

LIVING BLACK AT UNIVERSITY

Research into the experiences of Black students in UK student accommodation

Commissioned by
Unite Students



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*A research report commissioned by Unite Students
and undertaken by Halpin*



Research carried out May – August 2021, published February 2022.

ABOUT UNITE STUDENTS

Unite Students is the UK's largest owner, manager and developer of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) serving the country's world-leading higher education sector. We provide homes to 73,000 students across 173 properties in 25 leading university towns and cities. We currently partner with over 60 universities across the UK.

Our people are driven by a common purpose: to provide a 'Home for Success' for the students who live with us. Unite Students' accommodation is safe and secure, high quality, and affordable. Students live predominantly in en-suite study bedrooms with rents covering all bills, insurance, 24-hour security and high-speed Wi-Fi. We also achieved a five-star British Safety Council rating in our last audit in 2020.

We are committed to raising standards in the student accommodation sector for our customers, investors and employees. This is why our new Sustainability Strategy, launched in 2021, includes a commitment to become net zero carbon across our operations and developments by 2030.

For more information, visit Unite Group's corporate website www.unite-group.co.uk or the Unite Students' site www.unite-students.com

ABOUT HALPIN PARTNERSHIP

Halpin is a values-driven management consultancy that's tailored to the unique needs of the higher education sector. Home to a community of senior-level HE experts spanning all areas of university leadership, they offer a wide range of services to support Strategy & Transformation, Governance & Policy and Fundraising.

Founded in 2017 by Joint CEOs Susie Hills and Shaun Horan, Halpin has already clocked up over 130 projects for more than 70 clients in the UK and Ireland. It is now home to over 70 Consulting Fellows and Senior Advisors who have been hand-picked for their depth of knowledge and experience, and regularly share their insight and sector commentary via the Halpin 'Debate' page.

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This report would not have been possible without the participation of students and accommodation staff, and especially those who shared their often difficult stories with the research team through the focus groups. We hope that we've done justice to your views and experiences, and that through this research we will be able to improve the experience for other Black students.

CONTENTS

1.0	Foreword	3
1.1	Setting the context	5
1.2	Executive summary	8
1.3	Summary of findings	10
1.4	Summary of recommendations	11



INTRODUCTION

1.0 **FOREWORD**



Richard Smith

Time spent living in student accommodation is important and memorable. It is a place to make friends, to study, to develop an adult identity and to learn how to live independently.

At its best, it is a community of students that offers a sense of safety, comfort and belonging. Each of these have been linked to improved academic achievement, retention and mental health. What happens in student accommodation really matters.

Our research programme has touched on these themes in the past. In 2017 we found that non-White students felt less integrated in their accommodation than White students, and in response we worked to diversify our events programme. In 2019 we found that non-White students on average considered themselves less successful than their White peers.

But it was events in 2020 that really brought to the fore the racism that Black people face in day-to-day life, not just through isolated incidents but in a systemic way. In May that year, I sat trying to make sense of the video footage of US police brutally restraining and ultimately murdering George Floyd. Having already set out on a refreshed approach to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, this incident and the subsequent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement prompted us to commission this research that specifically looked at the experience of Black students. We especially wanted to listen to Black students talk about their experiences in accommodation in their own words, and this has been a central feature of the research which covers students in a wide range of purpose-built student accommodation.

This report makes for very uncomfortable reading at times, but that makes it even more vital that everyone providing student accommodation commits to action.

We have built the findings and recommendations of this research into our EDI Strategy and I look forward to sharing our commitments to Black students, which will include improved policy and process, more visible commitments to tackling racism and improved training and development for our teams.

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Some of the recommendations can only be addressed in partnership, and we have been overwhelmed by the response from universities and sector bodies even prior to the completion of the final report. There have already been promising conversations about building some of the recommendations into codes and standards, and being proactive in ensuring that Black students understand their right to escalate complaints if not resolved. We are committed to facilitating these conversations further and lending our support to subsequent actions.

