Addressing Attainment Gaps: BAME students experiences and recommendations for LSE

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Executive Summary

This report provides the findings of focus groups and interviews with Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students in taught programmes at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). **The aim of this research was to find out how the School could improve the BAME student experience as a means of closing the BAME attainment gap**.

These interviews and focus groups were conducted with 13 participants:

- 6 UK-Domiciled & 7 International students
- 5 Undergraduate and 8 Postgraduate Taught students
- 12 female and 1 male students
- 5 Black, 3 Bangladeshi / Pakistani, 2 Chinese, 1 Mixed Race and 1 Other students

The participants came from the following departments: Accounting, Economics, Gender Studies, International History, International Relations, Law, Management, Philosophy, Social Policy, and Sociology.

The research found that the BAME student experience at LSE is one shaped by:

1. **A lack of belonging:** Participants reported feeling as if LSE did not belong to them and that they were implicitly not welcome at the institution. Issues were amplified when gender and race intersected (feeling of not belonging at parties with White Men) and race and class (not being able to stay on campus outside of classes).
2. **A loss of confidence:** Participants recounted how their experiences at LSE caused them to lose confidence in themselves. This was something that occurred while at the School, not something they entered the School suffering from.
3. **A feeling of neglect:** Participants said that they felt they were consciously neglected by academics and tutors on their courses – both by academic mentors and in their classroom interactions. They recounted stories of being pushed aside when seeking help and not being engaged in seminars.

When considered together, it is not surprising that such an experience would be correlated with BAME attainment gaps. While NSS results do imply that LSE does struggle with the building of community and academic support, when experienced by BAME students, these areas become even more problematic.

Based on their experiences, the participants made suggested the following areas of the School needed to be improved:

1. **Student-Academic Interaction**: This is a clear area of tension for BAME students that can either minimize the negative experiences at the LSE *or* exacerbate them. Specifically, these areas are:
   a. **Academic Mentoring:** Participants claimed that they were often ignored by academics and their Academic Mentors. They suggested that Mentoring sessions should be timetabled, that Academic Mentors receive more extensive training, and that Mentorship be given a higher status at the School.
   b. **Classroom Interactions:** Participants recounted experiences of racial bias in their classroom interactions, as well as a lack of care. Therefore recommendations
   c. **Department Engagement:** Participants stated that social events with departments, including lunches, could help counter some of the feelings of neglect and lack of belonging.

2. **Curricular Changes:** This is about changes to how the School looks at curriculum design. Specifically:
    a. Students studying on PGT programmes, and UG students on programmes not traditionally linked to specific employment expressed a need to **diversify the curriculum** both in terms of representation (more authors of BAME backgrounds and from the Global South) and in terms of perspectives (more diverse theoretical and epistemological views). This was based on their own experiences of studying on programmes where their own voices were not represented, and where the entire continent of Africa or Asia was homogenised.
    b. All UG students and International PGT students highlighted the need **to transition into higher education** to be embedded into their programmes, including explicit engagement with the expectations of academics at the School and *how* to meet those expectations.
3. **Beyond Teaching and Learning:** Students identified a series of other areas that the School should improve that would impact the BAME student experience. This included:
    a. Changing the process of applying for financial aid to allow applicants to maintain their dignity. Students said that the act of having to tell their 'sad stories' robbed them of a feeling of respect and was a blow to their egos.
    b. Addressing party culture in the residences, where women of BAME backgrounds and those who do not drink expressed feeling excluded and uncomfortable around so much alcohol.
    c. Needing an extracurricular intercultural engagement centre that would offer creative events that encouraged different students to come together and that could offer advice specifically for BAME students
    d. Developing and resourcing mental health facilities – student specifically requested the creation of a new role of departmental mental health mentor.

In the *Recommendations and Conclusions* section, these areas of action recommended by participants are outlined in further detail. In each of the subsections under *BAME Student Experiences,* there are detailed descriptions, using the participants words, of what these students have felt and experienced while studying at LSE. In each of the subsections under *Area of Action,* there are detailed narratives of what participants experiences and suggestions to the School.

Participants and Overview of the Research

Between 19 February and 6 March, two focus groups and four interviews were conducted with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students from across to the School. **The aim of these focus groups and interviews was to establish, based on these students' lived experiences at the School, what LSE could and should do to improve attainment.**

Participants

Participants were recruited through the use of e-flyers sent out by Department Managers and the Student Union Education Officer. The interviews and focus groups were also advertised on displays in LSE LIFE and via LSE LIFE's weekly newsletter. Participants came from a wide variety of departments, which were:

- Accounting
- Economics
- Gender Studies
- International History
- International Relations
- Law
- Management
- Philosophy
- Social Policy
- Sociology

Table 1 gives an outline of each participant, including their level of study, ethnic background (the terms are those used by LSE as a part of tracking attainment gaps), gender, and domicile (UK or International).

Table 1 List of Participants

Overview of Participants				
Participant	**Level of Study**	**Ethnic Background**	**Gender (self-identified)**	**Domicile**
F1.1	PGT	Mixed Race	Female	UK
F1.2	UG	Chinese	Female	International
F1.3	UG	Chinese	Female	International
F1.4	UG	Asian Other	Female	International
F2.1	PGT	Black	Female	International
F2.2	PGT	Bangladeshi/Pakistani	Female	International
F2.3	PGT	Black	Female	UK
F2.4	PGT	Black	Female	International
F2.5	PGT	Black	Female	UK
I1	UG	Bangladeshi/Pakistani	Female	UK
I2	UG	Other	Male	UK
I3	PGT	Black	Female	International
I4	PGT	Bangladeshi/Pakistani	Female	UK

Please note: Department allocations are not included as some students reported being one of a very few number of students of a particular ethnic and national background in their departments. Therefore, in order to guarantee anonymity, all departments have been removed from the overview.

