

Racial dissonance in the unexplained spaces of the ethnicity awarding gap: A critical exploration of undergraduate, UK domicile, South Asian male student journeys in a university business school.

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Abstract

Racial dissonance in the unexplained spaces of the ethnicity awarding gap: A critical exploration of undergraduate, UK domicile, South Asian male student journeys in a university business school.

The focus of my thesis is the ethnicity awarding gap, a phenomenon prevalent across the higher education sector, whereby proportionately fewer first-class and 2:1 degree classifications are awarded to students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds in comparison to White students. This phenomenon sits within a wider backdrop of inequitable outcomes for people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds across areas such as the criminal justice system, employment, housing and education. Academics and policymakers alike have not been able to come to a consensus as to the definitive reasons for the awarding gap or what the solutions may be, confirming the complexity of the phenomenon and perhaps pointing to it being a 'wicked' issue. My research takes place specifically with undergraduate, UK domicile, South Asian male students in a business school, in a university in the northwest of England. In particular I consider contributory factors that may provide further insights into the ethnicity awarding gap between this grouping of South Asian male students and White students. My research draws on the experiences of South Asian male students through in-depth interviews and focus groups as well as in-depth interviews with tutors from the business school. My research operates in the area that I refer to as the unexplained space of the ethnicity awarding gap, i.e., that part of the awarding gap that is not easily explained by more quantifiable factors such as socio-economic status or prior qualifications.

Using principles of grounded theory and the use of inductive processes, a number of themes emerged from the data which provided insight into their experiences as students, and which

provides a theory which provides some insight into that gap and means to further consider it. Those themes included the centrality of culture and family, identity, transition, relationship building by the students with peer groups and tutors, and issues of mental health. I argue that these facets of life, grounded in culture reveal cultural touchpoints, i.e., points of contact between the university and aspects of student lives which are grounded in family and culture have some relevance to how students engage with university. I further suggest that these cultural touchpoints may create some level of dissonance in that interaction. I refer to this dissonance as racial dissonance. The theory that emerged from the data suggests that for some South Asian students, the themes that were revealed by the data, and grounded in family and culture, are aspects of South Asian male student lives that the university is not sufficiently able to take account of, thereby creating a level of racial dissonance in students' journeys through higher education, and which may adversely impact the ethnicity awarding gap.

My findings are discussed in the context of the literature review relating to the ethnicity awarding gap and in particular through bringing together and presenting a combined theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, cultural capital and field, and the key tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT). My research highlights the importance of universities listening to and understanding, in a nuanced and intersectional manner, the experiences, lives and perspectives of its students. I posit that better engagement by the university with these processes will provide greater opportunities to transform its approaches to education and its environment in order to make progress in addressing the gap. Furthermore, my research goes on to make a number of practical recommendations that will be of value to the higher education sector.

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Glossary

Word/Phrase/Acronym	Meaning
APP	Acronym. Access and Participation Plan
BAME	Acronym. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic. Has been used to collectively describe people who report as being from one of these ethnic groups.
CRT	Acronym. Critical Race Theory.
Direct Discrimination	When one person treats another person less favourably due to demographic attributes such as race, gender, sexual orientation etc.
ECU	Acronym. Equality Challenge Unit
Ethnicity	Refers to the belonging to a group or subgroup who share attributes such as heritage, culture or geographic commonality
Ethnicity awarding gap	The difference between different ethnic groups in relation to the proportions of first class and 2:1 degree classifications awarded.
First generation students	Those students who are first in their family to enter higher education
'Good' honours degree	First class or 2:1 classification conferred by a university.
HEA	Acronym. Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Acronym. Higher Education Funding Council for England
Indirect discrimination	Legal term which highlights policies, practices or rules that apply equally to all, but have an adverse impact on some groups without justification.
Inequity	Lack of fairness which can manifest in unequal experience or outcomes for individuals or groups.
Intersectionality	Describes how the multiple identities/ characteristics of an individual are combined to create more nuanced forms of (dis)advantage. E.g. ethnicity and gender
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
Minoritised ethnic	Refers to groups who traditionally have been described as 'minorities' usually by the majority group but may in fact be in a group that is in the global majority and have therefore been minoritised rather than in the minority.
OfS	Acronym. Office for Students
South Asian	Heritage that will include origins from India, Pakistan, Sri-Lanka, Bangladesh

Chapter 1 - Introduction, background and context

'Ethnic minority students in the UK are being awarded poorer degrees for reasons that have nothing to do with their academic ability.' (Richardson, 2015, p. 282). This bold statement is taken from a large-scale review of degree outcomes in the UK and lays down an unequivocal question for the higher education sector, which is, if it is not down to academic ability, then why are ethnic minority students being awarded poorer degrees? My research seeks to provide some further insights into this phenomenon. Since at least 2005, minoritised ethnic students have been awarded proportionately fewer 2:1 and first-class degrees, than White students (McMaster 2021, p.3). For the 2003/04 cohort of students this gap was 17%, slowly reducing to 13% for the 2018/19 cohort (McMaster, 2021, p. 7). It is worthy of note that the overall percentage of 'good' degrees conferred has risen during this period for all students, but the size of the ethnicity awarding gap has shown little change (Advance HE, 2021). It has been argued that its persistence and the limited progress in narrowing or eliminating this gap places this phenomenon into the category of a 'wicked problem' (Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting, 2022, p. 2). A wicked problem has been described as one that is impossible or difficult to solve. My own perspective on these differential outcomes is more optimistic, given the fact that some progress has been made, albeit limited, and now with increased impetus across the sector, the potential for further understanding and narrowing this differential is raised. Rittel and Webber (1973) argue that the difficulty in resolving wicked problems stem from the challenges in fully understanding the issue and therefore the potential solutions that may naturally follow. My research provides the opportunity to contribute to that further understanding.

The issue of differential outcomes for students of different ethnicities, hereinafter referred to as the ethnicity awarding gap is an issue that has taxed academics and policymakers for the duration of its existence (Dustmann *et al.*, 2010). However, the quest to find a definitive answer to its causes continues to be somewhat elusive and points to either the complexity of the phenomenon, an incomplete understanding of the underlying causes and also perhaps an insufficient prioritisation of the issue by the sector. It is this phenomenon which provides the focus of my research, with a specific lens on seeking insights into the contributory factors of the ethnicity awarding gap between undergraduate, UK domicile, male students from South Asian backgrounds and their White counterparts. Specifically, I focussed on UK-domicile South Asian male students in order to provide a more granular sample that would provide a clearer focus than a broader group, such as a minoritised ethnic group, as there may be different issues that affect different ethnic and genders. Furthermore, as the school data indicated that there was a larger awarding gap for South Asian males, compared to South Asian females, indicating a greater issue within this group and also access to a larger sample size in the school, this felt an appropriate group to focus on. I kept the sample to UK-domicile students to avoid the potential for bringing in additional issues that may only affect non-UK domicile students and may impact the outcomes of the research. The sample also only included undergraduates as my research was concerned with the undergraduate awarding gap. Throughout the thesis I refer to this more granular sample simply as 'South Asian males' for ease of reading, unless otherwise stated. Keeping the sample narrower in focus in this way was intended to allow for more specific insights to the awarding gap to be gained and is discussed in further detail in the chapter three. This introductory chapter sets out the background and implications of the ethnicity awarding gap, an explanation of the key terms

used throughout my thesis and outline of my own position within the research. It also sets out the specific questions that I seek to explore during the course of my research.

The findings of research commissioned by the UK Parliament stated that 'educational inequalities emerge in very early childhood and the effects continue throughout a person's life, affecting entry into higher education, future employment and lifetime earnings.' (Hobbs and Mutebi, 2021, para 1). The research also pointed to ethnicity as well as other factors such as economic disadvantage being associated with educational gaps. Educational inequities manifest in different ways, from the opportunity to access quality education, the experiences and choices that are available through education, and the educational achievement of different groups of students. It is the latter that my research is concerned with, although access and experience form an important part of the narrative that is linked to the outcomes that higher education students leave with.

The phenomenon of educational achievement gaps is of importance both for the individual and wider society. Notwithstanding the critical question of fairness and inequity for the individual, it is stated that 'achievement' gaps are also contributing factors to the way in which social mobility impacts society (Goodman and Gregg, 2010). That is, whether and how people can change their life outcomes in relation to areas such as income levels, occupations and an individual's ability to contribute to society. It has also been argued that educational achievement gaps have the potential to lead to 'social disruption, segregation and dissonance.' (Dustmann *et al.*, 2010, p. 272).

The consequences of the ethnicity awarding gap in the UK are significant, and Advance HE, an organisation that works with higher education to improve staff and student experience and outcomes, point to the related graduate outcome gaps that also persist. These gaps demonstrate that different groups of students have different outcomes when progressing from university after graduation, with reference to further study or graduate level jobs. National graduate outcomes data from the 2018 cohort shows that a higher proportion of White graduates (74%) were in highly skilled employment or further study in comparison to Black graduates (69%) and Asian graduates (70%) (Office for students, 2022). It is common for employers to ask for a minimum 2:1 classification when recruiting new graduates (UCAS, 2023) and it can be argued that the ethnicity awarding gap feeds into structural inequities in the workplace. Employers asking for a 2:1 degree classification effectively filter out proportionately more candidates from minoritised ethnic backgrounds through the use of such criteria. Where educational gaps begin to emerge therefore, the impact is not only on the individual, but also impacts the overall economic and social performance of a nation.

When reviewing data relating to educational achievement and gaps, it can be easy to forget that underneath the data are individual students who have their own stories to tell, their own hopes and aspirations, their own context of what success means, and their own sense of who they are and where they fit into society. The failure of the sector to address the phenomenon points to an enduring unfairness for minoritised ethnic students and leaves a challenging question for the sector as to why there has been little progress.

My interest in the ethnicity awarding gap began when I joined the higher education community in 2006 as a lecturer and I became aware that minoritised ethnic students were

being awarded poorer degree outcomes than their White counterparts. I began to ask questions as to why this was, what could be done to reverse this, and what the institutional response to this was. Over the subsequent years there were peaks and troughs of activity that took place within the university in attempting to address this. There were focus groups, data analysis, meetings, seminars and action plans, which despite some minor wins, have not managed to make significant inroads into the ethnicity awarding gap. The data for the business school that is the subject of my research, indicates that the ethnicity awarding gap between all South Asian students and White students stood at 19% for the 2018-19 cohort.

During this period my curiosity in understanding the factors that were contributing to the ethnicity awarding gaps grew and led me to the point of starting my formal research journey. This was a further quest of enquiry that would enable me to generate further insight and knowledge in this area, and I began my research journey when I became a senior manager in the business school. I started my doctoral journey in 2018 and during this period the interest across the sector in the ethnicity awarding gap has significantly increased. Several factors have contributed to this. In 2019 the Office for Students (OfS) introduced a sector wide key performance indicator (KPI) specifically to eliminate the ethnicity awarding gap between Black and White students by 2025 (Office for Students, 2018). This naturally prompted a sector wide focus on the issue and although the KPI itself only focussed on the Black/White ethnicity awarding gap there has been a broader focus on ethnicity awarding gaps across the higher education sector in relation to other ethnic groups. The second catalyst that intensified the focus on racial inequities during my research was the murder of George Floyd in the US during the summer of 2020, which provoked a global movement which sought to highlight

the prevalence of structural racism and the unequal outcomes that Black people face across all areas of society.

This mass movement caused many organisations around the world to question themselves and their approaches to tackling racial injustice. CBS news reported that the murder of George Floyd provoked some of the largest Black Lives Matter protests across the globe in recent history (CBS, 2020). In 2020 over 300 UK academics and university staff signed an open letter published in the Times Higher Education journal calling on the Secretary of State for Education to act. They stated:

'We believe the groundswell of protests in the US and the UK represent a crucial moment for us – as people directly affected by these issues – to call on the sector for help in eliminating racism.'

(Bothwell, 2020)

They went on to outline key interventions that needed to be taken to tackle the issue of structural racism in higher education. These included the setting up of committees to tackle racism, led by those who had direct experience of racism, publishing data on grants and funding by ethnic groups and providing ring-fenced funding to the Equality and Human Rights Commission to oversee the implementation of its recommendations. The institution in which my research took place published a statement in the summer of 2020 in response to the murder of George Floyd which stated that:

'We will work pro-actively with our staff, student and wider community in our response to the Black Lives Matter movement, with specific action taken to narrow the Black student ethnicity awarding gap and work to decolonise the curriculum.'

(Anonymous, 2020)

Awarding gaps, legislation and policy frameworks

The ethnicity awarding gaps within higher education exist within a UK higher education policy and legislative framework, one purpose of which, is to address educational inequities. The Equality Act 2010 contains provisions which prohibit direct and indirect racial discrimination in relation to individuals who are employed or receive services. The 2010 Act replaced a number of pieces of equality legislation, including the Race Relations Act of 1976. Notably, it contains a public sector duty that requires public bodies (which include universities) to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination.
- advance equality of opportunity; and
- foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities.

(UK Government, 2022)

In practice this means that organisations should 'consider the need to:

- remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people due to their

protected characteristics.

- meet the needs of people with protected characteristics; and
- encourage people with protected characteristics to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is low.

(UK Government, 2011)

Although this initially sounds a pro-active approach, it is worth noting that legislation only requires organisations to ‘consider’ acting and some have argued that this is not strong enough to generate a sufficient ‘push’ factor for organisations to actually advance equality, as it does not require organisations to actually prioritise steps to benefit disadvantaged groups (Olatokun, 2021). It is arguable that this is one factor that may have contributed to the slow progress in eliminating the ethnicity awarding gap across the higher education sector.

There has been limited reference to higher education policy and its connection to the ethnicity awarding gap until relatively recently. In 2001, the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) funded the establishment of the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) to support the higher education sector in relation to equality and diversity for staff and students (James, 2013). The ECU engaged in sector-wide projects, briefings, and seminars for higher education institutions, but was not a policy-setting or objective-setting body for the sector, and eventually it merged with Advance HE in 2019. From 2012-2019 HEFCE (which has now been replaced by the OfS) required universities charging higher fees to introduce Access Agreements, which focussed on widening participation, i.e., how universities would widen access to higher education from under-represented groups (Office for Fair Access, 2012).

However, this initiative was solely focussed on access, rather than student outcomes once they had entered higher education.

Since 2019, the OfS has required universities to replace Access Agreements with Access and Participation Plans (APP). Specifically, the scope of the new APPs was widened in 2019 from universities addressing inequities in access, to also include how students progressed through and out of university, utilising key metrics including ethnicity awarding gaps and student completion rates. Universities are required to produce five-year APPs that highlight the priorities and actions that universities will take to address disparities that are revealed by the data. It could be argued therefore that the policy framework to address ethnicity awarding gaps has been piecemeal and ultimately disjointed, at least until 2019, and may be a factor in explaining the slow progress in narrowing the ethnicity awarding gap.

Research aims

Given my own personal interest in this area, my professional interest and the emerging policy environment in relation the ethnicity awarding gap, I felt that I would be able to make a further contribution to understanding this phenomenon through further research. The aim of my research was to critically explore student journeys in a business school in the northwest of England, to seek qualitative insights into contributory factors that may be of relevance to the ethnicity awarding gap between South Asian male students and White students.

More specifically the objectives of my research are to:

1. Examine the experiences, and perspectives of undergraduate, UK domicile South Asian male students studying in a business school on their journeys to and through university and consider to what extent they offer insights into the contributing factors to the ethnicity awarding gap.
2. Examine the experiences, and perspectives of tutors in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap between undergraduate, UK domicile South Asian male students and White students and consider whether these offer insights into the contributing factors to the ethnicity awarding gap.
3. Make recommendations to the business school and wider university that offer interventions that will assist in narrowing the ethnicity awarding gap.

It is important to clarify from the outset, my own position within the research (Unluer, 2012, p. 1). This adds to transparency and therefore the credibility of the research. During the period of this research, I worked in a senior manager capacity in the business school where the data was collated. I am a male of South Asian heritage who attended university and was awarded a 2:2 degree classification. I have had a life-long interest (and frustration) with inequities, and particularly racial inequities, and during my career have worked across a number of organisations working to address these. I also have my own lived experiences of racism and barriers linked to my ethnicity that provided the impetus to examine the issues further.

The process of engaging in this research project caused me to reflect on my own journey through higher education and self-examining the factors that led to me being awarded my degree classification. I questioned my family situation and what that meant (first in my family

to go to university), my class (working) and self-efficacy at the time (low). During the research process I had to consider how and whether to use these experiences and how they may have affected the choices that I made in the research journey. Ely (1991, p. 104) highlighted that 'it is essential for qualitative researchers to understand that such hunches, insights, directions do not arise out of nothing and that, often, they are the results generated from meaningful lived experience.' Given the close connection that I have to the research area I decided that my own lived experience of higher education would bring me closer to the research and that that would be helpful. As a result, I developed a much deeper connection to my research and some of those 'hunches' and 'insights' undoubtedly shaped how the research evolved. This is discussed in further detail in chapter three.

Reflecting back to the start of my doctoral journey I was hoping to perhaps find the 'magic bullet' that would jolt open and lay bare the causes of the ethnicity awarding gap. However, as my reading and research progressed, it became increasingly clear that the phenomenon is more complex and multi-faceted than at first, I had appreciated. To date there has been no discovery of the 'roadmap' to eliminating the gap despite a growing amount of literature. As mentioned earlier it may be described as a 'wicked problem' with no obvious solution, but I saw an opportunity to advance knowledge in this regard.

Key terms

Terminology can be contentious, particularly in the context of race and ethnicity and it is important to set out the reasons for my use of particular terminology in relation to the

ethnicity awarding gap from the outset. Key terms that I focus on here include South Asian, race/ethnicity, awarding gap, the acronym BAME and intersectionality.

In the UK, the term 'South Asian' is a commonly used term to cover a number of countries on the Indian sub-continent and includes countries that for example include Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In themselves these countries also contain a large range of diversity relating to their citizens in terms of language, culture, religion and lifestyle (Minority Rights Group, 2022). The UK has a long history of migration from this region over the centuries, with a consequent South Asian population in the UK, where many now have roots that extend over several generations (Peach, 2006). In recent years there have also been increasing numbers of students from the Indian Sub-Continent entering the UK to study within the higher education sector (UK Government, 2022). This trend is reflected in the business school where this study takes place. However, my study focusses on UK domicile students of South Asian heritage, rather than those who have entered the UK to study.

During the course of my research and the writing up of it, there has been much discussion in relation to terminology relating to race across the higher education sector, in the literature, and in national media (Advance HE, 2022). As perspectives have changed in relation to appropriate terminology relating to 'race' during this period, I have adapted and reflected those changing perspectives in the production of the final draft of this thesis.

Race is often used to describe people with different physical traits, for example skin colour (Blakemore, 2019). However, others would argue that race is a social construct and that any understanding of race should accept that it is an arbitrary system of human classification with

little to no grounding in meaningful biological or physical differences (Hylton, 2018, in Jankowski, 2020). Race has also been described as a politically troubling concept due to its significance in differentiating and in creating social division (Osborne and Sandford, 2002, pp. 1-2). Spencer (2006 p. 33) argues that the term is used as a marker of difference, talking to the histories, citizenship and lineage to help determine rights for cultural and national groups. The term may also be defined in a more pragmatic manner, one that connects to one's identity (Appiah, 2005). Despite these arguments, it has been highlighted that ideas of race permeate all aspects of our lives from economics to politics, through to how we interact with one another in society (Lopez, 2004, p. 964).

Ethnicity refers to the fact of belonging to a group of people that may share a common culture or geographical background. It is a concept that is also debated by academics. Fenton (2010) states that:

'a further step or two would be to say that ethnicity refers to the social construction of descent and culture, the social mobilisation of descent and culture and the meanings and implications of classification systems built around them.'

Fenton (2010, p. 3)

In this definition ethnicity is also seen as a social construct but with more nuanced connections between people and groups that they may 'belong' to based on geography, language, history, culture and ways of life.

Aspinall (2020) argues that terminology relating to race/ethnicity can be seen as a form of representation whereby meanings are generated by a range of social categorisers, such as culture, politics and government. Hall (1997, p. 1) talks about 'cultural representations' in relation to race and ethnicity and states that such representations are an 'essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture.' He also goes on to state that 'social and linguistic conventions do change over time.' (Hall, 1997, p. 24). There is a strong argument therefore that the way in which we describe ethnic groups is important as it shapes the way in which society views and attaches meaning and values to those groups, but also that those descriptions can be fluid and changeable with time.

Ethnic descriptors are used in the collation of data for example in the national census or within organisations, allowing for a level of comparison and benchmarking to be undertaken between different groups of people. It is these ethnicity data splits which provide a picture of experiences and outcomes for different ethnic groups, and without which the focus of this thesis would not be possible. Notwithstanding this, there have been contentions when using terms to collectively describe a range of different ethnic groups and in the UK such terminology has also evolved over time. Different terms have been used to collectively describe groups of people, particularly, with 'minority' ethnicities. These have included terms such as BME (Black and Minority Ethnic), Non-White, People of Colour and BAME (Black, Asian Minority Ethnic).

The critique that can be made with all these terms is that there can be a tendency to assume homogeneity and that they do not adequately capture the cultural nuances of each ethnicity (Aspinall, 2020). During the course of my research the terminology associated with race has

been hotly debated, particularly around the acronym, BAME, which has been in use across many government and public sector bodies since around 2009 (Malik *et al.*, 2021). At the start of my research, it was the acronym that I used in my collective description for different minoritised ethnic groups, as this was the term that was in common use at the time. However, due to my own growing discomfort with this acronym and strong negative feelings across many sectors, including reports from the BBC (BBC, 2020), the NHS Race and Health Observatory (NHSRHO, 2021) and the UK Government (UK government, 2022), I decided it would not be appropriate to continue its use in my thesis.

A government commissioned report on racial disparities recommended that the acronym BAME should no longer be used and that more granular terms should be used if the need arose to describe ethnic groupings (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021, p. 32). The question for me therefore was, if not the acronym BAME, then what? Parker (2020) argues that using the term 'minority', can have a negative impact on the way that people from minority groups see themselves. She goes on to state that:

'To bring about systemic and lasting change, we need to be able to relate to the hopes, needs, desires of those requiring that change to happen. The simultaneous erasure of identity and "othering" that takes place when someone is called BAME does nothing to build a sense of common purpose – instead, it may potentially impede our progress in working towards an inclusive and equitable society.'

Parker (2020, para 6)

Milner and Jumble (2021) argue that BAME should be replaced with the term 'racially minoritised'. They argue that the word minoritised provides a social constructionist approach, as people are actually 'minoritised' by other people or organisations, rather than existing as an actual minority and that this minoritisation is a social process that is shaped by power.

For the purposes of this thesis therefore, I have reflected on the term that I use when referring to the collective of minority ethnic groups and have adapted the Milner and Jumble definition and use the term minoritised ethnic groups as a collective descriptor, as in my view it more accurately describes the collective, with the emphasis on ethnicity, whilst highlighting the perspective that groups falling under this term are minoritised by society. However, I have endeavoured to refer to the actual ethnic group under consideration rather than umbrella terms, where appropriate. My research is more specifically focussed on South Asian male students, i.e., students with heritage from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, and to this end most of the references to ethnicity are nuanced in this regard. I also acknowledge that even within this, there are limitations, as within these countries there lie many religions, languages, cultures and histories, and so even within these specific groups there has to be an element of caution. Terminology therefore is important as the tendency to use general descriptors will miss the nuances of who people are and their actual histories and cultures and is a consideration in my research. We can also see that terminology relating to race and ethnicity is fluid and will inevitably continue develop and evolve.

Another key term that will be used throughout this thesis, is 'ethnicity awarding gap'. This term will specifically refer to what has previously been referred to as the attainment gap between South Asian male students and White students unless otherwise stated. The term

'attainment gap' placed the focus on how well the student had performed and locates the issue with the student i.e., a deficit model which takes the focus away from the responsibilities of the organisation (Advance HE, 2021; Singh, 2017). The focus on awards and awarding, rather than achievements, repositions and locates the responsibility for the gaps with universities rather than the student, as it is the university that provides the teaching and learning environment which leads to the conferment of the award (Jankowski, 2020, p. 3). Adapting the terminology in this sense contributes to moving away from a deficit approach, to understanding the gap, moving the lens towards looking at the way in which education is delivered by the institution.

The final key term that is used throughout my thesis is intersectionality. An intersectional approach recognises the unique experiences of people based on the overlap and connection of characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation etc. The term first came into prominence through the writings of Kimberle Crenshaw who developed a Black feminist critique, arguing that race and gender were not mutually exclusive areas of analysis or experience (Crenshaw, 1989). She goes on to argue that there was a tendency to frame anti-racist and feminist theory through these singular lenses and that analysis needs to take account of the impact of the overlap. She states:

'Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.'

(Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140)

Intersectional approaches acknowledge and take account of social inequities through the broader lens of the inter-relating characteristics of people (Anthias, 2013, p. 4). It allows an appreciation of the fact that we cannot understand a characteristic without considering the characteristic around it (Phoenix, 2018). Taking an intersectional approach, for example, connecting race and gender, therefore allows research to be more focussed, with the opportunity to provide more specific insights on a particular group. This approach further assists an institution's understanding of what needs to be adapted and move towards a more personalised approach to resolving challenges.

As stated, the terminology that we use is important and has the potential to shape the way in which society perceives and engages with the challenges that confront it. My intention in this section was to clarify key terms that are used throughout this thesis and by so doing to encourage the reader to further reflect on that terminology. Furthermore, new words in the context of my research topic, such as 'racial dissonance', 'cultural touchpoints' and 'unexplained spaces' will be introduced and clarified in the body of this thesis.

My research will add to the literature in this area, by providing a nuanced and intersectional focus on a specific ethnic group, intersecting with gender i.e., South Asian male students, which to my current knowledge and inquiries has not been previously explored through this specific qualitative approach. Additionally, I consider the ethnicity awarding group through a theoretical lens, in order to provide some further critical considerations in relation to the awarding gap and present a theoretical model that I argue provides some further insights into the awarding gap. My research therefore seeks to provide both nuanced and unique insights into the ethnicity awarding gap phenomenon and thus adds to the knowledge in this area.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly it is intended that my research will facilitate further conversations, discussion, reflections, and consequently action to tackle this stubborn phenomenon within the university and beyond.

Summary of thesis chapters

This thesis documents in detail the literature review taken, methodology and methods used to collate the data, my findings, and a critical discussion to extract meaning from the data through the development of a new model, and finally I make recommendations intended to move the action to narrow the ethnicity awarding gap forward. A summary is provided below.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

In chapter two I document and discuss the literature that I reviewed during the course of this research. This includes a review of the literature relating to racial inequities in the UK, concepts of race, racism and institutional racism that contextualises the phenomenon of the ethnicity awarding gap. This chapter explores both peer-reviewed and other sector reports concerning ethnicity awarding gaps in the UK to gain insights in relation to the knowledge that has already been created in this space, and that may assist in the findings and analysis of my own research. I also explore theoretical frameworks that have relevance for my research, including frameworks such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Pierre Bourdieu's notions of habitus, cultural capital and field, and explore their potential for understanding the data collated.

Chapter 3 - Methodology, methods and analysis

Chapter three outlines my approach to the grounded theory methodology that underpinned my research, the methods that I undertook to deliver it and my approach to analysis of the data. I discuss ontological considerations such as exploring the interpretivist foundations that underpinned my overall approach to the research and the subsequent use of constructivist principles of grounded theory that provided the framework for my data collection and analysis. This chapter also explores the ethical considerations in undertaking focus groups and interviews as well as those relating to my positionality within the research. Finally, I explain why and how centrality was given to the experiences, which led to the emergence of themes, with the consequent position that these may shed light on factors contributing to the ethnicity awarding gap.

Chapter 4 - Findings

In chapter four I outline the findings and emergent theory from the data collation and analysis. From the analysis I highlight factors that influence the relationship between student and university or were important aspects of the lives of the students that took part in my research. These centred on culture, family norms, identity, relationships with peers and tutors and mental health, which in turn revealed cultural touchpoints for consideration between students and university. One of the key concepts that emerged was the notion of racial dissonance, i.e., the idea that at various cultural touchpoints between the student and the university there was the potential for disharmony, with questions posed for the university as to whether the educational environment was able to fully account for the matters raised by

the students and tutors in the research. In the data that was collated, themes also emerged as to the possible way in which this dissonance could be minimised.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

In chapter five I consider the meaning that emerged from the data in the context of the ethnicity awarding gap and the preceding literature review. My focus in the discussion chapter is to consider the emergent themes and theory using theoretical frameworks that provide insight into the data and also allows for a broader consideration of the findings. In particular I use the emergent themes and draw on the works of Pierre Bourdieu and the tenets of CRT to highlight how culture, race, lived experiences, agency and structural racism interplay and provide insights into the factors that may contribute to the ethnicity awarding gap. The chapter concludes with a presentation of a model which combines the conceptual frameworks of Bourdieu and CRT and offers the opportunity to consider the factors contributing to the ethnicity awarding gap and to generate further dialogue along the challenging road to eliminate the ethnicity awarding gap.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions and recommendations

In chapter six I provide a reflection the findings and discussion that have taken place in the thesis. In summary my thesis presents the notion of racial dissonance as one way in which the ethnicity awarding gap can be understood within the unexplained parts of the awarding gap and further through the exploration of theoretical frameworks, present a model for understanding the awarding gap. In this chapter I also provide a list of recommendations that

are informed by the findings and discussion and are intended to assist the university and wider higher education sector to consider further action that will move it forward in its journey to eliminate the ethnicity awarding gap relating to South Asian males.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

The purpose of my literature review is to provide background context to inequities related to ethnicity in the UK and more specifically those relating to ethnicity awarding gaps within higher education. It has been argued that a good literature review will show the doctoral author:

'moving between research activity, reading, interpretation of theoretical perspectives, the importance of conceptual and interpretive findings, and the actual processes of writing.'

(Wisker 2015, p. 64)

I will consider and provide meaning to the insights provided by peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed literature that relate to the potential factors that contribute to the ethnicity awarding gap, and to review wider theoretical frameworks which may also provide further understanding of that gap. This review will provide context for the findings and discussion chapters of my thesis and is intended to assist the reader to situate and draw meaning from my research. It will also help the reader to understand how the literature review contributed to shaping the approach to my research project.

In recent years the ethnicity awarding gap phenomenon in higher education has stimulated much interest and by universities, government agencies and regulatory bodies exploring contributory factors and how they may be addressed (Ferreira and Millward, 2023). Naturally, though still limited, an associated, but growing body of literature that delves into this

phenomenon is beginning to emerge and provides for further perspectives and insights into this matter (McMaster, 2021). This recent growth in literature may have been driven by the increasing awareness across the sector of the ethnicity awarding gap, combined with attempts from within the sector to narrow the gap. Another driver may have been the introduction of more focussed regulatory objectives requiring the sector to address this issue (Office for Students, 2018). As mentioned, the global movement prompted by the murder of George Floyd in the USA in 2020 caused much introspection across the sector in relation to structural racism and its impact on students (Braisby, 2023) and has led to a plethora of sector-wide workshops and seminars to review racial inequities across higher education in the UK. This increased interest will in turn undoubtedly lead to a greater focus and body of literature relating to the ethnicity awarding gap over the coming years.

The strategy to undertake my literature review included a multi-faceted approach to ascertain and locate literature that was pertinent to my research question. This included using databases such as Scopus and searching higher education related organisations' webpages, such as Advance HE and the Office for Students. I used search terms such as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic attainment gap, ethnicity awarding gap, higher education, discrimination, inequality, and ethnicity. This revealed a range of relevant works that were within the scope of my research area. I then adopted a 'snowballing' approach, which involved reviewing the papers that I found in initial searches for further relevant papers or citations (Study Skills, 2023). I found this process helpful, with those initial papers then directing me to other related articles or books that were referenced within those works. As the works of literature that I engaged with expanded at a rapid rate, I decided to categorise the literature to help keep my

review focussed and also to allow me to disregard or discount literature that was not relevant.

I categorised the literature that I reviewed into the following areas:

- The stubborn phenomenon of racial Inequalities in the UK.
- Peer-reviewed research studies relating to the ethnicity awarding gap.
- Non-peer reviewed sector reports relating to the ethnicity awarding gap.
- Theoretical frameworks that considered inequities.

I found that there were generally two overarching approaches to discussing the ethnicity awarding gap, grounded in either quantitative or qualitative perspectives, but explored within different types of literature such as primary and secondary research, policy documents, and also 'grey' literature. Some authors focussed on reviewing the quantitative aspects of the ethnicity awarding gap data in an effort to pinpoint where the issues were located. This included, highlighting what the size of the gaps were and overlaying other quantitative data such as prior attainment or subject level breakdown in an attempt to pinpoint causality. In relation to the qualitative focussed literature, I located reviews that sought to investigate and explain contributory factors within spaces that could not be explained by quantitative data. The research within this 'unexplained' space focussed on areas such as student experience, student engagement and approaches to learning and teaching. My literature review explored both of these aspects as well as related theoretical frameworks to provide a range of insights into the phenomenon of the ethnicity awarding gap.

Limitations of the literature review

There were challenges during the course of the literature review. These included the limited amount of literature relating to the ethnicity awarding gap in general (Wong *et al.*, 2021; McMaster, 2021), and a tendency within the literature to homogenise students, i.e., many studies tended to treat minoritised ethnic students as a single group, rather than reviewing the nuances and differences between the individuals that are included within this umbrella term (Islam, 2021 and Mercer-Mapstone, 2021). Furthermore, there was only a small amount of literature that I found that focussed on specific ethnic groups, or adopted intersectional approaches, which is where my research was situated. This indicates that further research is required, as it is evident from the data, that ethnicity awarding gaps do vary between students from different ethnicities (Advance HE, 2020). This suggests either that there may be different factors at play for different ethnic groups or that the same factors play out in different ways for different groups of students based on ethnicity. This was a gap that my research was intended to fill.

In addition, I found only limited literature that took an intersectional approach to the ethnicity awarding gap, and which left a further gap in knowledge, in being able to provide more nuanced insights into this phenomenon and misses potential opportunities for universities to adequately respond to factors that may have been found. Across the UK I noted that there is also a gender related awarding gap, with female students on average outperforming male students in relation to achieving 'good degrees' (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017). It was this gap in the literature that influenced my approach to the research and to introduce

intersectionality in my sample group, focussing on South Asian male students (see methodology and methods chapter for a more detailed rationale).

It is also worthy of note that in my review of the literature there were no absolute examples that I was able to glean that answered the question of 'what works', i.e., interventions that have incontrovertibly been successful in eradicating or reducing the gap, again pointing to the complex nature of this phenomenon. A further limitation in my literature review was not being able to include an extensive examination of the grey literature. Given the growing interest in the ethnicity awarding gap, it is likely that there will be much commentary across the sector in the form of internal reports, conference proceedings and seminars which would be a source of some important insights. I have included some of this, but due to time constraints and the challenge of accessing all of it, my ability to undertake the fullest of reviews was limited.

Additionally, most of the literature that I found tended to be based on small-scale studies, either in a single institution or perhaps across a small number of institutions, and consequently the literature tended to be concentrated in journal articles or reports, rather than more substantive bodies of work such as books, of which there were proportionately fewer. Another issue that emerged was that most of the literature was quite mixed, in that it explored different aspects of potential causes of the ethnicity awarding gap. This suggested a phenomenon that was complex and lacked consensus on potential points of causation and how universities may successfully address the matter.

A final challenge was finding literature that examined the ethnicity awarding gap through the lens of institutional or structural racism. I found this perplexing given the continued persistence of the gap and the fact that institutional discrimination has been a concept that provides a narrative for other sectors where inequities linked to race are prevalent (see below). I also found that there was little in the literature that explicitly connected the ethnicity awarding gap to any theoretical concepts or underpinnings. Despite these limitations it was nevertheless important to understand the broader questions, debates, findings, and theoretical underpinnings presented by the current literature.

The stubborn phenomenon of racial inequalities in the UK

In undertaking my literature review I found it helpful to review the broader aspects of inequities linked to race and ethnicity given my focus on South Asian male students in higher education. Although, my literature review is not intended to extensively investigate racial inequities across the UK, I felt that an overview of discussions pertaining to this area would be helpful in contextualising the more specific focus (and findings) relating to ethnicity awarding gaps in higher education defined by ethnicity.