For universities, I hope this research will help to extend Universities UK's excellent work on tackling racial harassment into students' living space, with a genuine contribution to knowledge and actionable recommendations. We are already working with Newcastle University to support their own work towards Advance HE's Race Equality Charter award, drawing on the draft findings of this research.

For private accommodation providers, I hope it will be a learning experience for you as it was for me, and a practical support to your EDI strategies. It is important that we take every opportunity to work together as a sector on this important issue.

But above all, this report is a commitment to Black students to make student accommodation a more safe, inclusive and welcoming home for you, creating room for everyone to thrive at university.

Richard

Richard Smith
Chief Executive
Unite Students

1.1

SETTING THE CONTEXT



Nick Hillman

It is now so widely accepted that higher education institutions need urgently to address prejudice on campus that even their own formal representative body has called for action. Universities UK have said they want to tackle ‘the institutional racism and systemic issues that pervade the entire higher education sector’.¹

There has sometimes been a common tendency among those of us working in higher education to assume our sector is more progressive, more enlightened and more welcoming than other parts of UK national life. In fact, universities are generally a microcosm of the society in which they sit and, as such, they are likely to contain that society’s flaws.

Recent success in widening participation to higher education is perhaps nowhere more clear than among Black pupils: between 2006 and 2020, Black pupils had the biggest entry rate increase of all ethnic groups, up from 21.6% to 47.5%.² So what is the problem?

There are two big ones. First, the opportunities are not equally distributed: for example, just 5% of Black Caribbean pupils progress to high-tariff institutions, which is under half the national figure of 10.9%.³ Secondly, after entry, Black pupils are more likely to be left behind: Black students outside those higher tariff providers have the lowest continuation rates of any ethnic group.⁴ It seems they are getting in but they are not getting on, at least not as often as other students.

The question which we must address is: how can we tackle these challenges quickly and effectively? On the teaching side, one way is by diversifying the curriculum.⁵ Moreover, schemes like Advance HE’s Race Equality Charter award are beginning to make a difference for students and staff.⁶

But the impact of racism on the non-academic aspects of student life has been largely ignored. That is why this new report is so vitally important. Where you live, who you live with and how safe you feel in your accommodation are crucial to student success. Anyone who looks back on their own time at university knows this almost instinctively.

No one can perform at their highest level if their accommodation while studying doesn’t truly feel like a home. As the following pages make clear, things that are often forgotten about in higher education can be very important to someone’s quality of life, such as appearance (including the availability of the right hair care) and diet (such as access to certain foods).

¹ Universities UK, *Tackling racial harassment in higher education*, November 2020, p.4

² Department for Education, *Entry rates into higher education*, 16 February 2021

³ Department for Education, *Widening participation in higher education*, 14 October 2021

⁴ Office for Students, *New OfS analysis examines differences in higher education access and continuation between different groups of students*, 16 December 2021

⁵ Mia Liyanage, *Miseducation: decolonising curricula, culture and pedagogy in UK universities*, HEPI Debate Paper 23, July 2020

⁶ Kalwant Bhopal, ‘Race matters: Addressing competing inequalities in higher education’, in Hugo Dale-Rivas (ed.), *The white elephant in the room: ideas for reducing racial inequalities in higher education*, September 2019, p.11-16

“

The impact of racism on the non-academic aspects of student life has been largely ignored. That is why this new report is so vitally important.

You can receive a lot of pushback when you raise the sorts of issues covered in this report. Very many large listed companies would shy away from them and let others take the lead. But Unite Students has never done that, and I pay tribute to their boldness in commissioning this important, and at times unsettling, report from which others can now learn.

They are right to have done so because of the intrinsic importance of the issues covered but also because we are at an important moment in public debate, when real change is possible. For example, the Office for Students is putting a new level of pressure on universities to reduce their non-continuation rates and improve the labour market success of their graduates. This report will help them do that.

