First-year transition, mental health and the attainment of undergraduate students at a UK university: A pilot study to understand the role played by ethnicity

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Abstract

In UK Higher Education, differential degree outcomes have persisted for many years between White students and students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. The present study investigates whether these ethnic differences also exist in transitional challenges first-year students experience and how those transitional challenges have impacted student wellbeing and academic attainment. The online questionnaire adopted engaged 99 undergraduate students including 15 from BAME backgrounds taking social sciences courses at one UK university. Whilst there was no statistically significant difference in transitional challenges faced by different ethnic groups there were marked differences in individual experiences, and findings do suggest BAME students are less likely to access the university's student support services if they encounter challenges during the transition period. In addition, it was found that the most prevalent transitional challenge among students of all ethnicities was encountering both homesickness and financial difficulties, whilst struggling with the course was perceived to have the largest impact on students' perceived attainment.

Keywords: BAME, attainment, wellbeing, transition, ethnicity

Introduction

Since the number of students entering higher education (HE) drastically grew in the early 1990s, student experience has become one of the most debated topics within HE, including universities' and educators' persistent efforts to gain a better understanding of the first-year student experience in order to design and implement appropriate support. First-year transitional experiences have also been seen as significant influencing factors in students' decisions on withdrawal and progression (e.g. Kantanis, 2000; Yorke and Longden, 2008). These factors can also have an impact on other important areas in their HE journey such as academic achievement (e.g. Miller and Lesik, 2014; Van der Zanden et al., 2019), wellbeing (e.g. Gibson et al., 2016), and social and academic engagement (Al-Sheeb et al., 2018). Briggs et al. (2012) suggested that some groups of students may encounter more challenges

when transitioning to university than others, including mature students with families, students who are the first generation in their most immediate family to go to university, and students from ethnic minority backgrounds. As the UK HE sector hosts an increasingly diverse student population, having a greater insight into the first-year transitional experience in the context of a range of student backgrounds has become more relevant and a timely exercise in understanding broader student expectations of HE. With these issues in mind, the current study sought to investigate transitional challenges students encountered during the first-year transition and their effects on student academic attainment and wellbeing, and in particular, to determine the role played by ethnicity. The research questions of this study were as follows:

- *What transitional challenges were experienced amongst students of different ethnicities?*

- *How did transitional challenges impact students' perceived attainment and wellbeing?*

- *Did students experiencing transitional challenges seek any help?*

Review of literature

'Points of transition are associated with increased risk of developing mental health problems, due to the stress of adapting to new circumstances' (Brown, 2016: 20). Transition from school or college to university is a challenging time, with thematic analysis of the available literature identifying the most common transitional challenges experienced by students as homesickness, difficulties with accommodation, financial concerns, struggling with the course and making friends. Described by Krause and Coates (2008: 494) as 'a complex and difficult time in a young student's life', issues such as living away from home for the first time, managing finances and juggling study and paid employment can have a significant impact on both wellbeing and attainment (Laidlaw et al., 2015). Those students who enter HE with a pre-existing mental health condition may find transition particularly difficult, with transfer of care further complicating matters (Brown, 2016). In addition, those who have not previously suffered mental ill health may experience problems for the first time due to elevated levels of stress during this period.

It is also apparent that the psychological well-being of transitional students is changeable over a short period of time. A study by Gibson et al. (2016) into the health behaviours of first year undergraduates found that levels of anxiety in students entering university were high during the first term but had significantly decreased by term two. Further evidence of this can be drawn from Knoesen and Naude (2018), investigating 'flourishing and languishing' in South African students during their first year at university. Students reported more negative experiences at the start of university, but as they familiarised themselves with common transitional challenges and subsequently became more resilient, positive experiences were more often reported.

