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Addressing the postgraduate mixed ethnic satisfaction gap in UK higher education

Abstract: *Between 2010-2023, postgraduate research and postgraduate taught students of mixed ethnic backgrounds have held the lowest satisfaction rates out of any ethnic group in British higher education. Yet, universities hold a limited understanding as to why. Through a content analysis of 13 years of AdvanceHE data (2010-2023), this paper addresses these nationwide institutional survey findings and exposes the on-going satisfaction gap. We contribute a call to action for scholars and educational practitioners to produce more empirical evidence and new methodological approaches investigating mixed ethnic experiences in UK higher education and argue that the Academy must begin to move away from monoracial anti-racism into more inclusive multiethnic approaches. Without inclusive multiethnic approaches, universities cannot pursue the goal of becoming anti-racist institutions.*

Introduction

Research has shown that there are unique experiences mixed ethnic PGRs have within their doctoral degrees compared to their monoracial counterparts (Garrett, 2024a), but how mixed ethnic populations, with unique intersectional identities, navigate monoracial higher educational spaces is not fully understood. Outside of higher education, similar issues arise in the context of early education, where mixed ethnic students are largely invisible in education policies despite rapid growth as a population (Caballero, Haynes & Tikly, 2007; Song, 2021). Research on mixedness has primarily focused on the binaries between Black and white mixedness (Song, 2021), providing essential information about racism and discrimination. However, this research overlooks other mixed ethnic identities from different intersectional backgrounds. This research is indicative of an overall dearth of knowledge of the lived experiences of mixed ethnic Britain as a whole, which has wider social implications regarding racism, belonging, and community (Garrett & Foden, [in review]).

It is important to situate mixed ethnic educational understandings in Britain as the predominance of literature on this subject has originated from the US (Joseph-Salisbury, 2014). For example, Combs, Johnston-Guerrero and Malaney-Brown (2022) argue that

universities must move into more multiethnic spaces of thinking because they are increasingly becoming more multiethnic and multicultural in a globalised world. However, the experiences of mixed ethnic students in the UK appear to mirror the US, where students were found to be forcing their mixed identities into categories to which they did not relate (Giebel, 2022), were being misrepresented in university census metrics (Wong-Campbell & Ramrakhiani, 2024), and were being negatively impacted by colour-blind approaches to equality (Modica, 2014).

Through a content analysis of AdvanceHE data, using 2010-2023 student statistical data, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), this article addresses nationwide institutional Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) survey findings on mixed ethnic student satisfaction. The article demonstrates that mixed ethnic postgraduate research (PGRs) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students held the lowest satisfaction rates out of any ethnic group in British higher education. However, the reason for this satisfaction gap is not understood.

In this article we offer three main contributions. Firstly, we highlight the linguistic shifts between 2010 and 2023 concerning mixed ethnic identity and theorise how this shift could shape data analysis. Secondly, we illustrate the sporadic attention that has been paid to mixed ethnic concerns within the AdvanceHE datasets, paying particular attention to the 2019 PRES and PTES. Thirdly, we address methodological concerns around mapping mixed ethnic lived experiences and drawing on practitioner recommendations to address these problems.

This article does not analyse the current data patterns of mixed ethnic students; instead, it critically interrogates current findings and provides the basis for further action for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars concerned with 'race', ethnicity and identity. We argue that institutions must begin paying attention to their mixed ethnic populations on campus, as they currently influence their higher educational experiences in ways that cannot be empirically explained. We argue that the academy must move from monoracial anti-racism into more inclusive multiethnic approaches. Without changing the approach, the higher education sector cannot achieve its anti-racist goals.

Mixed ethnic experiences in education

The first study to consider mixed ethnic doctoral identities in UK higher education explored mixed ethnic women's descriptions of navigating predominantly white universities (Garrett, 2024a). Findings from this study showed that mixed ethnic women with proximity to whiteness occupied a unique liminal space concerning whiteness, where they both belonged to and rejected whiteness. The study surfaced issues with studying mixedness in the UK as a lack of empirical data, the unique lived experience of being mixed in UK higher education compared

to their monoracial counterparts, and an overall lack of representation of mixedness in university EDI initiatives.