However, this omission of departments of study does not present any problems in reporting on the results of the interviews / focus groups because many of the recommendations made came from students from vastly different departments and studying at different levels. This implies that these areas are universally in need of addressing and should therefore be institution-wide.

Description of the Focus Groups / Interviews

In the focus groups and interviews, participants were presented with sector-wide and LSE specific data regarding the BAME attainment gaps. They were also shown a series of different composite universities, with hypothetical areas of activity.

In the focus groups, participants were then asked to create a possible series of recommended actions for LSE to take to close the BAME attainment gap, drawing on their own experiences as students at the LSE. They were reminded that the focus groups were forward-looking, and therefore, to share only what they were comfortable sharing regarding their specific experiences at the LSE.

In the interviews, participants were asked to do a similar thing – however it became more dialogic with the researcher asking questions to identify further areas of engagement for the School.

Seven participants in both the focus groups and interviews brought notes with them that they had made beforehand. When asked what motivated them to do so, all replied that either 1) they did not want to forget something important, or 2) they wanted a guiding document to help them stay focused on improving the LSE rather than letting their anger and frustration at the School take over the interview.

Broad themes

Due to the structure of the focus groups and interviews, the responses fall under two broad areas: BAME Student Experience and Areas for Action.

Under BAME Student Experiences, three themes appeared:

1. **A Lack of Belonging**: Student expressed that LSE was not for them, or that the LSE community did reflect who they are
2. **A Loss of Confidence**: Student reported that during their time at LSE, they lost any confidence that they may have previously had
3. **A Feeling of Neglect**: Students expressed feeling neglected by academics in their departments

The intersection of race and gender for international students and of race and class for UK-domiciled student seem to exacerbate these feelings of lack of belonging, loss of confidence and overall institutional neglect.

Under Areas of Action for the School, the following themes emerged:

4. **Student-Academic Interaction**: This is a clear area of tension for BAME students that can either minimize the negative experiences at the LSE *or* exacerbate them. Specifically, these areas are:
    a. Academic Mentoring
    b. Classroom Interactions
    c. Department Engagement
5. **Curricular Changes:** This is about changes to how the School looks at curriculum design. Specifically:

a. Students studying on programmes that claim to have an 'international' or 'global' focus, and students studying at the Postgraduate level all expressed a need to **diversify the curriculum** both in terms of representation (more authors of BAME backgrounds and from the Global South) and in terms of perspectives (more diverse theoretical and epistemological views).

b. Undergraduate students highlighted the need **to transition into higher education** to be embedded into the first year programme, including explicit engagement with the expectations of academics at the School and *how* to meet those expectations.

6. **Beyond Teaching and Learning:** Students identified a plethora of other areas that the School could improve that would impact the BAME student experience. This included changing the process of applying for financial aid to allow applicants to maintain their dignity, addressing party culture in the residences, a need for extracurricular intercultural engagement, and mental health awareness.

BAME Student Experiences

While the purpose of these focus groups and interviews were *not* to collect stories of their experiences as BAME students at LSE, students regularly referred to person experiences of their time studying at LSE as a means of justifying their suggested courses of action.

Upon analysing the recordings and transcripts from these, three core feelings seem to dominate the BAME student experience at LSE: 1) **a lack of belonging at LSE**, 2) **a loss of confidence while studying at LSE**, and 3) **a feeling of being neglected by academics and tutors**.

While none of these experiences are unknown or surprising to the School, what is clear is that these experiences are continual, common, and cause students to reach a 'breaking point' (the words used by I1) during their time at LSE. This breaking point seems to then create an active disengagement and a desire to 'get the degree done and just leave' (the words of I2). This attitude would reasonably lead to lower attainment in degree awards.

A Lack of Belonging

In the two focus groups and all of the interviews, participants stated that they felt they did not belong at LSE. This lack of belonging seemed to impact both communing, UK-domiciled BAME students as much as it did international students living in residences. It was also equally voiced by both undergraduate students as well as home students.

Some students attributed this lack of belonging to the competitive culture of the university. For example, I1 stated:

> *Like this high pressure institution killed me, and I didn't feel like I fit in at LSE at all. At all. I used to come here and then run home, because it was so… I felt it was so intense.* I1

And then later on continued:

> *We were in our own zone. We didn't want to be friends, it would be competition.* I1

However, all but two of the participants talked about specific experiences and interactions at LSE that led them to a realisation that they are not welcome or do not belong to the School community. I2, in his interview, told of an interaction during his first week of at the School with a senior level academic in his department claimed that his ethnic identity does not really exist.   He then went on to state:

> *It just leaves you very powerless, of what to do, and it just brings out the fact that you're… Even I'm walking around campus and I don't feel sort of … I don't feel like I'm meant to be here in a way, because of what's happen to me.* I2

The results of these interactions resulted in feelings such as:

> *It breaks you down.* F1.4

> *You feel like an outsider.* F2.2

Two participants who did not have specific experiences that they attributed to this feeling described the senses of a lack of belonging as being implicitly everywhere. In the words of I3:

> *You know you're not welcome. There are no explicit signs saying you're not welcome, but you know – you feel you're not welcome.* I3