Literature also offers insights into factors which have the greatest impact on student wellbeing. Whilst homesickness, difficulties with accommodation, financial concerns, struggling with the course and making friends were all repeatedly identified in thematic analysis, financial and academic stressors were also frequently reported challenges. Cooke et al. (2004), studying the relationship between student debt and mental wellbeing, found that 'students with high financial concerns felt more tense, anxious or nervous'. Similarly, Jessop, Herberts and Solomon (2005), comparing the impact of financial concerns on British and Finnish students, found that British students had more debt and also reported worse mental health. More recently, of 3,161 students surveyed by Save the Student (2020), 71% reported that they worried about making ends meet, with 58% reporting that financial difficulties had a negative impact on their mental health.

The effect of academic concerns on wellbeing is less clear. Al-Qaisy (2011), studying the correlation between mental health and academic performance, found that students experiencing mental ill health struggled to keep up academically. In contrast, Saklofske et al. (2012: 256), concluded that 'the associations of academic success and stress differed, and high stress was not a risk factor for poor academic performance'. Sanders and Lussington (2002), also found little support for an association between high stress factor scores and reduced academic performance. What is less apparent is whether the relationship between academic performance and mental health is two way, with academic struggles affecting wellbeing, as well as vice versa.

It is also less clear whether the experiences of BAME and White students differ. Literature investigating the transitional experiences of different ethnic groups is limited, but there are a few studies which provide insight. Parker et al. (2017) identified several areas where BAME students faced additional challenges during transition. A sense of belonging, regarded as important for both student success and wellbeing, was less likely to be felt by BAME students. 69% of 240 BAME students stated they felt they 'belonged' at university, compared to 82.8% of their white peers (sample size: 316 undergraduate students from all ethnic backgrounds). Similarly, a study by Cureton and Gravestock (2019: 13) concluded that 'ethnic-based difference occurs in how belonging is experienced'. To engender belonging a supportive holistic university environment is vital, with Bunce et al. (2019: 454) identifying that 'achieving one's full potential for learning, alongside experience of wellbeing, is supported by environments that help individuals to meet their needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy'. It is vital, therefore, that BAME students in particular are offered tailored support from Universities. However only around a quarter of UK universities offer any dedicated transitional support to BAME students (Office for Students, 2020).

Cultural, rather than ethnicity-based differences can also impact upon wellbeing during transition. Culture shock, experienced as a feeling of being overwhelmed by the need to rapidly adjust to new and unfamiliar ways of living at university, is

common amongst both White and BAME students (Kift and Nelson, 2005), but cultural differences can be more pronounced in both BAME and international undergraduates. The University of South Wales identified that 'coming to university in Britain can be a new and sometimes baffling experience for international students' and have aimed to increase preparedness by dedicating a section of their website to understanding and supporting cultural differences (University of South Wales, 2017). As a best practice approach, such initiatives are key in supporting the transition of all students by identifying what the common challenges are and offering bespoke support to increase understanding and foster resilience.

Methodology

Purpose

This paper draws on a subset of the findings from a student-led research project which investigated whether undergraduate students' experiences of five pre-identified, literature-informed transitional challenges vary, and how these challenges impacted student attainment and wellbeing at the researched university. Given previous studies on similar topics seldom investigate and compare transitional experiences of first year students who are from different ethnic groups, the current study has a specific focus on the role played by ethnicity. Another aim of the project was to provide recommendations to the institutional student support services. This was achieved through exploring participants' perceptions of their lived experiences when they first entered HE and understanding what changes students feel could be implemented by student support services in order to better support future new entrants' transition and study.

Participants

Data was collected from a group of 99 undergraduate students who were studying social science disciplines. Whist second year students accounted for the largest proportion of the sample (32.6%), the figures for foundation and first year students were the same (25.5% each respectively), with third years making up the remainder (16.3%). The majority of participants were aged between 18 and 25 years (94.9%), with 4.1% being 26 or older. Self-reported ethnicity information showed that 83 (83.8%) participants were white and 15 were BAME (15.1%). One participant did not provide information on ethnicity.