Similar findings can be found in wider education literature outside. Scholars have previously demonstrated that despite the 'Mixed' populations rapidly growing in schooling, they are largely invisible in current educational policies, which could be having a negative influence on their educational achievement and support systems (Caballero, Haynes & Tikly, 2007). In schooling, Joseph-Salisbury and Andrews (2016) argue that there is a requirement to include anti-racist interventions that target Black mixed ethnic boys who are suffering from a unique awarding gap comparable to Black monoracial male students. Where mixed ethnicity has been considered in UK-contexts, it has primarily focused on the Black-white binary identity due to the categories' larger demographic size (Song, 2021). While this finding is essential for the dismantling of anti-Black racism, it also takes a monoracial perspective on 'race' issues and risks overlooking the complex diversity of mixed ethnic identities.

There is a vast scholarly discourse concerning mixed ethnic identities across the globe, but it is significantly under-developed in contexts outside of the US. The UK in particular has largely relied on US-based structural understandings of mixed ethnic populations. It is yet to develop its conceptualisation of what it means to be mixed in Britain (Joseph-Salisbury, 2014). However, we argue that we can still draw on research findings in the US context that demonstrate a wider critique of anti-racist initiatives in predominantly white educational spaces, built by a wider architecture of historical discrimination (Garrett, 2024b).

Contemporarily, US scholars have found that there is a unique experience associated with mixed ethnic students compared to monoracial populations. Giebel (2022) argues that US colleges and universities' EDI initiatives force mixed ethnic identities to compromise themselves, finding that mixed students had to negotiate their identities and values to fit in with institutional ones. An example of how EDI shoehorns mixed ethnic identities in higher education can be seen through Wong-Campbell and Ramrakhiani's (2024) research. They found that US students with two or more ethnic backgrounds were imprecisely represented in institutional metrics, forced into categories that did not represent them. In the context of educational experiences more broadly, Modica (2014) argues that US schools that ignore 'race' in favour of a 'colour-blind' approach results in a fear of talking about racism, increased racial tensions, and overall student confusion and resentment over what it meant to be mixed in the classroom. Although limited, there are parallels in the experiences that mixed ethnic UK students are having in schools and universities with those in the US that require scholarly attention.

Methodological concerns

Post-war Britain heralded an era of mass migration from its former colonies, accelerating ever-increasing contemporary mixed ethnic populations. The question arises as to why the UK is yet to contend with issues concerning mixed ethnic students? We offer several informed propositions. First, methodological approaches to demographic data are insufficiently sophisticated to capture the necessary nuance to address mixed ethnic needs. The study of 'Mixed' ethnic populations in scholarship did not enter mainstream academia until the 1980s (Caballero & Aspinall, 2018) and explains the lack of empirical evidence available on mixed ethnic experiences in the UK, including intersectional ones (Gaither, 2018). Additionally, it was not until 2001 that the 'Mixed' ethnic category was first introduced to ethnic census options (Aspinall & Song, 2014), limiting the data available to investigate the lived experiences of mixed ethnic Britons.

Currently, the 'Mixed or multiple ethnic groups' demographic category has four sub-categories, and over 1.7 million people identify themselves as 'Mixed' (ONS, 2022), but even with these sub-categories, there are so many complexities in mixed ethnic data monitoring that are yet to be addressed. One of those issues is outlined by Aspinall (2015), who argues mixed ethnic identities have been characterised as challenging in the context of Britain's traditional ethnic categories, complicating standard statistical practices and remaining outdated. He uses the example of mixed ethnic studies that have previously had poor data reproducibility in the context of 'gold standard' methods of quantitative research; an issue that universities, most likely, also suffer.

One element of the racialised experience that quantitative data struggles to capture is the fluid nature of 'race' as a movable identity. Foundational US scholar Maria Root (1996) challenges colonial conceptions of 'race' through the multiethnic experience, opening up a new space to consider how 'race' can shift and change with space and place. However, this conceptualisation becomes a particularly tough problem to overcome in the monoracial university. Statistical data is inherently flawed when engaging with large ethnic group experiences, as the data can only give a snapshot of the demographic (Song, 2021).

