Castle).

Beku describes that racism and discrimination disempowers, and obviously affects academic performance, but he expresses confidence that anonymous marking protects him from institutional racism. But there is very little empirical evidence that teachers would not know the identity of their students during marking, in particular students such as BAIS, who have various markers, such as style of writing among many others. Beku asserts that racial discrimination at his university is not "rampant," but is the work of some racist individuals ("bad apples"). Beku buys into the narrative that racism is aberrational and not systemic. However, CRT tells us that racism is embedded in Western society and operates in taken-for-granted ways.

By contrast, Domu of Chapel shares an experience that suggests that low achievement of BAIS could be more systemic, and offers the most sinister of all explanations for the attainment gap that I have come across:

> Honestly speaking, for us from Africa, although we work very hard, it was very hard for anyone of us to get a first class. But home students, including those I do help sometimes and some who rely on me so much, they get first class. It could be based on their merit or luck, or I don't know exactly. But when we started, we the international students were really very committed, and we work so hard while most of

them were partying, and we have had to assist them most of the time. I do not know how the gear changed at the final stage; I feel it is most of the home students who finish with higher class degrees. The problem is there is no evidence that can really point to that, to say this happened because of racism. So, you know this [racism] happens and it really deprive you of something, but at the same time, if you don't have evidence, you can't make a claim. But I will say this, if I was a white student, looking at how hard-working I am, I think I will have gotten a fantastic first. That is what I believe (Domu, male, 29, Chapel).

Domu describes how African students work hard, and show more commitment, but still find it difficult to achieve as well as home students, who party a lot and depend on internationals such as him to complete assignments. There is some research support for his claim. Andrade (2006) found that international students in general are more academically engaged than home students, particularly in their first year of study. Black students complaining about receiving lower grades than white peers whose assignments they helped to complete have been reported by Van Dyke (1998), who documented similar grievances by a black student in a London university: "So and so never gives black students above 55. I helped a white student with an assignment and when he got them back he asked me what I got. He got an A and I got a C. He couldn't believe it" (p. 121).

Domu believes that racism plays a role in how his academic work is judged when he says "you know this [racism] happens and it really deprive you of something." However, he explains the difficulty of securing evidence to prove racial discrimination in this regard. This is probably because the underlying cause of the problem is more structural and/or institutional than a deliberate attempt by individual teachers to mark down a black African student (although that is not unheard of, as we will see later in this section). In her piece addressing white racism in the academy, Scheurich (1993) argues that:

> People of colour and those Whites who have concluded that White academics are racially biased are correct … the ways of the dominant group become universalized as measures of merit, hiring criteria, grading standards, predictors of success, correct grammar, appropriate behaviour, and so forth, all of which are said to be distributed as differences in individual effort, ability, or intelligence (Scheurich, 1993: p. 7).

Critical race theorists also point out that educational assessments standardized on past performances of the dominant cultural and racial groups not only unfairly discriminate against ethnic minorities, but also reproduce the historic inequality in attainment (Gillborn, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Professor Glynis Cousin has suggested that the BME attainment gap could be due to teachers' bias and/or prejudicial judgment associating BME students with a certain degree class. Like Domu, she ponders (in Steventon et al., 2016: p. 206), "When teachers behold BME, do they behold 2:2 students?"

Domu was so concerned and dissatisfied with the black/white attainment gap at his university that he raised the issue at a National Union of Students (NUS) conference, where they discussed, "Why minorities who work so hard can't get above 2:2?" After the NUS debate, Domu raised the issue with an official in the university. The response he said that he received is something that I have not heard or read about before, and it merits some attention. Domu explains:

> I even took up this matter with the administration once, and I was struck by what he said during our conversation, which he told me is strictly off the record. I just raised the issue by saying, "Why is it that international students are not getting first-class grades?" He said, "Well, this is off the record, Domu, but this is an institutional policy since the home students took loans, they are expected to have good results to get jobs so that they will repay their loans. But you, international students, you have a big advantage, you came here, you spend your money and maybe you have to go back. If you get jobs here, then that might disenfranchise the home student that may have to work and pay the debt they owe. So this is one incentive for them to get a first" (Domu, male, 29, Chapel).