In all the interviews and focus groups, the participants stated that being a BAME student at the School exacerbated the feeling of not-belonging that already occurs due to the competitive nature of the school. For example:

> *As a BME student, I didn't think I was a part of the LSE at all, like at all my first few years.* I1

> *They want me to be white. But I cannot be white. Because I don't know how to be white. I only know how to be me, but I'm being blocked.* F2.4

The intersections of race and gender as well as race and class seem to further exacerbate this feeling of not belonging. For example, in the first focus group, which consisted primarily of non-UK domiciled Asian women, this lack of belonging was linked to both a culture of drinking on campus and not feeling safe around drunk, white men. These women stated that:

> *I feel like sometimes students feel, like, excluded, like when I am there [at a social gathering] I don't know what to do when I'm not drinking.* F1.3

> *Especially because those parties are super masculine white aggressive spaces. If you are already not comfortable with that kind of activity, as, speaking for myself, as an Asian woman, entering that kind of space is just really stressful and causes a lot of anxiety because it feels sort of psychologically threatening but also physically threatening because you are literally outnumbered and kind of like out of place.* F1.1

Meanwhile for UK domiciled BAME students of lower socio-economic classifications (LSEC), living far from the centre of the London and communing amplified the lack of belonging. They reported:

> *But I can't be friends with Black people, White people, go out there and integrate with them lot, yeah, because LSE doesn't give me the opportunity to go and do that, yeah? The only people that I got is like classes and then after classes everyone goes their own way.* I1

> *I couldn't get off campus fast enough. There was nowhere to like be with people.* I2

LSE's lack of a campus with centralised spaces to hang out with students, the drinking culture in the residences, the competitive culture, and the multiple forms of micro-aggressions and invisible forms of discrimination lead to all BAME students feeling that they are not a part of the LSE community.

A Loss of Confidence

A second element to the BAME student experience was a feeling of a loss of confidence while studying at the LSE. It is important to note, each student reported *losing* confidence that they once had while at the LSE. **It is not that they entered the LSE with low confidence, but rather, their engagement with the institutions and its various people and systems that lead to a drop in overall self-belief**. Their words make this distinction clear.

I2 stated:

> *You're tested by the system which damages your confidence.* I2

Meanwhile, I3 offers a telling story of how she and her friends view the School as 'Lose Self Esteem':

> *Me and my friends, we call LSE, or we say that LSE stands for Low Self Esteem. Because even if you didn't have low self-esteem before coming in, you will definitely have it coming out.* I3

And, in the second focus group, F2.2 explicitly states that her confidence has dropped that was followed by enthusiastic claims of 'me too' from the other participants. Specifically, she said:

> *I think my confidence level has dropped since I've come here. It's not the same anymore.* F2.2

When giving examples as to why their confidence dropped, most students referred to specific interactions both in the classroom and in one-to-one settings (office hours or academic mentor meetings) as leading to this drop. For example, F2.3 recounted how one lecturer collected discussion ideas at the start of each seminar, but over the course of the term, never once choice one of her ideas. I1 explained that she felt she had been labelled a failing student by her academic mentor after doing badly on her first essays, and this mentor seemed to wash her hands of the student. And I3 stated it was because:

> *The institution has a way of making you feel like you are the problem by thinking differently, by asking questions and actually using your critical thinking, which is ironic.* I3

This area, and what is needed to improve is further discussed in the section 'Student-Teacher Interactions'.

A Feeling of Neglect

The final common experiences expressed by all the participants was a feeling of neglect through the institution – from academics, academic mentors, and the residences.

Participants noted that to most academics, students' need for support and/or mentorship while struggling through their studies were not vital parts of their jobs. Participants stated that these academics viewed their own research primary parts of their world, lecturing and leading seminars as secondary, and academic mentoring viewed as either tertiary, or not part of their job at all. For example, I1 said:

> *So when I took my essay to a [_] teacher, who is basically a lecturer. She looked at it and the advice that she gave me was really limited advice, ok, like and I feel like she sort of neglected what I was doing, sort of what I was doing as an undergraduate student.* I1

Meanwhile, F2.1 reported:

> *As a student, you are so down on the… what do you call it… the hierarchy, and you just feel it.* F2.1

I2 put the neglect in the context of a lack of care and viewing students impeding in their ability to be involved in competitive research. He stated:

> *The professors are not so caring. And they don't have time for you. Maybe it's just [_] where they're just so cut throat; they're there to just do their job and move on*. I2

Meanwhile I3 explicitly labelled the research focus of the academics as the cause of her neglect:

> *I think the academic mentors are more or less just interested in the research. Maybe because the focus of the department is more on the research. So I feel almost like a liability to my academic mentor. And also to a lot of the professors.* I3

These moments within the interviews and focus groups reveal the extent of the neglect they feel from the academics with which they have regular contact. However, it was not only academics that caused this feeling of neglect. F1.1 expressed feeling neglected by the residences, especially in terms of providing spaces for mental health support, and I2 and F1.4 reported the bureaucratic and distant nature of the Student Services Centre as being one that created a feeling of neglect as these students attempt to interrupt their studies.

Conclusions

These feelings of neglect, when coupled with the loss of confidence and lack of belonging create a clear picture of what might be key factors in the BAME attainment gap at the School. While the School does score low on the NSS for community and academic support, these issues seem to be amplified when coupled with the experiences of being a BAME student on campus. This is evident even when looking at the 2018 NSS results by ethnicity, where Black students, followed by Asian students were the most disapproving of their courses, and White students were the most approving.