As an example of flawed data, census figures are only based on self-reported identification, which is not always fixed or representative of individuals' self-identifications. A study of mixed ethnic young people in Britain found many respondents reported having multiple backgrounds, not just dual, and used combinations of intersectional identities to describe their identities accurately (Song & Aspinall, 2012). Additionally, quantitative statistical data can only show a small snapshot of the population, as these methods are inherently static and immovable, contesting the fluid nature of racial identity (Song & Hashem, 2010). Therefore, we need to

methodologically update how we consider mixed ethnic identities in quantitative research and data analysis. Without this, mixed ethnic students, and mixed ethnic groups in other contexts, will continue to be underrepresented in EDI initiatives, policy discussions on social inequality, and intersectional concerns pertaining to belonging, and community.

Why does satisfaction matter?

Universities often focus on the major concerns surrounding the awarding gap, particularly the racial awarding gap. However, institutions must look beyond the issue of grade outcomes and also understand the influence increased racism in higher education can have on mental health outcomes. It is common knowledge in higher education studies that ethnic minority students are typically less satisfied with their experiences than white counterparts, and Black African students, Black Caribbean students, and students of mixed ethnicity report the lowest levels of course satisfaction of all ethnic groups (Birmingham, Nathwani & van Essen-Fishman, 2020; Richardson, 2008). The influence of racism on student experience has a particularly detrimental impact on Black and Black mixed ethnic students. *The Broken Pipeline Report* by Leading Routes highlights the challenges Black students face in securing postgraduate research positions (Williams et al., 2019). Their findings include the awarding gap, and address the institutionally embedded concern of racism that is negatively influencing lived experience, satisfaction, and mental health.

Examples of how identity can influence student satisfaction can be seen in the work of Dicker et al. (2017), who empirically reveal the differences in experience students had with support services between different ethnic groups, and more men than women satisfied with support services. However, this result varied by year group, and student numbers were small. These results suggest the importance of clearly articulating what is available regarding support (academic, pastoral, study and health) to all students with unique intersectional identities. Thus, the satisfaction of all ethnic minority students is a strategic priority within which many mixed ethnic students are under-considered. There is no evidence that the experiences of Asian and Black students in UK higher education are significantly inferior to those of White students, but this does not rule out factors related to their broader social and cultural context that are impacting their overall mental health and satisfaction in their degrees (Richardson, 2008; Bunce et al., 2019).

In UK higher education, and wider global contexts, there is an urgent need to address anti-Blackness in universities that is harming Black and Black mixed ethnic students at all levels (Williams et al., 2019). Bell et al. (2020) describe the impact the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement had on UK institutions in 2020, where Black Americans particularly protested against systemic inequity and disenfranchisement. Actions that have come from events such

as the BLM movement include the Race Disparity's Unit (2022) guidelines that discourage the use of understanding ethnic minority groups as a single entities through language such as Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) and Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME), but still overlook the individual subgroups present within ethnic aggregations. While there is not an apparent awarding gap for the 'Mixed' category (AdvanceHE, 2023), a marked satisfaction gap has negatively impacted the educational experiences of mixed ethnic students.

In their study of Black mixed ethnic men's experiences with the police in the UK, Long and Joseph-Salisbury (2018) argue that they are having similar interactions with the police as monoracial Black men but are not always considered in the overall Black experience. Despite the lack of empirical evidence to support it, this finding suggests that Black mixed ethnic students might also be experiencing similar challenges to Black students at university but are being overlooked in policy considerations. Furthermore, recent research has shown that mixed-race people are more likely to experience detrimental unequal health outcomes in relation to their lack of community belonging (Oh et al., 2024).