A number of national reviews of racial inequities in society have been undertaken in the UK over the years and provide some useful insights into where they are situated in the UK. In a report exploring racial equality in the UK, the Equality and Human Rights Commission stated that:

'fundamental issues, including persistent disparities in employment and over-representation of ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system, show that structural injustices, discrimination and racism continue to be part of our society today.'

(EHRC, 2016, p. 7)

This report was published after a long line of reports and reviews of race equity in the UK over the last few decades. These include the Scarman Report (1981) which reviewed the context of the Brixton riots in 1981. It identified 'complex political, social and economic factors' that created a 'disposition towards violent protest' but did not explicitly condemn police racism and denied that 'institutional racism' even existed. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry in 1999, reviewed the circumstances surrounding the circumstances and subsequent investigation into the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a young Black man. The final report concluded that institutional racism existed within the Metropolitan Police Force (Macpherson, 1999). The report was also notable for providing a new definition of institutional racism, which it defined as:

'the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.'

(Macpherson, 1999, 6.34)

This definition prompted reflections by many public institutions into their own practices and processes regarding race equality (Lume, 2001).

The UK government's race equality audit in 2017 found that the UK had become ethnically more diverse over the years. However, it also highlighted the racial disparities between ethnic groups that existed in all areas of life affected by public organisations (Cabinet Office, 2017, p. 10). It found, for example, that Asian and Black households were more likely to be poor and more likely to be in persistent poverty. The audit found, that one in ten people from a Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi background were unemployed compared to one in twenty-five White British people. When considering employment in the public sector, it was found that employees from minoritised ethnic backgrounds were concentrated in lower grades. The audit presented a picture in the UK where unequal outcomes relating to ethnicity were a consistent feature across society. However, a limiting feature of the report was that it only presented a quantitative picture of the state of racial inequity and did not examine lived experiences or the causes of the unequal outcomes.

I also found that disparities in housing for people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds were also a feature of the national picture of inequity. I found that two in ten households that housed people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds were living in unaffordable housing, compared to one in ten White households (Rogaly *et al.*, 2021), that Black people were three and a half times more likely to experience statutory homelessness as White British people, and Asian people were at higher risk of living in overcrowded conditions (Bramley *et al.*, 2022, p. 6).

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities published a report which provided a different narrative to previous reports. It found that most of the racial disparities that were reviewed did not have their origins in racism (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021, p. 11). It pointed to factors such as family life, socio-economic background and geography as having a greater impact on disparities than ethnicity. The Minister of State for Equalities at the time, stated that she ‘wholeheartedly’ agreed with the conclusions.’ (UK Government, 2022). McKinstry (2021) also supported the findings of the report, arguing that the report highlighted that barriers for people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds were being reduced and that ‘race was no obstacle to advancement in the UK.’

In a critique of Macpherson’s definition of institutional racism, the commission stated that it was ‘especially concerned with the way the term ‘institutional racism’ is being applied in the current discourse on racial disparities.’ (Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021, p. 34). It cited examples where the term is being used where disparities are evident within organisations, implying that the term is being overused, often with no evidence. With specific reference to education, it reported that Indian and Chinese heritage pupils displayed high achievement during their school careers and higher entry rates to university, whereas Black Caribbean and White students fell below the national average. The Commission also reviewed the ethnicity awarding gaps in higher education, which it noted that in 2019/20, sat at 13% (Advance HE, 2020), but did not offer any reasons or causes for those gaps. However, they stated that:

‘Measures to reduce attainment gaps need to be tackled early by engaging young people while their expectations are still forming, engaging teachers and parents,

providing them with career guidance, and removing the academic, financial and cultural barriers to meeting their ambitions, rather than assuming that ambitions themselves are low.'

(Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, 2021, p. 98)

When reviewing the concepts of institutional and structural racism in higher education, it has been found that they are located in the organisation's failure to consider the interplay between institutional culture, environment and practices that impact individuals and groups from minoritised ethnic backgrounds (Advance HE 2021). In a report on racial harassment in higher education it was highlighted that universities 'must acknowledge the institutional racism and systemic issues that pervade the entire education sector' (Universities UK, 2020). The commission's finding on the awarding gap appears to be at odds with the scepticism in the report regarding the prevalence of institutional racism and also other's interpretations of institutional racism. If there are 'academic, financial and cultural' barriers present for individuals that are resulting in inequity in outcomes for minoritised ethnic students, then this would align with other reviews that suggest that these are factors that may amount to institutional racism in higher education.

In a further critique of the commission's report, Tikly (2021, p. 4) points out that the report omits evidence that was submitted that supported institutional racism as a key factor in explaining inequities. She also highlighted that the report relied mainly on quantitative data, rather than qualitative data, and that it discounted the validity of 'lived experiences. Furthermore, Bhopal (2021) also posited that the failure to acknowledge racism in education in the report was a factor that will lead to minoritised ethnic children being blamed for their

failings in education. As mentioned in my introduction, the ethnicity awarding gap sits against a backdrop of wider inequities for minoritised ethnic communities and the Sewell report seems to acknowledge this but does not seem to accept institutional racism as a cause. These latter points present a critique of the report that highlights the point that the report does not acknowledge race and lived experiences as factors that contribute to racial disparities. This raises a question as to whether this perspective would discount an important area of enquiry, risking the implication that the cause of racial disparities lies with the communities themselves, rather than how they are served.

The picture of unequal outcomes based on race or ethnicity in the UK across a range of areas is therefore a complex one, with significant and depressingly predictable racial inequities across all walks of life. The ethnicity awarding gap between different ethnic groups in higher education is part of that overall picture and sits within a broader context of racial inequities that are prevalent and deeply embedded within society.

Academic literature into quantifiable aspects of the award gaps in the UK

In my review of the more specific literature that related to the potential contributors of the ethnicity awarding gap, several positions have emerged ranging from those where researchers largely reviewed quantifiable data that is available to the sector, to those which approached the phenomenon from a more qualitative, interpretivist perspective. A complex and multi-faceted picture emerges from the literature in its attempt to shed light on the contributing factors of the ethnicity awarding gap. The Higher Education Academy in their review of ethnicity awarding gaps investigated gender and ethnicity awarding gaps in the UK.

They found that the contributors to these gaps were not likely to be simply condensed into a single tangible reason (Higher Education Academy, 2008, p. 3).

Quantitative studies highlighted factors such as the socio-economic background of students, prior qualifications and whether the student is a 'first generation' student as indicators that impact on attainment (Broeke and Nicholls, 2007, Richardson, 2015, Fielding *et al.*, 2008). The argument is made that these factors are disproportionately prevalent amongst students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds and therefore may provide an explanation for at least a part of the ethnicity awarding gap (Richardson, 2015).

A major study was undertaken into the ethnicity awarding gap which reviewed the data of some 65000 students from the 2002/2003 cohort. The reviewers systematically controlled for a range of factors which may be expected to impact on the classification of awards conferred, including prior attainment, subject of study, age, gender, disability, deprivation, type of higher education institution attended, type of level 3 qualification, mode of study and term-time accommodation (Broeke and Nicholls, 2007). The reviewers found that even when all of these factors were controlled for, that ethnicity was still a significant factor as an explanation of performance. They found that when the data had been 'controlled for' there was still a gap in the probability of achieving a 'good' degree for all minoritised ethnic groups. For example, prior to 'controlling', there was a 17% gap for Pakistani heritage students when compared to White students. Once the data had been controlled for, this gap fell to 6%. The data demonstrated that the factors that were controlled for could partially explain the reasons for 11% of the gap, particularly prior attainment. Broeke and Nicholls (2007), also went on to highlight the fact that obtaining a 'good' degree does carry a premium in the jobs market and

therefore there are potentially serious implications in relation to minoritised ethnic students and career prospects. Although this was a significant study there were limitations that were acknowledged by the authors, such as other data that was not available and that could also have been controlled for. Naylor and Smith (2004) in their review of data relating to the award of degrees from 1997-1999 found that when demographic and institutional variables had been controlled for, a discrepancy of between 6 and 21%, depending on ethnicity still presented, which in itself is interesting, as the explanation for part of the awarding gap relating to socio-economic background and entry qualifications may be more fluid than at first appears.

In a quantitative study undertaken by the Higher Education Funding Council, that tracked the entry, progression and attainment of a cohort of first-degree UK students by ethnicity, it was also found that certain profiles, such as entry grades or socio-economic background of students could only be a partial explanation of the ethnicity awarding gap (HEFCE, 2010). In this review it was found that after control there was a difference of 9% 'between young White and Pakistani & Bangladeshi finalists that cannot be explained by their profile.' This review reinforces the findings from Broeke and Nicholls (2007), that ethnicity is a factor in the ethnicity awarding gap and that this is distinct from other factors which are often used to explain differences in awards between student groups. Attributes in students that present as indicators for differential awards should always be areas of concern for universities, but the fact that ethnicity is an additional factor points to a space within the ethnicity awarding gap which may therefore be described as unexplained and prompts questions for universities and their practice to address this.

In his review of the ethnicity awarding gap, Richardson (2008) focussed on 'what was known' and 'what was not known' in relation to, as he describes it, the 'under-attainment' of minoritised ethnic students. He reviewed national data relating to three different groups of students including undergraduates, and in that review sets up a more defined context of causality with a focus on the impact of prior attainment. His conclusions state that the odds of 'an Asian student obtaining a good degree were half those of a White student' (Richardson, 2008, p. 37). In a later reflection on the data, he points out, that if this is the case, then 'ethnic minority students in the UK are being awarded poorer degrees for reasons that have nothing to do with their academic ability' (Richardson, 2015, p. 282). As the data demonstrates, other predictors for classification of awards such as socio-economic background may explain part of the gap, but this study suggests that although some of the ethnicity awarding gap may be explainable, part of it has no obvious explanation other than the fact relating to race and ethnicity.

Leslie (2005), in his quantitative study, postulates that one contributory factor for the ethnicity awarding gap may be the proportionately greater numbers of students entering higher education. His analysis found that twice as many minoritised ethnic students under the age of twenty-four entered higher education compared to White students. He argued that these proportionately greater numbers led to minoritised ethnic students being less well qualified on average when they entered higher education. However, this has been contested. Richardson, (2008) found overall, that despite the percentages of minoritised ethnic students entering higher education increasing, the odds of achieving a good honours degree remained constant for these groups, thereby arguing that the ethnicity awarding gap could not be

explained by the increasing numbers of minoritised ethnic heritage students entering higher education.

There are a number of other studies that explore the extent to which quantitative data can provide an explanation for the ethnicity awarding gap. This is significant, as if the difference in awards between minoritised ethnic students and White students may perhaps be explained by factors such as socio-economic background or prior attainment, then race or ethnicity becomes less relevant. However, in a review of student perspectives on the awarding gap Wong *et al.* (2021) found that ‘an ‘unexplained gap’ still exists even when students’ prior attainment (e.g. A-level grades or UCAS entry points) is considered.’ Similarly, in a review of data and literature relating to the ethnicity awarding gap, McMaster (2021), concluded:

‘Awarding gaps cannot simply be attributed to differences between White and Black, Asian and minority ethnic student. When comparing students with similar individual characteristics, who attended similar HEIs and with similar prior attainment, awarding gaps in HE remain.’

McMaster (2021, p. 15)

This is also acknowledged by the Office for Students who have framed the sector wide measure, in terms of the ‘unexplained gap’ and the ‘absolute gap’. They state that the sector wide measure is to:

'eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students by 2024–25, and to eliminate the absolute gap (the gap caused by both structural and unexplained factors) by 2030-31.'

Office for Students (2018)

Connor *et al.* (2004) reviewed data from HEFCE that investigated degree outcome data by ethnicity which was controlled by factors including age, subject mix and entry qualifications. It was found that when these factors had been controlled for, minoritised ethnic students were still found to achieve proportionately fewer good degrees when compared to White students. Connor *et al.* (2004), stated that their analysis of the data demonstrated that 'indirect' factors were also contributing to the ethnicity awarding gap. They provided several possible reasons for this. Firstly, they argued that other factors that had not been controlled for, could be at play. Secondly, that there may be an impact from the type of institution that minoritised ethnic students tended to be concentrated in, and thirdly, that there may be issues related to the particular relationships that minoritised ethnic students developed with their institution of study, with systematic direct or indirect discrimination also being cited as a possible contributor. The issues of relationships and of direct and/or indirect discrimination being a possible factor in the ethnicity awarding gap was of interest, as arguably these operate in the unexplained part of the ethnicity awarding gap and may provide some further insights into that gap.

It was also notable that in these quantitative reviews there was little or no discussion that provided further insight into potentially explainable factors such as entry qualifications or socio-economic background. My literature review found that although there is research that

explores the impact of factors on awards such as prior qualifications (Gill, 2017), first in family (Henderson *et al.*, 2020) and socio-economic background (Crawford *et al.*, 2014), there was very little that I was able to find that considered this in the context of the ethnicity awarding gap. There has been some recent interest in exploring this intersection, with one study analysing the awards conferred on students who had attended independent school (a proxy for socio-economic background) by ethnicity (Boero *et al.*, 2022). Boero *et al.* (2022) found that minoritised ethnic students who attended independent schools were awarded a greater proportion of first-class degrees as compared to both their White counterparts who attended independent schools as well as those who attended state schools. The authors postulated that one possible factor for this may have been the enhanced sense of belonging and confidence that minoritised ethnic students developed at independent school, thus becoming better prepared for university. There may be further areas of exploration therefore that may be usefully undertaken in relation to the intersection between ethnicity and known factors that impact on the level of award conferred. These additional layers further point to the complexities in fully understanding the underlying factors impacting the ethnicity awarding gap and particularly the challenge in researching in the space which Richardson (2015) describes as 'what was not known' or which I describe as the unexplained.

Academic literature in the unexplained space of the ethnicity awarding gap

The above section points to a space within the ethnicity awarding gap phenomenon that is not fully explained and requires further research and understanding. This section considers studies that have operated in the unexplained space, exploring factors such as relationships, power, racism, learning and teaching and other institutional forces that may provide insights

into the gap. Framing the ethnicity awarding gap therefore in terms of the explained and the unexplained is recognised as a way of describing the ethnicity gap, as it allows for a more precise investigation (Richardson, 2015; Office for Students, 2018; Wong *et al.*, 2021) and also brings the institution within scope as an area for consideration and into which my research aims to provide some insights.

Despite the limited scope of the literature, there were some perspectives that have been offered that explore the 'unexplained' space in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap. In his research synthesis of participation of minoritised ethnic students in higher education, Singh (2011) found that outcomes for minoritised ethnic students were disproportionately poorer across the whole higher education sector when compared to students from a White background. He reviewed the literature in relation to potential contributors to the ethnicity awarding gap and concluded that the 'relative impact of different causal factors – such as relative deprivation, social capital, institutional and direct discrimination and family and cultural background – remain open to debate' (Singh, 2011, p. 46). His synthesis highlighted the complexity in ascertaining the contributory factors of the ethnicity awarding gap and that the literature at that time was broad and somewhat open-ended in its conclusions.

Woolf *et al.* (2013) in a study on the performance of medical students found that psychological and demographic factors could not explain the difference in outcomes between White and minoritised ethnic students and suggest that 'it is arguably more important that researchers strive to understand the micro-structure, as well as the macro-structure of medical education' (Woolf *et al.*, 2013, p. 155). Macro-structures would include for example, the way in which an institution was set up and organised, including teaching practice, staffing

and decision-making structures, compared to micro-structures which might include the values, beliefs, and ways in which students and staff within the institution interacted with each other on a daily basis. Similarly, Mountford-Zimdars *et al.* (2015) highlighted that there were likely factors at the macro (educational structure), meso (individual institution) and micro (everyday student interactions) levels.

Dhanda (2010) in a qualitative study that explored the learning experiences of minoritised students at a university in the Midlands found that a range of issues that are not picked up in student metrics may be of relevance when considering the ethnicity awarding gap. Her review suggested that these may include the lack of role models, relationships with tutors and expectations from university tutors relating to minoritised ethnic students. Cousins and Cureton (2012) in their mixed methods review of the causes of the ethnicity awarding gap also found that the demographic profile of students could not fully explain it. However, their research utilised qualitative as well as quantitative research methods to supplement the findings of the quantitative data. Their findings highlighted four spaces where potential factors for the unexplained part of the ethnicity awarding gap may lie. These included 'relationships, socio-psychological impact, pedagogical impacts and social and cultural capital' (Cousins and Cureton, 2012, p. 7). However, these observations also present opportunities to explore, interpret and extract meanings in the interpretivist tradition and thereby add to the overall knowledge in this area.

The literature also highlights other potential causes for the unexplained part of the ethnicity awarding gap. These include the decision-making processes for students embarking on their higher education journeys, culture within institutions and the challenges associated with

university life (Miller, 2016, pp. 8-10). Another potential factor that was identified was whether parents of students had themselves been to university (Thomas and Quinn, 2007). The premise here is that where students had parents who had been to university, there would be a greater amount of support, 'insider' knowledge and a network which a student could draw upon as they journeyed through higher education. This notion strongly chimes with Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and its impact on power and exclusion. He viewed cultural capital as a 'power resource' (Swartz, 1997, p. 43) with the implication that those who had it would ostensibly do better in life, linking to the notion of social reproduction, i.e., the way in which social systems, often based on demographic profiles, reproduce themselves (Federici, 2019, p. 55).

The importance of social networks for students was highlighted in another review of the ethnicity awarding gap in medical and biomedical students which found that:

'both staff and students noted the importance of academic support networks, and the way course information is transferred through the social networks of students, which are often ethnically defined.'

(Claridge *et al.*, 2018, p. 9)

This again could connect to the idea of cultural capital. In the same review it was found that family responsibilities may disproportionately impact minoritised ethnic students, with these responsibilities impacting on both social and academic lives (Claridge *et al.*, 2018, p. 5). In a review of sense of belonging and socio-economic status it was found that:

'...participants whose demographic characteristics and social class are categorised as non-traditional or disadvantaged groups are less likely to participate in various social activities and more likely to be dissatisfied with their social life.'

(Young and Davis, 2020, p. 10)

However, it may be argued that factors such as family setup, ability to network and other areas of cultural capital appear to locate the issue with the student rather than the institution. Salkind (2008) in Wong *et al.* (2021, p. 1149) argues that these factors point to a 'culture deficit model' where minority groups do not achieve, as they lack important characteristics. This may be construed as being aligned to the student deficit model, i.e., where it is the traits of the student that may be 'blamed' for the unequal outcomes that are attributed to them rather than holding organisations to account (Davis and Museus, 2019, p. 119). The perspective of Salkind (2008) is challenged by Wong *et al.* (2021) who state that:

'cultural superiority by ethnicity connotes a deserved right to elevated social statuses and accomplishments, which signals and justifies paternalistic and condescending encounters under the guise of cultural and social hegemony.'

(Wong *et al.* 2021, p. 1149)

In essence Wong is raising a question about whose cultural capital is valued and the implications if a particular form of cultural capital is not acknowledged by the dominant group.

Frings *et al.* (2019) explored the impact of social ethnic identity and (in)compatibility on awards. In this study, identity focussed on the feelings that people had of belonging to a social group with incompatibility meaning the challenges that arise between people with different identities as a result of that difference. They found that minoritised ethnic students reported higher levels of ethnic identity. However, they also interestingly found that White students were disproportionately negatively impacted when incompatibility levels were found to be higher (Claridge *et al.*, 2018, p. 183). This may have implications for the way transition programmes are implemented within higher education, with careful consideration needed of how programmes develop peer group relations.

On the other hand, it may also be framed as, these are the actual traits of the students, and it is therefore the responsibility of the institution to adapt its provision, to better meet the needs of the students that arrive at its doorsteps (Smit, 2012; Dampier *et al.*, 2019) This latter view takes the debate away from the students and locates the issue squarely with the institution, i.e., that the institution needs to change so that it can better connect with the students, as they present. In a review of the challenges to higher education in South Africa, Smit (2012) highlights that it is for the institution to address the issues that emanate from a diverse student population and that often they are not prepared (Smit, 2012, pp 372-373). This could potentially link back to the underpinning tenets of critical race theory discussed below, proponents of which, would argue that responsibility for the ethnicity awarding gap is located within institutional structures and practices, rather than the student.

Mahmud and Gagnon (2020) in their investigation into the impact of mindset on racial disparities in awards, found that there is significant scientific evidence that unconscious bias

may influence teacher evaluations and surmise that unconscious bias in teacher evaluations may play a part in the explanation of the disparities in award classifications based on ethnicity. Tate and Page (2018) go further and postulate that unconscious biases are being used as the 'acceptable face of racism' to explain the ethnicity awarding gap within the higher education sector and point to the failure 'to address whiteness that avoids an acknowledgement of structural and systemic racism' (Tate and Page 2018, p. 142). This more recent literature puts forward the more contentious areas of conscious and unconscious biases playing a role in contributing to the ethnicity awarding gap, rather than locating the issue with student attributes.

Although these pieces of research provided some useful insights into factors that may impact on the ethnicity awarding gap in the unexplained space, my reflections on the literature were that some of the findings were quite broad in nature, making them potentially less clear. For example, Woolf *et al.* (2013) and Mountford-Zimdars *et al.* (2015) do not define precisely which aspects of macro or micro-cultures, may be of relevance to the ethnicity awarding gap. The sample group in Dhanda (2010) was wide, involving a range of ethnicities, genders and also included international students, making it difficult to ascertain whether there were differential impacts for the different groups in the sample. Also, the four potential areas of relevance found by Cousins and Cureton (2012) were broad in nature with the authors acknowledging that their findings require further research.

Higher education sector reports into the ethnicity awarding gap

In addition to reviewing traditional academic literature in this space, I also reviewed reports that had been published by organisations interested in higher education and that had undertaken work in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap. In 2019, the regulatory body for universities, the OfS set objectives for the sector to address ethnicity related awarding gaps (Office for Students, 2018). However, a review of information contained on its webpages does not seem to present any perspectives on the reasons or causes of this gap. Despite this, the regulatory body recommended nine points that institutions should undertake to narrow the gap (Office for Students, 2021). These include actions such as providing strong leadership and developing racially diverse environments. Although no specific causes are mentioned, the recommended actions suggest that they believe the issues relating to the gap are located with the organisation rather than the student. The role of the OfS has recently been scrutinised by the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee who stated that ‘the OfS should be more transparent about its approach, making clear why it makes particular requests and decisions’ (House of Lords, 2023). This may be supportive advice for the OfS in not just stating what changes universities needed to make, but also why.

Following a sector-wide call for evidence in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap in 2019 by Universities UK, a number of themes, that may explain the ethnicity awarding gap, were identified in the subsequent report. These included institutional culture, the need for institutional processes that better connected students to their university programmes and lack of diversity in the higher education staff profile (Universities UK, 2019). In relation to the last point, it was noted the proportions of minoritised ethnic staff employed across higher

education, were significantly lower than the actual minoritised ethnic student body and suggested that having lower proportions of minoritised ethnic staff limited an institution's ability to address the ethnicity awarding gap. The report also acknowledged the challenge presented to minoritised ethnic staff who were employed in the sector and stated that:

'It can mean that [minoritised ethnic] staff become overburdened with the responsibility of acting as role models and mentors, and this can also create a perception that the responsibility for addressing the attainment gap and related issues does not fall to other members of staff.'

(Universities UK, 2019, p. 17)

The report also highlighted the lack of inclusivity in the curriculum and highlighted that 42% of minoritised students reported that they could not see themselves in the curriculum, which may then impact on the way in which those students engage with their programmes. Advance HE (2020) similarly identified issues around organisational change and inclusive curriculum, but in addition identified the ways that student support is provided to students as being a potential contributor to the ethnicity awarding gap. Dale-Rivas (2019) in a report on the ethnicity awarding gap, point to institutional racism in higher education, the lack of discussion on matters relating to race, and a curriculum that is, in the main, presented from a White perspective as being contributors. In his article for the Times Higher Education journal, Akinbosede (2019) argues that there is an:

'observable reality that UK higher education is set up to see a White population as the norm and everyone else as an added extra, who should either fit in or face restrictions on their attainment or progression.'

Akinbosedede (2019)

Berry and Loke (2011, p. 15) in a report published by the Higher Education Authority and the Equality Challenge Unit identified universities' financial constraints as a reason that the ethnicity awarding gap was not being addressed in institutions. They argued that tackling the ethnicity awarding gap required investment in resources, for example in specialist staff, research or piloting initiatives. They argue that often universities would prioritise other initiatives. Miller (2016) in a literature review relating to the ethnicity awarding gap identified that the 'pressure of university life' disproportionately impacted students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, which in turn may impact on the classification of awards. This included issues such as this group of students being more likely to work alongside their studies and having an increased sense of isolation and alienation. From the reports that were accessible, the ethnicity awarding gap phenomenon appears to be increasingly located with organisations, rather than students, and poses a challenge to universities to adapt and change, perhaps affirming the view of Akinbosedede (2019) that the cause of the ethnicity awarding gap must not be located with minoritised ethnic students and that universities must look at themselves to locate where changes need to be made.

Although there was little literature that I was able to locate with a specific focus on particular ethnicities and the ethnicity awarding gap, I was able to find some studies that were more nuanced in this regard. Buckley-Irvine (2017) undertook a detailed review of those institutions

that had achieved a silver or gold rating in the Teaching Excellence Framework (Office for Students, 2023). They focussed on the awards conferred on Black students in 'silver' and 'gold' rated institutions as these awards were seen as 'badges' of teaching excellence and the aim of their research was to test whether the badge was justified in terms of the outcomes that students achieved. They found that there were significant ethnicity awarding gaps in 'silver' and 'gold' rated institutions between Black and White students achieving 'good' honours degrees and therefore questioned whether gold and silver awards for teaching excellence were appropriate. Islam (2021) reviewed the experiences of Muslim students and found that their experiences were linked to their identity as Muslims, e.g., the provision of halal food on campus or prayer rooms, or how religious events such as Ramadan were accommodated by the university. The report concluded that universities needed to enhance the way in which they embraced students with different ethnicities into the mainstream.

It may be concluded from the literature that there is an aspect to the ethnicity awarding gap that is not fully understood and that there are a number of suggestions and ideas presented as to the factors that may be operating in that space. There appear to be some differences as to where the issue is located, with some of the literature indicating that the issue lies with the students, for example, lack of cultural capital, family ties and perhaps different learning styles. However, there is a growing and perhaps more convincing body of literature that locates the issue with the university, and this may include factors such as curriculum, organisational culture and staff diversity.

Theoretical considerations and the ethnicity awarding gap

I next considered pertinent theoretical frameworks that may provide a deeper understanding of what may underpin the ethnicity awarding gap. In considering the scope of literature to be explored I was therefore drawn not only to 'real world' research into this phenomenon but also towards theoretical frameworks that may provide some illumination of the issues relating to the ethnicity awarding gap. There is a strong thread of literature that posits that education is not neutral (Freire, 1972; Lopez, G. 2003; Ade-Ojo, 2021) and privileges those who are able to 'fit in' with the way that educational systems are set up and the approaches to educating that are taken (Tate and Page, 2018). Those who do not 'fit in' or only partially fit in therefore, may not enjoy the same or similar outcomes and experiences as others (Freire, 1970; Bourdieu, 1996; Yosso, 2005; Gillborn, 2015; Ledesma and Calderon, 2015; Ladson-Billing, 2023). One way in which this may become apparent in higher education therefore is through inequitable outcomes for different groups of students when measuring areas such as student experience, degree classifications that are awarded and graduate employment. Considering the question of whether education is neutral or not through a theoretical framework therefore could provide useful lines of enquiry for the ethnicity awarding gap. There was potential to provide a bridge between themes that may emerge from my data, data from wider pieces of research in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap, and theoretical constructs. Making these connections would add further context to my findings and also provide for considerations that may offer the opportunity to move the discussion beyond the specifics of a small-scale study.

I chose to review literature relating to CRT, and also the works of Pierre Bourdieu, as both had perspectives on inequity, power and education which may have relevance in understanding unequal outcomes for students. Exploring these works would enable me to underpin the findings from my research with a theoretical framework and offer opportunities for a deeper contextualisation of the themes that were found.

Critical Race Theory

CRT has its origins in the USA, and potentially offers some insights into the contributory factors of the ethnicity awarding gap. Although there is no explicit talk of the unexplained aspect of the ethnicity awarding gap, the tenets that are posited provide potential areas of exploration within the space which is the unexplained part of the ethnicity awarding gap. CRT evolved in the 1970's in response to the lack of progress in racial equity being made through the civil rights movements in the United States (Edward, 1998). It was argued by some commentators that the movement was losing ground, and that new thinking was needed to tackle some of the more subtle forms of racism. The 'new thinking', which became known as CRT, questions the basis of the liberal order, drawing on discourse from critical legal studies and radical feminism. It explores the relationship between power, race and racism and the interface with policy, economics, and history (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

CRT can be characterised by a number of observations, which include the acceptance of racism as part of the fabric of society, the phenomenon of White people allowing Black people to make progress, whilst at the same time promoting their own interests (interest convergence), understanding the impact of European colonialist legacies, and the centrality

of the experiences of marginalised peoples (Edward, 2023). Importance is given to the voices of people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, and through this enabling that voice to better respond back to the prevalent racism (Rollock and Gillborn, 2011).

Proponents of CRT seek to demonstrate that racial inequities are a result of the operation and maintenance of structures that appear to be the norm but result in unequal outcomes. This is sometimes referred to as the 'colour-blind' approach (Raengo, 2016, p. 1). Raengo goes on to state that:

'overall, CRT espouses the following theses. Racism is ordinary; it is not made of extraordinarily vicious acts, but rather of assumptions that underlie quotidian practices and interactions.'

(Raengo, 2016, p. 5)

Racism is viewed as being at the centre of societal norms, with it being entrenched and embedded. In the context of a university, CRT would start with the assumption that racism is embedded in the university and results in unequal outcomes for minoritised ethnic students such as the ethnicity awarding gap (Hiraldo, 2010). Derrick Bell, who was at the forefront of the CRT movement, coined the phrase 'racial realism' arguing that Black people will not gain full equality in the US, due to the ingrained nature of racism in the fabric of society. He states:

'Black people will never gain full equality in this country, even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt

in ways that maintain white dominance...We must acknowledge and move on to adopt policies based on Racial Realism. This mind-set or philosophy requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status. That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfilment and even triumph.'

(Bell, 1992, p. 373)

Although this may be construed as a rather pessimistic position, it is a position that places the persistence of racism as an almost immovable presence in society with the underpinning notion that racism pervades society, and will continue to do so (Tate, 1997). A related and central tenet of CRT is the notion of White privilege or supremacy, which posits that being White confers an inherent advantage due to the socio-political, economic, and prevailing cultures in society (Solorzano, 1997; McIntosh and Caitlin, 1990). Furthermore, McIntosh and Caitlin (1990) argue that racism is taught as an aspect of life that places some people at a disadvantage, but the reverse is often not taught, i.e. that White privilege confers an advantage and that therefore the full picture of racism is not considered. Ansley (1997, p. 592) states that this phrase does not only refer to ideas perpetuated by far-right fascist groups, but also to the ways in which the levers of economic, political and cultural power are exercised by White people. Taylor *et al.* (2023) further argues that due to the all-pervading nature of racism it is difficult for it to be seen or recognised by those who might benefit (Taylor *et al.*, 2023). Bhopal (2023) in a review which considers the connection between CRT and White privilege further argues that Whiteness:

'is an identity that is seemingly invisible to White groups because it is constructed as a normative baseline, but one that is visible to people of colour because they are positioned outside its boundaries'

(Bhopal, 2023, p. 113)

Bhopal (2020) also considered the impact of inequalities within education from an intersectional perspective and suggests that White privilege also operates in the context of a 'hierarchy of oppression', arguing that gender inequality, perpetuated by White privilege, is often prioritised over racial inequality. She highlights that:

'The statistical evidence already discussed suggests that White women have benefitted more from inclusive policymaking compared to Black men and Black women.'

(Bhopal, 2020, p. 811)

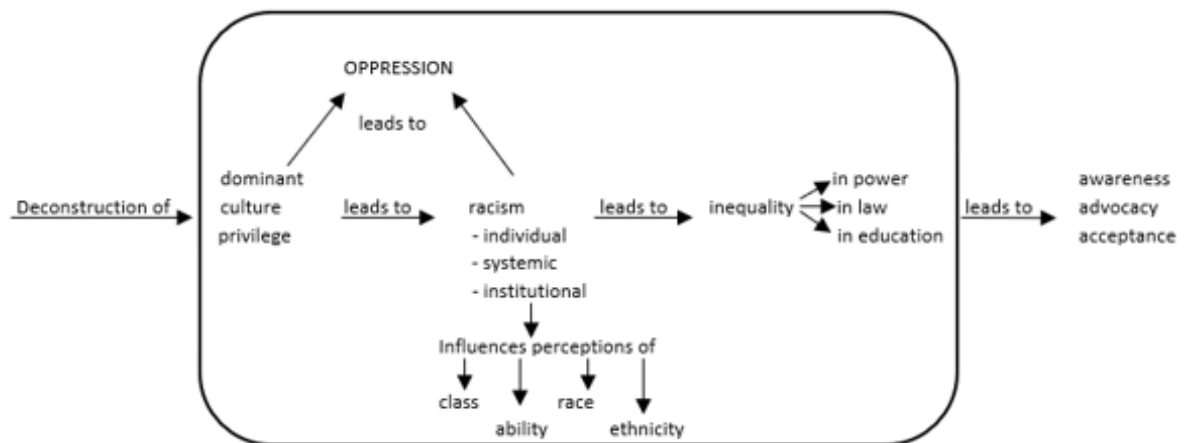
These authors argue that racism and White privilege, even on an intersectional basis, are ever-present and align with the position of Bell (1992), in that the acknowledgement allows one to consider how to move forward, rather than dwell on the question of whether racism exists or not. Capper (2015) argues that in the area of educational practice, leaders need to develop anti-racist practice and identities, which move away from deficit models. They need to engage in conversations in relation to race, evaluate progress that is being made, and finally to undertake regular equity audits in order to maintain momentum.

However, notions of White privilege have been critiqued. Goel (2021) argues that the term can reinforce stereotypes of minoritised ethnic communities being disadvantaged and also

psychologically impact individuals from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. Davids (2021) argues that the term does not translate well to a world where the histories and contexts of racism vary from country to country. Carr (2017) acknowledges that the idea of White privilege It has also been stated that the phrase has the potential to further divide communities (Carr 2017; Taylor *et al.*, 2023). This critique of White privilege does raise interesting points but there is a question as to whether they address the central notion of White privilege, which is the conferment of advantage, through skin colour. This point is addressed to some extent by Islam (2019) who argues that the phrase is often misunderstood, that all people can experience disadvantage, but that being a person of colour is more likely to bring judgment and behaviours from others that will contribute to disadvantage.

A model of CRT is provided by Movius (2020) that encapsulates some of the key tenets of CRT, starting with the premise of a dominant culture. In this model (fig. 4), she presents a diagram showing how CRT can be used to deconstruct notions such as dominant cultures and/or White privilege. Movius (2020) offers the perspective that these concepts lead to racism and oppression, which in turn lead to inequality. She argues that by understanding and accepting these concepts, this will lead to awareness and advocacy. I found the model useful in that it provided a framework through which to further consider my findings and related discussion.

Figure 1. Model of CRT.



Movius, (2020)

CRT has been used to critique educational approaches, highlighting inequities in the context of race (Tate, 1995; Gillborn, 2005; Ledesma and Calderon, 2015; Dixson and Rousseau, 2018; Ladson-Billing, 2023; Taylor *et al.*, 2023;). These discussions have focussed on areas such as educational policy, curriculum, pedagogy and assessments. The premise of CRT is that education is delivered in a manner that is culturally specific, with White superiority at its core, whilst purporting to be race-neutral or colour-blind (Ladson-Billings, 2023). Additionally, Ledesma and Calderon (2015) discuss how, in the context of the American higher education sector, students of colour may be seen as outsiders, or ‘at risk’ victims and therefore reify conversations that point to what a ‘successful’ student looks like, as discussed above. Iverson (2007, p. 597) points out that ‘looking through a CRT lens enables a critique of this discursive framing of diversity as disadvantaged and deficient.’