As struck by what I heard as Domu himself had been, I asked him the following clarificatory question:

S: Is he saying they work more/harder because of that incentive, or the university gives them an advantage to get a first?

D: Well, I feel it is the latter. But I don't have the evidence to support what he said. But that was what he was trying to tell me. The guy is one of the key stakeholders at the university then (Domu, male, 29, Chapel).

As Domu explains, a "key stakeholder" at his university told him "off the record" that there is a surreptitious policy assisting home students to attain higher grades so that they can get an advantage in the labor market and repay their loans. This is very concerning and needs serious thought and investigation. I am not entirely sure whether such investigation is possible by academic researchers alone. However, the conversation is hardly "off the record," and it might well have spread and impacted BAIS's, and perhaps other international students', morale and confidence. This also raises issues about how effective whistleblowing is in universities since, if proved, this would be unlawful organized institutional discrimination.

Marked Down Because of My "Race"

Another theme that emerged from analysis of BAIS's responses to the factors that affect their academic performance is the perception that they have been marked down or harshly graded because of their "race" and/or assumptions about lack of intelligence because they are from Africa. The literature identifies, *inter alia*, bias, prejudice, stereotyping (Brown & Knight, 2012), intellectual positions/values/personal taste (Bourdieu & de Saint Martin, 1974), and racism (Mahboob and Szenes, 2010; Scheurich, 1993) as reasons for subjectivity in marking student work in higher education. Although the practice of anonymous marking has been implemented as the main tool to ameliorate such problems in U.K. higher education (Bloxham et al., 2011), it would be very difficult to argue that assessors will not be able to identify foreign students such as BAIS due to writing style and/or language use, which may be distinctly identifiable. A previous U.K. study, albeit in school, reported that "black pupils are routinely marked down by teachers" (Asthana et al., 2010).

Astu, Wanja, Rosa, Baso, and Pala all share stories that "race"/ethnicity might play a part in the way they are assessed, how they perform, or the grades they are awarded for their work. Astu relates her experiences of chasing one of her teachers because she was dissatisfied with her grade:

My last piece of work was an essay that I did last term last year. I had to chase my module tutor as I wanted to ask for some personal feedback because I didn't understand why somebody who had written a very similar essay, as we worked on it together, got a higher mark than me. I literally had to chase her for maybe two or three weeks just to get an appointment to go and see her. I sent her back all the materials and my transcript, and she sent a two-sentence explanation, which was not satisfactory to me. It was only when I chased her up again a lot that I got the chance to get that actual feedback. It turned out that she had to move up my grade. If I didn't persist and chased her up, my grades would have stayed the same. Then I wondered if I was marked down. That incident really made me question a lot of things. I wasn't given any reason why my marks changed and my grades moved up. It happened just because I chased her up, and my personal tutor, who was not also convinced by the marking, helped chase her up. And also, from the generic feedback, I now feel that I was marked a lot harsher than some other people. I think I was harshly marked. That kind of gave me the motivation to ask for a remarking of another essay but it didn't succeed (Astu, female, 21, Castle).

As Scheurich (1993) argues, white academics can be biased against black students, as their own ways of thinking and their values have been universalized as measures of grading and merit. It is not possible to determine from the evidence whether Astu's teacher intentionally marked her down. However, what is significant is that Astu's confidence in the system is dented, and she already believes that she is discriminated against because of her "race." The series of events in her account reinforces this belief. Astu, who had expressed confidence in the anonymous marking practice at her university, was not convinced with her grade on this occasion, as a friend who she says submitted a similar piece of work was awarded a higher

grade. Her personal tutor was also not satisfied with her grade, which strengthened her doubt that she was given a fair grade. Although it is entirely possible that a student's grade can be changed after re-marking for any number of reasons, Astu was concerned that she had to chase her teacher for feedback, and by the fact that no explanation was given for increasing her grade. This seems to have eroded her confidence in the grading practice of her university, and made her question if she had always been marked down. That is why she applied for the re-marking of her other essay from the past, albeit unsuccessfully.