Without ignoring the perpetuation of anti-Black violence in UK higher education, we argue that understanding mixedness from a non-binary, intersectional perspective can help the dissolution of anti-Black racism, further social justice goals, and also include individuals who struggle to fit into one ethnic 'tick-box'. Contextualising these issues in wider British society, recent impacts of COVID-19 on UK universities continue to shape the satisfaction rates of all students, causing significant issues in teaching, proactive learning, and interpersonal relationships in crises (Khan, 2021). This interrogation of AdvanceHE data considers the social implications of the data contexts. It demonstrates the consistency of low satisfaction rates and attention deficit to mixed ethnic concerns across all reports, irrespective of social intervention.

An addressal of mixed ethnic community belonging concerns spans into wider discussions around racism in the UK. Research has empirically demonstrated how racism shapes the career trajectories of ethnic minority doctoral researchers during their PhDs (Garrett, 2024b), highlighting how satisfaction rates in their higher educational experiences were impacted by racism. Spanning even wider, Britain must become more critical about how community and identity boundaries are formed to address the rapidly increasing racial hostility across the country. Alongside this imperative in Britain, the issue is of particular concern for universities in a globalised world, as student satisfaction is also strategically important as it can have a massive impact on league table ranking (Bell & Brooks, 2017).

Methods

We conducted a content analysis of AdvanceHE data, using 2010-2023 student data, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) to outline current statistical understandings of mixed ethnic student populations. These surveys are summarised in Table 1, along with an acknowledgement of relevant changes to how the reports were conducted that year. In the analysis, we were unconcerned with the change in numerical data. Instead, we searched for how often 'Mixed' was mentioned as an area of significant interest when data were analysed to see where and why the authors became interested in mixed ethnic concerns.

Not all reports from 2010-2023 are outlined in Table 1 due to lack of access to the reports or when no report was conducted that year. For example, we could only access PRES reports from 2019 onwards, and, therefore, only used PTES reports starting from the same year. Additionally, there was a 2024 PTES report available at the time of writing this article, but it was discarded from the analysis as there was no PTES or student statistics report for 2024 available concurrently.

Table 1. List of reports used in the study

Date	Statistical reports	PRES	PTES	Relevant report changes
2010	Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2010.	N/A	N/A	Aggravated into six groups: white; black; Asian (includes Asian or Asian British Indian, Asian or Asian British Pakistani and Asian or Asian British Bangladeshi); Chinese; other Asian; other (includes mixed ethnicity and other ethnic backgrounds) . For some analyses the non-white groups have been further aggregated into a single BME group.
2011	Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2011 – Part 2: Students.	N/A	N/A	2010-2011 based on 2001 classification system Aggravated into six groups: white (this includes all white ethnic groups including white British); black; Asian (including Asian Indian, Asian Pakistani, Asian Bangladeshi, Asian British and Asian other); Chinese; mixed; other ethnic background .

Date	Statistical reports	PRES	PTES	Relevant report changes
2012	Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2012 – Students.	N/A	N/A	Based on 2011 classification system 2012/13 onward Arab grouped into other ethnic background.
2013	Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2013 – Students.	N/A	N/A	N/A
2014	Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2014 – Students.	N/A	N/A	N/A
2015	Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2015 – Part 2: Students.	N/A	N/A	N/A
2016	Higher education statistics report 2016: Students.	N/A	N/A	N/A
2017	Higher education statistics report 2017: Students.	N/A	N/A	N/A
2018	Higher education statistics report 2018: Students.	N/A	N/A	N/A
2019	Equality in higher education: Student statistics report 2019.	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2019.	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) 2019.	Aggravated into six groups: Asian (Asian or Asian British; Bangladeshi, Asian or Asian British; Indian, Asian or Asian British; Pakistani, and other Asian background); Black (Black or Black British: African, Black or Black British; Caribbean, and other Black background); Chinese; mixed; other ethnic background (including Arab);

