Listening to stories of study: Identity and the awarding gap experienced by Ethnic Minority students **in the context of distance education**

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Abstract

The 'disproportionality low degrees awarded to Ethnic Minority students are stark, representing an enduring challenge across the entire higher education sector including distance education. This paper reports on a study conducted in a distance learning university in the UK which employed a mixed methods approach (Creswell, 2017) to explore the experiences of m Ethnic Minority students. The paper draws on Steele's (2010) concept of 'over-efforting' and research undertaken by Stevenson into personal educational histories (Stevenson 2012a, 2012b). The methodology included quantitative analysis to provide a broad context with additional qualitative analysis of three case studies to provide rich, deep data. In combination, these data enable the authors to explore the significance of personal educational histories to understanding the individual experiences of three students within the context of broader quantitative patterns. The paper offers some insights into these experiences in order to raise important questions about the impact of identities and personal educational histories on participating in tuition within the context of distance education.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with the awarding gap of Ethnic Minority Ethnic Minority[1] students studying at degree level in health and social care, at an open distance learning university in the UK. The terms 'awarding gap' is used is preference to 'attainment gap' as while the discourse of attainment remains in common institutional use, the term 'awarding gap' has emerged to emphasise the responsibility of awarding bodies for the outcomes of students (Jankowski,2020). In recognition of the importance of recognising this distinction 'awarding gap' will be used unless literature is being cited which uses the term 'attainment'.

Students categorised as Ethnic Minority consistently attain lower good and very good pass results compared with their White peers across all sectors of higher education (Broecke and Nicholls, 2007; ECU/HEA, 2008; HEFCE, 2010). The awarding gap experienced by Ethnic Minority students in this study mirrors this stark and enduring pattern, despite proportionate recruitment, completion and pass rates. Stevenson suggests that "Even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors, being from a ME [Minority Ethnic] group was still found to have a statistically negative effect on degree attainment." (Stevenson, 2012b, p.103). The reasons for this are complex and contested. It is important to acknowledge that any exploration into the awarding gap risks reinforcing implied deficits within the population studied. However, failing to address such a clear imbalance in outcomes results is perpetuating (as yet not fully understood) discriminatory practices

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[1] We are using the term minority ethic due to concerns about the use of the term 'BAME' found elsewhere in the literature, see for example   Stevenson (2012): We recognise that students from ethnic minority backgrounds are highly diverse.. and any term risks implying a homogeneity which does not reflect reality of individual experiences. We also recognise that language and its meanings change over time and respect the rights of individuals to self-ascribe their identity.

This study draws on some of the literature to have explored the possible reasons for discrepancies in attainment (Richardson 2008, 2010, Simons, Beaumont and Holland 2019 and Tladi 2017) and specifically applies research into stereotype threat (Steele 2010), educational histories (Stuart et al, 2011) and possible selves (Stevenson 2012a, 2012b). The aim of the study was to gain a deeper insight into the Ethnic Minority student experience of the awarding gap within this setting. In doing so, the paper contributes to our understanding of the ongoing phenomenon of the awarding gap of Ethnic Minority students as compared to their White peers. In particular, it highlights how the challenges of engaging students in digital environments appear to be exacerbated as a result of Ethnic Minority students' anxieties about participating in a distance learning context.

Literature Review

An understanding of the factors influencing the retention and attainment of distance learning students has come under increasing scrutiny as more institutions develop flexible study routes alongside conventional delivery. Simons et al (2018) explored resilience as a factor for distance learners who were typically juggling competing demands of work and caring responsibilities alongside their studies. This study concluded that students demonstrated considerable resourcefulness in drawing on support from family and friends as well as the University. It also found that feedback on assignments and in tuition was particularly important to support retention (Simons et al, 2018). Tladi (2017) evaluated the importance of self-efficacy as a factor in the attainment of distance learners and concluded that the only significant category was distance learning self-efficacy (DLSE), a lack of which was associated with lower attainment. This association was particularly apparent for students with prior study experience that had taken place outside of the distance learning context. Tladi (2017) concluded that this finding reinforced the importance of inducting students to the

institutional context of their learning, in this case distance learning. Richardson has similarly undertaken a number of studies into the attainment (or awarding gap) of students in the context of distance learning, including students with autism (2017), students who are deaf or hard of hearing (2015) and also Ethnic Minority students (2010). Of these three groups, Ethnic Minority students were the only group to have comparable completion and pass rates but disproportionately low attainment which at the time of the study was actually widening, despite increased participation of Ethnic Minority students (Richardson, 2010). The disproportionately low degree performance of Ethnic Minority students across the higher education sector in the UK has been well documented in the context of both distance and face to face institutions The higher education sector has responded through initiatives such as providing mentoring, increasing levels of support and the provision of diversity awareness training for university staff (Sanders and Rose-Adams, 2014; Broecke and Nicholls, 2007; Fielding and Thomas, 2008; Richardson, 2008; 2010). . However, despite all the actions undertaken, the awarding gap remains stubbornly static.