In an exploration of how CRT applies to educational policy, Gillborn (2005) argues that educational policy reinforces the current status quo in relation to unequal outcomes for Black students. He states that the:

'English education system appears to be a clear case where the routine assumptions that structure the system encode a deep privileging of White students and the legitimisation, defence and extension of Black inequity.'

(Gillborn, 2005, p. 496)

In a separate review, Gillborn analysed twenty five years of the Black/White achievement gap in schools, and concluded that despite numerous educational policy initiatives, e.g., introduction of new public sector equality duties, introduction of new GCSE benchmarks and the Ethnic Minority Achievement Grant:

'the Black/White achievement gap remains a persistent and important scar on the English educational system, one that is partly maintained by the actions of policymakers who periodically move the goalposts without regard for the racist impact of their decisions.'

(Gillborn, 2017, p. 21)

He argues that education policy interventions that seek to 'raise the bar' or to make education inclusive for all, can actually serve to widen achievement inequities and 'maintain disadvantage' as they do not sufficiently acknowledge or take account of the impact on Black students (Gillborn, 2017, p.19). Ladson-Billings (1998, p. 19) makes a similar point in relation

to teaching practice in the USA, where she argues that educational teaching policy is 'conceived as a generic set of teaching skills that should work for all students' which in turn leads to a deficit model of teaching, reifying ideas that students of colour are 'lacking'. These notions align with CRTs critique of liberalism, i.e. that policies of practice that take an equal opportunity or 'colourblind' approach, allows people to ignore the perpetuation of social inequity (DeCuir and Dixson, 2004).

Reviewing UK higher education policy context in relation to equity, Thomas (2020) takes a more positive approach to the impact of education policy in the England, and concludes:

'The policy context in England has facilitated and led the sector, at least to some extent, towards a more inclusive approach to widening participation which values the success of all students and recognises the importance of institutional change.'

(Thomas, 2020, p.8)

However, she goes on to state that if the aspiration of equity in outcomes for all is to be achieved, then institutions will need to fundamentally change (Thomas 2020, p. 8). With the ethnicity awarding gap persisting despite legal duties, regulatory objectives and the requirements of Access and Participation plans, there remains a question as to whether the current education policy framework is having impact. CRT offers a lens through which to consider this lack of progress.

Furthermore, it has been argued that education is set up to privilege certain 'types' of students It has been suggested that these students are White, middle-upper class, non-

disabled and tend to have a more well-defined learner identity (Koutsouris *et al.*, 2021, p. 143). If it is the case that the university is set up to better serve this group, then there may be an assumption that those not from this group may experience inequity as they lack the cultural capital to fully succeed in this environment. However, in a counter view, Yosso (2005) argues that cultural wealth is measured against the 'White middle-class standard'. She states that the concept of cultural capital:

'refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society.'

(Yosso, 2005, p. 76)

Yosso (2005) provides a challenge to the idea that marginalised groups lack cultural capital, and instead shifts the lens and argues that individuals within such groups possess a wealth of skills, knowledge and attributes which are not recognised in traditional systems. She goes on to advocate for the consideration of the development of what she terms 'Community Cultural Wealth', which purports to move the focus from 'White middle-class' cultures as the standard against which all is measured, to the consideration of how cultures of people of colour should become more central, thereby redefining the whole notion of what is valued as cultural capital. This would have implications for educational policy in terms of how universities deployed their teaching and learning and more importantly how that was measured or assessed. CRT offers lens through which to consider the question of educational policy as well as norms and values within the education system.

CRT limitations

CRT is not without its critics and some commentators have questioned its relevance as an approach. Cabrera (2018) argues that CRT is lacking in racial theory and provides little insight into the structure of racism being more focussed on its outcomes. Consequently, there is insufficient structuring of concepts such as White supremacy, which he argues would help in differentiating between acts of racism as opposed to negative experiences. He advocates for more focus on 'Whiteness' to be added to CRT. Other limitations relating to CRT have also been posited. Tichavakunda (2019) argues that within the CRT model, agency has been under theorised and is rarely mentioned or defined. The question of agency is an important one in the context of how students engage with the myriad of situations that they find themselves in a university. Taking this critique by Tichavakunda (2019) to the university environment, then a scholar of CRT may point to the racism that is embedded within the system and point to the experiences of students of colour and leave the analysis there without further detailed consideration of student perceptions of their own agency and how this interacts with infrastructures.

Furthermore, Parsons (2019) argues that with its origins from the USA, and based on its history and structures, it is not applicable to the racial context and history in the UK. He goes on to state that a more intersectional and structural approach is needed in understanding inequity. He states:

'A recognition of the same injustices affecting others, to a large extent for similar structural reasons, suggests that a very real conspiracy is not just perpetrated against Black minority children.'

(Parsons, 2019, p. 318)

He argues that economic disadvantage is a stronger influence on lower educational attainment than race, with others also making the point that intersections such as 'class' should be considered alongside race. (Leonardo, 2012; Maisuria 2011; Belkin, 2021). Although there may appear to be some merit in this argument, I would refer back to the earlier studies cited in this literature review that highlight that even when factors such as socio-economic background are controlled for, race and ethnicity still emerge as factors in the awarding gap, with no easy explanation as to why, and as such provides an opportunity for universities to question their practices and how these interplay with race.

The central tenets of CRT provide a useful lens through which to consider the ethnicity awarding gap, providing an obvious connection with the central themes of race and ethnicity and how they connect to structures, power and inequities in higher education. However, given some of the limitations I was keen to explore whether some of these limitations may be mitigated by putting CRT in conversation with another theory. CRT has been connected with other theoretical frameworks such as feminist theory (Khan, 2016), Gramsci's notions of cultural hegemony (Carley, 2019) and also Freirean pedagogy (Smith-Maddox and Solorzano, 2002). I found limited references that connected CRT to Bourdieu's theories, but the potential connection between CRT and Pierre Bourdieu's frameworks, was explored by Tichavakunda (2019). He argues that 'CRT in education and Bourdieusian frameworks might be used in

concert advantageously to engage in more nuanced analyses of educational inequities' (Tichavakunda, 2019, p. 652). It is this latter connection that was of particular interest as my reading of both frameworks, suggested both CRT and Bourdieu operated in the space of structure, power and culture, and as such provide the opportunity for more nuanced insights in relation to the interaction between these aspects and race (Tichavakunda, 2019). I felt therefore that there was an interesting opportunity to consider CRT and Bourdieu together to assist in providing a stronger framework that may provide insights to the ethnicity awarding gap. These are considered in the section below and further discussed in chapter 5 with the presentation of a theoretical model.

Inequity in education – Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu wrote extensively in relation to power, culture, social structure and action (Swartz, 1997, p. 6). Bourdieu was also interested in education and wrote about education and inequity, arguing that the traditions of pedagogy, processes and cultures perpetuate social inequities rather than assist in eradicating them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). He argues this through his theory of reproduction and argues that the relative autonomy of higher education systems is a factor in this phenomenon and further argues, that education systems are not neutral (Swartz, 1997, p. 191). Bourdieu's key ideas relate to the notions of cultural capital, habitus, and field, which have been extensively discussed in books, journal articles and conferences (Nash, 1990; Reay, 1995; Swartz, 1997; Mills, 2008; Reay, 2009). Culture that relates to how individuals connect with, and to society is seen as a central tenet of Bourdieu's perspective on society. He argues that insights from processes and outcomes that derive from culture can assist in understanding the complexity of education systems

(Grenfell and James, 1998, p. 10). These are complex concepts, which attempt to frame the relationship and power balances between people, institutions and society at large. In this regard, the concepts provide an opportunity to consider the potential causes of the ethnicity awarding gap, as at the heart of this gap is the student, and the concept allows a consideration of their position within an institution where power resides.

Bourdieu's notion of habitus is an attempt to explain why people act in certain ways in particular situations which Bourdieu sees as being grounded in their cultural, educational and family backgrounds. Nash (1990, p. 432) states that habitus is 'a system of embodied dispositions which generate practice in accordance with structural principles of the social world.' Habitus has also been articulated as the dispositions a person learns through one's background, family experiences, class and culture (Tichavakunda, 2019). It is about who you are, where you have come from, which then informs your 'practice', or how you may respond to the world around you (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014, p. 198). This becomes an important consideration in the sense of questioning how these influences, contribute to the attributes that one may bring to a given situation and typifies the concept of habitus. Bourdieu states that habitus:

'ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms.'

(Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54)

He states that the idea of habitus is not only present within the relationships between individuals, but that it can also function at the institutional level. Expanding on this point, Reay *et al.* (2009) state that:

'any conception of institutional habitus would similarly constitute a complex amalgam of agency and structure and could be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour.'

(Reay *et al.*, 2009, p. 109)

Bourdieu explains in some of his later works, that habitus:

'is a socialised body. A structured body, a body which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world - a field - and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world.'

(Bourdieu, 1998, p. 81)

His explanation here is that individuals have embodied values and dispositions that derive from their life experiences and backgrounds.

Alongside habitus, Bourdieu was also concerned with cultural capital, arguing that the cultural knowledge and attributes that one accrues, may in turn impact on educational attainment (Swartz, 1997, p. 198). There may be a wide range of factors that may play into this concept such as the educational background of parents, education of the students and exposure to the arts and language. As well as knowledge, it would include other acquired skills such as

verbal, written, analytical and self-regulation, which carry weight in formal educational settings (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014, p. 197). Bourdieu pointed to the fact that there was an unequal distribution of cultural capital between different social classes and that education systems privileged certain cultural heritages that made students from the 'dominant' classes more prepared to succeed as they came into higher education (Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 5). Bourdieu also states that:

'the notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes.'

(Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243)

This then links with Bourdieu's related concept, that of field. The idea of a field can be likened to particular social worlds or aspects of society, which have their own rules, mores, and ways of working. A field may be a community, or it may include an organisation such as a university. In these spaces there will be the 'rules of the game' and one's habitus may (or may not) provide the individual with a 'feel' for those social norms. To that extent, field is the social setting in which habitus plays out (Swartz, 1997, p. 117). It is this interaction between habitus and field that contributes to determining one's practice and through that one's outcomes, i.e., how one reacts or decides what to do in a given situation. He expressed the notion through the following formula:

(Habitus + Cultural Capital) + Field = Practice

(Bourdieu, 1984)

Central to Bourdieu's equation above is the notion that agency and structure are connected in a 'dialectical relationship' (Swartz, 1997, p. 8), i.e., that both must be considered together to truly understand the implications of that relationship. Reay (1995) in her exploration of the concept of habitus through her research into mothers' involvement in their children's education, states that there is much that can be learnt from the interaction between habitus and field. She states:

'It suggests a whole range of questions not necessarily addressed in empirical research; How well adapted is the individual to the context they find themselves in? How does personal history shape their responses to the contemporary setting? What subjective vocations do they bring to the present and how are they manifested? Are structural effects visible within small scale interactions? What is the meaning of non-verbal behaviour as well as individuals' use of language?'

Reay (1995, p. 369)

Bourdieu in his writings essentially referred to class and how this may impact on educational outcomes. Examples of this may be grounded in one's social networks, the value that families place on education, exposure to the arts and possibly the way in which a language is spoken. It is also an example of how the conception of habitus and field offers an opportunity for the exploration of the unexplained spaces within the ethnicity awarding gap.

There is a concept there that warrants consideration, i.e., that one is a product of one's experiences, networks and values, and that society has barriers that at best stifle progress or at worst, conspire to keep one in those spaces to retain power for the dominant group. Some writers have looked at this concept to find solutions that may break the cycle of this social reproduction. Mills (2008) brought together Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital, and field in the context of his social reproduction theory and argues that they can be used to transform educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. She argues that this may be achieved by tutors drawing on and using different forms of cultural capitals and transforming the field, providing the curriculum as an example where 'schools can relate curricula to students' worlds, making the classroom more inclusive by legitimating locally produced knowledge.' (Mills, 2008. p. 84)

The ideas put forward by Bourdieu drew my attention, as his research provides a theoretical framework to understand power, structures, behaviours, actions and outcomes within groups in society (Swartz, 1997; Grenfell, 2014). These have some pertinence to my study, in that the above concepts appear to be the spaces within which my research is operating. In the context of the ethnicity awarding gap Bourdieu's concepts also provide a lens through which to consider the ways of life, customs and values of the students that are part of my study. Nash (1990, p. 436) in his analysis of Bourdieu and education and its tendency to reproduce inequity observes that, 'Bourdieu's theory suggests that the school will generally ignore the habitus of children of non-dominant classes', making the point that educational institutions have an inability to take account of 'non-traditional' students. Bourdieu (1986) goes further and concludes that challenging the status quo is also problematic. He states:

'the more the official transmission of capital is prevented or hindered, the more the effects of the clandestine circulation of capital in the form of cultural capital become determinant in the reproduction of the social structure.'

Bourdieu, (1986, p. 26).

Given my interest in the experiences of my participants and their education outcomes, Bourdieu's notion of habitus, cultural capital and field provide a framework to consider these.

However, some limitations to Bourdieu's framework have been highlighted. Bourdieu's main concern was with class in his discussions and one of the criticisms that is made about his conceptual framework is that it is not able to account for racial (or gender) inequities and therefore is problematic (Wallace, 2016, p. 907). However, the counter argument to this is that Bourdieu's formulation of class contains every part of an individual's social condition, including race and ethnicity (Horvat, 2003, p. 2) and there is a body of literature that argues that Bourdieu's concepts can be used to examine inequities linked to race, or indeed other characteristics such as gender (Reay, 1997; Go, 2013; Wallace, 2016). Reay (2004, p. 437), argues that the notion of habitus should be broadened to include race. However, I would argue that if one has to infer questions of race into a framework then this may weaken the framework and its ability to explicitly acknowledge the interplay of race and structure. It may also be argued that there is a danger of race being subsumed or even 'lost' to other factors such as class or gender.

Literature review conclusion

I found undertaking the literature review both challenging and rewarding. It was challenging in respect of the relatively small amount of literature that is focussed on the ethnicity awarding gap in higher education, with an even smaller amount that is dedicated to reviewing the ethnicity awarding gap in relation to specific ethnic groups or that approach the matter from an intersectional perspective. As my research was developing there did appear to be a growing amount of literature, with the recent increase in focus from regulators and academics in relation to this phenomenon. The other challenge for me was to find connections between the range of sources which specifically explored this issue, for example, academic journals, books and reports, and the theoretical constructions which could provide additional context through which to understand the ethnicity awarding gap. A final challenge or frustration was not finding the 'magic bullet' or an unequivocal intervention that worked to narrow the ethnicity awarding gap. On the converse I found the journey of reviewing the literature to be rewarding as it enabled me to conceptualise and to bring together, in a more detailed way, the various positions that were presented in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap and the various insights into it, which have enriched the meaning and discussion that I have been able to apply in my discussions in chapter five.

My intention in undertaking the literature review was to understand what insights researchers had discovered in relation to the existence ethnicity awarding gap, whether there were any impactful interventions that successfully narrowed the gap (and what that may say about the causes) and whether there was anything in the broader theoretical literature that

may assist in my understanding of, and interpretation of my research data, including perhaps providing insights that may be applicable beyond the sample in my research.

The literature that looked beyond the quantitative, into more interpretive perspectives and that focussed on the unexplained part of the gap was of particular interest, as it was where my research was positioned. In the unexplained space, the literature explored factors such as institutional culture, White privilege, lived experiences of minoritised ethnic students and approaches to learning and engagement as possible explanations. Again, although this literature was helpful in identifying possible areas that may provide some explanation, as discussed above, I found that some of the literature (e.g. Dhanda, (2010); Cousins and Cureton, (2012); Woolf *et al.* (2013); Mountford Zimdars *et al.*, (2015)) was quite broad in its findings and left further areas to be explored.

As my literature review developed, I also began to question what possible linkages there may be between 'real world' research and literature that was at the more theoretical or conceptual end of the spectrum. I reviewed this broader literature with a view to ascertaining whether it may assist in understanding whether theoretical frameworks could assist in providing an understanding of the data that I collected, and also whether this may help in revealing insights into the ethnicity awarding gap. I reviewed CRT and, Bourdieu's notions of habitus, cultural capital and field, and found that although both had limitations, both also contained strengths that could potentially have relevance to my research, and which together could provide a useful lens through which to analyse the data that I collected. The bridge between these theories and the findings in relation to the data will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

Chapter 3 - Methodology, methods and analysis

This chapter will outline the framework that I have used to inform and undertake my research, and the journey that brought me to the eventual methodology that underpinned my research. The chapter will also provide a detailed discussion on the methods and analysis of findings that I used to implement my research and the challenges and tensions that presented in the delivery of those methods and analysis.

The starting point was to decide on the methodology. Methodology is the overall design that frames the way in which data is collated and analysed to draw conclusions in relation to the research question that has been posed (Murthy and Bhojanna, 2009, p. 32). This is a critical part of the research journey as it provides the foundations upon which robust research methods can be built. As Lopez and Willis (2004, p. 726) state, 'implementing a method without an examination of its philosophical basis can result in research that is ambiguous in its purpose, structure, and findings.' In considering the approach to research which should be taken, it has also been well documented that the research question itself should drive the methodology so that the most appropriate conclusions may be drawn (Egan 2002; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2013, p. 2).

As mentioned, the overall aim of my research is to seek qualitative insights into contributory factors that provide a better understanding of the factors that may impact the ethnicity awarding gap between South Asian male students and White students within a business school based in the northwest of England. My research seeks to address some of the gaps in

literature, as discussed in my literature review chapter, and add to the knowledge in this area. I therefore needed to keep these points in mind in selecting a methodology.

When considering methodology, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's position in the research (Kassan, *et al.*, 2020). As outlined in the introduction, the research took place within the school where I was a senior manager, with a student group that was similar to me in terms of ethnicity and gender. Arguably this made me an insider researcher. Insider researchers are those who conduct research within their own organisation, social group or culture (Greene, 2014, p. 1). Mercer (2007, p. 3) describes the insider researcher as 'someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her [sic] a lived familiarity with the group being researched.' My employed role in the school during the period of research involved working closely with tutors to enhance student experience and outcomes. I would have regular day to day interactions with tutors to influence pedagogy and practice within the school and the wider learning environment, with the aim of improving student experience and outcomes. In relation to students, my relationship was more indirect, although there were situations such as course representative meetings, or student complaints when I would meet with students. In most instances, insider research in higher education involves academic staff who are 'immersed, embedded and strongly connected with both the setting and those being "researched" in a shared setting where they operate together in an ongoing basis' (Smyth & Holian, 2008, p. 34).

Critics of insider researchers state that the approach can be too subjective and brings bias into the research process, therefore compromising objectivity. Mercer (2007, p. 13) goes on to argue that a researcher who shares characteristics with participants does not necessarily

lead to a richer dataset. In her conclusion she argues that there are neither benefits, nor any negative impacts relating to being an insider or outsider researcher. On the contrary, Costley (2010) posits that insider researchers can benefit from their own knowledge of their institution where the research takes place. Foote and Bartell (2011, p. 45) argue that insider research which is undertaken describes the worldview of the researcher and is an important consideration in clarifying the potential influence that this position may have on the research. They go onto state:

'This positionality of a researcher is shaped by his/her unique mix of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identifiers, including positions of power into which society has placed the person, as well as his/her personal life experiences within and around these identifiers.'

(Foote and Bartell, 2011, p. 46)

Being a South Asian male, puts me in the same ethnic group as the group that I am researching and therefore also falls into Mercer's insider definition. I initially found the notions of insider researcher perplexing and questioned what the implications of my position within the research would mean for the validity of the data that would be collated. I found a particular challenge relating to my analysis and interpretation of the data, questioning whether the explicit or implicit use of my own life experiences within the research may make the data somehow less credible. I was also aware that this insider status may have the potential to impact participant relationships by affecting what they may or may not share.

As I further reflected on this approach, I concluded that my prior experience and similarity to the participants could be an advantage. Being from a South Asian background who was awarded a 2:2 degree classification, introduced aspects of my own journey that might inform the direction of the research. These might include my own experience of growing up in a South Asian family and community, the feelings of 'outsiderness' that I felt when I entered university and the relationships (or lack of) that I had with my tutors.

This also brought into consideration notions of reflexivity. Reflexivity has been described as 'the project of examining how the researcher and intersubjective elements impinge on, and even transform, research' (Finlay, 2002, p. 210). Finlay goes on to state that engaging with reflexivity can be uncertain and can easily lead to one ending up in the 'swamp and mire'. There is therefore a question of how helpful the ongoing process of self-analysis, positionality and adaption of the research process is. Pillow states:

'One of the most noticeable trends to come out of a use of reflexivity is increased attention to researcher subjectivity in the research process – a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am, and how I feel, affect data collection and analysis.'

Pillow (2003, p. 176)

Hastings (2010) argues that research:

'is a highly reflexive endeavour and with that reflexivity are related ethical dilemmas associated with viewing the data (and even the research process itself) through a different lens, with the potential for different readings.'

Hastings (2010, p. 308)

Reflecting on my position throughout the research and how it may impact the development of the research and the underpinning methodology that would be utilised was an important consideration and I attempt to reflect on this throughout this chapter.

Positivist and interpretivist approaches

There have been a range of discussions within the research community in relation to the different frameworks and foundations which form the basis of social research (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). At the basic level these could be characterised as positivist or interpretivist methods. Those on the positivist end of the research methodology spectrum argue that knowledge is created through scientific method and that the researcher exists outside the reality of the knowledge that is generated. The research methods used in the positivist approach may be characterised by a more quantitative approach which may seek to answer questions such as 'how much?' and 'what are the differentials?', i.e., that the methods are likely to lead to outcomes that are quantifiable as opposed to qualitative in nature (Wilson, 2014, p. 33). This notion could also be described as realism, i.e., that the findings of the research are binary in the sense of being either true or false (Pring, 2015, p. 59).

Those on the interpretivist end of the spectrum conversely argue that social reality is experienced and elucidated through the person themselves, therefore making reality much more complex, less binary and layered (Dash, 2005). In this regard the approach focusses much more explicitly on the perceptions and experiences of the individual. The interpretivist approach will ask questions such as why, what, and how, but allow the participant to answer with their own words describing perceptions, feelings, and experiences. Put another way interpretivists argue that reality is socially constructed rather than reality being an objective phenomenon that can be measured. If that is the case then the basis of social research is concerned with perceptions of reality, rather than what may be described as actually real (Pring, 2015, p. 60). There are also a number of positions along the positivist-interpretivist continuum and there may also be some level of overlap between the two positions. This is an important consideration in the research project lifecycle as it will determine the methods that are then used to collate the data, i.e., one's position on that continuum will determine the epistemological approach that is then taken (Grix, 2014, p. 63).

Initially I was drawn to underpinning my research from both a positivist position as well as more interpretivist approaches. I felt at the time, that positivist approaches could provide aspects which could be more tangibly 'measured' such as participant attitudes or perceptions. This assumption may have come from my previous academic discipline (law) which seeks to find the 'truth' through reasoned argument in relation to rules and regulations that are in place. In addition, I had a belief that patterns could be found within quantitative data, which could then be further interrogated using more qualitative approaches. My initial thoughts, perhaps based on these aspects were that there may be a 'truth' or knowledge to be 'found' or 'discovered' through the use of both quantitative and qualitative data.

However, the interpretivist approach better chimed with the question that my research was concerned with, and my own developing beliefs in relation to people's perspectives of their own truths being framed by their experiences and histories, or 'that realities are social constructions of the mind' (Guba and Lincoln 1985, p. 43).

Power was also an important consideration as the voices of those without power are often missing within organisations. In the context of the ethnicity awarding gap, it could be argued that the power lies with the institution and a question is raised here as to whether the voices of South Asian male students are heard in the context of that phenomenon. In essence, therefore there was an opportunity to explore the 'truth' may be that was pertinent to the participants' journeys and give prominence to those voices. As my research thinking developed, this became more appealing, given that my research was operating in the space of the 'unexplained' part of the ethnicity awarding gap.

Tutor and student stories and experiences would provide a richer narrative, with the potential to provide deeper insights than quantitative approaches. Ely (1991, p. 104) states 'people know a great deal from their own past and present experiences, from how their vision has been honed, from their evolving insights and hunches.' Ultanir (2012) continues with the idea that people create and evolve their perspectives and truths through the interplay of the values that individuals have developed and the ideas and occurrences which have impact on individual lives. I would also argue that there is a level of complexity in those experiences and perspectives that may not emerge through framing discussions via quantitative approaches. This very much chimed with my fundamental belief that the realities and truths of the tutor

and students would provide a rich source of knowledge, and this therefore became central to my approach and formed the focus of my research.

As I was considering my methodology my positionality and the relevance of reflexivity became apparent as I reflected on my own journey through education and my own interpretation of the experiences and that journey, which for me, was very much my reality. As discussed above I felt that my position in the research overlaid with an interpretivist approach would enable me to connect with this group better than other groups, taking a more reflexive approach, which in turn would improve the quality of the data collated. I therefore discounted incorporating quantitative methods as an underpinning approach, but questions remained about how I would build the foundations and framework through which data could be gathered and analysed.

There are many methodologies that are interpretivist in nature and that had the potential to be adopted in my research, but the two I was particularly drawn to were phenomenology and grounded theory. Phenomenology has been referred to as a philosophical movement, as a 'family of qualitative research methodologies' (Gill, 2020, p. 75). Phenomenology is concerned with lived experiences and seeking to understand and give meaning to an experience or occurrence (Starks and Trinidad, 2007, p. 1374). It has also been described as the study of human experiences, of how things are presented to us through those experiences (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 2). As mentioned, phenomenology is a family of research methodologies, where approaches range from research which should be free from any preconceptions when investigating a phenomenon (Moran, 2000, p. 4), through to interpretive phenomenology which is interested in taking a more interpretive or hermeneutic

approach to the collection and analysis of the data. It goes beyond a description of the experience and involves drawing implications in relation to the world that the individual inhabits (Lopez and Willis, 2004). After reflecting on these approaches, I felt that there were limitations to the approach which at one end of the phenomenology spectrum was at odds with the question of researcher bias and reflexive approaches and at the interpretive end, was unable to provide insights beyond the sample group and I therefore discounted using these approaches.

Grounded theory

This then drew me to grounded theory as a methodological approach to underpin my research methods. Broadly speaking there are two methods of reasoning within research methods, deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive approaches start with a conceptual framework or hypotheses that can be tested. Inductive approaches on the other hand do not start with a conceptual framework or hypotheses but rather start with looking at specific observations which then build up to broader concepts and theories. Grounded theory, which would be classed as an inductive approach, emerged from the writings of two sociologists Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser who questioned the prevalent approaches to qualitative research in the 1960's, in a study which involved researching end of life patients in a hospital Glaser and Strauss (1967). In this seminal work, they challenged the belief at the time, that qualitative research was not rigorous and that quantitative methods were the only truly objective research method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Chun Tie *et al.*, 2019). In order to support this, they articulate an approach to research which involves methods which are formulaic and prescriptive, requiring the collation and analysis of data

with precise coding and simultaneous analysis of the data. This method is iterative in nature, with each piece of data informing the subsequent data collection and analysis. It is posited that taking this approach then allows for a higher level theory to ‘emerge’ that is grounded in the data, and which can help to explain the issue that is being explored (Charmaz, 2006; Priya, 2016, Hassan, 20124).

The underpinning philosophical position of this approach is that it is rooted in objectivism, with the researcher as the dispassionate and neutral observer, with an external reality that can be ‘revealed’ (Priya, 2016; Timonen *et al.*, 2018). The perception of the formulaic and prescriptive nature of grounded theory was compounded by the later writings of Strauss and Corbin (1990) who further detailed the importance of data analysis, focussed on undertaking detailed and ongoing validation and verification of the data (Timonen *et al.*, 2018, p.3). The understanding and approaches to grounded theory have developed and different variants have evolved since it was first written about, and over the years scholars have sought to refine the theory and its methods (Clarke, 2003; Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2014; Timonen *et al.*, 2018). This is discussed in further detail below.

After discounting phenomenological approaches and following a review of grounded theory and its principles, I felt that utilising grounded theory would provide a more appropriate means of achieving my research aims, which were seeking to gain insights into the ethnicity awarding gap. The reasons for this included its focus on producing rich data (Charmaz and Thornberg, 2020), that the outcomes are more closely connected to the data, ‘allowing the researcher to “see” the research problem through the eyes of the practitioners’ rather than relying on external frameworks or prior literature review (Makri and Neely, 2021, p. 2), and

that it had the potential to generate theory from the data collected, with the potential to conceptualise (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Chun Tie *et al.*, 2019; El Hussein *et al.*, 2014).

An important consideration related to this latter point of theory generation was grounded in not using deductive codes or a conceptual framework to underpin my research (Charmaz, 2006). A conceptual framework brings together concepts and provides for a means through which theory can be tested (Seibold, 2002, cited in Bowen, 2006). In this respect it has been contended that a conceptual framework can provide the researcher with a set of lenses through which a particular phenomenon can be explored (Ivey, 2015, p. 153). It has also been argued that the conceptual framework is important in that it enables the researcher to find the appropriate tools to use in undertaking the research and thus provides academic rigour to the research findings. Although there is some merit in these points, given the persistent nature of the awarding gap, and the fact that I would be looking into the 'unexplained' spaces of the awarding gap, as discussed above, I was orientated towards creating new theory that came from the data, rather than using existing frameworks which may restrict the experiences and narratives to pre-determined lines of inquiry. Furthermore, as explored in my literature review, there was limited discussion that related to the awarding gap in the context of a theoretical framework, and so utilising a grounded theory approach provided the opportunity of adding to the literature by generating theory that may help to provide further insights into the complex phenomenon of the ethnicity awarding gap.

As mentioned above, the understanding of grounded theory and its implementation have been refined and developed over the years with variations that emerged that differed from its original conception of a theory that had objectivist underpinnings. A prominent researcher

in this regard was Kathy Charmaz who articulates a more constructivist approach to grounded theory which acknowledges and recognises the researcher's role in the interpretation and development of theory and who emphasises the point that researchers should be reflexive about what they bring to the research and what they see (Charmaz, 2006). She considers the relationship between researcher and participant and highlights the role of researcher and participant in the construction of knowledge (Timonen *et al.*, 2018, p. 3) moving grounded theory away from a methodology which is objectivist in nature to one which is more reflexive. In this sense constructivism is a concept that does not recognise the existence of an objective reality, but rather posits that knowledge is created through experiences and prior knowledge (Elliot, *et al.*, 2000, p.256). In later writings Glaser and Strauss also appear to challenge their original view of their own grounded theory being an objective pursuit and articulate a more reflexive position in relation to the underpinnings of the theory. They state:

'I agree with the constructivist viewpoint that concepts and theories are constructed by researchers out of stories that are constructed by research participants who are trying to explain and make sense out of their experiences and/or lives, both to the researcher and themselves. Out of these multiple constructions, analysts construct something that they call knowledge.'

(Glaser and Strauss, 2012, p. 9)

Furthermore, in later reflections Charmaz (2019) states that:

'The inherent emphasis on reflexivity in constructivist grounded theory prompts us not only to examine who we are in relation to the research but also to remain

reflexive about how we use grounded theory strategies and make claims about our findings.'

Charmaz, (2019, p. 165)

The earlier work of Herbert Blumer (1954) also supports the move towards reflexive approaches in grounded theory. Blumer (1954) distinguished between concepts that could be described as 'definitive' and those which he described as 'sensitised'. The former are those concepts which can be precisely defined or even benchmarked, allowing findings from the concept to be measured against each other. However, he further added the notion of the 'sensitised' concept. This is a concept that is more loosely defined and would include pointers or direction of travel that the research should take, based on their own experiences and knowledge. He states, 'it gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical issues' (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Gilgun (2002, quoted in Bowen, p. 14, 2006) argues that 'research usually begins with such concepts, whether researchers state this or not and whether they are aware of them or not.' Bowen (2006) goes on to argue that researchers using sensitised concepts do not necessarily need to test or refine those concepts, rather they can be used simply to lay the foundations for the research. Blaikie (2000 cited in Bowen, 2006) also argued that research that is concerned with theory generation, might require sensitising concepts, but no hypotheses. He goes on to state that qualitative research does not start with hypotheses or preconceived notions. Instead, in accordance with its inductive nature, it involves the researcher's attempts to discover, understand, and interpret what is happening in the research context (Bowen, 2006, p. 14). Charmaz (2006, p. 16) further contextualises this point and states:

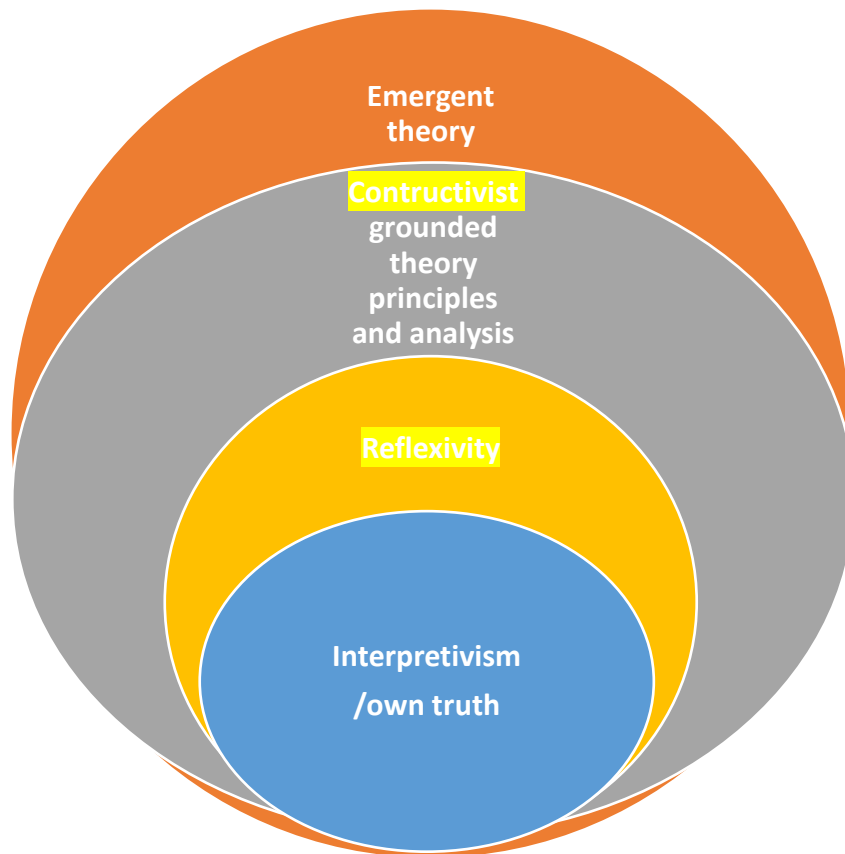
'grounded theorists often begin their studies with certain research interests and a set of general concepts. These concepts provide ideas to pursue and sensitise you to ask particular kinds of questions about your topic.'

Charmaz (2006, p. 16)

As I reflected on my approach to this research, I became aware that sensitising concepts were playing a part in the underpinning research framework, although I may not have realised this at the start of the process. As I was developing my research approach, sensitising concepts that I became aware of included, relationships that students formed in the university environment, expectations that students had of higher education as well as their motivation and engagement. These sensitising concepts may have been drawn from my position in the research and prior experiences and highlighted the relevance of reflexivity in my approach, but it also aligned with my constructivist orientation, which I felt would enable me to better connect with the research and co-constructing knowledge in that journey.

The final version of the grounded theory approach that I therefore undertook was rooted in constructivism. It was an approach that recognised the reflexive role of the researcher in constructing the data and the theory and was a variant of the original conception of grounded theory that was more constructivist in approach. The illustration (figure 2.) below highlights the different layers that came into play in the eventual methodological approach that underpinned my research.