Date	Statistical reports	PRES	PTES	Relevant report changes
				<p>White (all White ethnic groups including White British).</p> <p>For some analyses the non-white groups have been further aggregated into a single BAME group (BME Prior)</p>
2020	Higher education statistics report 2020: Students.	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2020: Global report. Advance HE.	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) 2020: National report.	<p>Introduction of the disclaimer statement on aggravating ethnic categories:</p> <p>“There are a number of issues inherent in grouping individuals into larger categories. The data presented does not allow for a more nuanced or in-depth understanding of the participation and outcomes of students from sub-groups within each ethnic group presented” (AdvanceHE, 2020, p.11)</p>
2021	Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2021 – Students.	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2021.	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) 2021.	Definition of BAME critiqued: “This definition is widely recognised and used to identify patterns of marginalisation and segregation caused by attitudes toward an individual’s ethnicity” (AdvanceHE, 2021; p.12)
2022	Equality in higher education: Students statistical report 2022.	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2022.	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) 2022 report.	Based on 2021 classification system
2023	Equality in higher education: Statistical reports 2023 – Students.	Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) 2023: Sector results report. Advance HE	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) 2023: Findings from the survey.	N/A

Linguistic shifts within the ‘Mixed’ category

Analysing the data outlined in Table 1, there were significant shifts in how language was used to describe aggregated ethnic groups. It is important to recognise this as a positive shift towards a more diverse consideration for multiple ethnic groups previously overlooked.

Nonetheless, we must also consider how language could influence how data are being analysed, critically emphasising the limitations the sector is still facing.

The most influential changes mirror the national classifications systems in the UK census every 10 years, i.e. 2001; 2011; 2021. However, this change also means that UK higher education institutions only shift their aggregated categories once the UK government deems appropriate to do so, instead of being driven by student needs. For example, *The Equality in higher education: Statistical report 2010* did not use the 'Mixed' category as the changes were not implemented until the 2011 statistical report. Therefore, data on the 'Mixed' category is not available before the 2011 report when the aggregated groups "white; black; Asian (includes Asian or Asian British Indian, Asian or Asian British, Pakistani and Asian or Asian British Bangladeshi); Chinese; other Asian; other (includes mixed ethnicity and other ethnic backgrounds)" (AdvanceHE, 2010), changed to "white (this includes all white ethnic groups including white British); black; Asian (including Asian Indian, Asian Pakistani, Asian Bangladeshi, Asian British and Asian other); Chinese; mixed; other ethnic background" (AdvanceHE, 2011) the year later.

The 'Mixed' category in the 2011 report is also outlined to be implemented because it was considered sufficiently substantial in growth rates to be considered statistically significant and subsequently to receive its aggregated group (AdvanceHE, 2011). This finding also aligns with Aspinall and Song's (2014) arguments that there has been a lack of mixed ethnic activism in the UK, and the 2001 'Mixed' category was only introduced because of the sizable nature of new mixed ethnic populations. Only paying attention to the growth of an ethnic group, instead of the needs and lived experiences of the ethnic group itself, unravels the true values of qualitative data collection in UK higher education, emphasising 'substantiation' over collective needs.

These findings expand into other ethnic groups considered to be 'other'. Although the 'mixed' category was introduced in 2011, the Arab group was not introduced until 2012 and was aggregated into 'other ethnic background' (AdvanceHE, 2012). Much like the 'Mixed' category before 2011, those within the 'Other' aggregated category are homogenised into a collective of ethnic groups considered 'difficult' to categorise due to their misalignment with the 'gold standard' of quantitative data analysis (Aspinall, 2015). Therefore, many identities within each aggregated group could be mixed, but different monoracialised or 'othered' categories could be chosen, erasing all the complexities of the individuals within them. Critically, this categorisation does not even include mixed ethnic individuals who do not identify as 'mixed' might choose to relate more to this demographic group (Song, 2021). We expand the arguments made by Song (2021) that data can only give a snapshot of the demographic, and

provoke that the snapshot itself is inherently flawed, particularly in the context of UK higher education.

Shifts in linguistic devices beyond just 'Mixed' could also be shaping how students self-identify in quantitative data. The movement away from terms such as BME in data collection can also impact mixed ethnic identity relations. Between 2010 and 2018, ethnic groups were aggregated collectively into BME, but from 2019 onwards, this term changed to BAME. Since 2020, AdvanceHE has acknowledged the issue with homogenising all ethnic groups into BAME. In 2021, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities recommended the government stop using BAME as a term and referred to ethnic minority groups individually rather than as a single group (Race Disparity Unit, 2022). Although the shift from BME to BAME does not immediately appear important for mixed ethnic students, it is still important to consider mixed ethnic students, who are often unaware of into which categories they are homogenised, and how they change the way they identify demographically (Song, 2021).