The next section offered key recommended areas of improvement for the School to address to improve the BAME student experience, which could result in the reduction of the attainment gaps. The first two sections: Student-Teacher Interactions and Curricular Changes are areas of that would be addressed through teaching and learning (both staff and student-facing), while the final section focuses on a cornucopia of other areas outside of teaching and learning that the School would need to improve or develop.

Areas of Action

Student-Teacher Interaction

The following quote from I2 provide a strong introduction to the recommendations that participants made regarding improving the student-teacher interactions at LSE. He said:

> My school had the policy, that LSE should also adopt, 'every child matters'. In the case of LSE, 'every student matters'. I2

This recommendation was offered as the underpinning education value that would both address the negative aspects of the BAME student experiences as well as reduce the attainment gap. The following recommendations – to bolster the Academic Mentoring system (and Office Hours), to improve classroom interactions, and to build community within academic departments – are aimed directly at addressing issues of neglect, belonging, and confidence.

Academic Mentors and Office Hours

Every single participant discussed at length the need to bolster the Academic Mentoring Scheme. This often dominated large portions of the conversations and seemed to speak to a common experience of a scheme that does not offer the kind of support that students feel they need in order to succeed at LSE. As I2 said, after spending twenty-two minutes of a 60 minute interview discussing Academic Mentoring:

> Mentorship is key. I2

I3 tried to describe the value that Academic Mentoring could have on the student experiences in the abstract. She stated:

> The Academic Mentors, they are supposed be, I think, they're supposed to be a glue in the Uni. So like, you as a student only need to deal with them, and they'll help you deal with the rest of the system. Yeah – that's not how it goes down. At all. I3

She then restated the focus of the department being more on research, which, as I quoted in the previous section, creates a system where she feels like she is a liability to her Mentor in terms of use of their time.

In the second focus group, participants discussed the inconsistency of Academic Mentoring. They dissected the difference an attentive versus distant Academic Mentor made, while expressing the sense of 'luck' for students who managed to get one of the 'good' Mentors. F2.1 stated:

> Some people are lucky, who get academic advisors or mentors or whatever they are, who sit with them. F2.1

Meanwhile F2.2 expanded on this by saying:

> Maybe I have a mentor who is related to my stream, and who is interested in my ideas, he might give me more time, or look at something I've printed out and help me on it. But then there are mentors who are not even getting back to the students. And not even replying to emails. And if they do see you, they're kind of pissed off for having to give you the time of day. F2.2

In the first focus group, participants reported a feeling of fear or nervousness about attending Academic Mentoring meetings, especially in their first year, which made it even harder to engage

with the system when their Mentors already had a hands off approach.   F1.2 describe the situation as follows:

> *I remember during my first year or second year it was like a thing, and students were struggling and didn't know where to look for that help or who to ask for that help and you know , were sometimes embarrassed and sometimes sort of scared to go to talk to your academic advisers*. F1.2

And F1.3 stated:

> *Sometimes students don't go because they don't know and don't want teachers to know this. Or they are scared.* F1.3

This was echoed even among PGT students as well. F2.3 put it simply when she said:

> *Talking to an authoritative person is difficult.* F2.3

Even students who did use agency during their undergraduate study, this did not necessarily result in a better relationship with their Academic Mentors. I1 detailed several of her experiences with trying to set up meetings with her Academic Mentor and other academics who taught her through office hours. An example of several experiences of trying to reach out to academics only to be told that they did not have time is as follows:

> *I messaged lecturers a week before the exam period to meeting up with them before my exam because I wanted to know the types of questions and stuff, yeah. And I emailed four. Out of the four, only one said that they could see me. Three said that no, they can't see me. And I, personally – that is unacceptable. Three said that I got really really busy schedule, as you may know exam season's approaching, I don't have time to see you. Blah blah blah and that was it. I still remember this because this experience killed me.* I1

She also detailed another occasion where her Academic Mentor seemed overwhelmed by the issues that I1 faced in her academic writing during her first year, and sent her away because she could not help the student in the allotted 15 minute appointment. In desperation to find help in writing her essay (this was before LSE LIFE opened), she called a friend attending City University, who did receive support on how to write academic essays.

Despite these negative experiences, participants continue to see Academic Mentoring as vital to success at LSE, and as a system that, while needing an overhaul, is worth keeping. And, because of this, the participants brainstormed several ideas which might make the Academic Mentoring Scheme work as the School intended and as the students needed.

The first focus group recommended that Academic Mentoring appointments be made compulsory and be added to their timetable. They felt that this would remove the difficulty of trying to negotiate two meeting slots each term while demonstrating to students that Academic Mentoring appointments were just as important as attending lectures and seminars.

> *So like, I feel like if the Academic Mentoring becomes compulsory, if it is compulsory and then students will go. Sometimes students don't go because they don't know and don't want teachers to know this. Or they are scared. But with compulsory they can go.* F1.3

Meanwhile, both the first focus group and two of the interviews **suggested that there be a form of training for Academic Mentoring where those that are 'good' examples of it, who understand how to support students, could work with those that struggle with this aspect of their jobs**. Each had

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examples of one person within their department or who had taught them who demonstrated good practice in terms of office hours or Academic Mentoring.   For example:

> She always has time for you. Not only, but when I went. This is my third year by the way. When I went and knocked on her door out of the blue, she opened it for me. Ok? She opened it and didn't say that she couldn't see me now. She opened it and she let me in. She is very caring. She cared about my education. I1

Finally, I3 suggested that **Academic Mentoring be given a higher status in the School**. She seemed to recognise that in order to academics to value it as much as they valued other aspects of their work, it would need to be given a higher status. She was not sure how this could be done – **either through giving Academics awards for being good Mentors, or asking them to demonstrate their Mentor skills as a part of their job review.**

Classroom Interaction

Discussed with almost as much enthusiasm and urgency as the Academic Mentoring Scheme was the need for change in classroom interactions between academics and BAME students. **Participants recalled experiences in the classes where academics seemed to focus their attention on students who were already aware of the expectations of university classrooms and were already doing well in their studies.** They felt that seminar leaders and lecturers purposefully avoided calling on them in class, and when these students did speak up, they felt these academics did not engage with the ideas they presented. The participants seemed to link this lack of attention in class to being a level of racial bias against them as BAME students.