Data collection and analysis

Running from February 2019 to October 2019, the project was affected by the coronavirus outbreak and lockdown restrictions. The original mixed methods design, utilising a face-to-face questionnaire and a focus group, had to be adapted to a stand-alone online survey using Qualtrics. Ethical approval was granted by the university's ethics committee and data collection was conducted in accordance with

the institutional ethics policy and GDPR requirements. Participation was entirely voluntary.

The questionnaire consisted of both closed and open questions, providing a mix of quantitative and qualitative data. In accordance with the research questions presented earlier, students' perceptions were sought as follows:

- Q1. To what extent are each of the five pre-identified transitional challenges relevant to your first-year transitional experience (five-point Likert style, rated from 1 to 5, with 1 being least relevant and 5 being most relevant)?
- Q2. To what extent are each of the five pre-identified transitional challenges significant to your academic attainment and wellbeing (five-point Likert style, rated from 1 to 5, with 1 being least significant and 5 being most significant)?
- Q3. Did you seek help from the university's available support services to handle transitional challenges (a single-answer question with three options including 'yes', 'no', and 'I did not encounter any of those challenges in my first year')?
- Q4. How do you think the university's support services could be more useful in helping students handle transitional challenges (an open-ended question)?

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (Version 25) and qualitative data analysis was carried out manually by one of the researchers following a reiterative coding, theming, decontextualising and recontextualising process (Nowell et al., 2017). From a sample size of 99, 29 participants provided partial responses and were therefore excluded from the final data analysis. Missing data was handled using list-wise deletion.

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative findings sought to highlight which transitional challenges participants perceived as most relevant to their own experiences. Figure 1 shows which challenges students felt were most relevant to them.
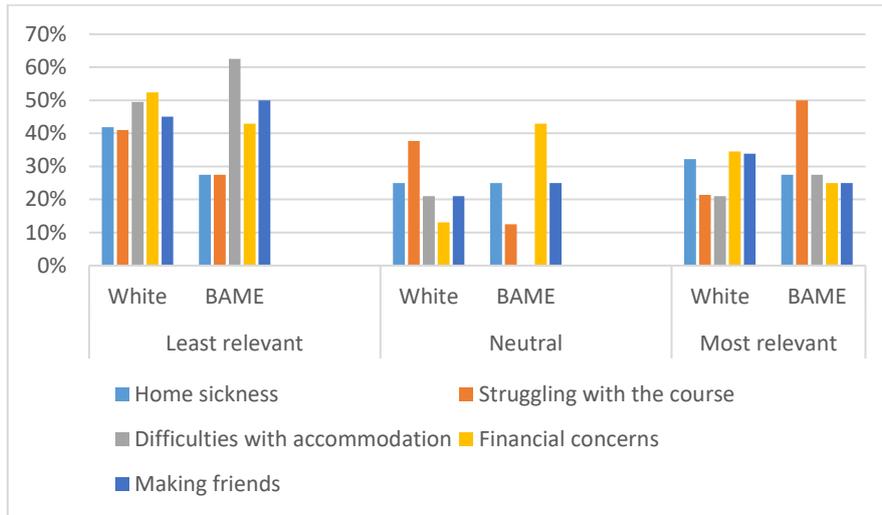
Figure 1. Transitional challenges and their relevance to respondents' experience in HE

Overall, for all respondents, the data shows that homesickness and financial concerns were the most relevant transitional challenge, with 59.7% of respondents rating homesickness as most relevant to them and 59.5% of respondents also rating financial concerns as most relevant. However, there were some reported differences between White and BAME participants. For White participants, the most relevant transitional challenge was financial concerns (34.5% rated as most relevant) and for BAME participants, the most relevant challenge was struggling with the course (50.0% rated as most relevant).

Table 1 shows the median rating for the perceived impact of all the transitional challenges explored by the study.