Considering further US-based empirical evidence showing mixed ethnic students are feeling misrepresented in university metrics and are compromising their identities to fit into these colonial categories (Wong-Campbell & Ramrakhiani, 2024; Giebel, 2022), our findings suggest that linguistic shifts might also be impacting the representation of mixed ethnic British students. Mixed ethnic scholars have expanded on this issue, arguing that 'mixed' as a linguistic device is not always relatable for those of a mixed ethnic background (Song, 2021; Aspinall & Song, 2014). Additionally, the change in language in the UK for mixed ethnic populations has caused a significant amount of misrepresentation of mixed identities as a whole (Aspinall, 2015) which could be happening in higher education.

We recognise that mixed ethnic students have a prerogative over which ethnic category(ies) they self-identify and that their identity can shift over time (Root, 1996). However, scholars have also found mixed ethnic individuals have been found to experience increased discrimination from monoracial communities when identifying as monoracial themselves (Song, 2021). Therefore, universities need to consider how their statistical data assumes to know the salience of monoracial categories for individual people and interrogating linguistic changes in data could be a starting point to dismantle monoracial higher education. Like the US, the UK is moving into a more multiethnic thinking space as they increasingly become more multicultural and grow their mixed ethnic populations (Combs, Johnston-Guerrero & Malaney-Brown, 2022). Despite the lack of empirical evidence to suggest there is a unique mixed ethnic experience of UK higher education, the data and mirrored findings from the US suggest there is a dire need for further investigation.

Sporadic attention to mixed ethnic concerns

Reports of low satisfaction rates for mixed ethnic students remained consistent throughout reports from 2010-2023. The 2019 PRES and PTES reports in particular demonstrated a significant interest in multiethnic satisfaction concerns. In the PRES, the author states that “the main ethnic groups who are less happy are those of Asian, Mixed and ‘Other’ backgrounds” and despite seeing “significant fluctuation” over the past three years, the satisfaction rates for mixed ethnic groups “remains relatively low” (Williams, 2019, p.14; p.22). The results contrasted with other ethnic groups, where students of “White, Black and Chinese ethnicity enjoy generally high levels of satisfaction”, suggesting there was a unique experience taking place “for students of Asian, Mixed and ‘Other’ ethnicity” (p.30) in satisfaction rates beyond monoracial experiences of higher education.

The PTES mirrored the responses of the PRES in 2019. Neves and Leman (2019) argue that the results “go against the stark White/BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) contrast” (p.4) that have previously been found in reports, as there was a mixed experience of satisfaction amongst aggregated ethnic groups. The findings exhibit that “Black, Chinese and White students” reported high satisfaction, but “Asian and Mixed students, as well as those of “Other” ethnicity” had more “disappointing” experiences (p.4). Not only does this supports the arguments of scholars highlighting the awarding and satisfaction gaps between ethnic minority and white students (Dicker et al., 2017; Garrett, 2024b; Bermingham, Nathwani & van Essen-Fishman, 2020; Richardson, 2008; Bunce et al., 2019), but also the discrepancies within the homogenised BAME group.

Moving into the 2020 reports, there are similar findings but at a reduced rate. For example, the 2020 PRES mentions that there was a “4 percentage point drop in satisfaction among Black PGRs this year, bringing their satisfaction levels (77%) in line with those of Mixed ethnicity, just 1% above PGRs of Other ethnicity” and “Mixed ethnicity PGRs who responded prior to lockdown were less satisfied with Research Culture, Progression and Responsibilities” (Pitkin, 2020, p.11). However, the 2020 PTES had no significant mention of mixedness in the report, also echoed in the PRES and PTES reports in 2021, 2022, and 2023. The main point we highlight here is that the 2019 reports actively demonstrate that there is a significant and ongoing satisfaction gap being experienced by mixed ethnic students that is being ignored in education policy. The issue is not that the problem has not been identified, but that the identified problem is not being considered important.