For example, I1 stated:

> I felt like the people that knew how to write got a lot of attention, got things sorted, had a good chemistry with the teacher. The people that didn't were like me and other students that are BME. Because I had another Bengali girl in my class, and she never attended. She never like came, because she goes if they don't care, what's the point of meeting the teacher? I1

Meanwhile, I3 reported:

> If you have already been schooled in a certain way of arguing your arguments in the classroom, where you feel confident to raise your voice, and you feel entitled to that space, um… you come in very differently, and that affects your interaction with the professor. A lot of the professors will have a more positive leaning towards those people. I3

I3 then elaborated that when she does finally have the confidence to speak, she feels like she needs to be better prepared to defend her argument than her white classmates. Specifically, she states:

> I feel I have to prove my intellect a lot more than white people. Like I've heard white people say some, for lack of a better word, dumb shit in seminars. Where the teacher has just let that pass. And then I've said something that can be proven by research, and then the teacher is questioning me. I3

In the second focus group, F2.2 put it simply as:

> In the class, there is no aid from the teacher, no help from the teacher directly. F2.2

While F2.4 comment on the issue of name recognition and taking the time to learn her name compared to the names of her white classmates:

She [an academic in the department] doesn't even say my name right. My name is [_]! It's not hard. F2.4

And F2.3 said:

They don't even make eye contact with you. They only look at their favourites. F2.4

Some participants did provide examples of academics who did interact well in the classes, and demonstrated a level of care for the students. These examples were not of teachers going through extraordinary lengths to be engaging and interactive. Rather, **examples of good teachers focused on small gestures that demonstrate care, awareness of diverse voices in the classroom, and a willingness to listen to them.** For example, I2 provided the following two examples:

So the particular comments you make in lectures, for instance, the particular nudges you give. I remember this comment, it sticks with me. 'The exam is only a learning tool. That's what you should treat it as. There is nothing harder, nothing less. It's a learning tool. And that's what you should aim to do.' For instance, that particular comment, its boom! It's bringing you back into perspective. I2

And:

Seeing a student struggling wit in class, and just go up to them after class and ask them 'are you ok'. I2

Meanwhile, I1 gave an example of a class teacher that took the time to email students back answers to questions raised in class, demonstrating that she had indeed been paying attention to her students.

After I asked a questions, she would message me back if something else had come to her mind, in her thoughts, saying to me, you know that thing that I gave you, look at this section, and this section will help you. Best of luck, and would sign off. So she was a very very good teacher. I1

These examples are simple interventions that seem to make a large difference for BAME students in the classroom. They do not require a change in pedagogic alignment – rather simply taking a few minutes to acknowledge students and show that they are both known and cared about.

In terms of the issues around perceived racial bias in the classroom, this speaks to **a possible need to engage academics in both reflexive discussions around racial bias, stereotype threat, and habit breaking techniques so that students no longer perceive a difference in engagement base on racial difference.**

Community with Academics

The final common area of student-teacher interaction discussed throughout the focus groups and interviews is **the need to further develop a sense of community through departmental activities and social events outside the formal curriculum.** This seems to offer a way of by-passing LSE's lack of campus by allowing the departments to be the centre of community, rather than a campus. This was also offered as a way for students to meet other academics in the department that they may end up building a stronger, more meaningful mentorship relationship with on the occasion that they do not get all with their appointed Academic Mentor.

In the first focus group, F1.1 suggested:

I really like it when my department has socials or free food, free alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, but then everyone kind of gets together in a way. And you feel like as isolated and you also get to see the rest of the people in your department that you don't share classes with, and maybe the rest of the department is more, you know, more diverse than the specific [courses] that you are taking. F1.1

Meanwhile, I2 gave an example of a lecturer from his programme who took the time to build in lunch meetings with students. This was a course I2 had to re-take, where his confidence was particularly low. However, these informal gatherings help create a sense that the lecturer cared for all students. He stated:

He scheduled Friday lunches. It eases things in. Again, bringing that relationship in, between professors and students closer. And he got it spot on. And it made me feel like if I tried, I'd be ok. I2

And I4 stated:

If you're given a chance to hang out with, you know, umm, people in the department, then you've got a chance to know maybe someone there who does care. And you feel, you know, celebrated. I4

Some departments, or individuals within departments are clearly doing a good job of trying to build this community – **it may be of interest for the School to incentivise all departments to develop such social events from the very beginning of degree programmes.**

Curricular Changes
Diversify / Decolonise the Curriculum
Within the recommendations made regarding the curriculum, **the need to either diversify or decolonise the curriculum was expressed most often**. While this was of particular concern for PGT students, because every PGT participant raised it, it was also mentioned by some UG students. With UG students, diversifying or decolonising the curriculum seemed less important for students in departments that traditionally have had more defined career paths.