While the persistent awardinggap is undisputed, there remains very little understanding of the causes. Cotton et al. (2015) proposed that Ethnic Minority students might be more likely to employ 'surface learning' and this could impact on their attainment. However, Sanders and Rose-Adams (2014) suggest that caution is needed with explanations offered, approaches (primarily) in the USA, which explore psychological factors (such as well-being, sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation), as these risk locating the cause of under attainment within the individual implying an unhelpful deficit model rooted in notions of Ethnic Minority students' personal characteristics (Sanderson, 2012b). These approaches have been criticised for failing to account for the multiple, complex factors that impact on the awarding gap including implicit and explicit discrimination at personal, societal and

institutional levels (Saunders, 2014). Cotton et al., (2015) suggest that drawing on the concepts of "educational life histories" (Stuart, Lido and Morgan, 2011, p.492) and "possible selves" (Stevenson, 2012b, p.103) offer more plausible alternatives to deficit models to explain the attainment gap:

> These [studies] examine the reasons why students from some Ethnic Minority backgrounds do less well than might be expected by analysing personal stories and their conceptions of what is desired, feared or hoped for in the future, articulated as their 'possible selves'.
>
> (Sanders and Rose-Adams, 2014, p.14)

Stuart et al. (2011) draw on Bourdieu's concept of habitus, or in simple terms the cultural capital gained from a sense of belonging in a particular context. They suggest that the Ethnic Minority students in their study potentially lacked such cultural capital as they "articulated less belief in their entitlement and rights at university" (2011, p.506). They went on to suggest that this potentially impacted on their attainment. Stevenson (2012b) explores the concept of possible selves, suggesting that for some students there was less congruence between the 'hoped for' and 'true' possible selves (2012b, p.109). She suggests that the reasons for such discrepancies included internalised negative stereotypes and a lack of confidence in using help seeking strategies. For example, the Ethnic Minority students in Stevenson's study were found to be more likely to avoid formal teaching and both Black and Asian students were more likely to attribute any underperformance to their own commitment or abilities and were also less "strategic and purposeful" in accessing support, including teaching (2012b, p.108). This approach, foregrounding personal stories, is one which will be used in this study to explore of the impact of societal and institutional factors and attitudes on

individual experiences. The students' stories have been analysed with an awareness of the complex and sometimes uncomfortable realities of stereotyping and discrimination.

Steele (2010) contends that the negative impact thatstereotypes have on academic performance is a standard predicament of life for people who identify as Black in particular. Steele's work on academic performance suggests that under performance stems from human inter-subjectivity, or in other words the fact that people are aware of what others think about them and that this has an impact on their performance. They are also aware that their actions or inactions can confirm the stereotype. Steele suggests that performance is therefore influenced by "stereotype threat" (2012, p.12) which he defines as the impact of the known beliefs of others about an aspect of our identity. He suggests that stereotype threat is present in any situation in which the stereotype of a group of people is relevant. The experience of stereotype threat is not specifically concerned with something negative, it is just an awareness that something could happen, which Steele (2010) identifies as a diffuse threat that is preoccupying. In essence, Steele's argument is that we are "being threatened because we have a given characteristic which is what makes us most aware of being a particular kind of person" (2010, p.73). A related concept which Steele argues has an impact on student learning and behaviour is that of 'identity contingencies' which he describes as being:

"Those conditions in a setting that reward some behaviours and punish others, and thereby determine how we respond in the setting and what we learn."

(Steele, 2010 p.68)

Identity contingencies are based on stereotypes and are powerful influences on behaviour in specific settings. Steele also coins the term "over-efforting" (2010, p.104) arising from his observation that Black American students had a tendency to put in twice as much effort as their White or Asian peers, in order to counteract the negative stereotype of academic

inability. Steele also argues that stigma pressure on intellectual functioning is relevant to all groups whose intellectual activities are viewed negatively in wider society. By taking this view, he does not confine the phenomenon of stigma pressure to (in his context) Black American students, he also includes gender. Steele (2010) argues that this over-effort is due to the Black American students' belief systems that promote the need to work twice as hard. Moule's (2009) exploration of unconscious bias may also provide a level of understanding regarding students' experiences and reactions. In this work Moule (2009) explains that unconscious bias is prevalent amongst all human beings and has its roots in stereotypes and prejudice and that these are deeply held and more often than not, unrecognised. From the perspective of this study, what is significant from Steele and Moule's work is that disadvantage can arise from deeply rooted social beliefs and actions (both intentional and unintentional). Moreover, individually these actions can appear insignificant and benign, but collectively they can amount to an invisible context of disadvantage. This study draws on this collective body of literature as it applies to Ethnic Minority students studying at a distance, in order to gain a deeper insight into factors that might be impacting on behaviour.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the individual lived experiences of a small number of Ethnic Minority students, in order to provide some qualitative insight into the statistics which consistently indicate inequities in the awarding gap for this group of students. The project sought to answer the following two broad questions:

In the context of students studying at a UK distance learning University at level 2 of an undergraduate degree:

1. How do individual students from Ethnic Minority backgrounds experience teaching and learning?

2. Based on the perceptions of students, what are the factors that impact (negatively or positively) on achieving equitable outcomes for all students? ?