We recognise that 2020 heralded great difficulty in higher education, and increased attention was brought to the forefront on institutional racism as a response to the murders of individuals such as Trayvon Martin, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor in rapid

succession (Bell et al., 2020). In addition, the UK was responding to the impact of COVID-19 which increased overall isolation, confinement, stress, anxiety, lack of clarity, financial worries, and employment concerns (Khan, 2021). Thus, the context of there being limited mention of mixedness in 2020 could be because of the social contexts of the year, characterised as a unique experience in higher education (Bell et al., 2020; Khan, 2021). However, this pattern is prevalent in every other report other than the 2019 PRES and PTES, suggesting that there is a wider issue present within mixed ethnic student populations in terms of university satisfaction.

Although not the focus of this article, it is pertinent to highlight additional survey findings to encourage future research into the relationship at the intersection between mixed ethnicity and disability. Consistently from 2012 onwards, the 'Mixed' category has been the lowest BAME non-UK staff category and has been the ethnic group most likely to disclose a disability for staff and students (AdvanceHE, 2011). The 'Mixed' category has maintained a low degree awarding gap for students, potentially explaining the lack of attention given to mixed ethnic students at a strategic level. Therefore, despite the low satisfaction consistencies, there continues to be a lack of anti-racist intervention for mixed ethnic students who remain largely invisible in educational policy (Joseph-Sailsbury & Andrews, 2016; Caballero, Haynes & Tikly, 2007).

As mentioned, concerns of mixed ethnic histories did not become apparent in scholarship until the 1980s (Caballero & Aspinall, 2018), and these reports exemplify how interest in mixedness in higher education continues to be sporadic. The questions spawned in these reports are not new (Gilbert, 2005; Caballero, Haynes, & Tikly, 2007). However, they appear to be at the beginning stages of tackling the satisfaction gap for mixed ethnic students and considering their lived experience.

The sporadic mention of mixedness also aligns with the complexities present in the demographic itself. Song (2021) presents arguments as to whether the 'Mixed' category can be considered a marginalised group; there has also been a scholarly absence of those who do not identify as 'Mixed' but hold multiple ethnic heritages (Gaither, 2018). Building on the arguments of Combs, Johnston-Guerrero and Malaney-Brown (2022), UK universities must move towards facilitating a more multiethnic response to racism and discrimination to successfully facilitate a true anti-racist environment.

Methodological concerns and recommendations

Concerns about the low satisfaction rates of mixed ethnic students expanded beyond the data and into methodological and empirical concerns. For example, the 2019 PRES report states

that the “Mixed and Other” categories are “potentially quite challenging as they are defined by diversity and contain a range of sub-categories” (Williams, 2019, p.22). The same concerns arise in the 2019 PTES that argues “a particular challenge for investigating the concerns of these cohorts lies in the fact that they are comprised of a range of different subgroups, each of which may be facing their own particular issues” (Neves & Leman, 2019, p.4), and “the issues that drive lower satisfaction among these Asian, Mixed and Other cohorts are likely to be particularly challenging to unpick, as these groups are in turn comprised of a range of different subgroups” (p.19).

Again, the problem is not the lack of recognition for the issues mixed ethnic students face in PGR and PGT student satisfaction. The problem is the distinct dismissal for the call to action these reports have previously provided. As ‘Mixed’ populations continue to grow rapidly in schools (Caballero, Haynes & Tikly, 2007), universities must also become spaces that consider the unique experiences of mixed ethnic students within their educational support systems within their data collection and analysis processes. Without this consideration, racism shall continue to perpetuate a particular form of prejudice that is impacting mixed ethnic students in ways we do not yet fully understand (Joseph-Salisbury & Andrews, 2016).