Francis et al. (2001) highlight how subjectivity in marking based on axes of social difference such as gender could also exacerbate such issues. They explored possible gender differences in achievement by analyzing undergraduate history students' essays from four London-based universities and found some evidence that "… male students who adopt a bold (masculine) style alongside a competent use of English, and conformity with academic conventions, may be particularly highly rewarded in assessment" (Francis et al., 2001, p. 324). The authors argue that this advantage to male students emanates from the norms of undergraduate academic writing style reflecting masculine values rather than feminine ones. This implies that BAIS, who are not the norm in the white middle class dominated U.K. higher education culture (Crozier et al., 2016), could face an even greater disadvantage, among other things due to bias and prejudice which may position them as the deficient Other.

Objectivity in marking is also challenged by Bourdieu (1990), who argued that subjectivity is an inherent part of a social practice such as assessment, and that marking could not claim total objectivity. It is the combination of some subjective, tacitly held beliefs about learning and objective assessment measures that generates "the logic of practice" (Bourdieu, 1990) for assessment. While "objective" may refer to prescribed marking criterion standards, subjectivity includes epistemological positions, biases, prejudice, and racism. The experiential knowledge of BAIS in this study secured some evidence that would challenge the discourse of marking as "objective" and color-blind judgment of student work.

BAIS also shared their vicarious experiences of racism and discrimination. Wanja shared stories of his friends who believe that they have been marked down, or negatively assessed, because of their "race," English-language proficiency, and/or cultural background.

Wanja describes stories of two black peers at his university, a male BAIS and a female home black student who was assumed to be BAIS and who was judged accordingly:

Story one

One Ghanaian guy who studies with us together here had problem with one of the tutors; she is a white English woman. Basically, she doesn't like people from Pakistan, or black people, or if you have accent. But for this Ghanaian international student, he was marked as failed, and then it was marked by someone else and they said, no, it's good enough, he will pass. He was very broken and he was in tears; it was really bad for him.

Story two

I have also even seen a girl, who is born here, but she was told her English is not good in her feedback … "Your English is not good because I believe you are foreigner." She was completely angry. I think she is from Zimbabwe [but] she is born here, so basically this is her home. She was very angry. She went to the lecturer, and she asked "How can you tell me that my English is not good and I am born here just like you?" She complained. She was born here, but because of her name, someone just looks at her name and say, "Oh, this person is not from here, so I assume his/her English is not as good." But, to be honest, according to my academic experience, many people from abroad, they got a very good written English, you know, more than people from here. That's one thing I have noticed, but because of where you come from it's still there [racism] (Wanja, male, 31, Parkside).

The experience of Wanja's Ghanaian friend is similar to that of Astu: he applied for re-marking and his grade changed. It is Wanja's observation that the tutor involved does not like ethnic minorities and people who have accents. This is consistent with Lee and Rice (2007), who found that discrimination based on accent(s) pervades many aspects of international students' lived experiences. In his second account, Wanja shares a story of a female home

black student whose assessment was negatively judged because the teacher believed her to be a foreigner, and therefore to have inferior English language proficiency. However, the student was born in the U.K., and she has a foreign surname because of her African heritage. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC, 2019) found evidence for a similar experience, where a home black British student related:

> Although I was not an international student but because I was black and dressed in religious garments he would assume I was an international student and often ask me and my fellow student questions like I'm not sure if they have things like this in your country (UK national postgraduate, Welsh university) (EHRC, 2019, p. 30).

These stories provide a further insight that "race" could trump citizenship in black students' experiences.

Previous research documented that BAIS believe that they are marked down because of their "race," both in the U.S. (Lee & Opio, 2011) and the U.K. (Maundeni, 2001). In a study of BAIS's experiences in a U.K. university, Maundeni (2001) reports the account of Lasisi, a female BAIS, of discrimination based on her skin color and accent:

> One of my lecturers has a negative attitude towards me just because of my colour and accent. […] I mean, he gives me low grades all the time no matter how much effort I put on my work. His course is the only one that I get low marks in. When I arrived, some African students told me that one way to survive academically is to work extra hard, to put double the effort that a white student puts in his/her work because some lecturers just assign grades on the basis of one's colour. I have experienced this (Lasisi, 21) (Maundeni, 2001, p. 270).