We are also at a tipping point in terms of student accommodation because of the sharp increase in the proportion of students who now spend some time in privately-owned Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA). Now that such PBSA is the norm, providers of this sort of accommodation, like Unite Students, have added responsibility to ensure their residents meet their full potential.

This does not mean that universities can leave any worries about accommodation to others. As well as still providing hundreds of thousands of student beds themselves, they get the blame when things go wrong at any type of accommodation used by their own students.⁷

The solutions to the challenges posed in this report are therefore likely to come only from partnership working.

Despite the challenging findings, this report is not an attack on our sector. Like Universities UK's own report, it shows how the sector can better deliver for all students and become a beacon by which other parts of our society can judge their own actions.

Just imagine how much more successful and harmonious our country would be today if racial prejudice had never been allowed to hold back individual talent.



Nick Hillman
Director
HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute)



⁷ Sarah Jones and Martin Blakey, *Student Accommodation: The Facts*, HEPI Analytical Paper 2, August 2020



1.2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We have known for some time that there is clear evidence of systemic disadvantage for Black students within UK Higher Education (HE). The 2019 report *Closing the Gap*⁸ by Universities UK (UUK) highlights a long-standing and well-known “attainment gap” which, at the time of publication, stood at just over 23 percentage points between the proportion of White and Black students achieving a first or upper second-class degree. To put this more starkly, more than 8 in 10 White students achieve these higher grades compared with fewer than 6 in 10 Black students.

The rationale for this research came from two separate understandings. Firstly, that the experience students have in their accommodation has an impact on their overall student experience and their academic attainment.

Secondly, while we may hear stories about the experiences of Black students in accommodation through word of mouth, social media, articles and news interviews, the research team were unable to find any existing research in this area. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)⁹ and Universities UK¹⁰ reports demonstrate the wider context of racial harassment in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), yet Halpin’s research team were unable to find substantive research on the lived experiences of Black students in halls of residence or private Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA).



The research team adopted a mixed methodology, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative field research with students and accommodation staff. The research spanned both university halls and the breadth of the private PBSA sector, with the majority of respondents having lived in university halls.

A crucial aspect of the research design was to listen to, understand, and amplify the day-to-day lived experiences of Black students in their accommodation, and use these as a basis through which to present key findings and propose recommendations to the sector. It is a goal of this report to give a platform to those voices and let them speak for themselves, alongside presenting conclusions and recommendations drawn from the research as a whole.

These are challenging findings, though they will probably come as little surprise to those in the HE sector. A summary of the key themes, findings and recommendations is set out on the following pages.

⁸ <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/black-asian-and-minority-ethnic-student>

⁹ Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Tackling Racial Harassment: Universities Challenged* (2019, EHRC)

¹⁰ Universities UK, *Tackling racial harassment in higher education* (2020, UUK)

¹¹ While accommodation providers are not responsible for external food outlets, this is something that affects Black students and therefore is worthy of attention.

Safety and belonging in accommodation

Black students reported a less positive experience in their accommodation on average compared with White students, in terms of a lower sense of belonging, comfort, safety and security. Only 43% of the Black students surveyed felt a sense of belonging in their accommodation compared with 61% of White students. Black students spoke about feeling that they are seen as out of place, and how White peers appear to have a right to speak and act in a racially discriminatory way. Black students feel that there is little support available for them when they feel distressed about these issues, and they describe the long-term impact on their mental health and wellbeing from feeling this way. Incidents reported include racial slurs and name calling, being excluded in social situations by White flatmates and being disproportionately challenged by security on-site. Cumulatively, these can have a significant impact on the everyday lived experiences of Black students.

Environment

Over a quarter (28%) of Black respondents indicated that they cannot access culturally relevant services close to where they live. Examples given included a lack of availability of culturally relevant food.¹¹ While half of all students believed that there were positive images of other cultures in their accommodation, Black students in particular were more likely to have expected to see more people who look like them in their accommodation. Where staff diversity doesn't reflect student diversity, this can lead to Black students not coming forward for help or support. In some cases, the accommodation felt as though it had been purposely segregated. A quarter of Black students in the survey agreed with the statement "My accommodation needs to be decolonised."