Figure 2. Methodology relationships



Methods

When developing research, it is important to be clear from the outset, which methods will be used within the research. This section outlines the grounded theory methods used to support my underpinning research methodology, including sampling, data collection methods, and analysis. I also provide an outline of relevant ethical considerations and how these were addressed. The aim of my research was to explore the journeys and experiences of South Asian male students and the wider tutor group in the business school in order to understand whether those journeys into higher education would yield any further knowledge and insights in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap between South Asian males and White students. Capturing and analysing these insights using grounded theory methods would allow these

insights to emerge in an open and organic way (Birks, *et al.*, 2019). Charmaz (2006, p. 5) sets out the key features of grounded theory methods as including:

- Purposive sampling
- Simultaneously collecting and analysing data.
- Avoiding the use of or deducting codes and categories from current theoretical frameworks.
- Ensuring that analysis takes place at each point, e.g., after each interview.
- Utilising participants with the intention of creating theory as opposed to simply representing the experiences of the group.
- Conducting any literature review once the data has been collated and analysed.

Another key feature of grounded theory is that data should be collated until a point of 'saturation' is reached, i.e., until no new themes emerge (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

As mentioned, the implementation of grounded theory methods as conceived by Glaser and can be challenging. They require a technical and prescriptive approach to data-collection and analysis and some limitations to it have been identified. Grounded theory methods have been described as a practically challenging process, particularly in collating the data (Myers, 2009) and it has been described as time-heavy (Allan, 2003). Charmaz (2006) also points to the potential for confusion in the deployment of methodological approaches, due to some of the complexities in implementing grounded theory principles. These were valid perspectives and provided me with some key points to consider when it came to deciding my overall implementation of grounded theory methods.

Timonen *et al.* (2018, p. 2) in their review of the development of grounded theory, also highlighted the practical difficulties in collating and analysing data simultaneously, e.g., if there are a number of researchers involved, then simultaneous analysis would be very challenging, or if it is necessary to interview participants straight after each other, then simultaneous analysis would not be possible. Their review of the use of grounded theory methods by researchers highlighted the varied interpretations of what 'simultaneous' meant, with variations to the method being deployed to take account of time available, sample size and the topic (Timonen *et al.*, 2018, p. 5). They conclude that a more pragmatic approach to data collation is viable within the traditions of grounded theory, stating, 'we see plenty of support within the GT tradition for open (initial) coding being used more pragmatically to "break open" a topic', and further, that following leads from data to inform subsequent stages were 'key to moving the data analysis forward in a focused manner' (Timonen *et al.*, 2018, p. 5).

Furthermore, it has been argued that grounded theory methods should be viewed as flexible guidelines that allow researchers to focus their data collection as a route to build theory rather than being absolutely prescribed (Charmaz 2008, p. 507). Chun Tie *et al.* (2019, p. 4) also state that the researcher 'can adapt the framework presented to inform and guide the design of a GT study', but also acknowledge that the relationship that the researcher has with the data and how it is collated will ultimately contribute to its value. These later developments of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) original grounded theory present the flexible nature of some aspects of grounded theory with the caveat that the process of data collection should be iterative in nature (Chun Tie, *et al.* 2019).

Having reviewed grounded theory approaches I developed a research methods design that would adhere to the general principles of grounded theory methods (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), albeit with a variation from the original conception acknowledging some of the challenges which are discussed below. This variation acknowledged some of the practical challenges in undertaking interviews, and simultaneously analysing them as there was some uncertainty connected to when students would be available to participate, i.e., there was narrow window within which the students would be interviewed, making simultaneous analysis more challenging (Timonen *et al.*, 2019). However, I would build in an iterative approach to the research design, in that the students would be interviewed first, then tutors and then focus groups would take place. Birks *et al.* (2019, p. 4) highlight the importance of coding the sample and points to the researcher developing their understanding of themes, concepts and connections at each stage.

The research design therefore included analysis that would take place after each grouping with that analysis then informing the next stage. Although I would not interview and analyse every interview simultaneously, my overall approach would allow for a process of refinement of the data in an iterative manner, building on the outcomes and insights from each stage (Charmaz, 2008; Timonen *et al.*, 2018). Finally, as one of the reasons for utilising grounded theory was to generate theory, I felt that the overall process would support the emergence of a theory that may provide insights into the phenomena at hand. In my case this was the ethnicity awarding gap. Further details of this process follow on from my outline of ethical considerations below.

Ethical considerations

The next step, once the methods had been designed was to consider ethical issues that may arise from my research and to apply for ethics approval through the university ethical approval procedures. This involved submitting an application form to the relevant university ethics committee, which in my case was the Business, Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee. Researchers should consider ethical issues at all stages in the research cycle (UKRI, 2021) and a number of potential ethical considerations were identified through the ethical approval process of the university, which are outlined below.

During the research process I would be asking minoritised ethnic students to talk about issues relating to the ethnicity awarding gap and needed to account for whether this in itself may cause distress, concerns or anxiety with the participants (Miller, 2016, p. 16). A related risk was that of internalisation, whereby students may internalise the narrative of differential outcomes during the data collection, so that the ethnicity awarding gap became a self-fulfilling prophecy. I therefore had to consider how my approach to data collection would be sensitive, given the potential that students may either be offended or upset at the discovery that they are part of a group of students that on average are being awarded lower grades than their White counterparts. I outlined during the application process that I would ensure that I emphasised to students that the ethnicity awarding gap data was an average and that not all minoritised ethnic students received lower classification degrees. I would also point students towards support that was available, both verbally, and through the participant information sheet that was provided to all students (appendix 1).

A further issue identified during the ethics application process was the power relationships that would emerge during the research. Power relationships are a constant presence arising from the social systems that are all around us (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 129) and any research method should require those undertaking research to consider and minimise any power imbalances that may be present (Tunstall *et al.*, 2022). The ethics application form contained a specific question as to whether there may be a power imbalance. In response to this question, I acknowledged that this issue could potentially arise with both student and tutor participants and their relationship with myself. I explained in the ethics form that I was cognisant that my role as senior manager within the school would bring with it an imbalance of power in my interactions with both tutors and students. Also, that in relation to tutor participants this could impact on whether they agreed to participate, what they chose to reveal in their narratives, either being more open if they wished for senior management to hear their views, or conversely be less open if they felt vulnerable in revealing certain narratives or views. I explained my mitigation in the ethics form by ensuring that the 'call-out' email to all tutors emphasised the voluntary nature of the request, that the request was from my role as a student, outlined the aims of the research and the confidential and anonymised nature of the interview.

Further mitigation was outlined in the participant information sheet, submitted with the form and finally, verbally when I met the participants. Further mitigation outlined included being mindful of how I presented, considering the time the interviews took place, dressing in a more casual manner to emphasise my status as a student I also explained that I would be cognisant of my tone and approach in order to build trust and rapport with the participants to put the participants at ease (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Finally, I outlined that I would ensure that I asked

open-ended questions to encourage a free-flowing dialogue and that I was non-judgmental in my responses.

A further power imbalance that was identified related to the student recruitment process, where I would be requesting course leaders to help promote the call out to students. I recognised that tutors may perceive that I was asserting my seniority and due to this may feel the need to comply, or even that they might be being asked to unduly influence students to be involved in the research. Also, there may have been an imbalance in power for students in being asked to take part in the research by the course leader as it was the course leader distributing the flyers. In order to mitigate this, I would ensure that it was emphasised to tutors that the request was being made in my capacity as a student rather than manager and that their engagement and support was entirely voluntary. I would also ensure that the course leaders would not be required to take the names of any students who wished to take part, but simply distribute the information.

Further mitigation was put in place by asking tutors to remind students that there was no compulsion to take part in the research, with my contact details being provided on the flyer, so that if students were interested then they could contact me directly. Tutors therefore would not necessarily know which students did or did not respond, thereby mitigating the power imbalance. However, I acknowledge that even by putting in place mitigation for the imbalance in power for tutors and students, or even the perception thereof, there was still a chance that this may have impacted their decision to participate and the manner of that engagement. All of these approaches and mitigations were outlined in the ethical process of

the university and were judged to be sufficient and appropriate, and approval was granted on that basis.

The sample

Grounded theory methods require an approach which starts with purposive sampling, which involves purposefully selecting participants as they have characteristics that are required in the sample to be considered (Nikolopoulou, 2022). Early on in my research journey I decided my sample would focus on a more precise group of students than would be covered by the umbrella term, minoritised ethnic. This was based on my literature review, which revealed limited knowledge relating to ethnicity awarding gaps being reviewed from the perspectives of specific ethnic groups. A further consideration was the student demographic profile of the business school, which potentially presented a good sample of male students from a South Asian heritage.

Reviewing the business school demographic profile using the university equality, diversity and inclusion data dashboard, showed that in the year 2018-2019, 39% percent of UK domiciled students in the school identified as being from a minoritised ethnic background and that 28% of the student population in the school identified as Asian. A further breakdown in relation to gender revealed that 21% of all female students and 35% of all male students identified as South Asian, with greater overall numbers of male students. The ethnicity awarding gap in the school in 2018-19 between minoritised ethnic students and White students was 23%, with the gap between South Asian and White students slightly lower at 19%. From an intersectional perspective the minoritised ethnic student population, 63% of female students achieved a

good honours degree compared to 52% of males from the same group. Given that South Asian male students were the largest group and that proportionately fewer from this group were awarded good honours degrees I concluded that this group warranted further exploration and would provide a sufficient sample size. I therefore brought ethnicity and gender together to focus my research on South Asian male students. I felt that this would generate new knowledge that was more focussed, and therefore perhaps more helpful in providing nuanced insights.

However, as mentioned in my introduction, during the process of choosing a sample, I reflected on the term 'South Asian' recognising that in itself, this was an umbrella term that encompassed a broad range of diversity, including differences in cultures, backgrounds, language and faith that may also impact on the student experience. There was therefore the potential for any findings to be generalised to this broader group rather than more specific. However, further narrowing of the sample group for example by Pakistani heritage male students would have made the potential sample group much smaller in number, particularly as I would be intersecting with gender, thereby making it more challenging to engage participants. Focussing on a particular faith was another consideration, but this would also have presented a challenge in terms of either smaller sample size or students from a particular faith group also having different national, language and cultural heritages, creating the risk of less focussed findings. Furthermore, during the data collection process it was apparent that all of the students referred to themselves using the word 'Asian' or 'South Asian' and there were no specific references to faith, and this was clearly the identity which the students attributed to themselves. I therefore chose South Asian as a descriptor for the participants as

this more accurately described their identity as they saw it, as well as potentially providing a larger sample as indicated by the school demographic data.

However, in order to mitigate the issues related to the potential for less focussed findings, I excluded postgraduates and also non-UK domiciled South Asian students. Non-UK students may bring additional dimensions such as issues relating to language, transitioning to a new country and having to 'learn' a new education system (Eze and Inegbedion, 2015 pp 60-62). These are issues that may also impact on the level of awards conferred and could potentially skew and add layers to the data that may potentially make any findings more generalised and less focussed.

When considering tutors, I was interested in tutors who had experience of teaching South Asian male students. Additionally, to ensure that gender diversity was taken account of, I sought a mix of male and female tutors. Ideally, I was also looking to achieve a mix of ethnicities in the tutor group, though recognised this would be more challenging given the demographic profile of tutors in the school. In practice all members of tutors would be eligible to participate given the diversity of the student population in the school. On review of the data, it was evident that all programmes contained students who fitted the demographic profile I was looking for. In practice however, there were some programmes such as accounting that had higher proportions of South Asian male students compared to programmes such as tourism and hospitality.

A key consideration in the development of my research methods was sample size, i.e., how many tutors and students would need to be in the sample to make the research credible and

valid. The question of the right sample size is contentious, with criticism being raised for the lack of rigour in justifying sample sizes in qualitative research (Boddy, 2016, p. 427). Furthermore, it has been noted that research methodologists tend not to provide precise guidance on estimating sample size (Marshall *et al.*, 2013, p. 11). This does raise some issues relating to validity and perhaps a lack of consistency in approach. However, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) note that:

'it is crucial that the interviewer collects a sufficient number of words from the interviewee. As such, the size of the sample, where the sample represents the data collected (e.g., words, body language), is an important consideration.'

(Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007, p. 107)

One of the early questions therefore for my research was, what is the right number of participants? Boddy (2016) concludes that as qualitative research is concerned with depth of understanding rather than breadth, a sample size of even one can be valid, if it can be justified. Given that I intended to undertake in-depth interviews and focus groups and after a review of similar studies, and discussion with my supervisors, I concluded that including 20-30 participants in the study would provide a sufficiently robust set of data. By the end of my data collection process, I had undertaken seven in-depth interviews with students, seven in-depth interviews with tutors and ten students involved in four focus groups. Towards the end of the process, it became evident that I had reached the point of saturation as elucidated in the grounded theory principles, i.e., that no new themes seemed to be emerging from the data. A summary of the interviewees and members of the focus group are provided in tables three-six below, with names changed in order to maintain confidentiality. As can be seen all

but one of the students are from a Muslim faith and the majority were 'live at home' students, meaning that they did not live in traditional student accommodation such as halls, or student accommodation and the majority were the first in their family to attend university

Table 1. Summary of interviews and focus groups

	Number of interviews/ Focus Groups	Length of interview/focus groups
Student Interviews	7	36 – 45 minutes
Tutor interviews	7	41-61 minutes
Focus groups	4	40-56 minutes

Table 2. Student participants

Names (pseudonyms)	Course	Year of study	Faith	Live at home or on campus	First generation
Ashraf	Marketing and Management	3 rd Year	Muslim	At home	No
Haroon	Business and Marketing	3 rd year	Muslim	At home	Yes
Adil	Business and Management	1 st Year	Muslim	At home	No
Hanif	Advertising	3 rd Year	Muslim	At home	Yes
Moshin	Accounting	1 st Year	Muslim	Campus	Yes
Mehboob	Accounting	2 nd year	Muslim	At home	Yes
Asif	Accounting	1 st year	Muslim	At home	No

Table 3. Focus group participants

Names (pseudonyms)	Course	Faith	Live at home or on campus
Ovez	Accounting	Muslim	At home
Mehboob	Accounting	Muslim	Campus
Sajid	Accounting	Muslim	At home
Yakub	Accounting	Muslim	At home
Rashid	Business and Management	Muslim	At home
Nadeem	Business and Management	Muslim	At home
Ishaq	Accounting	Muslim	At home
Zain	Accounting	Muslim	At home
Adil	Accounting	Muslim	At home
Younus	Accounting	Christian	At home

Table 4. Tutor participants

Name (pseudonyms)	Ethnicity	Gender
Faruk	British Asian	Male
Geoff	British White	Male
Janet	British – White	Female
Gillian	British – White	Female
Joanne	British-White	Female
Brian	British-White	Male
Simon	British-White	Male

The interviews and underpinning approaches

As I had decided that my fundamental and underpinning approach would be interpretivist in nature, I needed to consider which research methods tools would lend themselves to capturing the experiences of participants. Interpretive research is influenced by phenomenology and hermeneutics, which for educational research means an investigation of how people see themselves and the world that they live in (Al Balushi, 2017, p. 727). The use of interviews to collate those experiences are commonly used in social research to gain insights into the research topic.

'The research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation; it is an inter-view where knowledge is constructed between the interviewer and interviewee.'

(Kvale and Brinkman, 2009, p. 2)

I decided to collate my data through semi-structured interviews and focus groups to provide an opportunity for students to share their experiences and from those experiences to find

meaning that may provide insights into the ethnicity awarding gap. The purpose of including tutors in the process was to seek the experiences from those who directly taught and had regular contact with South Asian male students. Understanding tutor perspectives of student experiences can provide additional perspectives on those experiences, to gain a better understanding of the students' perspective (Bullen and Roberts, 2019, p. 482). Furthermore, given that the relationship between tutors and students has been highlighted as an important factor in a number of studies (Singh, 2011; Cousins and Cureton, 2012; Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; Wong *et al.*, 2021), further exploring tutor perspectives may have significance in providing insights into those relationships and which may not have been apparent from the student participant alone, therefore justifying the inclusion of tutors in the sample group.

Semi-structured interviews are commonly used by researchers to collate information in relation to a variety of research topics (Luo and Wildemuth, 2017, p. 256). They are designed to 'ascertain subjective responses from persons regarding a particular situation or phenomenon they have experienced' (McIntosh and Morse, 2015, p. 1). It is a method that allows for the researcher to explore a topic using a process of pre-planned and open-ended questions as prompts. In this sense it is a process that is partially open and brings in an element of deduction to the process.

This process of interviews and giving voice to the participants is not without contention. Czerniawski and Kidd (2011) in their edited collection specifically focussing on student voice, summarise the range of positions, with proponents of its use pointing to its role in institutional development, its democratic and empowering traits and a means to ensure inclusion and participation. On the other hand, they point to contrary positions which

highlight the use of voice in research as subjective, lacking in representation and the use of 'voices' being part of a managerial discourse. Although I understood the points in relation to subjectivity and representation, my research acknowledges the subjectivity and the influence of my positionality in its underpinning methodology. Furthermore, my approach acknowledges the subjectivity in the student voice, but I was of the view that this should not detract from their views being their lived reality and a critical source of knowledge (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Careful consideration needed to be given to the design and implementation of the interviews themselves. One of the first questions that must be considered is the purpose of the interview itself. Cohen *et al.* (2018, p. 508) argue that there are three potential purposes of the interview, firstly to gather information relating to a research objective, secondly to test out a hypothesis or to identify variables and relationships and thirdly to validate information from other research methods or to delve deeper into particular issues revealed by other methods. The purpose of my interviews connected with the first of these which was broadly related to gathering information, albeit in a nuanced manner. Although the term 'semi-structured interview' is commonly used in research methods, McIntosh and Morse (2015) argue that there is confusion amongst researchers about what constitutes a semi-structured interview. They point out that semi-structured interviews may be distinct from 'guided interviews' or 'focussed' interviews highlighting nuances in how the interview is described.

This was an interesting perspective, but other conceptions of the interview have also been articulated. Cohen *et al.* (2018, p. 507) further articulate three conceptions of the interview. These are firstly, that the interview is simply a means of knowledge transfer i.e., that the

interviewer asks questions, and open and honest answers are provided by the participant. The second conception is whether biases and subjectivities are recognised and controlled for. They articulate the third conception is one where the interview is seen more as an encounter that is closer to 'everyday life'. They state:

'the interview is a social encounter, not simply a site for information exchange or capture, and that interviewers should keep this in the forefront of their minds.'

(Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p. 507)

This latter view leans towards a position where knowledge is being co-created. Cohen *et al.* (2018) further point out that there are different types of interviews and that these sit on a continuum ranging from the very standardised interview where all participants are asked the exact same questions through to the completely informal conversation where there is no pre-planning of questions.

In considering these perspectives relating to my interviews I needed to consider the type of interview that would best meet the needs of my research objectives. Given that I was seeking to understand factors that may contribute to the ethnicity awarding gap, it became evident that my interviews needed to be a vehicle for discovery, i.e., that I needed participants to reveal information, or for me as the researcher to 'see' that information from the responses that they provided. In this regard my approach to the interviews leant towards the position of the co-creation of knowledge. Using this lens therefore it was evident that my interviews would need to be pre-planned. I was also conscious that the questions needed to be open-ended and that there would need to be scope for follow-up questions to allow for a deeper

delve into areas that may be of interest. Furthermore, as I was using principles of grounded theory, it was intended that the question areas would also evolve throughout the research process. Van Manen (1990) describes this process of 'discovery' as follows:

'A good description that constitutes the essence of something is construed so that the structure of a lived experience is revealed to us in such a fashion that we are now able to grasp the nature and significance of this experience in a hitherto unseen way.'

(Van Manen, 1990, p. 39)

This 'discovery' of significant experiences allowed for the emergence of further areas of enquiry in the subsequent set of interviews. I would argue therefore that my interviews may be more accurately described as 'guided interviews' rather than semi-structured, as areas for exploration would evolve during the process and in that sense be guided by what was revealed in previous interviews. One of the weaknesses in relation to guided interviews is that pertinent topic areas may be omitted, and the flexible nature of the questioning can lead to a lack of comparability, i.e., comparing like questions with like, between interviews (Cohen *et al.*, 2018, p. 510). I mitigated against missing out topics, by allowing respondents to add anything relevant at the end of the interviews. In regard to the question relating to comparability of interviews, I considered this less relevant as my approach to interviews was informed by grounded theory which does not prescribe comparability as part of the process, but rather is more concerned with themes developing and emerging from the information that is being relayed by the participants.

The focus groups and underpinning approaches

I decided to include student focus groups in my methods as it has been acknowledged that there may be some limitations to the interview, for example the issue of power between interviewer and interviewee (Alsaawi, 2014, p.154). It has been noted that combining both interviews and focus groups may yield more comprehensive results and may allow a dialogue to be developed that may not be possible through interviews alone (Katz-Buonincontro, 2022). Considering these points, I felt that the use of focus groups had the potential to provide a richer set of data than interviews alone. I decided to undertake focus groups just with students, rather than also including tutors, as it was the student interpretation and insights that I felt were critical and required some further in-depth discussion to better understand the data that had been collected to that point. They provided an added opportunity to delve further into some of the emergent themes from both students and tutors in a more dynamic manner and would further strengthen the student voice.

Focus groups bring together a group of participants from a particular sector to discuss a particular topic (Cohen, 2018, p. 532). They have also been described as a 'controlled discussion group', where the focus group analysis should be undertaken as such, rather than as a natural discussion (Smithson 2000, p. 104). Focus groups can be useful in stimulating discussion yielding data that may not be otherwise possible in interviews and encouraging groups to voice opinions (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). However, the weakness with focus groups is that there is the risk that they are influenced by the researcher's interests (Morgan, 1996) or that dominant individuals within the group may influence others (Smithson, 2000), or that the researcher may not hear the individual stories of participants.

These were important considerations and like interviews, the focus groups had to be pre-planned, and considerations made for understanding my own influence on the process. The pre-planning involved using the themes that emerged from the interviews to inform the areas that would be explored in further depth in the focus groups. I mitigated against dominant voices by ensuring that my plan to manage the focus groups included emphasising at the start that all had equity in voice and importance, ensuring that I observed the power dynamics in the group as discussions emerged and taking a deliberate approach to encourage all to speak.

Furthermore, I planned to mitigate against individual stories or insights being 'lost' or not being heard by taking a flexible approach to the questions and ensuring that I asked follow-up questions to participants to allow them to speak more freely and to elaborate. I would also be cognisant of asking quieter members of the group if they wished to make any contributions. These strategies worked well, given the relatively small numbers in each group. The focus groups were made up by students from the same demographic profile as the students that I interviewed, to provide consistency and to allow for themes to further emerge from the discussions that took place.

Student recruitment and interviews

Once ethical approval had been given for my proposed methods, the next step was the recruitment of students to take part in the study. The students needed to be male, of South Asian heritage, studying in the business school and needed to be of UK domicile. There were some challenges in recruiting students given that my role in the school was not directly

student facing and therefore I did not have a 'ready-made' route through which to recruit students. My approach therefore involved the assistance of course leaders to help in the recruitment. I explained the nature of the research to course leaders as well as the sample of students that I wished to include in my study. Once agreement had been provided, I produced a flyer (appendix 2), that course leaders could send to students on their programmes which generated seven expressions of interest, all of whom also met the eligibility criteria. The tutors approached were supportive, as all were interested in the research area, but I was cognisant and took account of the ethical considerations discussed in the ethics section above.

Following the expressions of interest, I contacted the students via email, providing a copy of the participant information sheet (appendix 1) and followed up with a telephone conversation to further explain the nature of the research and arrange a time for the interview. I interviewed these students as soon as possible after they had agreed, to ensure that the students' commitment was followed up on quickly, and before other priorities emerged for them. All interviewees were asked to read, and if comfortable to sign the consent form (appendix 3) at the meeting, and an additional copy of the participant information sheet was provided. The interview schedule (appendix 4) was compiled using the student journey as a guide, i.e., their journeys from pre-arrival, through induction and their experiences of university thereafter. This schedule was discussed with my supervisors and also piloted with a student in order to determine whether the schedule was robust and coherent. Following the pilot, it seemed that the interview areas were appropriate, and no further amendments were made to it. The interviews themselves were between forty-fifty five minutes in duration and were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The interviews were transcribed by an

external transcription service, mainly due to my own time commitments. The next step in the process was to analyse the student interviews as part of the grounded theory approach that I was undertaking to then inform the areas for exploration with the tutors.

Tutor recruitment and interviews

Shortly after interviewing the group of students face to face, the covid pandemic led to country-wide restrictions being imposed and the university transitioning all of its activity to online provision and contact. The pandemic raised some challenges in the further collation of data as the university faced an unprecedented situation, with both tutor and students having to adjust to new ways of working at very short notice. Following the interviews with students, the next stage of data collection was due to be from tutors. However, given the onset of the pandemic and countrywide restrictions and in consultation with my supervisory team I decided to temporarily pause my data collection to allow time for all to adjust to the new working environment, and also so that I could gain a better understanding of how long the new arrangements may be in place for. When it became clear that restrictions would continue for some time and the tutors and students had adjusted to using technology in their interactions with others, again in consultation with my supervisors, I decided that I would move to the next stage of data collection using technology to conduct the interviews.

I concluded that it would be appropriate to invite participants from the whole tutor population from the business school (approximately 120 tutors) via an email. From this invite I received interest from seven tutors who agreed to take part in the study and who were eligible under the set criteria. The demographic profile of those who agreed, included four

interviewees who were male and three who were female. Six were White and one was of Asian heritage from a pool of fifteen tutors who identified as South Asian. The pool of South Asian tutors was not representative of the student population, which made it a challenge to recruit more tutors from South Asian heritage.

Tutor interviews needed to be undertaken online, via Microsoft Teams due to the covid restrictions that were in place at the time. The interviews were arranged on an individual basis via email and consent forms (appendix 5) and information sheets (appendix 6) were sent via email to the participants prior to the interview. Each tutor was asked to electronically sign the consent form and send back to me prior to the interview. At the start of the interview, I went through the consent form again to ensure that the participants were happy to proceed. The interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour and were recorded using a digital voice recorder in the same way that would have been done if the interviews had taken place face to face. I did not discern any noticeable difference in the way in which the interviews played out online, as compared to the face-to-face interviews that were undertaken with the students. I was able to build rapport and the participants appeared to be relaxed, candid and open in the way that they responded to questions. Once the tutor interviews had been undertaken, I then analysed the data once again in line with the grounded theory approach to inform the next stage of data collection, which were focus groups.

Recruitment of focus groups

For the focus groups, I did not have to adjust my approach significantly for recruiting students, and I once again requested course leaders to assist in the recruitment of students. They sent

out flyers (appendix 7) and emails requesting participants. However, on this occasion, interested students responded to the tutor so that there could be a gauge on ascertaining whether there would be sufficient numbers to run focus groups along programme lines. The focus groups had to take place online using Microsoft Teams due to the ongoing pandemic restrictions that were in place. Online focus groups presented both opportunities as well as challenges. There were opportunities in the sense of making it potentially easier for students to access and participate in the focus groups. However, there was a question as to whether students would feel comfortable in engaging and being open in a group situation which was online.

The onset of the pandemic completely changed my working and research environment from a world that was populated with face-to-face meetings to one where all meetings were being conducted online. I therefore reviewed the literature to ascertain what knowledge there was, in relation to undertaking online focus groups for research purposes. The literature was limited, but some key points that I gleaned were that generally participants did appreciate the convenience of an online focus group, rather than having to travel to a particular space. However, there was a perception that online focus groups did not flow as well as in-person focus groups (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2017). Howlett (2021) in a review of the use of online methods in data-collection in light of the pandemic, questioned whether undertaking fieldwork without being there with the participants was always appropriate and states that:

‘while mediated methods can prove useful and sometimes even reveal more details about our research sites and participants, it must be recognized that online

and in-person methods do generate different types of data, and therefore, digital approaches are not necessarily appropriate for every project or type of research.'

(Howlett, 2021, p.11)

This was an important consideration and made me question the appropriateness of online focus groups. However, given the circumstances of the pandemic and the national restrictions in place relating to meetings, there were no other alternatives available, other than to wait for the restrictions to end. I had to balance waiting for the end of the restrictions, against continuing in the online world and decided, that given that at the time there were no firm timelines for ending the restrictions, I decided to continue with the research online.

In order to facilitate the focus groups and make it easier for students to participate I offered to conduct the focus groups directly after a teaching session if the numbers of students who expressed an interest from a particular course made that viable. This would make it easier for students to come together from the perspective of students being familiar with each other, but also from a timetabling perspective as students from the same course would have similar timetables, and therefore more likely to be available at the same time. The approach did have some impact and I was able to undertake four focus groups with students who had agreed to participate in the research. Each focus group was aligned to a particular course.

However, one of the issues that emerged was, that not all the students who agreed to join the focus groups actually joined the session, which led to smaller than anticipated numbers, with three focus groups having two students each and the fourth having four students. I had considered postponing the focus groups until such time as I had larger groups but given the

challenges in recruiting students and the ongoing challenges arising from the pandemic, I concluded that it would be better to continue with the students I had, rather than risk losing those as well.

I had set up a dedicated meeting link which was shared with the participants who had agreed to be part of the focus groups, that could be used to join the session directly after their teaching session. Given that the focus groups were being undertaken online, I emailed the participants who had agreed to join, a copy of the student consent form and asked that they electronically signed the consent form and send it back to me. At the start of the focus group, I went through the consent form and asked again that they confirmed in writing via the 'chat' function within Teams at the time of the focus group that they were happy to proceed. Additionally, I verbally summarised the information in the focus group participant information sheet (appendix 8) and again provided these during the discussions. The focus groups lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and were recorded using a digital voice recorder.

I found undertaking focus groups online more challenging than undertaking interviews online. I found that it was more difficult to build a rapport with the group and also that the discussions that did take place tended to be less free flowing than might have been the case if the focus groups were face-to-face. This may have been due to participants using 'online meeting etiquette' such as waiting until the speaking participant had finished before contributing, or putting an electronic hand up to be brought in. This aligned with Howlett's conclusion above that there is the potential for different types of data to emerge in the online environment as compared with 'live' focus groups. I attempted to mitigate this in subsequent focus groups by reminding participants at the start that they were free to contribute at any point and that

they did not need to put up hands to speak, to aid a more free-flowing conversation. Although this did have some impact, I was left wondering how the focus groups may have been different had I physically co-located with the participants.

Trust and credibility of the data

A final issue relating to the methods of research was that relating to trust and credibility as there is potential for the research findings to be of interest to a range of internal and external parties. This may include tutors across the university who may be interested in any insights relating to the ethnicity awarding gap and what this means for learning and teaching approaches. Similarly, there may also be interest from the broader higher education sector where the ethnicity awarding gap phenomenon has also generated much interest. It is therefore important that those interested in this data have confidence in it. Nowell *et al.* (2017) state that qualitative research is an important approach to make inquiries of particular phenomena and that its intricacies require systematic and rigorous methods to generate data that has meaning. Lincoln and Guba (1985) postulate that generating trust in the data is one way whereby the researcher can demonstrate to themselves and to others who are interested, that the research that has been undertaken has been worthwhile.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four questions which should be asked to establish trust in the research. These are, checking the value of the truth that is found, the applicability of the research, consistency, and neutrality of the researcher. Ways in which trust could be established would be to clearly articulate the methods used, their confirmability, reflexivity and also audit trails. Taking each of these in turn, I have been able to clearly articulate the

methodology and methods in this chapter. Confirmability can also be seen in both the findings section, where the reader can see how findings have been derived from the data that has been collected. In regard to an audit trail, I have kept notes on my approaches and thoughts during the process and made extensive notes on the data transcripts and constructed detailed spreadsheets relating to the data, which were then used to derive themes.

Analysis

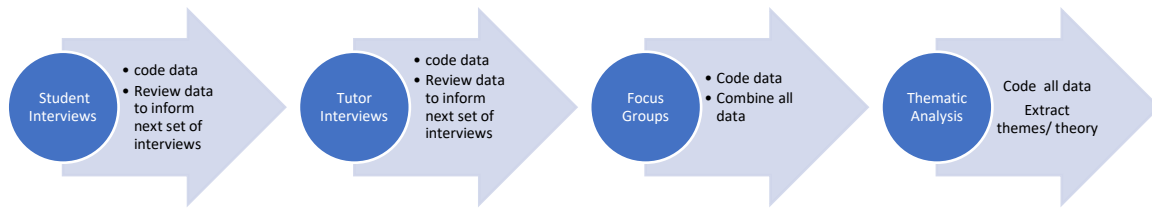
In this section I will outline my selection of analysis methods and my overall approach to the analysis of data. I considered several analysis methods that would assist in interpreting the data that had been collated. This was a challenge, considering the vast range of different analysis methods that could be utilised. During my doctoral studies I had the opportunity to review a number of data analysis methods including grounded theory, thematic analysis, voice relational methods and interpretive phenomenological analysis. After careful consideration I decided that I would utilise a combined approach using both grounded theory and thematic analysis methods to interpret the data. Combining grounded theory approaches with thematic analysis provides an opportunity to strengthen the depth of the analysis and also in the organisation of the themes. The process involves the review of responses, using relevant coding, which in turn enables the development of themes and theory, building on the iterative data that has been collated. (Chapman, 2015; Heydarian, 2016; O'Callaghan *et al.*, 2024).

Analysis using grounded theory and thematic analysis

In the grounded theory method, data is all (Glaser, 2001) and great emphasis is placed on how this data is collected and analysed. Grounded theory suggests that the data should be read and coded by micro-analysing, i.e., that transcripts should be reviewed 'word for word' and then attaching codes to the meaning that emerge. The data should be reviewed several times to allow for different perspectives and insights into the data to be revealed (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, pp. 65-68). The analysis of the data is very much led by the themes and meaning that emerge from the data in an iterative process. That is, after each piece of data that is collected, it should be analysed, which will then determine what data is collected next, until the point of 'saturation' has been reached. This process was central to the grounded theory approach and highlighted the value that was given to the data. Glaser and Strauss argued 'for grounding theory in social research itself – for generating it from the data.'

As discussed earlier, I deployed a variation to the original approach for grounded theory. This involved undertaking an analysis of the data at the point that each group of data had been collated, i.e., after all the students had been interviewed, then after the tutor focus groups and then after the focus groups, rather than after each interview. Following the analysis of each data set, the data was combined into a single spreadsheet and thematic analysis undertaken to analyse and identify the themes and theory that had emerged from across the three groups of participants. See Fig 2.

Figure 3. Stages of data analysis.



I interviewed 7 students in the first instance, followed by 7 tutors and then I undertook 4 focus groups. Each transcript was reviewed, and codes attached to words or groups of words in the transcript. After each sample group, I went through each transcript three times, initially using simple codes, then more detailed review in the subsequent coding, breaking down phrases and finally undertaking a comparison between the different groups to summarise themes. Codes and excerpts were highlighted digitally onto the transcripts after each review. These codes, along with the related excerpts were then transferred to an excel spreadsheet where I was able to order them into categories or themes. Separate excel spreadsheets were collated after each group of interviews and focus groups that had taken place: one for student interviews, one for tutor interviews, and one for student focus groups. Once the three spreadsheets had been collated, each with codes and themes, they were then moved to a single spreadsheet to undertake a thematic analysis to compare and extract a final set of concepts and themes. From this I was then able to extract an overarching theory discussed below.

An example of the coding was that all of the students and all of the tutors mentioned the family or connected words such as 'parents', 'Mum', 'Dad', 'sisters' or 'brothers.' In the

transcripts I then coded these parts of the interview with the word 'family' and transferred all of these to an excel spreadsheet. This enabled me to produce a spreadsheet within which all the 'codes' had been categorised into themes and allowed for further interpretation and analysis. I then reviewed the transcripts again identifying further codes, quotes and themes, each time adding to the excel spreadsheet. This then enabled me to adapt the interview schedule for the next set of interviews with tutors, to allow for a further focus on the themes that emerged from the student interviews.

An example of this was the emergent theme of mental health that came from the codes identified in the student interviews. This assisted in then directing the interviews with tutors in relation to mental health and provided an opportunity for tutors to provide their perspectives on this issue. In relation to the tutor interviews the importance of the place of family was also highlighted, which led to a further exploration of this in the focus groups. Although I had not planned any further interviews or focus groups, I found that overall, no new information was revealed through the focus groups, and that the data was confirmatory of the data that had been collated in the student and tutor interviews and that the point of 'saturation' had been reached. Table 5. below, provides an example of my initial coding process. Table 6. outlines the key question areas that were developed for exploration for the student interviews, tutor interviews and focus groups. The final piece of analysis involved merging the codes and information from the three spreadsheets into one, to create a single dataset which contained all the codes, words and categorisations. I then reviewed these with a view to determining the emergence of themes and theory.