I3 called out that the issue of a homogenous curriculum made up predominately of white men meant that not only was she not getting diverse perspectives, but *if* she wanted to find those perspectives, it was up to her to take on additional labour. As she states:

Any alternative perspectives are outsourced to students to find out. That means as a black student, I have to do a lot of extra research in order to feel represented in the curriculum and in the classrooms and in the conversations, which is… that is extra labour that not everyone has to take on. I don't think that labour should be on the students. That has to be on the institution. I3

This is a particular issue for this participant because, as she states:

I'm not represented in my curriculum. I3

This lack of representation in the curriculum creates a disillusionment with the School and feeds into the lack of belonging that was expressed by these BAME students. As F2.1 states:

You come in thinking this is where Nkrumah, where a lot of African presidents studied. It's such a radical space. You walk in think you know it's going to be representative of different perspectives but then you realise people are not actually interested in the Global South. F2.1

Participants also highlighted the fact that many academics seemed aware of the problem, but rather than address it, simply apologized for it. As I3 states:

> *The teacher said 'I apologise. I see that the representation here of minority scholars are little to none. I see that there is a problem here. I am working on it, but as of now, that is what it is.' And in my mind I'm thinking, that's not enough. You're rationalising not having to do anything.* I3

Meanwhile F2.3 describe the attitude towards decolonising the curriculum within her department as follows:

> *Here when I talk about decolonisation, I feel like they don't really care. They just add it onto the reading list as a tokenistic thing to do. To say, yeah, we're covering decolonisation. But in actual seminars, we don't talk about it.* F2.3

Therefore, she is making clear that any attempts to decolonise need to be seen as more holistic and expansive than simply adding more names to a reading list, which comes across as tokenism and not sincere engagement with what it means to have a truly decolonising curriculum.

I4 puts it as:

> *There is so little inclusion of minority voices.* I3

Linked to the issue of a lack of minority voices was also the issue of the use of current examples. Participants offered examples of current events directly relevant to their courses of study that were not included in reading lists nor discussed in seminars. As F2.4 states:

> *Nothing current is being studied! We are learning but no case studies that is going on now. And if you try to change the seminar, to be more discussive, they limit you*. F2.4

In the second focus group, participants highlighted that indeed the issue is more than reading lists. F2.1 described how her decision to use African examples in her assessments seems to have impacted how academics read her essays. She stated:

> *I got such a low mark, I was really upset for a long time. And then I was like, oh, maybe it was because I used African examples. I really need to use UK examples. You know, you even start feeling like you're being mark down because like, you're not talking about this context.* F2.1

F2.4 puts even more bluntly when she states:

> *We're supposed to be tamed. The education system is designed to make us become a European style thinker.* F2.4

The participants highlighted the need for the School to invest in hiring academics (in permanent and high level posts) who are experts in these diverse perspectives that are currently missing in the curriculum.   For example, I3 states that it is the Schools responsibility to bring in experts rather than expecting students to act as experts on diverse voices:

> *I am not an expert on everything race and everything ethnicity. So if we're going to do something about it, bring in experts, with the time and the budget, to research and teach diverse views and representation*. I3

The second focus group highlighted this issue as well, with F2.1 stating:

> *There is generally such a low representation of African lecturers, professors, assistant professors in this university so how will they even know how to [decolonise].* F2.1

One participant did talk about a course she was taking as a part of her degree programme that did make a conscious effort to offer diverse voices on a consistent, non-tokenistic way. In discussing that course, she expressed how it changed her attitude towards learning and her engagement by simply feeling represented in the course. She states:

> *It is the only course where I feel excited. Even after the seminar group, I'll be like a child, I'll be so excited. Because she knows what she's talking about – she's done some research. But when it comes to my other courses, I'll be drained. I no longer have energy and am frustrated.* F2.4

This validates what is already known about the link between belonging, engagement, and seeing ones-self in the curriculum. **In order for BAME students to engage – which is a vital part of attainment – curriculum must be designed in a way that they see their own voices, perspectives, and experiences represented in the curriculum.** This starts, but does not end, with reading lists. **For the School to be able to do this, these participants highlight the purposeful hiring of academics working from diverse and non-Euro-centric perspectives**.

Transition into Study at LSE

The second area of change was a call to **embed into the curriculum study skills and transitioning into studying at LSE.** In this case, all UG participants called for this, especially for the first year of study, and all international PGT participants requested it. Considering that in 2017-2018, 79% of all postgraduate students were non-UK domiciled, this need to embed study skills into the curriculum is justified.

The participants expressed frustration at their studies at LSE because they felt that academics expected them to have key skills and knowledge coming into the classrooms that had never been taught to them. And, while LSE LIFE was named as an improvement that the School had made, they claimed it was not enough – that because of the vast differences between previous educational experiences and expectations to LSE's expectations, that the programmes needed to offer this kind of instruction to overlap with the content.