Transitional Challenge	Median (Overall) N=70	Median (White Participants) N=62	Median (BAME participants) N=8	P-Value
Homesickness	3.00	3.00	3.00	0.58
Difficulties with accommodation	2.00	2.00	2.00	0.95
Financial concerns	2.00	2.00	3.00	0.72
Struggling with the course	3.00	3.00	3.50	0.43
Making Friends	3.00	3.00	2.50	0.52
No Challenges	1.00	1.00	1.50	0.77

Table 1. The significance of transitional challenges to student academic attainment: medians and p values

Results did not identify statistically significant differences in how transitional challenges impact upon students of different ethnicities when entering higher education. This could be attributed to the fact that the sample may not have had a

representative amount of BAME respondents, with a substantially larger proportion of White respondents than BAME respondents. Demographics of the university hosting the study mean that the sample was reflective of the university population, however in terms of analysis this should be considered as a limitation of the study.

Figure 2 presents participants' perceptions on the impact of transitional challenges on their attainment in three broader categories:
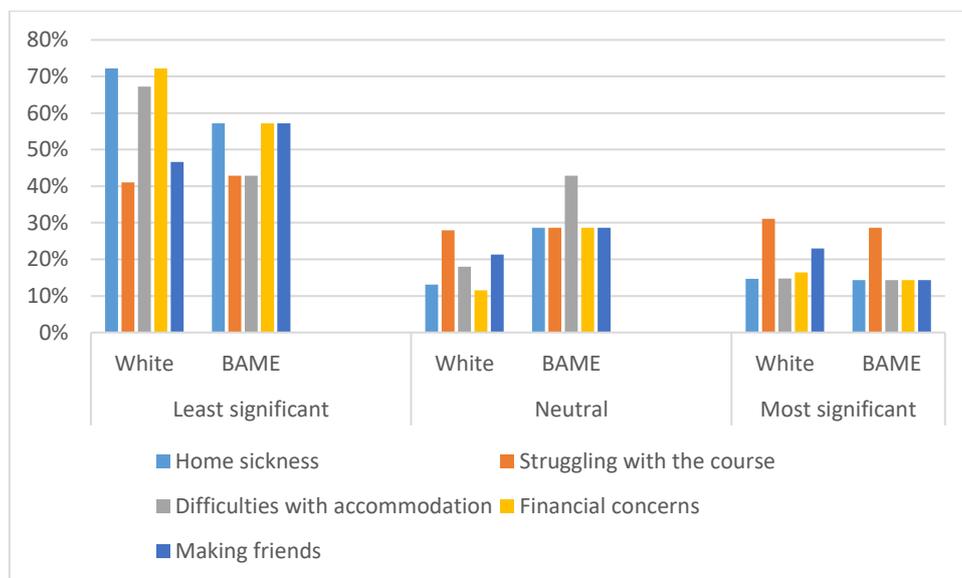
Figure 2. Transitional challenges and their perceived impact on student attainment

The data shows that overall, for all respondents, 'struggling with the course' was perceived as the transitional challenge with the highest perceived significance for attainment (59.7% rated as most relevant). Perceptions were broadly similar in both groups, with 31.1% of White students, rating this as most relevant, compared to a slightly lower percentage of 28.6% amongst BAME students.

	Overall N= 70	White participant N= 62	BAME participants N= 8
Did seek help	51.4%	53.2%	37.5%
Did not seek help	35.7%	33.9%	50.0%
Did not encounter any challenges	12.9%	12.9%	12.5%

Table 2. Help seeking behaviour amongst participants facing transitional challenges

Table 2 illustrates help-seeking behaviour amongst participants. Results highlighted significant differences in help-seeking behaviour between White and BAME participants, with BAME respondents reporting that they were less likely to ask for help from the support provided by the university if they were experiencing transitional challenges which impacted upon their wellbeing. 53.2 % of White participants

experiencing challenges to their wellbeing sought help from support services provided by the university compared to just 37.5% of BAME participants.