Table 5. Coding example

Cultural reference	Code	Further area for exploration
<i>'As an Asian I will'</i>	Ethnicity	Identity
<i>'The South Asian males...'</i>	Ethnicity/gender	
<i>'Asian people have families that demand a bit more and they want us to do well.'</i>	Family	Motivation
<i>'So, for me, for example it was like, if I go to uni, I can perhaps get a better paid job'</i>	Employment	
<i>'We certainly don't tend to see many students that...from that background that live on campus, the majority of them will commute.'</i>	Transition	
<i>'Yes, so what I was about to say is, when they come to university, there's that newfound freedom that they wouldn't have, they're in charge of themselves, so what that means is that they'll probably do things that they probably couldn't have done back home.'</i>	Freedom	Family influences
<i>'So obviously with Asian guys there is a bit of stigma talking around mental health'</i>	Mental health	Mental health
<i>At home you wouldn't want to do anything but when I went out, I was different'</i>	Dual personality	
<i>'I think the family impact of it is huge,</i>	Pressure	

Table 6. Iterative interview/focus group development

Areas of exploration with students	Areas of exploration with tutors	Areas for exploration in student focus groups
Decision making/ motivations in coming to university.	The place of family in the lives of South Asian students	Family influence in student journeys into HE.
Expectations and aspirations.	Approaches to teaching.	Tutors
Engagement with university and programme of study.	Relationships with students	Identity.
Relationships with peers and university tutors.	Perceptions of student engagement.	Engagement with university
Priorities.	Perceptions of peer relationships between students.	Notions of 'freedom' for the students.
	Mental health.	Mental health

Thematic analysis

The final part of my analysis used the vehicle of thematic analysis. I undertook this analysis on the whole dataset using codes to produce key themes and look for a theory. Thematic analysis is described as an approach for 'identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within data' (Braun and Clark, 2006, p. 79). Braun and Clark (2006) also summarise the benefits and pitfalls of undertaking thematic approaches. The benefits include the fact that it is not prescriptive, the flexible nature of the approach and the fact that the narratives of different research participants can be examined together. Some of the disadvantages that they put forward are that they include the lack of research on thematic analysis and the fact that its flexible nature could lead to inconsistency. This in turn could lead to questions of trust in the data. Nowell *et al.* (2017) points out that 'Trustworthiness is one way that researchers can persuade themselves and readers that their research findings are worthy of attention.'

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 80) state that thematic analysis is not thought of as a method of analysis in its own right but is a more generic approach towards qualitative data. They go on to state that thematic analysis can be distinguished from theory and therefore is able to be used flexibly with several different theoretical frameworks. Given this flexibility, and the possibility of being able to use this approach to strengthen the approach to identifying themes and theory, it was an appropriate method to complement the grounded theory approaches and themes. The step-by-step approach to thematic analysis was outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and their approach is summarised below.

Table 7. Phases of thematic analysis

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
3. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
4. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

(Braun and Clarke, 2006)

Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2006) highlight that the above steps can be adapted and applied flexibly to suit the researcher's area of study and the type of data being collated. They also point out that the analysis may not necessarily flow from one step to the next and that there may be an element of movement between the stages. This flexibility could present a challenge and it has been argued that the approach lacks clarity and is too general in approach (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). Braun and Clarke have further refined their approach to thematic analysis and acknowledge the reflexive nature of it and have since written extensively to redefine those aspects from their seminal publication in 2006, now referring to it as reflexive thematic analysis. In their updated text, they state:

'We settled on using the adjective reflexive for our approach to TA because we came to recognise that valuing a subjective, situated, aware and questioning researcher, a reflexive researcher is a fundamental characteristic of TA for us, and a differentiating factor across versions of TA.'

(Braun and Clark, 2021, p. 5)

The approach takes account of the role of researcher in the production of knowledge (Byrne, 2022). For example, in the process of coding, Braun and Clarke (2020) state that within a reflexive thematic approach, 'we understand coding as an active and reflexive process that inevitably and inescapably bears the mark of the researcher(s).' Themes therefore are created by arranging the codes around a common concept that is interpreted from the data (Byrne 2022). This recognition of the role of the researcher in producing codes chimes with my own reflections on my position within the research discussed earlier.

However, Braun and Clarke (2020) argue that what is important in selecting a research method is that it fits the purpose of the project and that the research question and method are in alignment. My research question is essentially seeking insights into factors that may influence the ethnicity awarding gap between South Asian male and White students and analysing the overall data that had been used, using principles of grounded theory to seek out themes fitted well with the overall purpose of this research project. Reviewing that data through the lens of thematic analysis would allow for further analysis which would allow for an overview analysis to capture any further themes or to add validity to the themes that had emerged. The process ensures that themes are not omitted or given undue weight and in essence can act as a process of triangulation (Chapman *et al.*, 2015, p. 203). I undertook a

thematic analysis by the use of a spreadsheet where all the key words, phrases and quotes were transferred, alongside the codes.

As discussed, grounded theory is a methodological approach, which can be used to allow theory to emerge, and I collated data and analysed it through an iterative process. Through this process it became possible to build codes, and through the use of thematic analysis, identify themes which were grounded in the data and allowed for a theory to emerge. The specific findings, themes and emergent theory are discussed in the findings chapter below.

Chapter 4 – Findings

During my research, data was collated through interviews and focus groups with male UK-domicile undergraduate students of South Asian heritage and interviews with academic tutors. My findings relate specifically to this group of students rather than a broader group of students. In the preceding chapter I outlined my approach and rationale to the collation of data using principles of grounded theory and thematic analysis to seek meaning from the data. This chapter presents the key findings, themes and the emergent theory that emerged from my research, highlighting themes and sub-themes, contextualised by specific data from students and tutors.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset of this chapter, three points. Firstly, the South Asian population is not a homogeneous group and that within this group lie a wide range of beliefs, values and ways of living, determined by factors such as religion, regionality and individuality (Ibrahim *et al.*, 1997). My specific findings relating to this group of students should not be interpreted as applicable to all South Asian male student lives. However, there are themes which emerge that may assist the university and others to consider their approaches to better connect with South Asian students within the learning environment. Secondly, it could be argued that my findings are applicable to the lives of students from different backgrounds and characteristics to those in my research.

However, I posit that my findings provide a picture of specific layers located within the lives of some South Asian male students, which add a level of distinction to the lives of the wider student population. This should not be interpreted as a 'deficit', i.e., that the specific layers

are something that must be 'fixed' or removed, or that they are in some way problematic. They are not. The students who arrive at the doors of higher education are their authentic selves, with their particular life experiences, values and perspectives. My findings provide some insight into a slice of the worlds of the students that took part in the study and also the lens through which tutors see their South Asian male students. Thirdly, and following on from the previous point, the findings should be taken as posing a challenge to the university as to what this means and how they need to adapt and reform in order to better reach out and connect with this group of students, as one of the tools with which to address the ethnicity awarding gap. This will be discussed in further detail in the discussion chapter below.

My thematic analysis revealed a number of themes that emerged from both the student and tutor groups. However, the analysis also highlighted some additional context and variation on those themes as well as perspectives on the location of the challenges that came from the tutor group. The main themes from this final analysis included the importance to students of family and culture, sense of identity, transition, friendship groups, and relationships with tutors, as well as the impact of mental health. The convergence of themes from tutors and students provided a level of assurance that the themes had some relevance.

Further insights or sub-themes that emerged from the tutor group, provided some additional context to the main themes including the need to revisit the curriculum, connecting with South Asian student families/carers, and the need for wider institutional change that would lead to stronger connections and engagement to South Asian male students. It is notable that these additional tutor insights focussed more on what needed to be done in relation to change, including changes to university structures and processes, indicating a location of the

issue with the university. Themes and sub-themes that emerged from tutors and students are summarised in table 8. below.

Table 8. Emergent themes and sub-themes

Student and tutors – key themes raised	Tutors – sub-themes
Identity - the sense of being South Asian male –	Importance of engaging the family in South Asian student journeys
Motivation – reasons for entering university	Potential impact of tutor/student relationship, where the demographic profile of the tutors does not match the student demographic profile.
Transition Cultural/ family responsibilities and duties e.g. caregiving responsibilities	Curriculum that does not always sufficiently connect to or engage with the South Asian student
Relationships with peers	The focus on the institution and the need for it to change, rather than the student, to strengthen the connection to South Asian male students
Relationships between tutor and student	
Impact of mental health and ‘taboo’ of South Asian males raising or talking about this issue	

The literature review chapter highlighted factors such as lived experiences of minoritised ethnic students, relationships, institutional culture and institutional approaches to the learning environment that may have an influence on ethnicity awarding gaps (Connor *et al.*, 2004; Dhanda, 2010; Cousins and Cureton, 2012; Singh, 2011; Frings, 2019; Universities UK, 2019). Elements of these factors chimed with the themes that emerged from my research and perhaps strengthen the insights that these elements provide in understanding the unexplained aspect of the ethnicity awarding gap. My findings are based on themes that are grounded in the experiences and perspectives of the participants, though there are

implications for institutional culture and approaches throughout with an emergent theory considered towards the end of this chapter.

My findings specifically relate to South Asian males as opposed to the broader group of minoritised ethnic students that has been the focus for much of the literature. In fact, as previously discussed my participant group ended up being even more nuanced than that, in that almost all of the student participants who accepted invitations to join the research described themselves as being from a Muslim faith background, thereby making the findings particularly relevant to this group. However, I would suggest that there are points of consideration that will be of relevance for other demographic profile of students who experience inequities in experience or outcomes.

Prior to outlining the detailed findings, I will introduce key words that I use to help contextualise the findings. I conceptualise the dynamic between student and university as 'cultural touchpoints.' The word touchpoint in the context of my research is a word that describes a point where two or more elements come together, in this case the different aspects of family or culture interacting with the world of university. My notion of 'cultural touchpoints' is an adaptation of the concept of the concept of 'customer touchpoints' which is commonly used in the business environment to highlight the different points at which customers may interact with a business. Stein and Ramaseshan (2016, p. 8) explain that 'customers have experiences every time they "touch" any part of the product, service, brand or organization, across multiple channels and at various points in time.' De Keyser *et al.* (2020, p. 38) go on to explain that 'these touchpoints are critical to experience formation as without any actual or imagined interaction taking place, there can be no customer experience.' I have

adapted this concept to the university environment to highlight the particular interactions between the student and university where the culture and backgrounds of the students have some significance in helping to better understand that relationship, whether that be in transition from further education, through to the impact of mental health. I go onto suggest that these cultural touchpoints may create some level of dissonance between the student and university. Dissonance can simply be described as a lack of harmony. Provost (2023) expands on this and defines the term as:

'the tension that results from the combination or clash of two incompatible elements. In other words, it is the opposite of harmony, which is the culmination of complementary factors, and it can be found in a variety of fields.'

(Provost, 2023, Para 2)

The term 'dissonance' has also been used specifically in education to contextualise the relationship between some students and the educational institution. In a review of dominant cultures and social economies, it has been argued that 'it is in the relationship between social institutions and the learner that high degrees of dissonance can result in failure to learn, or a distortion of the learning process' (Gordon and Yowell, 1992). Jensen and Bickel (2012) in their review of Native Americans who graduated from American universities hypothesised that 'cultural conflict or dissonance' was a reason for the higher dropout rates for Native Americans. The analysis of my findings is critical in presenting the idea that there is some level of dissonance or disharmony being created in the cultural touchpoints between the university and aspects of South Asian male student lives. I posit that there is a racial element, located in the race or ethnicity of the students and manifested through expressions of culture that

underpins this dissonance. The dissonance results from the university and its ways of working not being able to embrace the values and culture of those who do not fit within the dominant culture of the university. As such, I further argue that the dissonance can be linked to McPherson's definition of institutional racism, i.e., 'the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin' (McPherson, 1999). I therefore refer to this phenomenon as racial dissonance and suggest that racial dissonance is:

'a form of institutional racism, where cultural touchpoints create areas of incompatibility between an organisation's practice and an individual, grounded in race, culture and ethnicity, and through those interactions, creating a level of disharmony.'

It is this racial dissonance that may shed further light on possible factors that operate in the space of the unexplained part of the ethnicity awarding gap.

Family and culture in the South Asian male student journey

From the analysis of the data, it was clear that family norms and culture were an overarching theme that emerged from the interviews and focus groups. Culture is a notion that is difficult to define despite a large body of literature on the subject (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Matsumoto (1996, p. 16) states that culture is, '... the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next.' Spencer-Oatey (2008) describes culture as:

'a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour.'

(Spencer-Oatey, 2008, p. 2)

Although definitions do differ in their emphasis, it may be argued that at the core of any definition of culture is a commonality of shared beliefs and values in a group which to a greater or lesser extent influence individual behaviours or interactions with others.

Family and culture permeated many of the conversations with tutors and students. This manifested itself in discussions that centred on values, beliefs and behaviours linked to being from a South Asian heritage. Shariff (2009) characterises the South Asian culture as one where the importance of the family and its welfare is central. She goes on to state that 'the emphasis on collectivism fosters familial interdependence throughout the lifespan; children are socialized to remain emotionally dependent on their parents well into adulthood' (Shariff, 2009, p. 37). Although I would argue that this definition is somewhat of an over-generalisation, the emphasis on family at the heart of South Asian culture was central to all of the conversations that I had with tutors and students. Singh (2011, p. 4) in his synthesis of literature regarding the awarding gap at the time, noted the possibility of 'faith, religion, culture and socio-historic permutations having direct links to educational attainment.' One example which typified the comments around family and culture was highlighted by Ovez, who talked about growing up and his upbringing. He states:

'our upbringing is a lot different to people from different backgrounds, well that's what we believe and what I've come to believe as I've grown older.'

Ovez, 2nd year accounting student

Ovez goes on to talking about how family values in relation to education may influence the interdependence and socialisation within some South Asian families:

'Asian people have families that demand a bit more and they want us to do well. Any parents would be to be honest, but it feels like there's a bit more pressure from home in terms of achieving, doing well and setting standards. Especially for me, because my family's from an educated background. There's a lot more demand and motivation in a sense as well.'

Ovez, 2nd year accounting student

Other students talked about fitting family responsibilities around university commitments, the impact of which was to make university less of a priority. A typical response was provided by Haroon, a third-year marketing student when asked where he ranks university in his life priorities. He says:

'It would definitely be somewhere in the middle, because at the top is always family, family first. It was always, do you know what I mean looking after my family, making sure everything is alright any issues or anything like that.'

Haroon, 3rd year marketing students

Mehboob, a second-year accounting and finance student, in one of the focus groups talked about the impact of Asian family values influencing the paths that children took. He talked about the expectation of him working in the family business, which in turn raised for him the question of how this impacted his life choices. He states:

'I guess in a way everyone has to help their families, but I guess a little part of you might think well what about myself, what if I want to do something and maybe I don't want to go into... Yes, maybe I don't want to go into those roles, maybe I want to make a path for myself, maybe I don't want to work in the family business.'

Mehboob, 2nd year accounting student

The impact of family was also raised by some of the tutors. Janet, when talking about South Asian males states:

'Going to university is a very small part of their life, they fit it in, around their jobs, they're socialising, their family commitments, if they have childcare responsibilities, university has to fit in, it's a very small part of their life, even though it's a big cost.'

Janet, female tutor

Brian when talking about family and South Asian students also provides a comment that typifies the tutor perspective, stating:

'I think the family impact of it is huge, but I certainly wouldn't underestimate as well, in some respects the relevance of it to them as well.'

Brian, male tutor

In this quote Brian acknowledges the impact of family, but also acknowledges the importance of this to his South Asian students, which again suggests that there is a difference in impact and cultural norms relating to family between White and South Asian students.

The references to family values, culture and upbringing were prominent throughout the discussions with students and demonstrated the centrality of family in the lives of the students that were interviewed. However, within this it was evident that there were sub-themes that linked into this overarching theme including identity, motivation, transition, relationships and mental health, which are explored below.

South Asian male identity

In discussion most students described their world through the lens of 'being' South Asian, using phrases such as 'Asian culture is...', 'As an Asian I will...', 'it just feels like we're part of an extended family...', 'I would say South Asian lads...', 'I mean Asian boys, Asian lads.....'. Whereas culture may be described as beliefs and values that may influence practice, identity is more concerned with individual feelings about belonging to a group and what that may mean (Grimson, 2010, p. 63). The feelings or references to being Asian and often references to Asian maleness raised the notion of identity, i.e., that there was a strong sense of how the students saw themselves and the group that they 'belonged' to. That group was also gendered

(male) and very much linked back to being Asian. Tutors also referenced this group, using phrases such as, 'South Asian males would...', 'or the Asian males coming in and it's just like a mass group of about 20 or 30 of them...', 'The South Asian males...' Such phrases revealed a context in which there were clear ideas about how students saw themselves as being part of a group, but also how there was perhaps an identity that tutors also saw and ascribed to the students.

The sense of identity also aligned with aspects of my literature review. In a study in 2021, which explored the experiences of South Asian students at a university in the UK, it was found that 'being Asian was a significant aspect to their lives shaped by their different cultures and identities' (Islam(b), 2021). In a review of ethnicity and intergenerational influences on consumption it was found that:

'even though a second-generation person may be western in a number of different environments, certain consumption decisions (especially those in the public domain) are still very much entrenched and influenced by Indian culture.'

(Sekhon, 2007, p. 165)

Frings (2019) found that students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds tended to have a higher awareness of their ethnic identity compared to White students, but that with this were perceptions of potentially higher levels of incompatibility with other identities such as learner identities within higher education, both in practical terms (time and resources) but also psychological terms relating to beliefs, norms and experiences.

When analysing conversations that took place within my research, it became evident that those conversations not only revealed the importance of culture and family in the university life journey of the students, but that this in turn created an identity for the students as South Asian and in some areas more specifically identity as a South Asian male. Islam (2021, p. 15) in her review of the experiences of Muslim students at university found that 'Asian intersectional identity pervades almost all aspects of the majority of our students' lives.' Sense of identity is important and can be used by people to make sense of themselves, of what they do and how they may be different to others (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000, p. 4). Within the notion of identity is the question of how this identity interplays within higher education and I argue is an example of a cultural touchpoint and raises a question of whether it fosters a level of incompatibility or dissonance with one's surroundings as argued by Frings (2019) and in turn what the implications are for the ethnicity awarding gap?

Motivation to enter higher education

A further sub-theme that emerged from discussions with students and tutors, under the overarching theme of culture, was the family influence on students' motivations, and decisions relating to them entering higher education. It is well documented that one of the key influencers and motivators for students entering higher education is the potential to secure higher skilled and remunerated employment (Schmidt *et al.*, 2011). It has also been noted that motivation to go to university does vary between disciplines (Taylor and House, 2010). All the students that took part in the interviews were clear that one of their motivations for entering higher education was as a route to securing better skilled and remunerated employment. Although this was unsurprising and aligned with motivations of

the wider student population, there was an additional layer revealed by the tutor and student interviews that linked motivation and influence with family and South Asian heritage.

Cultural norms and family influence revealed by the student participants placed a high value on higher education. It could be argued that this may be reinforced by the fact that there are proportionately higher numbers of minoritised ethnic undergraduate students in higher education (Advance HE, 2020, p. 126). Cotton *et al.* (2016) in their study of ethnicity awarding gaps found that minoritised ethnic students scored the statement, 'I believe that a university education is very important', significantly higher than White students. Minoritised ethnic students in that survey also reported a greater influence on student decisions from families. Their study also suggested that minoritised ethnic students were more likely to be motivated by the future career prospects from a course, as compared to White students. Family influence therefore did appear to be a strong factor in students' decision to enter higher education.

An additional factor for consideration here was that when the student participants in my research were asked, most stated that their parents were first generation migrants to the UK. Thomas and Quinn (2007) argued that students who were first-generation into university had less 'insider' knowledge and support as they journeyed through higher education. It has further been argued that the desire for first generation migrants to improve themselves socially, economically and educationally are strong motivators for this group (Crozier, 2009, p. 293). This notion could also be a factor in the high value placed on higher education by some South Asian families as gaining a degree may be seen as one way to improve one's life chances. Gofen (2009) looked at the impact of families for first generation students, i.e., those

that were first in their families to attend university. Gofen found that family was a significant factor in first generation students breaking the 'mould', i.e., that parents wanted their children to do 'better' than they did and going to university was a marker of that betterment. The majority of students in my research described how their families, including extended families, played a part in shaping their decisions to come to university and it may be argued that the high value placed on higher education linked with the idea that parents of first-generation students wanted their children to 'break the mould' and played a significant role in those decisions.

The value placed on higher education by South Asian families is described by Asif, who was a first-year accounting student who had been in full-time employment after college for six years, before deciding to enter higher education. He sums up the sentiment as follows:

'I think with Asians as well you are more respected if you have got a degree I would say. Like especially like, you know you hear like people talking, like not gossiping but you know they talk about other families. And it's very like impressive that you have got a degree you know.'

Asif, 1st year accounting student

Ashraf, a third-year marketing student, and one of the students who was not a first-generation student, received strong support from his family and extended family to attend university. When asked the question what influenced him to attend university, he unequivocally states:

'Probably my family first, because everyone in my family – well, most people in my family have been to university, so my dad, my uncles, my cousins, so I'd say they had an influence.'

Ashraf, 3rd year marketing student

Moshin was the first in his family to attend university and was the only student in the cohort of student participants who lived on campus. He had engaged in extensive conversations with his family about going to university, despite having older siblings who had not attended. Contrary to what other students had mentioned, Moshin stated that initially his father was not in favour of him going to university, mainly due to the cost and not understanding how the student loan system worked, but Moshin very much saw university as a way to progress and was determined. He states:

'But growing up in Asian households, you kind of can't go against parents if that makes sense? But I thought I can't be in a position that my sisters are in. They stopped school and went into work, and I didn't want to go into some, go into those sorts of roles, so I wanted to do better.'

Moshin, 1st Year accounting student

He explains how he persuaded his family that going to university was what he wanted to do and goes on to state:

'So, it was quite a big leap for the family, but having talked to them, they were really swayed by me going to university. It was more my decision, so yes there was,

especially from my sisters, they were very supportive in me going to university and doing better than them, basically.'

Moshin, 1st Year accounting student

As well as the motivation for entering higher education, subject choice was also a consideration. In one study relating to South Asian students studying nursing, it was found that all students who took part in the study had experienced pressure to choose a subject that would lead to a well-paid job (with the perception that nursing wasn't) (Dyson *et al.*, 2008, p. 168). All the students involved in my research were studying business related subjects. These were seen by the students as subjects which they felt would provide natural progression to jobs such as accounting, management, and marketing roles and perhaps provided an explanation as to the higher numbers (39%) of students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds that were studying these subjects in the business school. Haroon, a third-year marketing student talked about his reason for choosing a business-related subject, very much linking it to his employment prospects for the future. He states:

'So, for me, for example it was like, if I go to uni, I can perhaps get a better paid job, a better title rather than staying in a basic job all my life.'

Haroon, 3rd Year Marketing student

From the tutor's perspective there was also a theme that for South Asian students there was an expectation from home to study certain types of programmes that have more obvious career paths. This linked to points raised by students in the study that the reason for going to university was to 'get better paid jobs.' Janet, talked about her experiences of teaching South

Asian male students and how she felt that for some, there was pressure from home to study certain types of courses, such as business. She states:

'University is a really good thing and really important for them, but they've also got to do the right course as well. And there is a pressure for them to do certain courses.'

Janet, female tutor

The perspective of the students who were interviewed, suggested that for some students from South Asian backgrounds there was a family expectation around studying subjects with perceived good employment prospects. There may be a number of reasons for this, wrapped up in culture, values and expectations. However, whatever the underlying reasons may be, I would postulate that motivation to come to university is a cultural touchpoint for consideration. If there is a layer of culture contributing to the motivations to enter higher education and subject choice, then there is the inevitable question of what impact this has on the student/university relationship and how each student responds in that scenario. There is also the further question as to whether motivation, linked to going to university and subject choice for some South Asian students is an example of a cultural touchpoint which may generate some racial dissonance. Although, the extent to which family influence on South Asian student subject choice at university impacts on the ethnicity awarding gap is not clear, it is a theme that reinforces the important role that family plays in the life choices of South Asian male students and perhaps is an area for further research.

Transition and beyond

Following on from the motivation for entering higher education, transition was also a theme that emerged from the data. A number of sub-themes that impacted beyond transition also emerged with links back to culture and family norms. These included the notion of 'freedom', caregiving, and mental health, which are discussed below.

Transition

Morgan (2020) highlights the point that students may have several concerns and anxieties when transitioning into university, including financial concerns, the work itself and of making friends. Briggs *et al.* (2012) further nuances this point and discuss the challenges for students 'in transition' making the point that for some students there is an element of 'social displacement' which could be exacerbated if the student is mature, first in the family to attend university or from an ethnic minority background. Wilcox *et al.* (2005, p. 712) argue that becoming a student is about negotiating their old life and the new life ahead of them and that making and maintaining social support networks with peers is a key aspect of student life. Furthermore, Kantanis (2000) argues that social transition into university is a key part of successful academic transition and found that a substantial proportion of students did not believe that they had adapted to becoming independent learners after their first semester. Again, these are factors that will be relevant to many students, regardless of background. However, there were certainly points that emerged from the data that I would argue reveal a further cultural touchpoint as the culture and backgrounds of the students connects with process adapting to university life.

Hanif, a third-year advertising student, recalls how he experienced challenges during his first year. In class he was not particularly engaged and felt disconnected from classmates. He goes on to explain:

'I kind of got that feeling that nobody wanted to speak to me, because it was like, alright fair enough I am not speaking to you; I am sat there in kind of silence. But you are not saying anything to me either so there is no reason for me to say anything to you, there is nothing to speak about here.'

Hanif, 3rd year advertising student

I explored the reasons for this patchy engagement and Hanif stated that part of the reasons for this were, that there were not many other students from his background on the course and that he found this difficult. He states:

'... if I am being honest with you because being from Blackburn is a massive Asian community, there is loads of Asians there. There was barely any Asians in the class at all, not that I don't mind mixing, I am completely fine with mixing with different cultures and different people. But at that time, it was just, you know you don't gel with certain people.'

Hanif, 3rd year advertising student

Certainly, for Hanif it would appear the challenges of transition were compounded by the fact that he did not feel able to 'gel' with his course colleagues and that was partly linked to his

ethnicity. The aspect of building friendships as a part of transition was also acknowledged by

Asif:

'I think it was easy making friends but if you don't make friends in the first couple of weeks and you just stay alone then it will be difficult.'

Asif, 1st year accounting student

Asif was studying on the accounting programme and had stated that the friends that he made were mainly from a similar background to himself. The accounting programme in the business school had proportionately higher numbers of South Asian students studying on it, which perhaps explains his opportunity to connect with other students. Zulfiqar also reflected on being an Asian in his first year and stated:

'I'd say in actuality, for me personally I feel like pertaining to this course it's been a lot easier being Asian. I see a lot of similar people to myself. It's been easier for me transitioning into uni, especially being on the course as well.'

Zulfiqar, 2nd year accounting student

Within these observations by students are notions of culture, of where and how friendships are built. Hanif alludes to the challenges of not easily connecting with students that are from different backgrounds, whereas Asif and Zulfiqar, provide the converse account, i.e., that they found transition easier due to meeting people who were 'like them'.

The student participants also highlighted that they weren't prepared for the move from a more structured and supportive environment at college, to one that they saw as being more pressurised. Factors cited by students included the move to more independent learning and less support than they were receiving at college. A typical response was given by Rashid:

'The difference for me is pressure, in terms of college it's much more relaxed but the university is more pressure. You don't get that help at university where in college you would. At university it's more independent.'

Rashid, 3rd year business studies student

Kift and Nelson (2005) in their review of university transition strategies argue that first-year students have learning needs that arise from transition that links into both the academic and social transition. They go on to state that 'from multiple starting points, all students are on a journey to becoming self-managing or self-directed learners and the first-year curriculum must help get them there.' Linked to this point they make the case that a key aspect of curriculum reform needs to ensure that tutors have knowledge of who the students are, an understanding of their fears and perceptions and an acceptance of their starting points (Kift and Nelson, 2005). Although Kift and Nelson's analysis does not specifically reference ethnicity as a factor in the transition, there is certainly a reference to acknowledging the starting points of each student, of which ethnicity, I would argue is a factor.

The challenge of transition was also picked up on by a tutor, who when speaking about South Asian students, reflected on some of the issues regarding the early years of university becoming more enduring. He says:

'So, I think some of the challenges really, that they [South Asian students] gain from year one, almost kind of stayed really with them, in year two and year three.'

Brian, male tutor

Freedom

Linked to transition was the notion of 'freedom' which emerged from the data. Freedom was a word used by several of the students and some tutors, to describe how for some South Asian students studying in a place away from their hometown provided opportunities to explore life in a way that perhaps wasn't possible for them when they were studying at school or college. There was a link here back to culture, family, and upbringing. Moshin, when asked the question how it was for South Asian male students in the first year stated:

'Yes, so what I was about to say is, when they come to university, there's that newfound freedom that they wouldn't have, they're in charge of themselves, so what that means is that they'll probably do things that they probably couldn't have done back home.'

Moshin, 1st Year accounting student

Moshin went on to explain that South Asian male students may be more restricted when parents and family were in closer proximity. Here is an example of where culture and family may be having an impact on student behaviours. The idea of freedom was also raised by some tutors. Janet had discussed this with some of her students in class. She states:

'I think what I've discovered is the social side of university is so important, and when I've discussed it with some students, they've said that it gives them this new freedom, particularly some of the Asian community. So, they're away from their parents, their grandparents, for the first time really, even though they're commuting.'

Janet, female tutor

When explored further with students, how this new-found 'freedom' may manifest, examples were given such as eating off campus, or driving to a different town or perhaps exploring the nightlife. It became clear that socialisation was an important aspect of university life for South Asian students, with new ways of exploring becoming possible at university. As one of the tutors, Faruk puts it:

'And I guess when you experience that level of freedom that you've never had before, then it will become the natural focus of your attentions, because it's where the happiness is, the momentary happiness.'

Faruk, male tutor

The notion of freedom for students was explored further in the focus groups and the question was posed as to whether the idea of freedom was different for South Asian students as compared to White students. Mehboob, in discussion stated:

'I'd say just for some students, especially White students there might be a similar feeling to freedom, like moving from home to uni might not feel so different. I guess for Asian students that difference is a lot more profound.'

Mehboob, 2nd year accounting student

The point raised by Mehboob is key, as it points to similar issues to others being experienced by South Asian males but more exacerbated for South Asian male students. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011, p. 47) found in their study of an Italian university, that non-traditional, live at home students put more effort into cultivating relationships outside of formal teaching sessions than 'traditional' students. The study looked at the impact of this on continuation rates, rather than attainment, but found that forming these relationships acted as a positive for students staying on the programme.

The idea of an enhanced need for some South Asian students to focus on the socialisation opportunities that university offers perhaps links to transition, with, for some, South Asian identity, tighter family structures and family expectations impacting students and how they navigated their way through university. If there is a greater propensity or a perception for South Asian students to take advantage of the relative 'freedoms' that the university space offers, then there is a question as to how the school and university adapts their practice and ways of working to provide those opportunities within a campus and learning environment framework. I would argue that there is a cultural touchpoint here that perhaps operates in the unexplained part of the ethnicity awarding gap, creating some racial dissonance, whereby the 'pull' of the university and its student environment may not sufficiently embrace some

South Asian students, with implications for engagement and in turn the awards that are conferred.

Caregiving responsibilities

The data also illuminated other sub-themes relating to the influence that culture and family had on other aspects of the students' lives beyond transition which underlined the influence of family throughout the South Asian university journey. This included matters relating to caregiving responsibilities, e.g., looking after older (and sometimes younger) members of the family. I would argue that the issue of caregiving and how the university responds to that is a further cultural touchpoint that was highlighted through the data. A caregiver is described by Bridges (1995) in Parveen *et al.* (2011) as someone who provides help to a member of the family who has emotional or physical challenges, usually without remuneration. Parveen and Morrison (2009) found that being of South Asian ethnicity was a predictor for high levels of 'familism' or having a sense of duty in providing care for family members. This was an aspect that was also evident in the literature review, which also highlighted that students from minoritised ethnic students were less likely to engage due to care giving responsibilities (Claridge *et al.*, 2018. P. 5). An example was highlighted by one of the student participants in this study. Khalid was a final year marketing student who was brought up by a single parent and for whom, by his own admission, coming to university was a big decision. He described how he and his brothers felt the need to support his family:

'So obviously me and my brothers take it upon ourselves to sort of support the family and be there financially. So having a part time job as well, eight hours a

week, just minimum, alongside university. And you know sort of balancing the home needs if you like, I feel like a lot of people might have stuff going on at home it stops them coming to university, that might be impacting stuff.'

Khalid, 3rd year marketing student

The issue of caregiving and its impact on university life also emerged as a strong theme in the focus groups. Nadeem a third-year business and management student, describes in his focus group how for some months he took on responsibilities to look after his Grandad, whilst in the final year of study. He says:

'Personally, myself I've been having to look after my Grandad and stuff because he's been quite ill recently. I guess my lectures have been put on more of a backburner but he's doing better now so I have more time, I guess.'

Nadeem, 3rd year business and management student

He goes on to state:

'Asian culture is a lot more family orientated. We do tend to look after our elders, we bring them into our houses when they can't... Rather than putting them into a home or something like that you're more likely to see the person brought into a younger family member's house.'

Nadeem, 3rd year business and management student

Nadeem here presents a picture whereby caregiving is more than just an individual decision; it is in his view an aspect of life that is grounded in culture and values. Rashid provides a further perspective to the caregiving responsibilities that he had. He states:

'I don't think you personally have to see it as a responsibility, you see it as an honour really. This person has looked after you. When I was a baby, I lived at my Grandad's house, so he looked after me, and now that he's old, it's just the right thing to do. Thank God right now I'm young, fit and healthy, so if I can help out someone who isn't then why shouldn't I?'

Rashid, 3rd year business and management student

Here Rashid goes further and describes caregiving responsibilities as a privilege rather than causing angst or tension and highlights the strength of family bonds and ties. Responsibilities outside of university life were also raised by Hanif. When specifically asked about his perspectives on the ethnicity awarding gap he states:

'There is reasons for that, and the reasons are that they [South Asian students] are lacking motivation, the reasons are they have 101 responsibilities outside of university that nobody else knows about.'

Hanif, 3rd year advertising student

Claridge *et al.* (2018) in their research into the ethnicity awarding gap within medical sciences at a UK university found that family responsibilities may be a factor to consider. In their study they found that South Asian students in their sample talked about such responsibilities not

being the same for White students. Parveen *et al.* (2011, p. 869) found that motivations linked to caregiving by those from a South Asian heritage were related to fulfilling cultural duties. Their study also found that South Asian caregivers were less likely to be able to access support from wider systems for several reasons, from attitudes such as 'we care for our own' through to a lack of culturally appropriate formal services being available. Giunta *et al.* (2008) found that cultural values and beliefs have an influence on caring roles within families, which in turn shape whether formal support systems are accessed by the family, with those from minoritised ethnic backgrounds less likely to access formal support systems than those from White backgrounds.

The impact for some students of South Asian heritage may be the juggling or prioritising of engaging with university. Faruk, was a tutor of South Asian heritage who, when discussing the impact of family stated that this is something that South Asian students don't need to raise with him as he already had that insight and understanding. He states:

'I will know that they have caring responsibilities, I will know that there are social things as well that they have to deal with.'

Faruk, male tutor

He goes on to describe situations that he found his students in, which due to his own cultural background, which was similar to the students in the study, was able to relate to and have a level of understanding, which perhaps other tutors would be less likely to connect with.

This does raise a question as to whether this aspect of South Asian student lives is acknowledged and taken account of within current teaching and structural approaches by the university. It further poses questions such as, to what extent do university systems and processes take account of caregiving responsibilities in areas such as timetabling, assessment protocols and its mitigating circumstances procedures. It is another example of a cultural touchpoint between the reality of student lives and university, where racial dissonance may be being generated and I would argue is a further point of interest in understanding the ethnicity awarding gap.