Policies and procedures

Almost a quarter (23%) of Black students disagreed with the statement "There are clear and accessible policies promoting equality, diversity and inclusion in student accommodation" compared with just one in ten (11%) of White students. They did not know if there were policies and procedures to tackle racism and felt that this was not a priority for those making policy. There was a gap between having policies and procedures, and putting them into practice. Most Black students said they would not report racism, and some reported a poor response in which incidents were not taken seriously or dealt

with. In some cases, this was attributed to staff being predominantly White. Some students were concerned about reporting incidents, fearing that they would not be believed and the impact this would have on them.

Experiences of racism

More than half of Black students surveyed reported having been the victim of racism in their accommodation and 64% of all student respondents reported having witnessed acts of racism. Not all of these incidents were from fellow students; some were from staff. Experiences discussed in the focus groups included the use of racial slurs and racist language, and microaggressions such as touching hair. Casual racial discrimination was more common than explicit racism, but all of these incidents had a serious impact on students. The positive findings within this theme are that there are instances in which racism is being confronted. Half of all survey respondents and 40% of Black respondents have witnessed staff confronting racism. Two-thirds of students and 57% of Black students have witnessed other students confronting racist attitudes. This is something to build on.

Mental health

Three-quarters of Black students reported some level of impact on their mental health due to racism, with some feeling distressed in their accommodation. This is compounded by a lack of support and difficulties in finding counsellors with either the lived or professional experience to understand the impact of racism on mental health. As a result, students are turning to family and Black peers for support.

Black students report relying on their friends and family for support, with home students often going home at the weekend rather than finding support structures within their accommodation. Many students rely on the Afro-Caribbean Society or similar ethnicity-based networks for support, even when they are not formal support organisations. Black students feel that the distress caused by racism is not given due consideration by non-Black counsellors who do not have either lived experience of their own, or professional experience in supporting those affected by racism.

1.3

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

1

Black students have a less positive experience than average in their accommodation in terms of sense of belonging, feeling comfortable in being themselves, and sense of safety and security.

2

Black students are impacted by microaggressions in accommodation.

3

The accommodation environment leaves some Black students feeling uncomfortable.

4

Some Black students report that staff have enabled microaggressions and other forms of racism to thrive.

5

The diversity of accommodation staff does not reflect the diversity of the students in accommodation.

6

Some students report that accommodation is allocated in a racially segregated way.

7

Black students are not always aware of policies and procedures relating to racism in their accommodation, or these policies and procedures do not exist.

8

There are low levels of trust among Black students in the processes that sit behind anti-racist strategies.

9

The majority of Black students surveyed have been the victims of racism in their accommodation.

10

Black students are relying on their friends, relatives and ethnicity-based networks for emotional and psychological support because culturally relevant support isn't available within mainstream services.

1.4 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Universities and accommodation providers should collaborate to eliminate racism from all areas of the student experience, including student accommodation.
- 2** Improve acclimatisation and integration activities for all new students and extend the period over which these activities take place.
- 3** Introduce meaningful race training for peers and staff.
- 4** Accommodation providers should confirm a commitment to tackling racism, both in their internal policies and in their student behavioural agreement or charter.
- 5** Improve the representation of Black people as employees to reflect the diversity of students.
- 6** Universities and accommodation providers should work together to create intentionally diverse and inclusive student accommodation.
- 7** Universities and accommodation providers should collaborate to ensure mental health and wellbeing support is available, accessible and appropriate for Black students.
- 8** Ensure there are clear and accessible policies and procedures (including anonymous reporting) that deal explicitly with racism in accommodation.
- 9** Accommodation providers should routinely collect, analyse and publish relevant data on the racial diversity of their residents and employees, as well as outcomes of reporting and investigation of complaints.
- 10** Accommodation providers should work to build a relationship of trust with Black students.

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