There is a 16-year gap between Wanja's and Lasisi's accounts, suggesting that the perception of being discriminated against in grading and assessment based on skin color and accent (the things that mark BAIS as visible minorities) is persistent. In a study of BAIS's lived experiences in a U.S. university, Lee and Opio (2011) reported that a Zambian student related that "Some professors, if you seem or feel like you are better from Africa, will not give the grade you deserve" (p. 639).

In this study too, BAIS seem to strongly believe that they suffer from low expectations and discrimination because of their racial identities. Baso and Pala related stories that allude to the strong suspicion and perception that they could be racially discriminated against in grading, and do not always get the grades they deserve because of their "race":

> It's very distressful sometimes, to see that you do your coursework properly, submit it and, at the end of the day, you don't get the grades you think you deserve. You look at it and say, "Is it because I am a black [person]?" Sometimes you don't get the help you think the other white students get from lecturers. You see that and say, "Is it because I am a black?" Sometimes the lecturers they do it [racism], but they do it professionally, because they know the codes of [conduct] of the university, so they try to do it in some kind of way that they would not be exposed (Baso, male, 28, Downtown).
>
> It's embedded, it's not clear. They pretend as if it [racism] is not there, but for you to get a first class, I think that one is discretional on the part of lecturers, for example, if you get 69 or 68 [marks], so you can see that to give you first class is discretional. So there, I think if they do [want to discriminate], there it comes. But, like, it's embedded, it's hidden, it is not conspicuous, you can't spot it, like, that easy, but you can see, like, their own kids easily get first class – the white British citizens and those who are born and bred here (Pala, male, 36, Canal-Great).

These two accounts reveal some serious misgivings and a lack of trust on the part of BAIS that they may not be earning the grades they deserve because of their "race". They also doubt if they are getting a similar level of help to that given to white students. They believe that lecturers may demonstrate racial discrimination that is "embedded," "hidden," and not conspicuous, so it cannot be spotted easily. According to Baso, this is because lecturers are cautious due to fear of retribution. Pala indicates that the discretionary power of lecturers in borderline grading between a first-class degree and a 2:1 is a space of possible racism. He

believes that they exercise this discretionary power to award "their own kids" (white British students) a first-class grade. CRT asserts that racist beliefs can be part of the "normal" taken-for-granted practices of educational institutions such as universities, where assessment practices may be seen as neutral, and more often than not escape critical inquiry (Gillborn, 2008). CRT also acknowledges that "race" and racism are central, permanent, and fundamental parts of Western societies (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and that they should be seen as a central factor in defining and explaining individual experiences of minoritized people such as BAIS.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study reveals that some important challenges in negotiating academic performance in university are related to a deficit understanding of BAIS and their position as the racial other. As the analysis shows, these challenges range from being doubted and questioned, to outright perceived racial discrimination in marking and grading. This includes not receiving higher grades because they are black Africans, and, in some cases, experiences of being harshly graded and then having their grade increased through successful appeals. This finding is consistent with the literature that reports the prejudicial judgment of the performance of both home black students and BAIS (C. A. Lee et al., 2020; Steventon et al., 2016; Talley-Matthews et al., 2020). This study also unearthed (albeit from a single BAIS) what is, to my knowledge, the first story of a university being suspected of deliberately favoring home students to earn a first-class degree to help them secure employment and pay their debts, as opposed to international students, who leave after graduation.

The finding that perceived racism and discrimination is one factor shaping the academic performance of BAIS is significant in view of the fact that extant literature on the attainment gap in U.K. higher education routinely identifies "race"/ethnicity as an explanatory factor, but fails to investigate racism as a possible cause (Broecke and Nicholls, 2006; Connor et al., 2004; Leslie, 2005). This study has allowed the documentation and analysis of factors affecting academic performance from the perspective of BAIS, and has listened to the voices of those who experience the practice of educational assessment in U.K. higher education differently. BAIS's lived experiences of assessment detailed in this article demonstrate, as Delgado and Stefancic (2017) articulated, "what life is like for others" (p. 43) within a system that may be thought to be just and fair for all. By so doing, the study has also produced some evidence that the black/white attainment gap established in the literature is also reflected in the student experience.