Notably, the reports offer useful recommendations for future approaches to these methodological problems. For example, the 2019 PRES states that there is a need to understand particular mixed categories rather than ‘Mixed’ as a sub-category. It recognises that “identifying and understanding what may be behind the consistently lower scores may prove particularly difficult” but regardless, the results “appear to identify a significant need across the sector to delve deeper into the composition of these categories” (Williams, 2019, p.22). In this report, there was a clear prompt to conduct “further investigation[s]” into closing this concerning satisfaction gap (p.30). Likewise, the PTES 2019 report argues the issue is that “how ethnicity links to the quality of the experience appears to be an under-researched area” that requires a “cross-sector collaboration in order to help understand what can be done to help ensure a comparable experience for all” (Neves & Leman, 2019, p.34).

The calls to action from these reports match the calls made by other multiethnic scholars who expose numerous examples of overlooked intersectional and self-reported mixed identifications in quantitative data (Gilbert, 2006; Song & Hashem, 2010; Song & Aspinall, 2012). Despite these strong claims to continue investigating mixed ethnic sub-categories and unique multiethnic higher educational experiences in the UK, these calls have since been largely ignored. This deficit in consideration could be for a number of reasons. For example, because the ‘Mixed’ higher education census ‘tick-box’ challenges Britain’s traditional ethnic categories, it complicates standard outdated statistical practices (Aspinall, 2015).

Nonetheless, scholars should begin conducting further investigations into the mixed ethnic satisfaction gap, taking a cross-collaborative approach to do so, and then consider mixed ethnic scholarship that also provide further recommendations as to how universities can become multiethnic-supportive spaces.

Conclusion

This article addresses nationwide institutional EDI survey findings on mixed ethnic student satisfaction and exposed several on-going problems with the low satisfaction gap for mixed ethnic PGRs and PGT students and how to tackle it. Through a content analysis of AdvanceHE data from 2010-2023, we highlight previous attempts at drawing attention to this problem, previous recommendations, and how EDI survey findings have inconsistently focused on mixed ethnic concerns in academia. Our findings may have only provided a summary of the mention of mixedness in higher education survey data, but we also uncovered how these summaries align with previous mixed ethnic studies and call to action academics, practitioners, and policymakers concerned with 'race' and identity in higher education.

First, we demonstrate that academics and practitioners conducting demographic data collection in higher education need to be aware of the impacts the language changes have potentially had on the way we examine mixed ethnic data. We know that mixed ethnic individuals have a unique relationship with categorisation and can hold many monoracial and multiethnic identities in static statistical data (Song, 2021; Aspinall & Song, 2014; Song & Hashem, 2010). Therefore, those analysing the lived experiences of racialised students must consider how the changes in linguistic traditions might affect who is in which demographic group.

Second, we determine the consistency of mixedness in demographic reports. Scholars have previously argued that mixed ethnic students have been misrepresented in data collection (Wong-Campbell & Ramrakhiani, 2024; Giebel, 2022) and overlooked in policy considerations and anti-racist interventions (Caballero, Haynes & Tikly, 2007; Joseph-Salisbury & Andrews, 2016). All of these concerns were mentioned in the 2019 PRES and PTES reports but were previously and have since been ignored. Therefore, universities require more consistent action in their mixed ethnic interests to engender meaningful change for multiethnic student communities.

Third, we contribute a summary of methodological concerns and unmet recommendations. Previous reports made two main claims; that the composition of ethnic categories makes it difficult to know who is in the 'Mixed' ethnic category, and that it is an under-researched area that makes it hard to ensure a comparable experience for all in higher education. These recommendations echo the ongoing calls to action from other scholars who continue to

articulate that current methodological approaches to ethnic monitoring are outdated (Aspinall, 2015), and unrepresentative of many mixed ethnic students (Wong-Campbell and Ramrakhiani & 2024; Song, 2021).

In this article, we have not provided the solutions, but instead the call to action to bring together scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in collaboration to address the ongoing dismissal of mixed ethnic studies in UK higher education and many other parts of the world. Reiterating the claims from Combs, Johnston-Guerrero and Malaney-Brown (2022), universities must move into more multiethnic spaces of thinking to truly achieve equitable spaces. Without this move, universities claiming to be anti-racist organisations are failing their legal obligations to dismantle systemic racism.

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