Relationships (peer and tutors)

Relationships with peers

Building on the theme of transition and freedom, a further sub-theme that emerged from the tutor and student participants related to the nature of peer relationships. This connected to the importance of friendship groups for South Asian male students, and the way in which those friendship groups developed and interplayed with university life. Peer relationships relating to friendship groups were discussed by students, both in the interviews and focus groups. As previously discussed, the majority of students stated that making friends at university was important and that not making or having friends could be an issue for successfully navigating university life. Through discussion with student participants around friendships, it became apparent that most, if not all of their friends at university were from similar ethnic backgrounds to themselves. There were several reasons that were given to explain this, including that students found it easier to connect with people like themselves,

their shared interests and experiences and also coming from extended family structures, which led to a tendency to extend that concept into friendship groups. Moshin explains it in the following way:

'I guess there is that need to be part of, if you're happy being part of a community or you have been part of a big family structure, being by yourself doesn't seem nice. It's alien, you've never really felt like being by yourself.'

Moshin, 1st year accounting student

In another focus group Sajid, a first-year accounting student talks about his experience. He states:

'I've had that literally all my life since I've been in primary school. It might be where I'm from, but it's mostly been Asian lads that stick together and even at school, college, everywhere, it's just been like that.'

Sajid, first-year accounting student

Sajid was alluding to the fact that he grew up in a predominantly South Asian area and that would have influenced who his friendship groups would be and for him this had carried on into university life. A picture therefore emerged from the discussions with students of South Asian male students tending to gravitate towards those of similar backgrounds to form friendships. There is of course a question as to whether students from other ethnic backgrounds experience the same and also gravitate towards people like themselves.

Antonio (2004) in their review of friendship groups in college postulates that peer groups' influence on student development is a significant factor on the change process for students. Their review also found that peer groups act as a reference point for students against whom they can evaluate themselves. This raises a point about the nature of the group, aspirations within the group and attitudes towards engagement with education. So, if for example, there are positive experiences and values within the group relating to engagement with university, this may positively influence attitudes and behaviours within the group and conversely if there are negative or indifferent values in relation to education, this may then influence behaviours in the opposite direction. Within the sub-theme of friendship groups, the issue of peer pressure was raised with both students and tutors mentioning this aspect of groups. Asif in a typical comment, states:

'So, some of them are like, they only live nearby, so they come in here with friends. So, there is that pressure of, oh if he's not doing that, I'm not doing that. You don't want to do things by yourself.'

Asif, 1st year accounting student

This aspect was also mentioned by some of the tutors. Janet talked about friendship groups in class and states:

'I think, there seems to be a bit of peer, which there will be at that age of anyone, but I've particularly noticed with some of the groups of Asian males, there's a lot of peer pressure to act a bit cool, and not ask the questions, and play along a bit.'

Janet, female tutor female tutor

It is not clear from the discussions what the impact is of having friendship groups for the participants, which are in the main monoculture, and which perhaps raise questions relating to peer pressure, but Bali, a third-year business studies student observes that there could be some negatives to monoculture friendship groups. He states:

'Obviously, you're limiting the point of view that you can have really, if you're only interacting with the people who have the same experience and the same point of view as you, you're not going to broaden your mind, you're not going to see from other people's perspectives. It is quite a negative thing. It just happens as well. You end up being drawn to people that look like you.'

Bali, 3rd year business studies student

For the participants in my study there are indications that being from a South Asian background has some relevance to friendship building in transition, the social opportunities that are presented at university and the nature and impact of friendship groups that are formed. The data would suggest that within transition processes there are cultural touchpoints which may create some racial dissonance, with the notion of freedom and the manner in which friendship groups are formed. These themes speak to the role of induction strategies, pedagogy and the tutors in creating an environment where engagement and friendship between students from different backgrounds can take place in an inclusive manner.

Relationships with tutors

Tutors and students talked about relationships with each other and the impact that this has on students. There was a strong consensus from both groups that the relationship building element between tutor and students was important in the classroom environment and for keeping students motivated and engaged. This aligns with some of the findings in previous literature which also highlighted the importance of those relationships (Connor *et al.*, 2004; Dhandu, 2010; Mountford-Zimdars, 2015). I would argue that this relationship is a further cultural touchpoint where racial dissonance may potentially be created. Students emphasised the importance of tutors 'getting to know them' as an element in the relationship that helped to build a sense of belonging. Haroon captured the theme through the following comment:

'I think the course leader, even if it's just a five, ten-minute chat, whatever it might be, that would be nice. I think very small things, very subtle things will make a big difference.'

Haroon, 3rd year marketing student

The importance of student/tutor relationships was also emphasised by some of the tutors that were interviewed. Janet talked about the importance of this for her students and says:

'I think key to teaching and the key to this level of teaching anyway, is that relationship building, and I know some, many would disagree, and they just want to go in and deliver.'

Janet, female tutor

Janet also emphasised the impact that this had for the students, in that from her experience, spending this extra time understanding the students in front of her had a positive impact on student engagement and performance. Gillian, another tutor also took time out to get to know her South Asian students. She states that:

'So, I needed to really know my students, as much as they were willing to give, like you know with it being appropriate of course. But I needed to know them so that I could guide them appropriately. But that it is a lot of time, an awful lot of time. And not everybody wants it.'

Gillian, female tutor

In this statement she is not only highlighting the extra time that building those relationships can take, but also the added implications for workloads for tutors. Gillian also talked about getting to know the students on a more personal level as one of the 'hooks' to engage students and found this particularly impactful with her students of South Asian heritage and outlined a number of success stories with South Asian students:

'These kinds of things don't come up in just face to face teaching, it's getting like what skills do you have, who do you know, those kinds of things. But showing a genuine interest in them, and sometimes I have had people say to me, nobody ever really cared. '

Gillian, female tutor

In the context of building relationships Faruk talks about how for some South Asian students it may be more difficult to explain certain cultural situations to tutors who are not from the same background, and through this to build those relationships. He explains how it may present as a barrier:

'And that fear of explaining the ins and outs of everything would probably lead that student to not even bother saying it in the first place, or just not going to the lectures full stop, and then looking like a "bad student" who never turns up.'

Faruk, male tutor

Gillian also highlighted another 'hook' related to getting to know the students, which related to getting to know the parents and families. This was done informally through open days or parents coming in for award events, where Gillian would ensure that she talked to parents to ensure that they understood the educational journeys that their children were on. She goes on to state:

'And it's engaging with those families as soon as we can have sight of them and see the whites of their eyes. It's important because if they know what we need, they will help us.'

Gillian, female tutor

Gillian went on to talk about how making this contact might be even more impactful by perhaps formalising it. The involvement of parents and families of students raises an interesting perspective for South Asian students when considering the earlier discussion on

the prominence of family in the lives of South Asian students. Given that the majority of students involved in the research were also first-generation students, it raised a question as to whether there could be benefit for tutors in the school, building stronger relationships with families as a way to build networks and stronger support systems for students, but also as a way to build the school and university's knowledge and intelligence surrounding the culture and lives of its students. This may conflict with the idea that students in higher education are adults who should be independent and a balance that would be needed between independence and building those support and intelligence processes.

The issue of building relationships with South Asian male students raised the question of diversity in the profile of tutors and the implications for students if the tutor body does not reflect the demographics of the student body. Data from the school's equality, diversity and inclusion dashboard, which draws from HESA data, indicated that in 2020, 39% of its UK domiciled students were identified as being from a minoritised ethnic backgrounds, with only 12% of tutors identifying as being in this group. Within this disparity, a question is raised as to how easy it is for tutors to relate to and understand students who are from culturally or religiously different backgrounds. Universities UK (2019, p. 17) argue that having proportionately fewer tutors from minoritised backgrounds restricts the organisation's ability to narrow the ethnicity awarding gap. Neal *et al.* (2015) further argue that having diversity in the teaching workforce leads to fairer policy decisions in education, student outcomes, and breaking the stereotyping and assumptions related to minoritised groups. In their review of literature in the US, Villegas and Irvine (2010) found three strong reasons for having a diverse teaching workforce. Firstly, that teachers of colour may act as role models for all students, secondly that there is the potential of teachers of colour to enhance the outcomes and

experiences of students of colour and thirdly by attracting teachers from diverse backgrounds it can lead to the increase in supply to the teaching workforce. It is the second of these arguments that is pertinent to this research. Their research concluded that:

'Whether inside or outside school, learning occurs in a cultural context and involves an active construction of ideas. In their attempts to make sense of new learning input, students continuously strive to connect their prior knowledge and experiences—both individual and cultural—with the new ideas to which they are exposed.'

(Villegas and Irvine, 2010, p. 178)

This point certainly resonates with the view that if students can see themselves in the teaching staff, then it may help in building connections with the students, but also possibly in tutors being able to better connect their teaching to the lives of the students in front of them.

On a related theme of events or activities that the university may deliver, Moshin states:

'If they want to come here and they want to relax or something, there's not anything Asian based to do. Even like some of the cuisine, no one wants to come here and eat, they'll go to things at the mall. Right now, I'm missing home food, rice, curry, all that sort of stuff. I don't really want to eat stuff here if you know what I mean.'

Moshin, 1st year accounting student

In this comment Moshin is clear that there is no explicit activity that relates to the Asian student demographic and in an earlier comment provides the example of the lack of halal food available on campus and points out that many students from a Muslim background will often choose to eat off campus. I would argue that this is an example of exclusion and in turn raises a question of the implications for sense of belonging and connectedness to the university and arguably points to a further cultural touchpoint with associated dissonance. However, interestingly, later in his interview Moshin, when asked whether he felt a sense of belonging states:

'Yes, no it's, as I said everyone here is really accommodating, I don't feel like I'm being like excluded from anything.'

Moshin, 1st year accounting student

This is a contradiction of his earlier comment relating to the fact that there is no halal food provision on campus, or activities specifically aimed at South Asian students. Islam (2021) in her research into the experiences of Muslim students across three universities found that whether consciously or unconsciously some Muslim students may feel a lack of entitlement or power over the university environment which results in an acceptance of the way in which the university operates. Islam *et al.* (2018, p. 94) refers to this phenomenon as 'satisfied settling' which she describes as 'a mechanism in which (Muslim) students have justified (unconsciously) not having access to a richer and more fulfilled university experience in relation to religious needs.'

It is worthy of note that students in their narratives did not explicitly mention feeling excluded or discriminated against, and Moshin's comments typify some of the responses given that align with the notion of 'satisfied settling'. This does raise a question as to whether the school and the wider university learning environment appreciate this point. There is a question as to whether the university sufficiently gets to know its South Asian male students, their hopes, aspirations and challenges within the university environment, or indeed whether an assumption is made that because there are no complaints of discrimination or exclusion, that all must be well, leaving the notion of racial dissonance even more hidden.

It is acknowledged that building good relationships between tutors and students is complex and takes time, knowledge and skills to do well. There is also the related question of diversity within the workforce, with the argument that a university workforce that looks like its students will be better able to connect with them. I would argue that tutor relationships with students can present as a cultural touchpoint, with tutors and students highlighting the importance of this relationship and its potential for racial dissonance to occur. Key questions for the school and university therefore are whether tutors have sufficient time, skills and cultural intelligence to build strong relationships with its South Asian students and what efforts are being made to diversify the workforce.

Mental health and South Asian male students

A major theme that emerged from the discussions was mental health as it related to South Asian male students. This was an aspect that was not evident from the literature review that I undertook. However, this was raised by every student in the interviews and focus groups,

as well as tutors. Analysis of the data indicated that there were several factors that played into this for the students. These included the pressure for some, of living a 'dual' life and also the pressures that arise from family responsibilities and expectations. It is recognised and acknowledged that although generally the male population is less likely to talk about or access support services in relation to mental health (Mental Health Foundation, 2021), that this was more acute amongst Asian males (Prajapati and Liebling, 2021; Smyth *et al.*, 2022; Cooper *et al.*, 2012). This suggested that there was potentially an additional cultural touchpoint with the potential to create some dissonance in the relationship in being a South Asian male with mental health issues and the way in which the university responds to this (or not).

This was summed up by comments that were made by some of the students and tutors.

Rashid states:

'I think in our families it's not acceptable. If you see an Asian culture, they don't... If you see it in White people, they more accept it if you've got this mental health issue, you can go and speak.'

Rashid, 3rd year business and management student

In his interview, Hanif went into more detail when talking about the context of mental health and South Asian male students. He put it this way:

'So obviously with Asian guys there is a bit of stigma talking around mental health and what not. It's a bit of a wider topic to discuss, yeah, it's not like a closed thing, it's a massive thing to talk about. But there is a bit of a ... Asian guys don't really

come out and talk about, listen I am feeling a bit depressed today, I am not really feeling my best today, I have got this going on, my mind is somewhere else.'

Hanif, 3rd year advertising student

Interestingly Hanif revealed during the course of his interview that he was referred to, and did access, the student coaching service that the school offered for an extended period of time. He reported how just having someone to talk to helped him through and helped to clear his mind which in turn helped him to focus on his studies. Despite this he was adamant that Asian male students would be less likely to access or to 'stick with' such services. In a review of rates of access to psychological services in London, it was found that being from a Muslim faith background and living in more deprived backgrounds were linked to a higher risk of not accessing or completing treatment, Smyth *et al.* (2022). Prajapati and Liebling (2021) found in their literature review of the experiences of South Asian service users that 'they constructed their cultural identity through a set of important values which were neglected by mental health services' (Prajapati and Liebling, 2021, p. 598).

In the focus groups this was a point that was reaffirmed by a number of students and Mehboob, in relation to South Asian male students', states that:

'I'd say it's more; they're scared of opening up in a sense. They don't think that but when I don't think anyone could relate to my situation, I feel like other people would be in the same situation, they don't feel other people can help them so what's the point sharing it?'

Mehboob, 2nd year accounting student

Although Mehboob indicates here that South Asian students may be reluctant to talk about mental health, the reason he gives is that tutors may not be able to relate to the situations that South Asian students find themselves in and implicitly questions the current make-up of mental health services.

When exploring the factors that contributed to mental health one of the recurring themes that emerged was the issue of dual personality. This is the notion that some South Asian students navigated two versions of themselves, one that they presented at home, and one which they perhaps presented to friends and others outside the family. This phenomenon was linked to the idea of 'izzat' or 'honour'. Some of the students talked about how their families would be concerned about reputation and how the reputation of the family within the wider community was important. Sajid states:

'It was draining, mentally, you didn't really want to do anything. At home you wouldn't want to do anything but when I went out, I was different, I don't know how to explain it, but I just was.'

Sajid, 2nd year accounting student

On a broader theme Mehboob stated that:

'Reputation is a big thing in the Asian community. You have a reputation when you do come home or you're in your locality. The things you do in your hometown, if someone from the community sees that you're out galivanting in the streets, that hurts not only your reputation but your family's reputation as well.'

Mehboob, 2nd year accounting student

This related to pressures connected to family expectations and norms around behaviours, a point that was made by several students in the focus groups. Tutors also referred to this phenomenon and discussed how students might discuss aspects of their lives with them which they wouldn't reveal to their parents, acknowledging the challenges that this left for the students. Faruk states:

'But the sense of shame that would hit them if their parents ever found out some of the things, some of this dancing in nightclubs, having girlfriends who are not from your own culture, or having girlfriends at all in some cultures, sex before marriage. All of these different things that people go through, which is the natural process of life, they will never allow their parents to find out those things, they'll never ever allow their parents to find out.'

Faruk, male tutor

Although not all the students reported the dual personality phenomenon, there was a strong emphasis relating to this issue which therefore raises questions as to impact. In one US study of college students and stigmas around mental health it was found that younger, more religious Asian males from lower socio-economic backgrounds had elevated levels of personal stigma attached to mental health, with an associated correlation to levels of help-seeking i.e., the higher the personal stigma, the less likely the person will be to seek help. (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2009, p. 535). In a UK study at a large London based university, it was found that students whose ethnicity is a strong aspect of their identity, are less likely to seek psychological help, with aspects of this linked to greater stigma around mental health (Soorkia, 2011, p. 619). In the context of mental health services beyond higher education, it has been argued that it is

not South Asian service users that are hard to reach, but the services that focus on mental health who fail to adequately reach this group. The reasons given included eurocentric approaches within mental health services, institutional racism and lack of understanding of the communities (Prajapati and Liebling, 2021, p. 598). The data from my research would suggest that reluctance to access mental health services by South Asian male students may still be an issue. This may be an issue despite the increased focus on mental health across the higher education in recent years, with 96% of UK universities reporting that they had increased resources invested in mental health over the last five years (Pollard, 2021). This may be another cultural touchpoint where there is potential for a level of racial dissonance to be created. If South Asian male students are experiencing mental health issues, then there is a challenge to the university as to whether mental health services are able to support that.

Emergent Theory

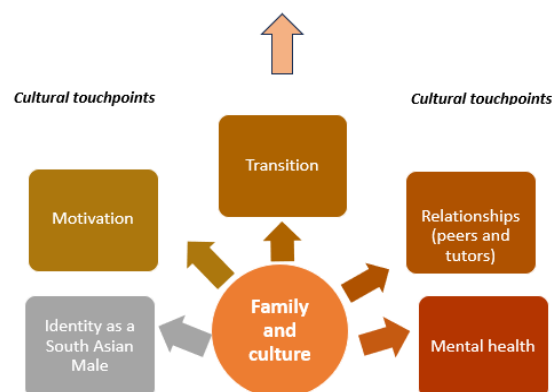
The findings highlight themes that have been identified through the grounded theory data-collection and analysis process that I undertook. As discussed, the outcomes of grounded theory should lead to a set of concepts that relate to each other and are expressed in the production of a substantive theory (Tie *et al.*, 2019; Birks *et al.*, 2019). The theory should be able to explain a particular group's perspectives on a specific issue (Turner and Astin, 2021, p. 257). In relation to the themes that emerged from the data, it was possible to conceptualise these in terms of cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance respectively. Cultural touchpoints presented at the point where aspects of the student lives (grounded in family and culture) came into contact with the university, e.g., the notion of freedom or caregiving responsibilities. Racial dissonance, as discussed by the participants manifested in ways such

as the university not sufficiently being able to fully embrace some South Asian male students in terms of university not being a priority for them, lower levels of engagement by students with university, and the challenges for the university in responding to mental health and South Asian male students.

At an overarching level therefore the concept or theory that emerges is that cultural touchpoints related to South Asian male identity, motivation, transition, relationships (peers and tutor) and mental health, all grounded in family and cultural heritage, are an aspect of life in some South Asian male student journeys. The theory suggests that these cultural touchpoints create a level of racial dissonance in those journeys through the university not being to being able to sufficiently take account of these and which in turn may adversely impact the ethnicity awarding gap. The theory provides some insights into the ethnicity awarding gap and figure 4. provides a visual representation of the theory. Although this is an overarching theory rather than being detailed and precise, it provides some further conceptual clarity (Birks, *et al.*, 2019), which I build on in the discussion chapter below.

Figure 4. Emergent theory

Racial dissonance in South Asian male students' journey through Higher education



Minimising racial dissonance – suggested ways forward

During the course of the interviews and focus groups I also asked questions relating to how the university should respond. The overarching theme that emerged from this question centres very much on strengthening the way in which it engages with students, or as one of the student participant's question, 'how will the university grab our attention'? This was an instructive phrase that frames how responsive the university is to the actual students who arrive to study; very much putting the challenge of engagement at the doors of the university. In the next chapter I will argue that questions of how the university engages with South Asian male students, its understanding of their lives, how tutors build relationships with this group of students and how it adapts its approaches, may be critical in making inroads in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap.

For many of the participants, we see a picture whereby motivation and engagement with university is influenced by culture and identity linked to being South Asian and male. These are factors that operate in the unexplained part of the ethnicity awarding gap and provide insight into that space and provide some pointers for the university to consider if it wishes to advance equity in the ethnicity awarding gap. During discussions with tutors and students I asked what needed to change and there were several sub-themes that emerged that link to the above findings and focus on minimising the racial dissonance created at the cultural touchpoints discussed above. These include relationship building with tutors, within peer groups and parents and families, mental health support provision, and diversity of staff.

It was recognised by both tutors and students that taking the time to get to know a student is an important feature of that relationship. Tutors talked about the value of building relationships with South Asian male students and the impact this could have. A typical response was given below by Joanne, who would use the technique of talking about other areas:

'I found that occasionally turning the topic away from what we're studying, actually helps them to study better, because it's a little bit of a mental release, which they seem to appreciate.'

Joanne, female tutor

Hanif, also talked about the importance of building relationships with tutors and particularly the importance for him, of the ethnicity of tutors in that relationship. He states:

'I mean I don't know about yourself, but I feel a lot more comfortable talking to somebody the same ethnicity as me, as somebody who is Asian. Because you can relate on a lot more levels.'

Hanif, 3rd year marketing student

When asked about how those relationships could be strengthened Haroon states:

'Perhaps that could be talked about through the one to ones, seeing what difficulties maybe at home if they are absent to classes or stuff like that. And just sort of, you know being on their page and helping them through stuff in a way.'

Haroon, 3rd year marketing student

Again Haroon, is talking about tutors being 'on their page', highlighting the need for tutors taking the time to understand their students. The issue was also explored further in the focus groups and the groups also talked about the importance of relationship building by tutors. Sajid talks about a particular tutor's approach. He states:

'[Tony], he seems like a good guy, you can get on to a level with him, but there are some that you don't really want to like as much. That's how I'd explain it, that's how it is in my head.'

Sajid, 2nd year accounting and finance

When explored further, Sajid talks about the way in which Tony takes time at the start of class to talk to students and ask what is going on in their worlds outside of university. Again, the notion of tutors being 'on a level' with students is made. The point is reinforced by another tutor, Janet, who states:

'I think if I can learn a bit more about different cultural things, then it probably just makes me a little bit, just, I've just got a bit more information as a teacher, about what isn't going to work.'

Janet, female tutor

Joanne goes further and makes the point that it was not just about getting to know the students but how that information is used to make changes. Simon goes further and talked about involving South Asian students more and tutors thinking carefully about the challenges facing South Asian male students, the skills development needed and the challenges that are

set for students. The point is further expanded on by Joanne, who also raises the idea of the institution changing rather than the student. She states that:

'I think it needs to be more realistic about the kind of students that it's got, and it's not necessarily shifting the students' priorities, but shifting ours.'

Joanne, female tutor

This very much talks to avoiding the student deficit and trying to 'fix' the student. Gillian, when responding in discussions relating to what could be changed, reinforces the point about tutors considering the students that are in front of them, rather than maintaining the status quo in teaching practice and making adaptations accordingly, states:

'...and we can actually support people and get the right learning to them in the way that they want it. It's about ... it's not about treating people as you would like to be treated, it's about treating people as they want to be treated.'

Gillian, female tutor

Faruk, in his observations of building relationships states:

'I think maybe we should make more of an effort when it's Eid or when it's Hannukah or when it's Diwali or Holi.'

Faruk, male tutor

Relationship building and understanding between tutors and students therefore is seen as a way forward for tutor and student participants and there is a question as to whether there is currently sufficiency in that relationship building from the perspective of South Asian male students or whether tutors have the necessary skills and knowledge on how to do this effectively. The idea of the school or university adapting itself to better wrap around the students it has, might involve greater engagement with the student body to better understand those needs and through that, be in a more informed position to understand what needs to change. However, even within this approach there may be limitations as to the information that students may provide if they are unaware of the complexities of how universities operate.

In the context of relationships, peer relations were also a theme that emerged when discussing the way forward. This related to a point raised by a number of students and tutors in relation to South Asian students and the notion of 'freedom' when some South Asian students entered higher education. There was also the question of students tending to form friendship groups with students from similar ethnic backgrounds. In relation to the former point students suggested that the university need to look at issues such as timetabling and making teaching more engaging in order to 'grab the attention of its students'. In this narrative there is a question for the university in term of how it inducts and supports the student transition into university and develops a campus where students feel comfortable and where they want to be. There would need to be some consideration in relation to how these processes would connect South Asian male students to the campus.

In relation to mono-cultural friendship groups there was a suggestion by some students, and acknowledged by some of the tutor participants that more could be done to integrate different ethnic groups within the classroom and in the wider university environment. Janet states:

'So, I think the building of a community is really, really important, and I guess integration, with different cultures and stuff, within classes, again.'

Janet, Female tutor

As discussed earlier, several students talked about parental involvement in their higher education journeys, during their time at university, indicating that some parents had a lack of awareness of university. Khalid's response typified the comments made. He states:

'And I do think that's another issue is that with Asian students, the parents don't know what their children are doing at university.'

Khalid, 3rd year marketing student

And then reflects:

'...because it's education I think there should still be an interest from the parents into their children. That's how I feel, I think there's a lack of communication and I just think that it's become a bit of a social norm that once students get into college or university, whatever, that parents just take a step back.'

Khalid, 3rd year marketing student

Joanne builds on this point and talks about the importance of tutors not only building relationships with students but also argues that relationship building with parents is also important. She states:

'But that contract also needs to be with the parents, or whomever or the family. And I found that conversations with families right at the beginning, so right from application was absolutely essential so success.'

Joanne, female tutor

There is a question here as to whether parental involvement in university journeys had an ethnicity angle to them. However, there may be a linkage here to the fact that minoritised ethnic students are more likely to be first in family to university. Given this then it may be useful for the university to explore whether and how to build those relationships.

Linked to engagement is the issue of mental health which emerged as a consideration for South Asian male students within higher education. Questions are raised from the data as to the university's ability to sufficiently cater for this aspect of South Asian student life. Ashraf, a third-year marketing student when asked how the university could better support South Asian male students with their mental health states:

'If I was talking just about Asian students, I would say just make sure you constantly keep in contact with them, and I'd make it clear to them that we aren't in contact as much with our parents, perhaps, at university. So, fulfil that, if it's a

guy who's a module leader, like a fatherly figure at university, it's about building that relationship.'

Ashraf, 3rd year marketing student

The point raised here links back to the previous point relating to building relationships with students and implicit in the statement is the building of trust so that the students have a safe space to disclose if the need arises. In discussion with tutors about mental health, the issue of representation emerged, relating to the ability of tutors to connect with South Asian male students within the pastoral support areas of the school. Brian states:

'Again, me and [Freya] have had numerous conversations about the connection and does a young Asian male connect to her, as an academic coach, does a young Asian male connect to me as a course leader, you know? That's kind of a real sort of challenge.'

Brian, male tutor

Freya is the academic coach in the school, who provides additional support to students in the business school. The point made by Brian is essentially about representation and diversity in the workforce, with the implication that currently the lack of representation of South Asian male tutors, as well as in the coaching service provided by the school, being a challenge. Brian questions what the lack of representation means for being able to connect with a diverse range of students. Action to address the diversity in the workforce is therefore an area that may assist in better understanding and supporting South Asian male students generally, but also in relation to those who may have mental health issues.

Engagement in the classroom emerged as a theme from the tutors, when asked what they felt could improve, relating to the content of the programmes. Several tutors talked about how modules that expose students to the 'real world' and modules where students are able to bring in their own experiences tend to achieve better engagement.

'So, a lot of students do feedback to us, particularly when they work with external organisations, or when they work on project work, that it's the modules that exposes them most to real life, and it's the modules that they can, when they graduate, they can reflect back on and think actually that really supported us, in kind of moving forward.'

Brian, male tutor

Joanne provided an example of a change that she had made:

'I rewrote one of my assignments that was individual based, unfortunately, but I asked them to talk about companies that were in their hometowns, so that it was more personal to them and kind of more based on their culture as well. And actually, it worked really well.'

Joanne, female tutor

Janet, in her response to the question of what worked for South Asian students stated:

'What really does help is real life things and the second-year coursework. It used to be an essay, and it was dreadful, it was dreadful for me marking and the

students just, I don't know, they just didn't engage, so now we do a poster presentation. So, we do that on a topical issue every year.'

Janet, female tutor

Other tutors talked about 'bringing people from the [South Asian] community into the classroom' in order to make the teaching more relevant to the lives of South Asian students and a recognition that there are few links with South Asian businesses or alumni. Brian acknowledges this:

'You know, being brutally honest, there's never been a strong kind of you know, South Asian kind of like presence really, with organisations that we've been working with....one of the things I don't think that we do particularly well is our links with [South Asian] alumni.'

Brian, male tutor

In this thread of points raised by the tutors it can be seen that tutors consider that the curriculum itself needs to be reflected upon and question how it connects with students. There is a theme that emerges of adapting the curriculum to better connect with the lives of the students that arrive at university. In their descriptions of bringing in more real life, practical elements or introducing more student-relatable content it can be argued that the tutors may be advocating an approach to teaching that is more focussed on the students. It has been argued in the literature that one way in which this might be achieved is through making the curriculum more inclusive (Universities UK, 2019). One approach to designing a more inclusive curriculum is the move to 'decolonise the curriculum', which is an approach to

curriculum design which challenges tutors to reflect on their curricula and consider whose knowledge and content is being presented (Begum and Saini, 2019; Arday *et al.*, 2021; Arshad, 2021). There has been much recent discussion relating to decolonising the curriculum (Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021) who describe decolonising the curriculum as follows:

'The central debates in decolonial scholarship in the UK revolve around the Whiteness of the curriculum, the dominance of Eurocentric and Western-centric thought, the issue of diversity of perspectives in the curriculum and the representation of Black and minority ethnic (BME) staff.'

(Moghli and Kadiwal, 2021, p. 3)

It has been argued that failing to decolonise can put students at a disadvantage. Wilson *et al.* (2020, p. 144) argue that by 'teaching a partial curriculum we are failing all our students and limiting their critical development.'

A further method that is increasingly becoming popular in higher education in the UK is the concept of co-creation, i.e., to involve the students in removing barriers, designing services or curriculum that are on offer. It is seen to improve student experience and engagement from the 'inside' (Wright, 2021, p. 26). This also chimes with concepts explored by John Dewey who argued that learning best takes place when the tutor enmeshes this with the cultural and personal backgrounds of students (Hildebrand, 2018). Dewey argued that the learning environment should explicitly connect the subject matter to the student's issues or personal circumstances and advocated a problem-solving approach to learning. Linked to this, was the need for teachers to revisit or even re-learn their approaches to teaching. O'Neil and

McMahon (2005) also point out some of the critique of student-centred learning, with the main critiques being its actual focal point being the learner themselves (rather than the knowledge that they may need to be taught), as well as the challenges and resources required to implement this approach. There is a question here, which is, if there is a desire to move towards approaches which embrace 'decolonisation' or are more student-focussed, then are tutors equipped to truly adapt their pedagogical approach to account for the South Asian males that are present in the classroom?

From the above themes therefore, the way forward, it could be argued, centres on the university engagement with South Asian male students. The themes from the data suggest that there is thinking to be undertaken by the university as to whether its strategies to connect with its diverse range of students are working. The data brings out themes relating to engagement, relationships, the way in which mental health is supported, building a curriculum that better relates to its students and enhancing the diversity of its staff. Within that space I would argue that thought will need to be given to the racial dissonance between current university approaches and the experiences, values and culture that come with the students that arrive its doors.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

As discussed in the literature review chapter, inequities relating to the ethnicity awarding gap persist in the higher education sector against a backdrop of broader and wider inequities for people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds in the UK (Cabinet office, 2017). The awarding gap phenomenon is therefore part of a bigger picture of inequitable outcomes for people from this group, rather than an isolated issue within the higher education sector. In the previous chapter I presented key findings and themes that emerged from the data in relation to the participants that took part in this research. The data was collated and analysed using principles of grounded theory and thematic analysis leading to the emergence of key themes and theory. I argue that this theory provides some insights into factors that impact on some South Asian male student journeys through higher education. Although the emergent theory relating to cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance provides some insight to the understanding of the factors that impacted the South Asian male students in my research, I felt that there was an opportunity to further consider and build on this through the application of a theoretical lens to help understand whether further meaning could be drawn from the findings.

The literature highlighted that part of the ethnicity awarding gap may be explained by measurable factors such as entry grades and socio-economic background (Richardson, 2015; Leslie, 2005; Connor *et al.*, 2004). However, a number of studies also pointed to the fact that even when these factors were controlled for there was still a gap that persisted, and for which there were no obvious causal factors (Broeke and Nicholls, 2007; Richardson, 2008). It was in the space of this unexplained gap that my findings were of particular relevance. The key

themes of relevance to the student journeys that emerged and conceptualised as cultural touchpoints included family, culture, identity, transition, relationships, and mental health. These aligned with some of the themes that emerged from the literature review relating to the ethnicity awarding gap, which included family considerations (Singh, 2011; Thomas and Quinn, 2007; Cousins and Cureton, 2012) relationships (Dhanda, 2010; Woolf *et al.*, 2013) and institutional factors (Universities UK, 2019).

This chapter seeks to discuss the findings to draw further meaning from the unexplained space of the ethnicity awarding gap and to further contextualise the emergent theory. In particular I will discuss the meaning through the lenses of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts relating to habitus, cultural capital and field (Bourdieu, 1992) and also through the key tenets relating to CRT (Delgado, 2012; Bell, 2008; Stefancic, 2017; Parker and Gillborn, 2020). I chose these two frameworks as both are concerned with inequities, both place privilege at the centre of their frameworks and both allow for analysis to take place in relation to the individual's relationship to institutions/structures.

There are facets of each framework that link to some of the themes that emerged from the literature review and also with the notions of cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance discussed in the findings chapter. Given these points, the frameworks offer the opportunity for a specific consideration of the ethnicity awarding gap in the context of ethnicity and offer the opportunity to consider the findings beyond the context of the research participants in this study. I will discuss each concept separately as the two frameworks approach the question of inequities in different ways. I will also show how both frameworks have limitations which individually do not allow for the fullest analysis, and I argue that bringing

the two theories together elicits stronger insights and meaning into my data, and what this may mean in the context of the unexplained spaces of the ethnicity awarding gap.

Bourdieu, cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance

As discussed in the literature review section, Bourdieu was interested in the dynamics of power in society and particularly in how power is transferred in society to maintain social class systems. He was also interested in how this manifested in education and argued that education systems serve to reproduce the social class system. As discussed in the literature review section the key concepts that he uses to highlight the inequities in the education sector are habitus, cultural capital and field. I considered my findings through this framework which I argue provide insights into the cultural touchpoints between some South Asian male students and university and through that, some illumination of the factors that may be at play in the unexplained spaces of the ethnicity awarding gap.

It was evident that culture and family formed a central part of who the students were, their values, how it informed some of the choices they made, and in turn how this shaped some of their actions. Taking Bourdieu's concept of habitus, it was apparent that family and all that that meant for the participants was very much an example of that habitus. All of the students talked about the importance of family or how aspects of family life or values linked to it played out for them. It was encapsulated by the following observations made by the students:

'With Asians in particular they are very family orientated, so family first, anything that goes on with family you are putting that first.' [priorities]

Khalid, 3rd year marketing student

'but from where I am from where we have grown up and stuff like that, we don't do that kind of stuff.' [extra-curricular activities]

Khalid 3rd year marketing student

'but growing up in Asian households, you kind of can't go against parents if that makes sense?' [behaviours]

Moshin, 1st year accounting student

'There's just a different bubble when you're at home, or even in your locality as an Asian.' [dual personality]

Ovez, 2nd year accounting student

The above examples highlight how the concept of habitus may play out for the students and the values that shape student actions. The values raised here point to values that have developed over time, likely, through generations of family, and are deep-seated and rooted in culture and history. This idea of family orientation and culture manifested in many ways and were highlighted in the touchpoints of motivation, transition, relationships and mental health. Specific examples provided by students, included, caring for elders, the manner in which the students socialised outside of family, or just wanting to do 'right' by the family. When considering these cultural touchpoints, the data also pointed to these potentially impacting on the student interaction with university and the prioritisation of it in their lives,

and which I argue may generate some racial dissonance. Ashraf typified the sentiment when talking about where university comes in his priorities. He states:

'I would say I was, probably after my home life, home life being social life because most of my social stuff I do is at home, and probably after my work life as well, I think because I did so many hours at work that I neglected university a bit, so I would say it was a bit down the pecking order.'