There are several implications of this. First and foremost, there needs to be acknowledgment on the part of universities that "race" and racism affect BAIS's lived experiences. Currently, there seems to be a deafening silence around the centrality of "race" in the lived experiences of black students and, as Pilkington (2014) remarked: "… universities are extraordinarily complacent. They see themselves as liberal and believe existing policies ensure fairness; in the process, they ignore adverse outcomes and do not see combating racial/ethnic inequalities as a priority" (p. 207). This complacency is exacerbated since BAIS do not have the means to challenge their experiences of racism, which are deeply embedded in society and institutional cultures.

I hope that this study contributes to disrupting this complacency and silence. I recommend that higher education institutions and their staff be made aware of the views of BAIS, and of their responsibility to continuously critically examine their assessment practices. Given the diversity within the BAIS group, future research can consider whether experiences of racism and discrimination in assessment practice differ between male BAIS and female BAIS, or between BAIS of different socio-economic status, or between types of institution and course, as well as if, and in what ways, the profile of teaching staff correlates with experiences of racism and discrimination in assessment practice. This is significant, as BAIS underlined the positive impact on their academic experiences of being taught by a black academic. Another interesting study would be to look at the experiences of black African academics working in U.K. universities.

There are limitations to this study. My sample contains only students from universities in England, and had I included BAIS from the other three countries of the U.K., analysis of the influences of contextual differences would have been possible. I also did not include BAIS from French-speaking sub-Saharan African countries, whose experiences could have arguably been shaped even more by English-language problems and differences in colonial history and legacy. My analysis is also limited in its focus on gender. CRT does not prioritize gender as an analytic category, and if I had used a feminist theoretical lens, I would have been able to foreground gender.

REFERENCES

Abdullah, D., Aziz, M. I. A., & Ibrahim, A. L. M. (2014). A "research" into international student-related research: (Re)Visualising our stand?. *Higher Education*, *67*(3), 235–253.

Ackers, J. (2002). Evaluating UK courses: The perspective of the overseas student. In D. McNamara & R. Harris (Eds.), *Overseas students in higher education: Issues in teaching and learning.* (pp. 199–212). Routledge.

Alexander, C., & Arday, J. (2015). *Aiming higher: Race, inequality and diversity in the academy*. Runnymede Trust. https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Aiming%20Higher.pdf

Andrade, M. S. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education*, *5*(2), 131–154.

Asthana, A., Helm, T., & McVeigh, T. (2010, April 4). Black pupils "are routinely marked down by teachers". *The Observer*. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/apr/04/sats-marking-race-stereotypes

Bartoli, A. (2011). Assessment and international students-black African social work students. *Enhancing the Learner Experience in Higher Education*, *3*(1), 45–58.

Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.

Bhopal, K. (2018). *White privilege: The myth of a post-racial society*. Policy Press.

Bloxham, S., Boyd, P., & Orr, S. (2011). Mark my words: The role of assessment criteria in UK higher education grading practices. *Studies in Higher Education*, *36*(6), 655–670.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P., & de Saint Martin, M. (1974). Scholastic excellence and the values of the educational system. In J. Eggleston (Ed.), *Contemporary Research in the Sociology of Education* (pp. 338–371). Methuen.

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (Vol. 4). Sage.

Broecke, S., & Nicholls, T. (2006). *Ethnicity and degree attainment*. Department for Education and Skills. http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6846/1/RW92.pdf

Brown, S., & Knight, P. (2012). *Assessing learners in higher education*. Routledge.

Bunce, L., King, N., Saran, S., & Talib, N. (2021). Experiences of black and minority ethnic (BME) students in higher education: Applying self-determination theory to understand the BME attainment gap. *Studies in Higher Education*, *46*(3), 534–547.

Carroll, J. (2014). *Tools for teaching in an educationally mobile world*. Routledge.