Qualitative findings

In line with quantitative findings of the research, qualitative data also identified financial concerns as the most relevant transitional challenge experienced by students overall. The severity of students' financial difficulties appeared to vary however, with some students reporting a substantial impact on daily living, whilst others merely had less disposable income than desired. Amongst students in more challenging financial positions, many found that such difficulties led to other transitional challenges, including difficulties making friends due to not having enough money to spend on leisure activities with peers. One respondent adversely affected by their financial difficulties reported:

> '(I was) in a bad, controlling relationship and then leaving the relationship, (I was) not getting enough money so I wouldn't be able to go out with friends or eat more than once a day.'

Undoubtedly, responses of this nature highlight the impact that financial problems may have on students' physical, mental and social health, as well as on their academic studies. Research consistently demonstrates that loneliness, which may result from being excluded from unaffordable activities with friends, is correlated with worsened mental health and educational outcomes (Eccles and Qualter, 2020). Furthermore, hunger is also associated with poor mental health, especially anxiety and depression, and reduced academic performance for young people (Ashiabi and O'Neal, 2008; McIntyre et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2012). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are thought to be under-represented in HE and therefore it appears unjust that psychological and academic barriers for such students persist, even upon successfully achieving access to university (Alon, 2009).

Open-ended questions also identified that some students who are struggling with the academic demands of their course feel that their progress is further hindered by lack of consistent support provided by academic staff. Upon contacting lecturers for academic help, some students reported receiving replies that did not offer any useful advice, which consequently deterred them from seeking help again. For one student, this not only impacted upon their perceived attainment, but on their mental health too:

> 'Some lecturers were not helpful or constructive in their feedback and emails. Sometimes they'd be rude, which to someone with anxiety, makes you not want to email again and feeling completely stuck.'

Such attitudes are likely to have detrimental effects on student learning, with research emphasising the importance of developing good relationships as integral, with good professor-student rapport an important factor in learner motivation and participation (Buskist and Saville, 2004; Christensen and Menzel, 1998; Frymier,

1994). Further research suggests that welcoming emails from lecturers enhances student motivation and immediacy, benefitting not only academic attainment, but course satisfaction too (Legg and Wilson, 2009; Wilson, 2006; Wilson and Taylor, 2001). By adopting this developmental approach to early communication channels, lecturer communication could be pivotal in tackling transitional challenges that undergraduates experience and help in the building of relationships.

With only 15 out of the 99 participants being from a BAME background, little ethnic diversity within the sample meant that the study's aim of determining whether there were correlations between transitional challenges experienced and ethnicity was difficult to ascertain. Worryingly however, and despite the fact that racism was not listed as a transitional challenge on the survey, two respondents of BAME backgrounds highlighted experiencing racism within their free-text responses. References to racism included:

> *'(I) made friends with a couple of people who I later realised were not good people. (I) experienced racism. (My) boyfriend got knocked out.'*

> *'(I experienced) racial challenges.'*

These responses provide very little detail regarding the context in which racism was experienced by the undergraduates, for example whether it was within student accommodation or in lectures or seminars on campus. More information on this would allow a deeper understanding of the impact of racism on academic performance and mental health, as well as better informing actions required to address racial discrimination among undergraduates. However, racism can undoubtedly be an upsetting and sensitive topic which respondents may not wish to elaborate on. Previous studies have established that being a victim of racism is positively associated with poorer mental health and psychological distress, as well as a cause of lowered self-esteem (Williams et al., 2003; Barry and Grilo, 2003). Self-esteem is a key ingredient for academic success, and therefore it is unsurprising that a plethora of research proposes that experiencing racism negatively impacts educational outcomes (Marsh et al., 1999; Martinez et al., 2004).