Ashraf, 3rd year business and management student

Janet goes further and makes the following observation when talking about South Asian male students:

'Going to university is a very small part of their life, they fit it in, around their jobs, their socialising, their family commitments, if they have childcare responsibilities, university has to fit in, it's a very small part of their life, even though it's a big cost.'

Janet, female tutor

We can see here, along with the issues related to caregiving responsibilities, discussed in the findings chapter, that for some students, university may not be the highest priority. The theme that emerges from these sentiments' links to Bourdieu's notion of habitus and his idea that one's habitus links to one's 'embodied dispositions', i.e., how one's values, shaped by habitus, influence the behaviours and practices of the individual. Using the lens of habitus, my findings therefore point to a student's habitus being very much shaped by values relating to family and culture.

There were also references made by the students in my research that alluded to Bourdieu's related concept of cultural capital as they talked about their personal situations and backgrounds. As previously discussed, one's cultural capital is the broader knowledge, skills and attributes that one acquires through life. A number of manifestations of cultural capital emerged from the data, including that the majority of the student participants were first in family to attend university, that friendship groups of the participants were largely mono-cultural, and the students reported limited involvement with extra-curricular activity. Ovez states:

'From an Indian background you're quite secluded, you're not really around many other people that have a different way of thinking.'

Ovez, 2nd year accounting student

These examples talk to the formation of cultural capital, of how the informal building of knowledge, skills and attributes are being developed for students who were interviewed. It raises some questions: Are the attributes that are developed through these experiences ones that enable students to flourish in the university environment? Is the university able to seamlessly embrace these aspects of student lives? Does the university actually value the attributes that the students bring, in a way that confers benefit for the student? And does the question of cultural capital contribute to the dissonance created and in turn impact on student outcomes? This links to the notion that there is an 'ideal' type of student, one whose attributes and life experiences will make it more likely that they will flourish in a university environment.

There are certainly questions posed here in relation to how and whether higher education can better value the experiences and different forms of cultural capital that may be brought by South Asian students. I posit that questions for the university need to include, how might different forms of cultural capital be understood, and how might those experiences, histories, skills and knowledge brought by South Asian males be appropriately valued in the university environment?

Bourdieu's notion of 'field' adds a further layer through which to consider the context of my findings. As previously discussed, the university itself can be considered a 'field' in the Bourdieusian sense. It is a space that has its own ways of working (explicit and implicit), values and norms that tutors and students need to adhere to in order to succeed. (Koutsouris *et al.*, 2021, p. 132). They state:

'This is because educational institutions operate based on policy, guidelines and expectations that reflect widely accepted principles about what a higher education institution represents, what it means to be a learner, what counts as knowledge etc.'

(Koutsouris *et al.*, 2021, p.132)

There are expectations and values laced throughout the university 'field' that for example may relate to areas such as engagement, extra-curricular activity, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, relationships and so on. My findings highlighted the importance of the relationship between tutor and student and the challenges that may arise from a lack of cultural understanding between South Asian male student and tutor, as well as an

underrepresentation of diversity in the tutor body. My findings also point to the challenge of mental health and South Asian males and their access to university mental health services. These two aspects highlight the importance of 'field'. Bourdieu (1984) argued that it is the interaction between habitus, cultural capital and field that determines how people react in the 'field', or as he termed it, one's practice. I suggest that Bourdieu's formula also aligns with my notions of cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance discussed above, i.e., that those cultural touchpoints result in certain (in)actions in the space of the field, which in turn raises the question of agency. Agency is the capacity or will of people to understand and engage with the circumstances and structures that they find themselves in. It has been defined as 'the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998, p. 970). That is, the way in which individuals engage over time with the different environments and structures they find themselves in. It considers the impact of structures within society and individuals' opportunities for engagement and the extent to which those individuals can shape their own lives (Jaaskela *et al.*, 2017, p. 2063). They summarise the concept of agency as the:

'individuals' capability to engage in intentional, self-defined, meaningful and autonomous action, which is constrained by power relations and structural, contextual factors.'

(Jaaskela *et al.*, 2017, p. 2063)

In the context of students in higher education it allows us to consider how those students make decisions relating to their journeys through higher education. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) go on to argue that this manifests in 3 ways - *iteration*, the reproduction of previous

ways of thinking and behaviours, *projective* – the way in which an actor may envisage their future and trajectories, hopes and fears, *evaluative* – the ability to evaluate one's circumstances and consider alternative sets of action in response to a particular context. They see agency as being informed by the past, the present, but also an individual's vision of their future. It raises a question relating to the extent to which students have the power to determine their own actions and experiences, which in turn may then have an impact on their own experiences, actions and outcomes.

The concept of agency emerges as a consideration from my research and is evident in the choices that students in the research group were having to navigate, either consciously or unconsciously. These ranged from whether to prioritise family over university, which friendship groups to make, how to engage (or not) with tutors, whether to engage with extra-curricular activity (or not), or whether to engage with mental health services (or not). It has been argued that choice is central to habitus, but that the choices will be constrained. Reay argues that:

'Choices are bounded by the framework of opportunities and constraints the person finds himself/herself in, her external circumstances.'

(Reay, 1995, p. 354)

It is the ability to enact these choices that then lead to the actions or, practice, that the individual takes within any given context, thus determining their levels of agency. The choices presented will of course be seen and acted upon differently, depending on the habitus of the person. For example, students in the research talked about the general lack of engagement

in extra-curricular activities by South Asian male students. These are choices that are made, and it is understanding these types of decisions that will enable ways forward to be found. For example, in this context, the following question may need to be asked; what are the constraints for South Asian male students in engaging with extra-curricular activities put on by the university? In reality, engaging may not be a realistic option for some students due to other priorities. It may of course be argued that students in this sense are exercising choice in prioritising other aspects of their lives. However, if engaging in extra-curricular activity is not a realistic option, then the agency of the student is somewhat diminished. This leads to the question of how the university should respond in this scenario and perhaps consider how might the value that extra-curricular activity provides, be deployed in different ways so that the benefit may be conferred on this type of student?

Using the concepts of habitus, cultural capital and field provides a lens through which to discuss my findings and highlights the way in which histories, backgrounds and identities may create racial dissonance in a higher education system that perhaps is unable to fully align with some South Asian male students. Using Bourdieu's framework assists in illuminating areas that I would argue have some relevance to understanding the ethnicity awarding gap. It relates to the point at which, who the students are, and what they bring, intersects with a university that is not aligned to those students. I would argue that this is a point where the neutrality of the university is brought into question and highlights the conferment of advantage to a particular type of student. So, asking the question as to how well adapted is the South Asian male to higher education may be a question that some may ask, but on reflection, I would argue that a better question would be, how well adapted is the university to embrace the South Asian male student? Bourdieu's concepts have some alignment with

my findings related to cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance and illuminate the space in which the ethnicity awarding gap can be considered.

However, I also reflected on some of the limitations that were highlighted in the literature review chapter in relation to Bourdieu, and in particular the criticism that the framework does not explicitly consider race. In the case of the students that took part in my research, a concern was that although Bourdieu's framework aligns with the notion of racial dissonance being created between the habitus of students and the field of higher education, the framework itself would not of itself explicitly pull-out the specifics relating to race. I would argue that it is the detail of that racial dissonance that is critical in truly understanding the impact of race and ethnicity for the university, the practice of students and through that the impact on ethnicity awarding gaps. That detail for students in my research includes the sense of being Asian, the related family duties and the argument that the family and environmental set-up for some students may not allow for the development of the type of cultural capital that is valued by higher education.

Bourdieu's framework can be used to frame my findings relating to the ethnicity awarding gap as the coming together of habitus (and cultural capital) and field which in that interplay, may create points of dissonance between student and university. I position this dissonance as racial and posit that it resides in the unexplained spaces of the ethnicity awarding gap. However, this framing in itself does not provide the more nuanced insights that may be needed to fully understand that dissonance. Questions remain such as: What decisions are made by the students in relation to aspects of their higher education journeys? What precisely is it about the student's habitus and the university structure that leads to that dissonance?

To what extent are the students able to engage with university (or not)? How is White privilege considered by the university? And to what extent does the way in which education is provided, create racial inequalities? As discussed, Bourdieu's framework does not explicitly provide the means to consider these questions and it is evident that the question of race is missing from the framework.

The insights relating to cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance were only gleaned through the specific focus on race as part of my research and possibly the shared/ insider characteristics of the researcher. These aspects of the lives of students are inextricably linked to race and ethnicity, but Bourdieu's framework does not explicitly point towards race or ethnicity being a point of enquiry. Race and ethnicity are a factor that has to be brought in by the researcher which raises the possibility that this element could be missed or not considered. It is left to the consciousness or awareness of the researcher to bring in, and I would argue therefore that there is a missing element from Bourdieu's framework and its ability to sufficiently consider race.

A further criticism of Bourdieu is that it does not sufficiently incorporate lived experiences and that too much emphasis is placed on structures, without full consideration of how individuals may react in given circumstances (Coudry, 2005). What seems to be missing then from Bourdieu's framework is the explicit consideration of voices or the actual lived experiences, in this case, of the students. During the course of my research, issues and themes emerged as the student voices were explicitly considered in the context of race and ethnicity. I would argue therefore that it is only by centralising the student voice that proper sense can be made of those interactions and that Bourdieu's framework does not explicitly consider

this. These limitations caused me to consider how further meaning could be added to my findings and in particular, how race could be explicitly considered as part of the theoretical framework, how the consideration of voice could fit in, what that meant for agency and through those considerations to provide some stronger insights into the unexplained space of the ethnicity awarding gap.

Critical Race Theory, cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance

In addressing the potential limitations of Bourdieu in the analysis of the data, I looked to CRT as an additional lens through which to consider my findings. The key tenets of CRT, as discussed in the literature review, include the notion that racism is part of the fabric of society, the idea that 'Whiteness' confers privilege and advantage, and that voices and lived experiences are key to understanding the impact of race. CRT also provides a critique of liberalism, i.e., approaches that advocate neutrality and a colour-blind approach to race (Crenshaw, 1988). This is the argument that simply providing equal access to education and to learning, teaching and resources, is inherently fair and adheres to the notion of 'equality of opportunity'. However, the reality may be that not all people have access to education, e.g., due to finance or caring responsibilities, and once in the system, may not have the same experiences or ability to engage. DeCuir and Dixson (2004, p. 29) in their exploration of the impact of race at an elite US university state that, 'the notion of colorblindness fails to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the construction of people of color as other.', arguing that it also makes it difficult to interrogate the idea of White privilege and its potential impact. Linked to this are perspectives that CRT offers in relation to educational policy which were explored in the literature review chapter, positing that

education and the policies and approaches through which it operates are not neutral and that it serves to maintain the status quo (Ladson-Billings; Ledesma-Calderon, 2015; Gillborn, 2017). Although a review of national education policy is out of scope for this research project, I was unable to locate any research that considered education policy in relation to the awarding gap. There are therefore unanswered questions as to the role that it plays in contributing to or perpetuating the ethnicity awarding gap. Furthermore, similar questions may be asked of policy and practice within the university context.

The tenets of CRT therefore provide a useful lens through which to further consider the notions of cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance that were raised in the findings chapter. I would argue that employing those tenets allows for an interrogation of these areas, in a way that Bourdieu's framework does not. In the cultural touchpoints of transition, relationships and mental health, we can approach the areas of dissonance with certain assumptions, e.g., that race/ethnicity and racism are a part of the equation and that race-neutral approaches should be an explicit consideration. Specific questions can also be asked, such as the impact of White privilege, of dominant cultures and the role that voice has played in understanding lived experiences.

CRT and what the students and tutors revealed

These concepts of dominant culture as discussed by Movius (2020) and other proponents of CRT, allow for a further discussion of the data collected and their potential connections to the ethnicity awarding gap. One of the cultural touchpoints that emerged was the relationship

between student and tutor. The students in my research talked about the importance of that relationship, as did the tutors. Ashraf states:

'So, some of the Asian students that I know, their relationships with their course leaders are either not strong enough or they don't like them for whatever reason, so I think that's a big issue.'

Ashraf, 3rd year marketing student

Faruk, one of the tutors also talks about the importance of those relationships and offers the following reflection:

'it's just about recognising that what works for other cultures, what is their background, where did they come from? What pressures are they experiencing? What can I do to be the type of person that they would feel comfortable enough to come and talk to about serious concerns that they might have?'

Faruk, male tutor

Gillian, one of the tutors, emphasised the importance of tutors getting to know students and something about their lives. Gillian felt that this was a particularly helpful approach in getting to know her South Asian students and this approach influenced her approach to teaching. However, other tutors highlighted that there were challenges in genuinely connecting with South Asian students, due to differing backgrounds. Faruk provides the converse perspective and suggests that his background makes it easier for South Asian male students to connect with him. He states:

'But they do feel a sense of connection with you, because you do look, and sound like them.'

Faruk, male tutor

In all these positions, the question of race/ethnicity undoubtedly emerged from the data as a factor in those relationships and perhaps to the notion of a dominant culture. It also feeds into the point made by Ladson-Billings (2023) in relation to the lack of neutrality in education. It could be argued that all students have access to the same tutors and resources at university; but that those relationships may develop differently depending on the ethnic backgrounds of tutors and students, or tutors' willingness and ability to connect with those who may have different backgrounds to themselves.

The challenge related to relationship building may also be compounded by the lack of diversity in the tutor body in the school, which Movius (2020) and proponents of CRT might argue influences the way in which a dominant culture emerges, and through that would lead to individual or institutional racism impacting students from South Asian backgrounds. It is clear from the school tutor profile data that there are not enough 'Faruks' which I argue may cause some racial dissonance and which in turn may impact student outcomes such as ethnicity awarding gaps. Acknowledging the potential for racial dissonance in the tutor/student relationship would allow the university to move forward and consider in a much more focussed way, how its tutor body may better connect with all of its students, and in this case with its South Asian male students.

Another example that highlights the impact of dominant culture relates to South Asian male mental health which emerged as a key finding. Mehboob and Hanif along with other students, share their concerns that there are specific mental health issues that relate to South Asian males, and that opening up to discuss mental health, would be less likely for this group, again typified by the comment from Rashid.

'I mean we don't really talk about mental health, it's mental health for Asian lads doesn't really exist. It's something that if you talk about it, it's seen as not being very... I don't know, I don't know how to describe it, but it's not very positive because you're talking about your feelings and it's not really something that you do in an Asian background.'

Rashid, 1st year business and management student

Using the notion within CRT of dominant cultures and White privilege being the starting point, then the assumption would be that mental health services within university are set up in ways that better serve White students. Critical race theorists would bypass the question of; is there a racism issue within our mental health services and go on to argue that for South Asian male students this explains the inequities in mental health services.

A further point of interest raised by the data was that none of the students explicitly raised the issue of racism, though there was some talk of challenges and barriers, e.g., mental health and relationships. This in itself indicated that the student participants may not be aware of the potential disadvantage (racism and institutional racism) that they may encounter when entering higher education. It chimes with the notion of 'satisfied settling' put forward by Islam

(2021) who found that Muslim students subconsciously excuse institutional failures by having lower expectations. This would also align with Bourdieu's view that one's unconscious plays a part in how individuals act in given situations leading to the reproduction of inequality and also the idea of the oppressed not having consciousness of their own oppression (Freire, 1970).

I reflected on Ladson-Billings argument that education purports to be race-neutral, when in fact it is not and suggest that this raises the important question of agency and the extent to which students had the capacity to understand their positions and have the confidence to make appropriate decisions in navigating the potential disadvantage. The implications of this 'acceptance' or lack of insight, may be that the status quo is maintained, and that the organisation does not see the need to change due to lack of student voice, and therefore advances are not made in relation to inequities such as the ethnicity awarding gap.

The notion of dominant or privileged approaches was commented on by some tutors. In this context, they highlighted that perhaps the curriculum was not connecting as strongly with South Asian male students. Examples given included the need to adapt the curriculum to make it more relevant, perhaps by allowing students to bring in examples and case studies from their own experiences, or as suggested above, decolonising the curriculum. This perspective aligns with the interplay within CRT of policy, dominance and privilege (Gillborn, 2005; 2017). There was also acknowledgement that sometimes tutors can make assumptions about students based on their ethnicity and about the need for tutors to get to know their students better. Joanne summed the sentiment up well when asked about her thoughts on the reasons for the ethnicity awarding gap. She stated that:

'I think it needs to be more realistic about the kind of students that it's got, and it's not necessarily shifting the students' priorities, but shifting ours.'

Joanne – female tutor

Reviewing the cultural touchpoints of identity, transition, relationships, mental health and university policy through the lens of CRT and White privilege is one way in which to conceptualise the link between dominant cultures, policy, racism (individual or institutional) and inequities (ethnicity awarding gaps). If one starts with this assumption, then proponents of CRT would argue that one can immediately move on and ask the question how to move forward and what policies will be needed to enable this, rather than spend time and resource investigating whether race or racism is a factor or not within that dissonance.

The role of lived experiences in CRT

One of the tenets of CRT posits that lived experiences and narratives are important as they can then be used to contextualise organisational structures and processes. Ladson-Billing (2023) argues that 'the primary reason then, those stories or narratives, are deemed important among CRT scholars is that they add necessary contextual contours to the seeming "objectivity" of positivist perspectives.' She makes the point that the use of 'voice' in this regard helps to link 'form and substance', i.e., voice can be used to better understand what is actually going on in given situations. I would argue that my concept of cultural touchpoints is one way to conceptualise the connectivity between form and substance. Rose and Shevlin (2004) argue that there is a dominant position adopted by professionals and policymakers which in effect excludes marginalised groups and leaves them on the periphery of decision-

making processes in education. Ledesma and Calderon (2015) further argue that educators must critically engage with those voices in order to take the meaning from them and through that to engage with White supremacist ideology that is prevalent across pedagogy.

The student and tutor voices were critical in my research in understanding the journeys and experiences of South Asian male students, and nuanced factors were revealed which may provide some 'contextual contours' relating to the ethnicity awarding gap. Cultural touchpoints were revealed where the importance of family, relationships and mental health potentially impacts on the relationship with university and are areas that I argue generate some level of racial dissonance. The importance of hearing from the student therefore allows for a deeper understanding of what is actually happening, where the cultural touchpoints are, and what level of racial dissonance may be being created. One example of this is the idea, linked to the theme of family, that for some South Asian males, entering higher education was seen as a source of 'freedom'.

'They feel free, like I said, they can do whatever they want. I've seen that within my own peer group, I've seen that with my own friends as well.'

Rashid, 3rd Business and Management student

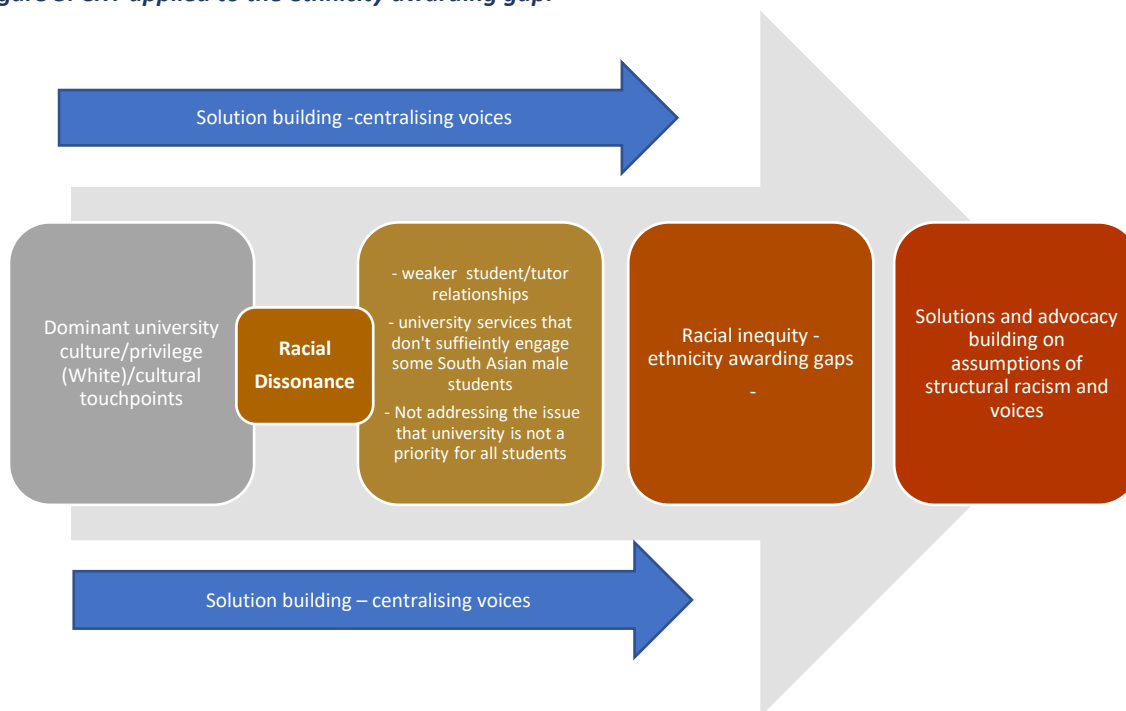
The theme provides some important context that adds meaning to the ways in which some South Asian students engage with university. It reveals that some South Asian male students see opportunities presented at university to socialise in ways that perhaps were not possible for them at school or college. Additionally, the student discussions on this provide an insight into the home context of the students, where perhaps social norms and family values are not

structured in ways that allow for more extensive socialising with peers. It provides an insight into an aspect of mindset for some South Asian male students that could have some bearing on their engagement with university. It is an example of the voices coming to the fore and revealing a notion that the university needs to understand and be able to respond to. As one student points out in this context, it is the university's job to 'grab the attention of the students.' It is an example of knowledge emerging through the engagement of student voices and those voices adding a layer of context that provide insight into the interaction of some South Asian students with university. It may explain in more nuanced ways, decisions that are made by students, provide a point for consideration in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap and therefore a route through which to consider how the university may respond.

Conceptualizing the voice and what those voices revealed allowed me to reflect on Movius's CRT model and its relationship to the ethnicity awarding gap. The model appeared not to include an explicit reference to the consideration of lived experience and voice which is an omission that should be considered. I posit that the model (with some adaptations) can be utilised to further contextualise my research and provide insight into the ethnicity awarding gap. I add into the model, understanding the tutor and student voice and the notion of racial dissonance, which provide the additional contours and context that could lead to developing solutions throughout that continuum. This would begin with the assumption of a dominant university culture with its inherent ways of working, expectations and privileges, including White privilege and accepting the notion of cultural touchpoints. I argue that these cultural touchpoints would lead to the racial inequities as outlined above, such as weaker tutor/student relationships, university services such as mental health provision, that are less able to connect with South Asian male students and an operating presumption that university

is a priority in the lives of students. In figure 5. below a model is presented which is an adaptation of Movius’s CRT model and offers a suggestion as to how CRT can be used to provide insight into the causes of the ethnicity awarding gap and a route to building solutions.

Figure 5. CRT applied to the ethnicity awarding gap.



Using the lens of CRT also provides a lens through which to consider my research findings. It adds some further specific context, which Bourdieu’s framework does not. It centralises race both from the perspective of the individual and the institution and places the lived experience at the heart of understanding impact. CRT also aligns with my notion of racial dissonance being created at the intersection of student and institution. CRT would question the set-up of the university, its culture and ability to embrace difference and presents a challenge to the university in its ability to react to and eliminate any racial dissonance that is generated.

The example relating to student/tutor relationships, is a case in point. Advocates of CRT would point to the lack of neutrality and White supremacy in the relationships that tutors build with students. However, it can also be argued that it does not focus as much as perhaps it ought on what the implications of this are or necessarily ask the question as to how the student responds in that scenario. There does not appear to be a detailed framework to consider how the individual actually interacts with the institution, other than the broad consideration of listening to lived experiences. It is argued that a deeper consideration of agency is needed to take the analysis to a more nuanced level and to consider how individuals respond and make decisions in given situations and environments and what levels of agency South Asian male students have.

My research focusses on the stories of South Asian males in the context of the ethnicity awarding gap. Racial context is a significant component of the findings of the research, and much of the data collected revolved around race and ethnicity. CRT therefore provides a useful lens through which to consider the data that was collected and helps to provide further context in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap. The key tenets of CRT provide a tool that can be used to provide insights into ingrained educational disparities (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 54). The aspects of CRT that are of relevance here include the premise that racism is a part of the fabric of society, the lack of neutrality in the provision of education and also the centrality of voices giving rise to an understanding of the lived experiences. CRT allows for the consideration of the student through the lens of race and ethnicity and the impact of this on the journeys of South Asian students. As previously discussed, the students in my research did not explicitly raise racism as a factor in their university journeys. However, CRT would

certainly start with that as a premise and would include within that, the notion of White privilege within its fabric and the impact that this has on students who are not White.

I would argue therefore that although CRT, like Bourdieu, is helpful in interpreting my findings, there are still some limitations in its approach. For example, there does not appear to be a strong focus within the tenets of CRT that allows for the consideration of agency and the interaction between the individual and institution and how that may then inform practice. For example, lived experiences are viewed as central, but there does not appear to be a framework within CRT that brings together the lived experience in the context of the structured environment and how the individual may respond or act in that context. There appears to be no further clarity relating to the interplay of race and structure and the navigation of those from an individual perspective in the structured way that the Bourdieusian concepts do.

The ethnicity awarding gap through the combined lenses of Bourdieu and CRT

Given some of the limitations of Bourdieu and CRT in the analysis of the data collected, I would argue that a stronger framework could emerge by combining key aspects of both and using the strengths of each to draw out stronger meaning. Both Bourdieu's concepts and CRT provide lenses through which to consider inequities and more specifically for the purpose of my research, the ethnicity awarding gap. Although they are quite different concepts, there are synergies between the frameworks. Both view the interplay of behaviours and cultures and objective structures as central to understanding inequity and both provide a critique of deficit models of thinking (Tichavakunda, 2019). I would argue that linking both frameworks

can provide further insights into the factors that may impact the ethnicity awarding gap in relation to South Asian male students. Bourdieu's framework and CRT scholars challenge the neutrality of education and argue that the way it is set up reproduces hierarchies, i.e., that systems are set up in a way that benefit those from the dominant culture. The impact of the education system, although appearing to be meritocratic it is argued, bestows privilege on those who are able to and have the required cultural capital to engage and succeed.

Both CRT and Bourdieu see privilege as a key component in the reproduction of inequity, with structures and systems favouring those whose image it was set up in. Here Bourdieu's notions of cultural capital, habitus and field are instructive. From the data, cultural touchpoints such as family, culture, relationships and mental health emerge and raise questions of who the university is set up to best serve and who is privileged in that system? I argue that these operate within the context of field, raising questions of agency and in turn one's practice. The limitations of Bourdieu (lack of explicit consideration of race and lived experiences) and CRT (lack of consideration of agency) I argue, can be mitigated by combining both frameworks allowing the researcher to better understand and draw further insights from the data.

Including race with Bourdieu's framework

In terms of the lack of explicit consideration of race in Bourdieu's framework, one of the key tenets of CRT, i.e., that racism is a permanent feature of institutions including the notion of White privilege can fill this gap. Accepting the permanent nature of racism allows for the interplay between cultural capital, habitus, and field to then be considered with this lens and therefore for race to be explicitly considered. It also allows for the question of White privilege

to be considered, particularly in the context of field. An example of this is the emergent theme of mental health and South Asian males. I argue that this cultural touchpoint may generate some racial dissonance in relation to the interaction between mental health and South Asian male students. CRT would start with the assumption that mental health services within the university are not set-up in a way that adequately addresses the need of the South Asian male student population and also set up in a way that is more accessible to White students. Including this key tenet of CRT within a theoretical framework would challenge the university to perhaps consider setting up services in ways that explicitly embrace race, thereby minimising any dissonance generated in those services or the 'field'.

In my research, students talked about the communities in which they lived, of relationships with tutors and each other, of caregiving responsibilities, of being first in family to attend university and of working during their studies. Although Bourdieu might recognise that the forms of cultural capital acquired through these experiences may not align with the expectations of university, CRT proponents, such as Yosso, would advocate for a more robust approach that requires organisations to understand and value the cultural capital or wealth that come with the students that arrive at its doors, in this case South Asian male students.

As previously discussed, there are aspects of Bourdieu's framework therefore that make it less complete when considering the findings of my research in the context of the ethnicity awarding gap. Overlaying CRT on to the notions of habitus, cultural capital and field allows for a more nuanced consideration of what may be happening in that scenario, in the context of institutionally racist institution and allows the researcher to move beyond the question of whether race is a factor. I would argue that this insight is significant as it allows for a more specific consideration of how the university may address this.

CRT and agency

My research raised questions relating to the students' agency. It has been argued that tenets of CRT do not sufficiently consider agency and how the implications of this are considered in given scenarios. Although the issue of 'lived experiences' is given centrality within CRT, it has been argued that there is an under-theorising of how those experiences might connect with structures and the choices that participants may exercise when in the field, i.e., what are the implications of those lived experiences in informing or restricting choices that students make? Given the themes relating to culture and identity that emerged from the data, I would argue that consideration of agency is important and the way in which students respond when in the field is an important point of enquiry, particularly when considering the ethnicity awarding gap.

A particular point of interest that emerged from my research was that the students did not directly talk about or mention racism, or even raise points that university practices may act as a barrier. This brings into question the notion of 'satisfied settling' as posited by Islam (2021) where students may not necessarily 'see' that there is any dissonance due to the veneer of neutrality in the way which the university operates. If this is the case, then I would argue the students' agency may be compromised due to their acceptance of their disadvantage as a price that has to be paid to attend university, or simply that they are not fully cognisant of their position or that racial dissonance that may be being generated. Agency becomes relevant in the context of how the students see their student journey and what may be impacting on that journey. Bourdieu's notion of habitus emphasises the role that the unconscious plays in the 'reproduction process'. Bourdieu's conceptualisation relating to

cultural capital, habitus and field provides an opportunity to consider agency or as Bourdieu calls it 'one's practice' in a more developed way than through the tenets of CRT. It allows for a clearer conception of this relationship as opposed to CRT alone.

Bourdieu's concern with the interaction between habitus and field also allows for the consideration of how individuals may respond in particular environments, and what their practice may be, based on their past experiences, values and future aspirations. Agency is central to his theory. This may involve the exploration of questions relating to student engagement, how students make choices relating to that engagement and what the university should do in order to mediate that engagement through its structures and personnel. The explicit inclusion of the consideration of agency, as in the interaction between habitus and field would allow for more meaningful insights to be drawn.

Table 9. summarises the points at which Bourdieu and CRT can be combined and what this means for the ethnicity awarding gap.

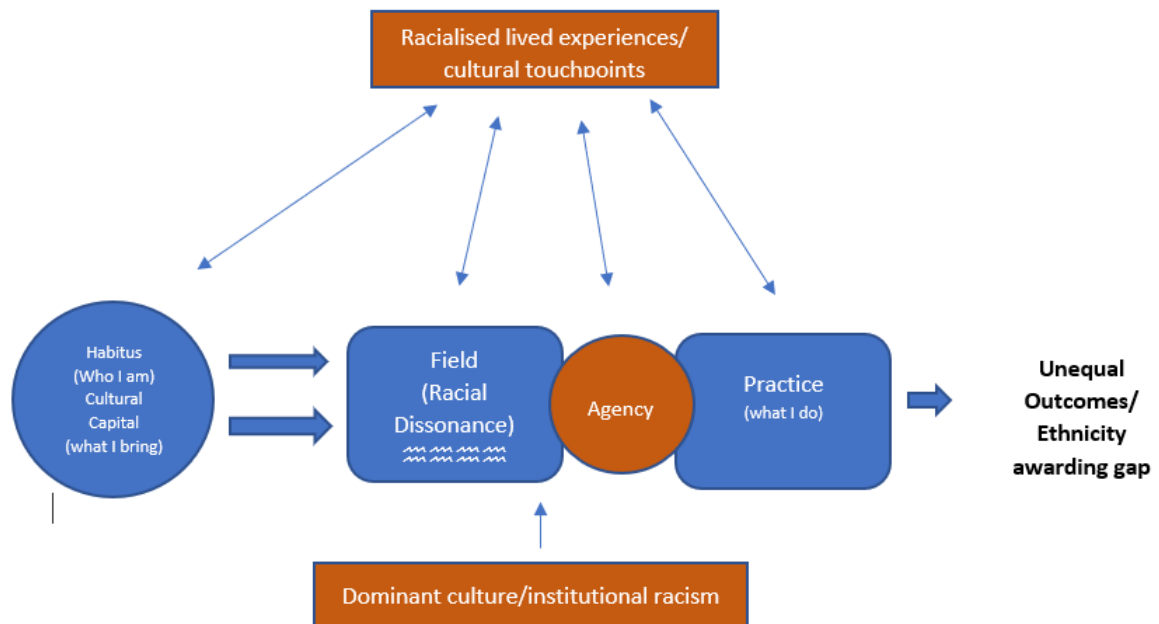
Table 9. The ethnicity awarding gap, Bourdieu and CRT

Bourdieu	Bourdieu limitations	CRT	CRT limitations	Bourdieu + CRT and the ethnicity awarding gap
Histories and being (Habitus)	Lack of voice/no explicit consideration of race	Lived experiences/ Race matters	No explicit consideration of agency.	More nuanced conception of the individual overlaid with racial context – the stories and perspectives of South Asian male students
What attributes are valued (cultural capital)	No explicit consideration of non-traditional cultural capital	Valuing of attributes brought by the student (Cultural wealth)		More explicit consideration of what attributes are valued by the university. Greater focus on the set-up of the organisation - How does the university engage South Asian male students?

Dominant cultures (field)	Race needs to be explicitly built into consideration	Assumption of White privilege		Reproduction of inequities based on race
Interactions and behaviour for people within particular social environments (practice)		Assumption of institutional racism	Lack of consideration of agency	Explicit consideration of agency and consequent dissonance caused by the coming together of South Asian male students and the university set up

My findings and emergent theory indicated a number of cultural touchpoints which may create some dissonance for South Asian male students in their higher educational journeys. I posit that these cultural touchpoints (underpinned by family and culture), and subsequent generation of racial dissonance, shed some light on the unexplained spaces of the ethnicity awarding gap. I further argue that overlaying this theory with the combined concepts of Bourdieu and the key tenets of CRT, provides a model (figure 6.) that further contextualises my emergent theory.

Figure 6. CRT, Bourdieu and the ethnicity awarding gap



The combined model presents a picture that current educational systems and processes at the university and wider higher education sector are underpinned by a dominant culture that is unable to 'see' and fully respond to South Asian male students. More specifically the model below demonstrates the interplay between habitus, cultural capital, field, agency and practice. Using the model in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap I posit that the student (with their habitus and cultural capital) enters the university (field) and in this space points of racial dissonance are created between student and university. Central to the model is the acknowledgement of institutional racism, being a part of the make-up of the organisation with racial dissonance which is generated and understood through the cultural touchpoints described above, being a manifestation of this.

I further suggest that it is within the cultural touchpoints that the question of agency becomes important and determines how the student navigates (practice) the field, making decisions about what they do or do not do. Fully understanding these racialised lived experiences therefore is a critical aspect of the model, and which will provide further meaning to the habitus, cultural capital, field, student agency and the practice that that leads to. Utilising this model to consider the ethnicity awarding gap provides an opportunity for the university to better understand and develop appropriate interventions that may impact the unexplained aspects of the ethnicity awarding gap. This is further considered in the conclusions and recommendations chapter below.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

My thesis started with the assertion that minoritised ethnic students were being awarded proportionately fewer ‘good’ honours degrees than their White counterparts for reasons that were not related to academic ability (Richardson 2015). The data is unforgiving in highlighting the fact that this group of students have left university with proportionately fewer ‘good’ degrees than their White counterparts since data records in relation to this began, and it is recognised that this has the impact of perpetuating inequities into the world of work and society (Advance HE, 2020). The persistence of this inequity brings into question, whether the university and higher education sector is appropriately set up to address student inequities such as the ethnicity awarding gap status quo as relates to the awarding of degree classifications.