Connor, H., Tyers, C., Modood, T., & Hillage, J. (2004). *Why the difference? A closer look at higher education minority ethnic students and graduates*. Institute for Employment Studies Research Report, 552. http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/ethnicity/migrated/documents/educationreport.pdf

Crozier, G., Burke, P. J., & Archer, L. (2016). Peer relations in higher education: Raced, classed and gendered constructions and Othering. *Whiteness and Education*, *1*(1), 39–53.

Daley, P. O. (1998). Black Africans in Great Britain: Spatial concentration and segregation. *Urban Studies*, *35*(10), 1703–1724.

De Vita, G. (2002). Cultural equivalence in the assessment of home and international business management students: A UK exploratory study. *Studies in Higher Education*, *27*(2), 221–231.

DeCuir, J. T., & Dixson, A. D. (2004). "So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there": Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, *33*(5), 26–31.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory*. New York University Press.

DeSante, C. D. (2013). Working twice as hard to get half as far: Race, work ethic, and America's deserving poor. *American Journal of Political Science*, *57*(2), 342–356.

Dixson, A. D., Rousseau, C. K., Anderson, C. R., & Donnor, J. K. (Eds.). (2006). *Critical race theory in education: All God's children got a song*. Routledge.

Doharty, N., Madriaga, M., & Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2021). The university went to "decolonise" and all they brought back was lousy diversity double-speak! Critical race counter-stories from faculty of colour in "decolonial" times. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *53*(3), 233–244.

ECU. (2020). *Equality in higher education: Students statistical report 2020 (Word) | Advance HE*. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/media/5942

EHRC. (2019). *Tackling racial harassment: Universities challenged | Equality and Human Rights Commission*. https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged

Essed, P. (1991). *Understanding everyday racism: An interdisciplinary theory*. Sage.

Francis, B., Robson, J., & Read, B. (2001). An analysis of undergraduate writing styles in the context of gender and achievement. *Studies in Higher Education*, *26*(3), 313–326.

George Mwangi, C. A., Changamire, N., & Mosselson, J. (2019). An intersectional understanding of African international graduate students' experiences in US higher education. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *12*(1), 52.

Gillborn, D. (2008). *Racism and education: Coincidence or conspiracy?* Routledge.

Harper, S. R. (2012). Race without racism: How higher education researchers minimize racist institutional norms. *The Review of Higher Education*, *36*(1), 9–29.

Hyams-Ssekasi, D., Mushibwe, C. P., & Caldwell, E. F. (2014). International education in the United Kingdom: The challenges of the golden opportunity for Black-African students. *Sage Open*, *4*(4), 1–13.

Iannelli, C., & Huang, J. (2014). Trends in participation and attainment of Chinese students in UK higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *39*(5), 805–822.

Kingston, E., & Forland, H. (2008). Bridging the gap in expectations between international students and academic staff. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *12*(2), 204–221.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *11*(1), 7–24.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (2016). Toward a critical race theory of education. In A. D. Dixson, C. K. Rousseau, C. R. Anderson, & J. K. Donnor (Eds.), *Critical race theory in education: All God's children got a song.* (pp. 10–31). Routledge.

Leathwood, C. (2005). Assessment policy and practice in higher education: Purpose, standards and equity. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *30*(3), 307–324.

Lee, C. A., Chrisinger, B., Greenlee, A. J., Garcia Zambrana, I., & Jackson, A. (2020). Beyond recruitment: Comparing experiences of climate and diversity between international students and domestic students of color in US urban planning programs. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0739456X20902241

Lee, J., & Opio, T. (2011). Coming to America: Challenges and difficulties faced by African student athletes. *Sport, Education and Society*, *16*(5), 629–644.

Lee, J. J., & Rice, C. (2007). Welcome to America? International student perceptions of discrimination. *Higher Education*, *53*(3), 381–409.

Leslie, D. (2005). Why people from the UK's minority ethnic communities achieve weaker degree results than whites. *Applied Economics*, *37*(6), 619–632.

LSEU. (2017). *Understanding Attainment Gap at LSE*. https://www.lsesu.com/pageassets/democracy/resources/Understanding-the-Attainment-Gap.pdf

Madriaga, M., & McCaig, C. (2019). How international students of colour become Black: A story of whiteness in English higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2019.1696300

Mahboob, A., & Szenes, E. (2010). Linguicism and racism in assessment practices in higher education. *Linguistics and Human Sciences*, *3*(3), 325–354.