I1, a UK-domiciled UG recounted her experiences from her first year of study:

> *I'm not gonna lie to you, my writing skill wasn't up to scratch up to university level, but that is something that wasn't taught. That wasn't taught to me.* I1

F2.4 also expressed frustration at not being told *how* to write an academic essay that would meet the expectations of LSE academics:

> *They don't tell you that they want these specific things when writing an essay. And when you have already done it, they tell you oh you should have done this this this and this. And I ask why didn't you show me this upfront? Why didn't you give us already distinction essays and upload them on Moodle, so we can learn from them?* F2.4

However, writing skills is not the only thing students struggled with during their transition into studying at LSE. Reading and exposure to key knowledge was included:

> *All we had was overload of readings, overload of works, overload of essays that were due in this day, this day, this day, but no one's sitting there telling us how to go about it, how to get it done.* I1

And:

> *Lecturers at LSE assume you have this implicit knowledge, and you're not competing from the same, on the same knowledge level.* F2.1

Alongside embedding explicit instruction on academic literacies into the curriculum, I2, an alumni of the LSE Choice programme, **suggests that LSE extend the LSE Choice programme into the first year as a means of both creating a support network for UK based BAME students and offering additional instruction on academic literacies and skills**. He states:

> *LSE Choice – the pre-university programme. For me it was good, but there is more to that. A lot of LSE Choice students come to LSE as well, but it needs to be maintained or paired.* I2

Several departments at LSE have developed courses in the first year of UG study that aims at providing explicit instruction on academic skills and expectations within the curriculum. For example, International History has the 'Think like a Historian' course. The School could consider rolling this out across the university. As for at the PGT level, required courses in the first term would need to be redesigned to include explicit engagement with expectations of PGT study at LSE and how to meet those expectations. Finally, the idea of extending LSE Choice into a first year programme designed specifically for supporting WP students could be explored.

Beyond Teaching and Learning

While the focus groups and interviews focused primarily on teaching and learning interventions that the School could engage in to improve BAME attainment and student experience, other areas of improvement did crop up. In light of the research coming in from Kingston University, UCL, Leeds Beckett, and others that states that institution wide change in all areas of operations are needed to address BAME attainment gaps in a meaningful way, it seemed important to both allow participants to express these areas of change as well as include them in this document.

Dignity in Seeking Financial Assistance

In the second focus group, the very first area of change that was expressed and discussed was a need to edit the current Financial Assistance application processes to allow applications to feel as if they are being treated with dignity. Several students in that focus group detailed the process as it is to apply for and be qualified for financial assistance, and how that process seemed to rob them of their dignity.

F2.3 stated:

> *Applying for that hardship grant, I just found it like, just upsetting in a sense because… You have to do certain things. Like print out a bank statement for the last month, and if it goes over £100 you have to state what you used it for, and it has to be justified. And like, if your parents can't support you anymore, your parents have to write a letter saying why I can't support my child anymore. And then you have to explain what you've done to ensure to improve your financial situation. It's embarrassing and you feel distrusted.* F2.3

F2.2 put it more concisely when she stated:

> *Because they ask for your financial accounts and then a statement and the point of it is telling your sob story. Which it is, again, that hits your ego and respect. I'm thinking why am I being asked to do this?* F2.2

And it was F2.1 who linked the process directly to dignity and the intersectional experiences of being minority ethnic and coming from a family with intergenerational poverty:

> *It does something to your dignity when you know to get a scholarship you have to tell your sad story, you know? And as people of colour we always… that's our access to resources. That's crippling that that is something we always have to do. It should be known at this point in history, generally, people of colour need support and there needs to be dignified ways where they just get it. Where you don't need to explain because of colonisation my grandparents were [unclear] and then my parents were born poor, and the effects of being from a family where intergenerational poverty exists.* F2.1

It may be prudent of the School to review its current process for applying for hardship grants and bursaries to ensure that the School is not asking students to recount narratives that leave them feeling infantilised and / or without dignity.

Resident Life

Meanwhile, in the first focus group, students discussed needing further support and a change in culture in the academic residences. All students had lived in the residences for at least one year of their studies at LSE, and felt that the culture focused heavily on alcohol consumption, which left them feeling uncomfortable. They also felt that more peer mentors were needed on dorms – this recommendation was made by a student that, now in her third year, is a peer mentor herself. When recalling her arrival at the School in her first year, she said:

> *London was quite a change. I would agree that it would be a very good idea to have peers like that like on your floor. Like a peer you can talk to. Because I sort of remember, I arrived, I just sort of settled into the hall.* F1.2

She also described the focus of drinking during fresher's week and how she felt:

> *It is heavily emphasised that you drink during that week and not all students drink. Literally. Yeah. And there is this perception that if you don't socialise right there at that moment, you will lose everything, you won't have friends, like to the other years of your degree.* F1.2

Others also pointed to the drinking on halls as exclusionary. F1.3 stated:

> *I agree with that point because usually there will be like my hall is social in the sense that there are a lot of events going, not every now and then. And it is just that sometimes it just too much going on on alcohol and drinking and like… er… I feel like sometimes students need to like feel like excluded, like when I am there I don't know what to do when I'm not drinking.* F1.3

The students in this focus group recommended that the residences explicitly put on alcohol free events, especially during fresher's week, to create an atmosphere that lets students know that they can socialise and make friends on campus without engaging in drinking. F1.2 suggested that this could even happen in the second night of fresher's week – which would set the tone very early on. This would then need to be maintained throughout the academic year. They did not recommend removing alcohol from all social events – just ensuring that there was an increase in those that were alcohol-free. This seems like a reasonable recommendation, especially considering that an increase of students prefer to abstain from drinking.

Intercultural Engagement Centre

During three of the four interviews, students suggested setting up a centre, group, or space that would promote cross-cultural interactions. While none of the interviewees used the term 'Intercultural Engagement Centre', the descriptions of what they were asking for clearly fit within this realm.