The question to be considered therefore is, if the reason for proportionately fewer ‘good’ degrees is not academic ability, then what? My thesis explores possible contributory factors to this awarding gap, and I argue that my findings shed some further light on this phenomenon and offers the concepts of cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance as new ways in which to conceptualise the ethnicity awarding gap. There were some limitations to my research, and these are outlined below. Furthermore, I provide some concluding comments and towards the end of this chapter, make recommendations which aim to minimise racial dissonance between South Asian male students and the university, and also suggest areas of further research that may be undertaken to provide further insights into the ethnicity awarding gap.

Limitations of the research

In undertaking my research, I acknowledge that there were potential limitations that may have had some impact on the findings and discussion. These included my positionality, the use of online focus groups, the version of grounded theory which I undertook, the sample and my choice of theoretical frameworks to discuss my findings.

In terms of my positionality within the research, I acknowledge that to a certain extent I was an insider researcher who had an affinity with the students in terms of my own background and experiences. In this regard sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1954) may have been a factor in the way in which the research evolved, for example in the selection of the first set of questions that were posed to the students. At the same time, although I was an EdD student, I was by no means a student in the same way as my participants and I was older and with a staff position of significant responsibility at the university they attended. As a result, I was both an insider and an outsider and was potentially prone to making assumptions or judgements based on my own experiences rather than only on the experiences of the participants. There was potential therefore to argue that my research may not be purely objective.

However, throughout my research I acknowledge my reflexive approach, examining how my positionality could have impacted the research process. For example, whilst analysing the data, I reference that my own personal values and experiences of higher education could have influenced the interpretation of the data and I have also acknowledged that sensitising concepts may have had some influence. However, although there may have been some limitations in terms of this from an 'objectivity' perspective, my positionality may also have

brought some advantage in enabling me to connect with participants, building trust and confidence with them enabling the co-construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2006)

A further limitation was the mode of delivery of the focus groups. These had to be undertaken online due to the pandemic regulations in place at the time. The fact that they had to be conducted online may have impacted on the quality of the discussions and they potentially could have been more free-flowing and discursive, yielding richer data, if they had taken place in person. It is difficult to ascertain whether any different themes may have emerged if delivered face to face, but due to the regulations online delivery was the only possible method of delivery at the time.

Potentially there may have been limitations in my approach to grounded theory during my research. I adapted the original approach to grounded theory from the 'pure' approach as articulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to a more flexible approach as acknowledged by Chun Tie *et al.* (2019) & Timonen *et al.* (2019). Rather than analysing each interview to inform the next, I analysed the data after each group of interviews, acknowledging my position within the research. Although it is difficult to ascertain whether and how the findings may have changed if I had taken this 'pure' approach, I was satisfied that my approach aligned with later iterations of grounded theory deploying a more constructivist and flexible approach as articulated by Charmaz (2014). Furthermore, I was satisfied that the process yielded an appropriate set of data with a point of 'saturation' having been reached with no new themes emerging at the point of the focus groups.

I also acknowledge that there may have been some limitations in the student sample that I used, with a focus on South Asian males. Although this group is narrower than the broader category of minoritised ethnic students, it is still an umbrella term which incorporates a broad range of nationalities, religions and cultures and therefore there was the potential for generalisations to be made in the findings and discussion. Focussing on a specific grouping within this had the potential to provide even more specific insights. There was an option to focus on a sub-set of South Asian students, but then the potential pool of participants within the School would have been significantly reduced, which in turn may have impacted the quantity and quality of the data collected. I mitigated against this by only including UK domicile South Asian students in the sample. It was also significant that during the interviews, the student participants all referred to their 'Asian' background rather than a heritage linked to their national, language or faith backgrounds, indicating some level of commonality and shared understanding of being 'Asian' between the students.

A final limitation may have been in my use of theoretical framework connected with Bourdieu and CRT. Although I discuss the specific limitations of each of these frameworks within the literature review chapter, one of the potential limitations of my selection of these frameworks may be that I did not undertake a full review of other theoretical frameworks that could have been used to consider my findings. This may have revealed further possible connections and alignment with a broader range of frameworks, leading to further insights into the awarding gap. However, I focussed on Bourdieu and CRT due to the strong resonance that each had to consider matters of inequality and race within the context of education.

Whilst acknowledging these potential limitations, it is also important to note that they also provide opportunities for new research. This may include undertaking a purer form of grounded theory approach, further research in relation to sub-groups within the South Asian umbrella, for example specifically focussing on Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage students. A wider review of other theoretical frameworks could also be undertaken to consider the ethnicity awarding gap which may in turn provide further insights into this phenomenon.

Further concluding comments

The specific inequity relating to the ethnicity awarding gap sits within a broader and embedded range of racial inequities across key aspects of society such as housing, criminal justice and employment (EHRC, 2016; Cabinet office, 2017; Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities, 2021). The ethnicity awarding gap phenomenon continues to perplex the higher education sector, both with its persistence and seeming lack of clarity about what is required to tackle it, with some arguing that it sits very much in the ‘wicked problem’ category (Ugiagbe-Green and Ernsting, 2022). As someone who has had a lifelong interest in equity and working to advance it, this research journey has allowed me to collate new insights into factors that may contribute to the ethnicity awarding gap in relation to South Asian male students.

The aim of my research was to critically explore student journeys in a business school in the northwest of England, to seek qualitative insights into contributory factors that may be of relevance to the ethnicity awarding gap between South Asian male students and White students.

More specifically the objectives of my research were to:

1. Examine the experiences, and perspectives of South Asian male students studying in the business school on their journeys to and through university and consider to what extent they offer insights into the contributory factors to the ethnicity awarding gap.
2. Examine the experiences, and perspectives of tutors in the business school in relation to the ethnicity awarding gap between South Asian male students and White students and consider whether these offer insights into the contributing factors to the ethnicity awarding gap.
3. Make recommendations to the business school and wider university that offer interventions that may assist in addressing the ethnicity awarding gap.

There was strong evidence from the literature review that part of the awarding gap can be attributed to quantifiable factors such as entry qualifications and other socio-economic factors. However, it is also clear that when these factors are controlled for, there is still a gap which remains unexplained, other than the link to ethnicity. The literature relating to this unexplained space presents a more complex picture where no clear answers are presented in answering the question as to what the contributory factors to this part of the awarding gap are. It is within this space that my research is focussed and central to that research are the voices of students and tutors who shared their insights.

In my research, an overarching theory emerged that was grounded in the data, and which allowed me to develop the concepts of cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance. The theory suggests that for some South Asian male students, their identity, motivation, relationships (peers and tutor), transition and mental health, grounded in family and culture, are aspects of lives that the university is not sufficiently able to take account of, thereby creating a level of racial dissonance in students' journeys through higher education and which may adversely impact the ethnicity awarding gap. Additionally, it was suggested that the need to consider the curriculum, the need for the university to change, as well as connecting with South Asian families were brought in as factors that were important in the consideration of the awarding gap. There may of course be other aspects of South Asian male students' lives which did not emerge from my research but may create additional cultural touchpoints and racial dissonance. I further built on the concepts by offering a definition of racial dissonance as:

'a form of institutional racism, where cultural touchpoints create areas of incompatibility between an organisation's practice and an individual, grounded in race, culture and ethnicity, and through those interactions, creating a level of disharmony.'

I further considered these findings and emergent theory through the theoretical lenses of Pierre Bourdieu's framework of cultural capital, habitus and field, and CRT and through these offered a combined model that potentially offers further insights into factors that shed light on the awarding gap and may be considered beyond the scope of the students and tutors that were participants in my study. The model assumes that race and institutional racism are a part of the fabric of organisations and does not need to be questioned so that organisations

can then then move to the next question of how to address it. Further, the model acknowledges the cultural factors that are part of who the students are, which in turn lead to some level of racial dissonance being created. This in turn may impact on agency and sheds some light on student outcomes such as the awards that are conferred. Therefore, the model raises the key question of how to minimise this racial dissonance. Critical in considering this and referred to in the combined model is the students' voice, and the understanding of those lived experiences by the university and what that means in terms of the students' agency and how the university needs to respond to that. Understanding the specific aspects of racial dissonance highlighted therefore, provides the university an opportunity to develop more explicit interventions whereby this dissonance can be minimised.

It is important to acknowledge that the principles that underpin these findings and related discussion may also be applicable to students with cultural and demographic heritages that also do not align with the expectations of universities. It is likely that the dynamic between these groups of students and the university will also present cultural touchpoints that are pertinent to those groups and which in turn may also create forms of dissonance which impact their outcomes. Again, I would argue that acknowledging this dissonance and developing an understanding of the diverse range of students within the university, and adapting provision within the university will be key in minimising inequities.

The students and tutors who took part in the survey made suggestions, in terms of what the university could do in order to strengthen its approach to the ethnicity awarding gap. These suggestions revolved around building stronger relationships with its South Asian male students, and linked to this, to recruit a more diverse workforce that may support the

strengthening of those relationships. It was also found that there was a need for the university to consider the way in which mental health services are delivered so that South Asian male students feel better able to connect with those services, confident that they will receive a culturally appropriate service. Suggestions were made by tutors to design a curriculum that better connects to South Asian male students, with the argument that there needs to be some form of decolonising of the curriculum, so that a broader range of perspectives and knowledge are delivered within it. Tutors also alluded to the institution needing to change, in order to better connect with South Asian male students, rather than changing the students. In order to successfully transform these aspects then the detail of working out the solutions should fully involve South Asian male students to ensure that the 'necessary contextual contours' are fully understood (Ladson-Billing, 2023).

My thesis adds to the knowledge that currently exists within the phenomenon of the awarding gap discourse in the following ways. Firstly, my research takes an intersectional approach and focusses on South Asian male students, and through this approach, themes and notions were revealed which allow for the further consideration of factors that relate to this group. Secondly, I considered the findings through the lenses of theoretical frameworks that offer new insights and ways in which the dynamic between student, tutors and institution can be considered, and which there did not appear to be any specific consideration of in the literature. By combining the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and CRT, I present a model that offers a way of considering the awarding gap that is new and novel. I would argue that these new perspectives will allow for further discussions and action to take place not only within the business school and university in which the research took place, but also across the wider higher education sector. I intend to disseminate the findings and discussion points

outlined in this thesis with the university in which the research took place, and also across the higher education sector through the medium of seminars and where possible presentation at appropriate conferences, involving both students and staff. This will allow for the findings, discussion points and recommendations to be further tested and potentially refined.

Recommendations

It is clear from the persistence of the awarding gap both within the school and across the university that transformative actions will be required to make inroads into addressing the ethnicity awarding gap that applies to South Asian males. The recommendations align to my model at figure 6., which incorporates the need to centralise South Asian male student voices in the detailed development of those actions. Both tutors and students made suggestions as to what could be improved. These, together with the further insights gained through my findings and discussion chapters, give rise to a number of recommendations which should be considered by the university. The recommendations focus on minimising the racial dissonance for South Asian male students, although the underpinning approaches of some of the recommendations may also be of benefit to other groups.

My recommendations may be considered at a number of levels, although I use the term university throughout my recommendations. They are applicable at the business school level which may enable a more agile approach in the first instance and should also be considered by the school leadership team. They should also be considered by the university leadership team, reflecting the need for a whole institution approach, Finally the recommendations will also be of interest to the wider higher education sector which faces similar issues relating to

the ethnicity awarding gap. The following recommendations are therefore made based on the findings and discussion chapters in this thesis.

Overarching approaches

1. To enable a more solution focussed approach to tackling the ethnicity awarding gap between South Asian male and White students, the university should acknowledge the part that institutional racism and specifically racial dissonance plays in the phenomenon. This is an essential first step, which will allow the conversation to move on from the question of whether race or racism plays a part, allowing for a greater focus on what needs to be done to remove barriers for this group.
2. In order to minimise the racial dissonance created at the various cultural touchpoints highlighted, it is recommended that the university instigate a transformation strategy which incorporates the more specific recommendations below relating to transition, relationship building, curriculum and mental health. The overall aim should be to create an environment which is able to take account of the lived experiences and lives of South Asian male students. Focussing on the findings from my research, any new strategy should focus on how key areas of the university's educational provision can be reshaped to better connect with its South Asian students.
3. At the heart of my model (fig 6) is understanding students and their lived experiences. It is therefore recommended that the transformation strategy should establish a South

Asian male advisory panel or a cohort of South Asian student peer to peer grassroots researchers who can collaborate with the wider South Asian student population and university to co-create interventions that will minimise any racial dissonance that is identified. This group should be established with appropriate training, resourcing and that provides reward and recognition for the students, including financial payment to recognise the additional work that the students will undertake. This principle of reward and recognition should be applicable not only to the development of the transformation strategy but also to the more specific recommendations below. Without this partnership with students, it is likely that any changes will not be well-informed and less likely to be successful.

Student motivations and transition

4. Students highlighted the challenges and opportunities that presented during induction into university, and the importance of friendship building. For some South Asian male students this included the idea of 'freedom' when entering university, which for the students was grounded in ethnicity and culture. It is recommended that the induction process is reviewed in partnership with students so that it is sufficiently engaging and is able to 'grab the attention' of South Asian male students. This should involve a review of the range of information and timetabled activities that take place as part of induction so that they are able to better resonate with South Asian male students. This may for example include the following which were suggested by the tutors and students. The marking of culturally relevant activities such as Eid, Diwali and South Asian history month and ensuring that culturally appropriate catering such as halal

food is available. Also inviting high profile South Asian professionals during induction, with relatable stories that will engage South Asian students may assist in strengthening the interest of South Asian students.

5. It was highlighted by tutors that the involvement of parents and families may lead to a greater understanding of and connection with South Asian students and the enhancement of its own cultural intelligence about the communities that it serves. Developing stronger connections with South Asian parents and families may provide opportunities for them to understand the university environment thereby leading to more effective support networks in the students' home environment. It is therefore recommended that establishing a greater connection between the university and South Asian parents/carers, for example through a South Asian parents'/carers' network, targeted family days or outreach events during the induction period, may assist in strengthening the connection to the university. The university should explore with its tutors and students, the most appropriate way in which these relationships can be developed.

6. The data indicated that for some South Asian students, university was not their most important priority. A cultural touchpoint that emerged from students and tutors was the centrality of family in the lives of some South Asian students. The findings indicated that matters such as caregiving responsibilities, and family duties that were priority considerations for some South Asian male students. It is critically important for the university to better understand this phenomenon and what this means for key administrative processes within the university so that any racial dissonance that is

generated in this space can be minimised. It is therefore recommended that processes such as timetabling, modes of assessment delivery, and mitigating circumstances policies are reviewed in partnership with South Asian students and adapted so that they are flexibly able to account of the complexity of student lives, for example in their caregiving responsibilities.

Relationship building (peers and tutors)

The importance of relationships between students themselves and between South Asian male students and tutors were key cultural touchpoints that emerged from the data. This is an important feature for any student. However, the findings suggested that those relationships may not develop sufficiently for some South Asian male students, grounded in the data that some tutors may not have knowledge about the lived experiences of South Asian males and implications of the under-representation of UK domicile, South Asian males within the staffing body. Building and developing effective relationships with South Asian male students is important to enable deeper and more meaningful engagement to take place between students and tutors. Specifically, this should involve:

7. Tutors being supported by the university to build stronger relationships with South Asian male students, through a comprehensive and coordinated training and development programme for tutors. This could involve activities such as spending a day 'shadowing' South Asian male students, reverse mentoring, cultural intelligence training and seminars exploring South Asian heritage and experiences. An additional way in which relationships could be strengthened is through partnering with

community organisations based within South Asian communities as a way of not only building knowledge within the workforce, but also as a way of signalling the university's interest in the South Asian community. The programme should focus on building consistent skills and knowledge across the workforce, including an understanding of anti-discriminatory practice, the impact of cultural touchpoints and how to better connect with South Asian male students. It is inevitable that time for relationship building with students will also need to be factored into tutor workloads to facilitate this.

8. The university and the higher education sector in general are not representative of the diversity in the student body and both students and tutors questioned the impact of this on truly understanding its students. From the data available at the time, it was apparent that the school staff profile was under-represented when comparing the proportion of South Asian tutors as compared to South Asian students. It is therefore recommended that more pro-active approaches to diversifying the tutor body are implemented so that the university better reflects its South Asian student population. Positive action measures will be required to make significant inroads. This could for example include both a focus on the 'pipeline' of academic staff for example, providing bursaries for South Asian male students to undertake PhDs and their subsequent journey into academia, as well as initiatives that focus on recruiting South Asian tutors from within academia, industry and practice.
9. The student participants highlighted the importance of being able to establish friendships during the transition period and that this was partly linked to ethnicity and

culture, with some students finding it difficult to make connections with their peers. One way in which this aspect of student life can be strengthened is through the establishment of a peer to peer support programme for first year South Asian males, with a focus on enabling South Asian male students to develop support networks and friendship groups to better navigate the first year.

10. Students and tutors also highlighted that friendship groups tended to be monocultural.

Although it is not clear what the impact of this in terms of student outcomes, there may be some benefits in implementing a pro-active policy of facilitating greater intercultural engagement between students, which in turn may support the building of relationships within cohorts and sense of belonging. It is recommended that the university develop and adopt pro-active strategies that facilitate a greater integration of South Asian male students with those from different backgrounds in and outside of the classroom. This may be facilitated through in-programme project work, through supporting subject level student societies, field trips and social activities that bring students from different backgrounds together.

Curriculum

Tutors in particular, highlighted issues relating to the curriculum and questioned whether it was entirely relatable to the South Asian male student, potentially impacting on areas such as sense of belonging and engagement. It is therefore recommended that:

11. The school and university should review its curriculum to ensure that it better connects with its South Asian male students and is relatable to their experiences so they are better able to see themselves in it. A 'decolonising the curriculum' programme should be implemented across the school/university. This should include involving South Asian male students in the process to ensure that their perspectives and experiences are included the development of the curriculum. This may be done for example, through co-creating assessments and relatable case studies and developing in-class discussions that draw on South Asian male student personal experiences. A further example may include the use of alumni from South Asian backgrounds to share their journeys and insights.

12. Quality assurance processes, such as programme review, and validations, should be reviewed to ensure that academic teams and schools reflect on whether the curriculum incorporates decolonised approaches. This will ensure that these considerations are embedded within 'business as usual' processes of the university rather than one-off initiatives.

13. A programme of development should be implemented for tutors to support them in developing their knowledge of the key principles of decolonisation and what this means for their curriculum as well as the skills in implementing these changes.

Mental health

Cultural touchpoints were found for South Asian male students that may create racial dissonance in some areas, such as caregiving and mental health, and questions were raised as to how the university accommodated or acknowledged this.

14. Mental health emerged as a key issue for South Asian male students. The data indicated that there was a cultural/ family perspective to this. The data also indicated that South Asian male students were unlikely to access university support services, which may impact on engagement with their programme, school and university. It is recommended therefore that the university undertake a review of the accessibility of its services for South Asian male students. This should include:

- a. an analysis of the proportions of South Asian male students accessing its service.
- b. the skill set of support service staff.
- c. delivery models of its mental health services with a specific consideration of the services' effectiveness in connecting with South Asian male students.
- d. The demographic profile of student support services to better understand whether it is representative of the South Asian male student population.

Areas for further research

Through undertaking this research and considering the findings potential areas, for further research were highlighted and which are outlined below:

1. This research focussed on better understanding the factors that may impact on the unexplained spaces of the ethnicity awarding gap. However, the literature review also highlighted the scant literature that reviewed the explainable factors of the awarding gap such as prior qualifications or socio-economic background, with the intersection of ethnicity to better understand the impact on the awarding gap. This is an area that has the potential to add to the knowledge in this area where further research may provide further detailed insights.
2. Although there is some literature that explores the impact of education policy or national frameworks on the awarding gap, there was little or no literature that explicitly considered this specifically in relation to the impact on the ethnicity awarding gap. Further research could therefore be helpful in considering policy from a number of levels including national policy level, but also from a university policy level with a view to addressing the more structural aspects of the awarding gap.
3. Further research may also be undertaken from an even more granular level, perhaps considering national heritage, e.g., Pakistani or Indian heritage students, or perhaps from a specific faith perspective to further understand if this provided any further nuanced perspectives in understanding the ethnicity awarding gap.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Participant information sheet - student interviews.

An inquiry into the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Ethnicity awarding gap within the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise.

Participant Information Sheet for Semi Structured Interviews

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The overall aim of my research will be to explore attitudes, expectations, motivation and educational influencers of South Asian male students, who study business related subjects in higher education. More specifically the purpose of the research is

4. To consider to what extent cultural factors, such as family matters, living at home, caring responsibilities and other factors impact on attitudes and approaches to education.
5. To gain an understanding of approaches that South Asian males in the study take to engaging with their programmes of study, including engagement with course team, university services and the wider student body.
6. To make recommendations or suggest possible solutions for improved engagement and attainment of South Asian male students through better levels of understanding and knowledge of this group of students.

This will inform our understanding of the experiences of this group.

2. Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to participate in the project because you are a South Asian male studying in the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise. We welcome your input by taking part in a short interview.

3. Do I have to take part?

There is no obligation to take part if you do not wish to.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you do agree to take part, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis by the project team. If you are happy to take part, please complete the attached consent form, which covers the interview.

5. What if I change mind about taking part?

If you wish to withdraw at any time, you may do so. Please contact Pradeep Passi by email: pradeep.passi@uclan.ac.uk or Joanne Doherty: jdoherthy@uclan.ac.uk if you wish to withdraw. Following this, any information that you may have provided will be withdrawn from the research process with immediate effect.

6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

We do not consider that there are significant risks to taking part. Care will be taken to ensure confidentiality and your anonymity throughout.

7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

A benefit of taking part will be that you can use this opportunity to reflect on your personal and professional development from this experience. You will also be contributing to findings that may benefit future students.

8. What if something goes wrong?

If something goes wrong or you become concerned, you should contact Pradeep Passi or Joanne Doherty, and discuss this. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to yourself.

9. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. Your participation will be dealt with in strictest confidentiality and anonymised.

10. What will happen to the results of the research study?

As part of the research, we are intending to analyse data to identify key benefits that you highlight on mentoring. This research will provide UCLan with quality first hand empirical research findings in relation to influences and motivation in relation to South Asian males and factors that may influence their higher education journeys. The findings of this research study will also help to shape learning and teaching strategies within the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise.

The results of the research will also be reported in conference papers and may also be put forward for publication in journal articles, It will also inform my doctoral thesis recommendations in relation to learning and teaching approaches.

11. Who is organising and funding the research?

The Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise is supporting this research.

12. Who may I contact for further information?

If you wish to find out more about the project itself, the lead researcher on the project is Pradeep Passi, from University of Central Lancashire. If you have any questions about the project please contact Pradeep Passi by email: ppassi@uclan.ac.uk or Joanne Doherty at jdoherthy@uclan.ac.uk

Thank you for your interest in this research.

Appendix 2 – Student interview flyer

ASIAN MALES' STUDENTS NEEDED

- I am looking for Asian male student volunteers to help me with some research that I am undertaking in the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise.
- I am researching potential factors, as part of my Doctoral study, that may contribute to Asian males, on average, under-attaining when compared with the School as a whole.
- You may have some valuable insights that could inform this study and help to shape our approach to learning and teaching in the School.
- If you are interested, you may be asked to take part in a relaxed conversation for approximately 30 minutes with the researcher.

Please contact me, (Pradeep) at ppassi@uclan.ac.uk or let your tutor that you are interested, and I will contact you.

Thank you.

Appendix 3. Student consent form

Consent form - Students

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research.

Your participation will be used by UCLan to explore issues relevant to the educational journeys, perceptions and motivations of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students studying in the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise. The information provided will help us to understand why, on average, BAME students do less well in terms of degree attainment than their white counterparts.

All information that you share will be held confidentially in accordance with the requirements of the UK's data protection legislation. At no point will the information you provide be shared in a way that would allow you to be personally identified. Any material provided to UCLan during this research will be anonymised.

Please sign below to confirm that you have been informed of the purpose of this research and

1. have been provided with a participant information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions about it,
2. that you understand that all information about you will be treated in confidence by the researcher except that relating to the disclosure of illegal activity or safeguarding issues
3. that you understand that I am undertaking this research as part of my doctoral studies and not as a senior manager within the School.
4. you will not be personally identified in any report arising from the research.
5. That you give your consent to the interview/focus group being audio recorded
6. your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time up to the point at which data will be analysed and anonymised. This will happen by [insert date]

Name:

Date:

Appendix 4 – Student interview question areas

Question areas - students

Name

Studying:

Age:

Religion:

At home or on campus

Parents when to uni:

Decision making/ motivations in coming to university.

- Why university?
- Why this degree?

Expectations and aspirations

- Expectations of university/ Aspirations?
- Tell me about your overall experience through first and second years.
Motivation/connection with programme and tutors

Engagement with university and programme of study

- Sense of belonging
- Extra-curricular engagement
- Factors that impact/support what you do at University

Relationships with peers and university staff

- How do they influence your engagement at Uni

Priorities

- Home/life/uni
- What can we do to enhance the sense of belonging for Asian male students

Appendix 5. Staff consent form

Consent form – Staff – Awards gaps research

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research.

Your participation will be used by UCLan to explore issues relevant to the educational journeys, perceptions and motivations of South Asian male students studying in the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise. The information provided will help us to understand why, on average, South Asian male students do less well in terms of degree attainment than their white counterparts.

All information that you share will be held confidentially in accordance with the requirements of the UK's data protection legislation. At no point will the information you provide be shared in a way that would allow you to be personally identified. Any material provided to UCLan during this research will be anonymised.

Please sign below to confirm that you have been informed of the purpose of this research and

1. have been provided with a participant information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions about it,
2. that you understand that all information about you will be treated in confidence by the researcher except that relating to the disclosure of illegal activity or safeguarding issues
3. that you understand that I am undertaking this research as part of my doctoral studies and not as a senior manager within the School.
4. you will not be personally identified in any report arising from the research.
5. that you consent to the interview/focus group being audio recorded.
6. your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time up to the point at which data will be analysed and anonymised. This will happen by [insert date]

Name:

Date:

Signature:

Appendix 6. Participant information sheet – staff interviews

An inquiry into the Asian male attainment gap within the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise.

Participant Information Sheet for semi-structured interviews - Staff

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. I am undertaking this research as part of my doctoral studies (Professional Doctorate in Education). I am also a member of staff and a senior manager in the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise and the research will also help to inform the work that I am involved in the School, although this will come secondary to the research itself. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for expressing an interest to take part in this research but do take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The overall aim of my research will be to explore attitudes, expectations, motivation and educational influencers of Asian male students, who study business related subjects in higher education. It is envisaged that this will assist in identifying factors that may contribute to the under attainment of this group. By taking part you will be helping to create new knowledge relating to attainment, possibly leading to recommendations which may improve attainment. More specifically the purpose of the research is

7. To consider to what extent cultural factors, such as family matters, living at home, caring responsibilities and other factors impact on attitudes and approaches to education.
8. To gain an understanding of approaches that students in the study take to engaging with their programmes of study, including engagement with course team, university services and the wider student body.
9. To make recommendations or suggest possible solutions for improved engagement and attainment of Asian male students through better levels of understanding and knowledge of this group of students.

This will inform our understanding of the experiences of this group.

2. Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to participate in the project because you are a member of staff in the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise. We welcome your input by taking part in a short interview.

3. How long will the interview take?

The interview will last approximately 45 minutes.

4. Do I have to take part?

There is no obligation to take part if you do not wish to.

5. What will happen to me if I take part?

The interview approach will be completely non-judgmental, and you will be free to respond to interview questions how you choose. Your participation in this research will not impact on any aspect of your employment and you can be assured that my role in the research is primarily as a researcher rather than as senior manager and therefore there will be no implications for your individual role in the School.

If you do agree to take part, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis by the project team. If you are happy to take part, please complete the attached consent form, which covers the interview.

6. What if I change mind about taking part?

If you wish to withdraw at any time, you may do so up to the point at which data will be analysed and anonymised. This will happen by [insert date] Please contact Pradeep Passi by email: ppassi@uclan.ac.uk or Joanne Doherty: jdoherly@uclan.ac.uk if you wish to withdraw. Following this, any information that you may have provided will be withdrawn from the research process with immediate effect.

7. What will happen to the data that you collect?

Data that will be collected, namely notes and transcripts from the interviews, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office, of which I am the sole occupier. The focus groups and interviews will be recorded using a digital device. You will be informed when the recording has started and ended. All questions from myself and your responses will be recorded. Audio recordings will be transcribed to create a physical record of the conversations, which in turn will be saved on a password protected file on the University network. Audio recordings will be transferred to a password protected file on the University network. The audio recording on the device will be deleted following transcription. The audio file on the network will be deleted after 5 years.

8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

We do not consider that there are significant risks to taking part. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout except where any illegal activities or safeguarding issues are disclosed. In this case I may have to pass on information to the relevant agencies. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the project.

9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

A benefit of taking part will be that you can use this opportunity to reflect on your personal and professional development from this experience. You will also be contributing to findings that may benefit future students.

10. What if something goes wrong?

If something goes wrong or you become concerned, you should contact Pradeep Passi or Professor Candice Satchwell, and discuss this. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to yourself.

If participants have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, they should contact University Officer for Ethics (email address OfficerforEthics@uclan.ac.uk).

11. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout except where any illegal activities or safeguarding issues are disclosed. In this case I may have to pass on information to the relevant agencies. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the project and you will not be personally identified in any publications or presentations.

12. What will happen to the results of the research study?

As part of the research, we are intending to analyse data to identify key benefits that you highlight on mentoring. This research will provide UCLan with quality first hand research findings in relation to influences and motivation in relation to South Asian male students and factors that may influence their higher education journeys. The findings of this research study will also help to shape learning and teaching strategies within the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise.

The results of the research will also be reported in conference papers and may also be put forward for publication in journal articles, It will also inform my doctoral thesis recommendations in relation to learning and teaching approaches.

13. Support needs

If you have any particular support needs to enable you to participate in the research, then please do let us know so that we can discuss how best we can provide support to enable you to participate. Please Contact ppassi@uclan.ac.uk or csatchwell@uclan.ac.uk for further details.

14. Who is organising and funding the research?

The Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise is supporting this research.

15. Who may I contact for further information?

If you wish to find out more about the project itself, the lead researcher on the project is Pradeep Passi, from University of Central Lancashire. If you have any questions about the project, please contact Pradeep Passi by email: ppassi@uclan.ac.uk or Candice Satchwell@uclan.ac.uk

Questions, comments or concerns

You can contact any member of the research team for further information:

Candice Satchwell	Phone: 893799 (x3799)	Email: csatchwell@uclan.ac.uk
Pradeep Passi	Phone: 893152 (x(3152)	Email: ppassi@uclan.ac.uk

If participants have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, they should contact University Officer for Ethics (email address OfficerforEthics@uclan.ac.uk).

Finally - thank you for taking part.

Appendix 7. Student focus group flyer

ASIAN MALE STUDENTS NEEDED

- I am looking for Asian male student volunteers to help me with some research that I am undertaking in the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise.
- I am researching potential factors, as part of my Doctoral study, that may contribute to Asian males, on average, under-attaining when compared with the School as a whole.
- You may have some valuable insights that could inform this study and help to shape our approach to learning and teaching in the School.
- If you are interested, you may be asked to take part in a relaxed conversation for approximately 30 minutes with the researcher.

Please contact me, (Pradeep) at ppassi@uclan.ac.uk or let your tutor that you are interested, and I will contact you.

Thank you.

Appendix 8. Participant information sheet – focus groups

An inquiry into the Asian male attainment gap within the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise.

Participant Information Sheet for Focus Groups

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. I am undertaking this research as part of my doctoral studies (Professional Doctorate in Education). I am also a member of staff and a senior manager in the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise and the research will also help to inform the work that I am involved in the School, although this will come secondary to the research itself. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for expressing an interest to take part in this research but do take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The overall aim of my research will be to explore attitudes, expectations, motivation and educational influencers of Asian male students, who study business related subjects in higher education. It is envisaged that this will assist in identifying factors that may contribute to the under attainment of this group. By taking part you will be helping to create new knowledge relating to attainment, possibly leading to recommendations which may improve attainment. More specifically the purpose of the research is

1. To consider to what extent cultural factors, such as family matters, living at home, caring responsibilities and other factors impact on attitudes and approaches to education.
2. To gain an understanding of approaches that students in the study take to engaging with their programmes of study, including engagement with course team, university services and the wider student body.
3. To make recommendations or suggest possible solutions for improved engagement and attainment of Asian male students through better levels of understanding and knowledge of this group of students.

This will inform our understanding of the experiences of this group.

2. Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to participate in the project because you are an Asian male student studying in the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise. We welcome your input by taking part in a short interview.

3. How long will the interview take?

The interview will last approximately 45 minutes.

4. Do I have to take part?

There is no obligation to take part if you do not wish to.

5. What will happen to me if I take part?

The interview approach will be completely non-judgmental, and you will be free to respond to interview questions how you choose. Your participation in this research will not impact on any aspect of your education/employment and you can be assured that my role in the research is primarily as a researcher rather than as senior manager and therefore there will be no implications for your individual study/ role in the School.

If you do agree to take part, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed for data analysis by the project team. If you are happy to take part, please complete the attached consent form, which covers the interview.

6. What if I change mind about taking part?

If you wish to withdraw at any time, you may do so up to the point at which data will be analysed and anonymised. This will happen by [insert date] Please contact Pradeep Passi by email: ppassi@uclan.ac.uk or Candice Satchwell @ csatchwell@uclan.ac.uk if you wish to withdraw. Following this, any information that you may have provided will be withdrawn from the research process with immediate effect.

7. What will happen to the data that you collect?

Data that will be collected, namely notes and transcripts from the interviews, will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office, of which I am the sole occupier. The focus groups and interviews will be recorded using a digital device. You will be informed when the recording has started and ended. All questions from myself and your responses will be recorded. Audio recordings will be transcribed to create a physical record of the conversations, which in turn will be saved on a password protected file on the University network. Audio recordings will be transferred to a password protected file on the University network. The audio recording on the device will be deleted following transcription. The audio file on the network will be deleted after 5 years.

8. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

We do not consider that there are significant risks to taking part. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout except where any illegal activities or safeguarding issues are disclosed. In this case I may have to pass on information to the relevant agencies. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the project.

9. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

A benefit of taking part will be that you can use this opportunity to reflect on your personal and professional development from this experience. You will also be contributing to findings that may benefit future students.

10. Why are you asking for permission to speak to my parents or family members.

As part of my research, I am interested in the family member perspective on University to see if there how that may impact on student engagement. You are under no obligation to provide this consent.

11. What if something goes wrong?

If something goes wrong or you become concerned, you should contact Pradeep Passi or Joanne Doherty, and discuss this. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to yourself.

If participants have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, they should contact University Officer for Ethics (email address OfficerforEthics@uclan.ac.uk).

12. Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout except where any illegal activities or safeguarding issues are disclosed. In this case I may have to pass on information to the relevant agencies. Your anonymity will be maintained throughout the project, and you will not be personally identified in any publications or presentations.

13. What will happen to the results of the research study?

As part of the research, we are intending to analyse data to identify key benefits that you highlight on mentoring. This research will provide UCLan with quality first hand empirical research findings in relation to influences and motivation in relation to and factors that may influence their higher education journeys. The findings of this research study will also help to shape learning and teaching strategies within the Lancashire School of Business and Enterprise.

The results of the research will also be reported in conference papers and may also be put forward for publication in journal articles, It will also inform my doctoral thesis recommendations in relation to learning and teaching approaches.

14. Support needs

If you have any particular support needs to enable you to participate in the research, then please do let us know so that we can discuss how best we can provide support to enable you to participate. Please Contact ppassi@uclan.ac.uk _or Candice Satchwell @ csatchwell@uclan.ac.uk for further details.

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the project please contact Pradeep Passi by email: ppassi@uclan.ac.uk . Candice Satchwell @ csatchwell@uclan.ac.uk

Questions, comments or concerns

You can contact any member of the research team for further information:

Candice Satchwell **Phone:** 893799 (x3799) **Email:** csatchwell@uclan.ac.uk

Pradeep Passi **Phone:** 893152 (x(3152)) **Email:** ppassi@uclan.ac.uk

If participants have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, they should contact University Officer for Ethics (email address OfficerforEthics@uclan.ac.uk).

Finally - thank you for taking part.