Makepeace, E., & Baxter, A. (1990). Overseas students and examination failure: A national study. *Journal of International Education*, *1*(1), 36–48.

Marshall, P., & Chilton, E. H. S. (1995). Singaporean students in British higher education: The statistics of success. *Engineering Science & Education Journal*, *4*(4), 155–160.

Matsuda, M. J. (1987). Looking to the bottom: Critical legal studies and reparations. *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*, *22*, 323.

Maundeni, T. (2001). The role of social networks in the adjustment of African students to British society: Students' perceptions. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *4*(3), 253–276.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Morrison, J., Merrick, B., Higgs, S., & Le Métais, J. (2005). Researching the performance of international students in the UK. *Studies in Higher Education*, *30*(3), 327–337.

NUS. (2011). *Race for equality: A report on the experiences of black students in further and higher education*. National Union of Students London. https://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12350/NUS_Race_for_Equality_web.pdf

Parker, L., & Lynn, M. (2002). What's race got to do with it?: Critical race theory's conflicts with and connections to qualitative research methodology and epistemology. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(1), 7–22.

Pauley, G. F. (1988). *Overseas fee-paying students at Curtin University of Technology: A report on their progress after one year*. Curtin University of Technology.

Pilkington, A. (2014). The sheer weight of whiteness in the academy: A UK case study. In R. Race, & V. Lander (Eds.), *Advancing race and ethnicity in education* (pp. 193–209). Palgrave Macmillan.

Ponterotto, J. G. (2006). Brief note on the origins, evolution, and meaning of the qualitative research concept thick description. *The Qualitative Report*, *11*(3), 538–549.

Richardson, J. T. (2018). Understanding the under-attainment of ethnic minority students in UK higher education: The known knowns and the known unknowns. In J. Arday & H. S. Mirza (Eds.), *Dismantling race in higher education* (pp. 87–102). Springer.

Richardson, J. T., Mittelmeier, J., & Rienties, B. (2020). The role of gender, social class and ethnicity in participation and academic attainment in UK higher education: An update. *Oxford Review of Education*, *46*(3), 346–362.

Scheurich, J. J. (1993). Toward a white discourse on white racism. *Educational Researcher*, *22*(8), 5–10.

Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 118–137). Sage.

Silverman, D. (Ed.). (2020). *Qualitative research*. Sage.

Smith, S. V. (2017). Exploring the BME student attainment gap: What did it tell us? Actions to address home Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) undergraduate students' degree attainment. *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, *5*(1), 48–57.

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(1), 23–44.

Sriprakash, A., Tikly, L., & Walker, S. (2019). The erasures of racism in education and international development: Re-reading the 'global learning crisis.' *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *50*(5), 676–692.

Steventon, G., Cureton, D., & Clouder, L. (2016). *Student attainment in higher education: Issues, controversies and debates*. Routledge.

Talley-Matthews, S., Wiggan, G., & Watson-Vandiver, M. J. (2020). Outsider in the academy: Experiences and perspectives of Caribbean women attending predominantly White institutions in the southeastern region of the United States. *Race Ethnicity and Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1718077

Tight, M. (2004). Research into higher education: An a-theoretical community of practice? *Higher Education Research & Development*, *23*(4), 395–411.

Van Dyke, R. (1998). Monitoring the progress of ethnic minority students: A new methodology. In T. Modood & T. Acland (Eds.), *Race and higher education* (pp. 115–133). Policy Studies Institute.

Dr Solomon Zewolde is a part-time Lecturer at the University of East London. He holds a PhD in Race and Higher Education from the Institute of Education, UCL. His work experiences include being an educator, a researcher, and an academic administrator in both public and private universities in Ethiopia. His current research interests include critical internationalization studies, the international student experience, the attainment gap in higher education, and the exploration of how 'race',

ethnicity, habitus, and cultural capital interact to shape both experiences and outcomes for black students in higher education. Email: szewolde@uel.ac.uk