Whilst ethnic-related issues were only identified in two of the responses, challenges associated with being an international student were a more frequently recurring theme, suggesting that xenophobia within universities would be an important focus for future research. International students typically reported not feeling fully integrated with students from the UK, but this was not necessarily as a result of ethnic differences. One respondent listed factors that made their transition to university more difficult:

> *'Not being from the UK, allergy, language barrier, cultural differences.'*

Feeling unable to 'fit in' due to being of a different nationality appeared to be a common struggle, inhibiting the ability to make friends and be involved, leading to a

sense of loneliness for many. Language barriers seemed to be a large cause of isolation for non-UK students within the university, preventing confident participation in both educational discussions and socialisation with peers. An example of this included:

> *'Feeling lonely at the course as was the only non-British in my group.'*

Research suggests that social problems that are frequently encountered by international students may arise from overwhelming cultural differences, with lack of familiarity with UK culture acting as a psychological stressor (Constantinides, 1992; Lin and Yi, 1997). Additionally, previous studies have identified homesickness, finance and housing issues as three factors that are most likely to cause problematic adjustment to university life in the UK for international students (Stafford et al., 1978). An international student described a housing issue associated with xenophobic discrimination, reporting:

> *'(I experienced) bullying as I was a non-UK, threatened by accommodation manager, needed lawyer and paid second rent to somehow escape that hell.'*

Ultimately, it would appear that students of different nationalities were more likely to encounter challenges that UK domiciled students do not, emphasising the need for further research into the impact on student mental health, academic outcomes and overall university experience.

Conclusion

This article identified trends from existing literature that indicate whilst homesickness, struggling with the course, making friends, financial difficulties and problems with accommodation are all challenges commonly experienced during transition, there is a general lack of research into the role ethnicity can have in regards to transitional experiences and challenges. Based on a pilot study at a UK university, this paper provides some useful insights into whether transitional experiences of first-year students vary among different ethnic groups and how these challenges affected academic attainment and wellbeing. These experiences were obtained from a small group of undergraduate students with an online questionnaire being employed to provide mixed-nature data.

In general, this study can only offer limited evidence for the role played by ethnicity, with cultural influences seeming to be more relevant to the first-year transitional experience (as demonstrated by some of the free-text responses collated from the qualitative data). However, whilst findings did not identify statistically significant differences between BAME and White students' first-year experiences with respect to the pre-listed transitional challenges, there were some important differences observed between the two groups. Whilst financial concerns and homesickness were the most prevalent transitional challenges experienced by students overall, there were various individual experiences reported in the qualitative findings which

demonstrated marked differences in the experiences of BAME and White students. Some early evidence suggests that BAME students were more likely to feel that 'struggling with the course' was a relevant transitional challenge, though both BAME and White participants regarded this transitional challenge to be of the highest level of significance to their academic attainment.

Another important finding of this study indicates that compared with White students, students from the BAME backgrounds were less likely to seek help from the support services the university provides for dealing with transitional challenges, with a marked difference in the percentage of White students exhibiting help-seeking behaviour when compared to their BAME peers. This finding may have considerable implications regarding the effectiveness of university support services in supporting the BAME student community. Further research into why help-seeking behaviours between ethnicities differed and what can be done to improve the relevance and effectiveness of those services to non-White students would be of benefit to both students and service providers.

Results of the current study also have practical implications for the facilitation and delivery of university support services for BAME students. A first step would be to ensure the engagement of BAME students in the evaluation and design of services to ensure that they are fit for purpose for diverse student groups. Pertinent questions for support services to ask could centre around understanding what the barriers are to BAME students seeking help, and what could be done to remove these barriers and encourage help-seeking behaviour. This should be achieved through proactively engaging BAME students and exploring their relevant lived experiences, for example exploring what aspects of their courses BAME students struggle with during their first year at university and what aspects of their wellbeing are impacted by transitional challenges. Once those key questions have been better understood, the involvement of BAME students in designing a service which responds to their unique needs from the ground up is vital. Further involving BAME student groups in the promotion of services and embedding a peer to peer approach to delivery may also help to encourage increased uptake of support. Crucially, universities should not ignore the fact that student demographics have changed significantly over the past few years, but that support services have not always kept pace with this change. Universities have a responsibility to understand the needs of their particular student population, abandon a 'one size fits all' approach, and ensure that wellbeing support is tailored to respond to the needs of a modern, culturally and racially diverse university community.

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