I1 recounted how she felt there was no space on campus where she could meet people different from herself. The only space of community she felt she could enter was the Faith centre, which limited who she could interact with and become friends with. She stated:

> *So we just got different groups going on here. That we got our own people, you know what I'm trying to say? The only way that I got friends here was through that community Muslim, a Muslim society or the Faith Centre. That's it. That cause me… that made me feel like, oh my god, you know, I'm not part of LSE, I can't fit in, this ain't right for me. Everyone is just really different here. That's what I'm trying to say.* I1

As a way of countering this, I1 suggested that a centre could be created that sponsor social events and groups revolving around intercultural creativity. For example she suggested poetry writing and performances, art workshops, and activities that would allow people with different cultural backgrounds to come together and share. Meanwhile I4 saw that such a centre could:

> *It should be an integrated space. Like community*. I4

I1 also felt that by focusing the intercultural engagement centre around creativity, it could allow students to voice and work through the stress and anxiety of being in such a competitive environment. She said:

> *I want poetry nights were like students get up, and like talk about the **real** LSE, the reality of their experience at LSE. Not bullshitting their way like always*. I1

I3 also discussed the creation of a 'group' or 'board' aimed at creating a space for diverse students to come together. Aside from intercultural exchange, she suggested that such a centre could *also* act as a space where BAME students could come to for advice or to share experiences. She stated:

> *There should be an inclusion or diversity… um… group or board, so that as a minority student, I know that there is awareness of the needs that I have. And I can meet others like me. And we can help each other. A group that sees me as a black student learning.* I3

Several universities in the United States have groups like this, that are spaces for intercultural engagement, where students from vastly different backgrounds can come together, meet each other, and hang out through engaging in creative endeavours, while also offering peer support for BAME and diverse students. It may be worth investigating how these centres operate and the feasibility of creating such a space at the School.

Mental Health

Throughout all the focus groups and interviews, mental health was constantly alluded to, especially in relation to 1) the competitive culture of the school, 2) the lack of belonging, 3) the feelings of isolation, and 4) the stress and anxiety of not performing well throughout their academic studies. This matches trends throughout the sector of a rise in mental health concerns, and LSE is clearly not immune to these rising concerns.

I1 described the issue around mental health and the connection to the institutional culture around competition and doing better than their classmates as follows:

> *People be like I'm killing it, I'm smashing it, I got all my notes sorted. Because everyone does that in class. On their own, people will be crying, but as soon as their friend walk in, it's a different image, it's a different face. That need stops now. That is too long now. And that is the cause of everybody's anxiety and other people's stress. It's because we are so focused on other people's plates that it's cleaning our own. Do you know what I'm talking about?* I1

During the first focus group, participants suggested that the School should hire departmental mental health mentors at the School. For example, F1.2 suggested:

> *Sort of departmental mentor. Who is going to care specifically for the mental health. And they are also aware of the types of degree and types of problem that people are most like to have when they are like they are doing that particular type of degree. So yeah… And you can like book appointments with them. Because sometimes academic advisors they're not really prepared to deal with this mental health issues where this person be specifically paid for this as a separate position.* F1.2

The feasibility of hiring 23 + mental health mentors would have to be investigated. However, clearly the School does need to invest more resources for 1) preventative measures, 2) reducing stigma around mental health, and 3) offering more spaces and options for seeking mental health support.

Recommendations and Conclusions

During these focus groups interviews with BAME students from taught programmes across the School, participants made the following recommendations to improve BAME student experience and attainment:

1. **Bolster and provide consistency in the Academic Mentoring Scheme across the school.** This includes:
   a. Timetabling Academic Mentoring sessions so that it reduces the negotiation between academics and students to set them up.
   b. Provide more extensive training to Academic Mentoring and encourage good practice across the School to create consistency.
   c. Raise the profile of Academic Mentoring at the School by either offering reward and recognition to those that do well, or by making it a part of CDR.
2. **Improve the student-teacher interactions in the classroom because currently there seems to be a lot of implicit racial bias in teaching.** This could be done by
   a. Encourage teaching staff to demonstrate care for students by touching base with all students
   b. Provide in-depth, in person racial bias training that engages with issues around stereotype threat and provides habit breaking strategies.
3. **Encourage community building within departments.** This would include offering more departmental social events that allows students and academics to mingle in less formal settings.
4. **Diversify / decolonise the curriculum** so that all students and perspectives are reflected in the curriculum. This would involve:
   a. Ensuring multiple perspective from both the Global North and Global South are represented in the reading lists
   b. Regions of the Global South are not unnecessarily homogenised. In other words, do not have one week on the entire continent of Africa, while European countries are investigated separately from each other.
   c. The curriculum include current events and case studies that relate to the content of the course.
   d. Encourage the use of examples and case studies from the Global South in assessments.
   e. Hire permanent academics to teach courses that draw from diverse, de/postcolonial perspectives.
5. **Offer embedded, explicit instruction on the academic literacies needed to study and succeed at LSE**. This could be done through embedding *how* to read and write for PGT students into core modules and / or creating 'Think like a __' courses into first year undergraduate programmes.
6. **Review to bursary and financial hardship application process** to ensure that we are not asking students to present their situations in narratives that leave them feeling robbed of their dignity.
7. **Encourage the Halls of Residence to develop more inclusive social events, especially during Fresher's Week, that do not revolve around the consumption of alcohol.**
8. **Investigate the feasibility of creating a Intercultural Engagement Centre** that would both offer opportunities for diverse students to meet each other and engage in creative activities as well as allow diverse students to come seek for advice and fellowship for issues that they specifically face.

LSE Teaching and Learning Centre

9. **Invest more resources in the destigmatising, prevention, and treatment of mental health for all students.** Students recommended that there be department specific mental health advisors.