As a mixed methods study (Creswell 2017), both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to gather and analyse data. The quantitative data aimed to produce a broad snapshot of the profile and performance of Ethnic Minority students studying at level 2 in 2014/15, while the qualitative data provided deeper insights from three personal stories of study, gathered through semi structured interviews. A purposeful sample of six of 21 respondents to the online survey were selected for interview. Respondents had indicated a willingness to be interviewed and demographic data showed they represented diversity in terms of the course studied and their personal and educational profile. The case studies included here represent the three students for whom a complete and comprehensive data set was achieved.

Data collection involved:

- Statistical data on student profiles and performance available routinely within the University

- An online survey which was offered to all students who fitted the brief of self-identifying as being from a Ethnic Minority background studying a level two module within the health and social care curriculum area. The survey provided data on each students' profile including modules studied, age, gender, disability and a free text box where the student could provide a more detailed self-description of their ethnicity and inform the research team why they were interested in participating in the study. This data provided a snapshot for the specific cohort studied within the broader context for the data of the whole University

- Semi-structured interviews with six students, three of whom who participated in two rounds of semi structured interviews. The first interview was conducted face to face at

the mid-module point and the second interview, conducted on the phone, took place within 2 months of module results being released.

In advance of the interviews, broad areas of questioning were shared with students , these drew on existing literature (outlined above) and suggested that a wide range of social and educational factors could have an impact on individual experience. The first interview focused on educational histories, motivations, attitudes to, and use of, support and any barriers to effective study. The second interview reviewed the year: the questions were focused on the students' original attainment goals, support and barriers.

Responses from the participants were used to produce educational life histories, which afforded the opportunity of revealing what Sanders and Rose-Adams (2014 p.14) have described as the "intimate and nuanced perspectives on the experiences and expectations of BAME, particularly in relation to academic help-seeking strategies". Questions were also constructed in a way that was mindful of the importance of external factors in relation to attainment (Sanders and Rose Adams, 2014; Stevenson, 2012b).

The data was thematically analysed by three members of the research team in the context of the current literature on the awarding gap experienced by ethnic minority students. This approach involves the researcher familiarising him/herself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential codes and themes, defining and naming themes and then producing a report based on the findings (Antaki et al., 2002 as cited by Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of seven themes, six of which appeared in all of the case studies. The seventh theme (English as an additional language) appeared in two of the case studies, given its minority status it has been noted but not explored in this paper:

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Throughout, the data analysis was driven by the intention to attend carefully to the voices of the students, listening to their experiences of study through their own stories.

Findings

Contextual quantitative data

Statistical data indicated that women constituted 83% (n=192) of participants, 17% (n=40) were defined as being of low socio economic status (based on the university institutional definition), 34% (n=78) had prior qualifications below A level, both of which were consistent with the profile of the general population at the university studied. The data suggested the sample included a higher proportion of older students, with 65% being over 35 compared with 45% in the general student population (UCAS 2017). Across the sample of 21 participants, 63% identified themselves as 'Black', 19% as 'Asian' and 15% as 'Mixed'.

Table 2, 3 and 4 present student performance for each ethnic group for the sample as compared with the whole student population, based on completion, pass rate and attainment:

INSERT TABLES 1, 2 & 3 HERE

This data supported the original rationale for this study. The average completion and pass rates of Ethnic Minority students in the general student population were lower by 5% and 10% respectively. Attainment based on achieving a good pass were awarded at 17% lower for the Ethnic Minority students. The average completion and pass rates for the students in the sample were higher than the university wide Ethnic Minority population (15% and 25% respectively), while the attainment rate was 5% *lower* than the average Ethnic Minority population across the University. This suggests that within the sample studied, students were

more likely to complete and pass but less likely to gain a good pass, a striking illustration of the awarding gap.

The case studies

In order to explore these issues in more depth, case studies were developed using online survey and interview data obtained from three students. For the purposes of this paper, the three students forming the case studies are referred to as Lameck, Gabby and Jasmira; names are all anonymised and the profiles of these three students are detailed in Table 5:

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

Lameck

Lameck is a male in his mid 40's, he describes himself as follows:

From Zimbabwe. Cultured like other cultures, whereby as a man you have responsibility for your family. Respect of elderly.

Lameck is married, has a child and lives in Yorkshire where he works as a night support carer and artist. Lameck is studying as he wants a management role in care. Lameck was studying a level two module on dementia care. He has a Higher National Diploma (equivalent to the first two years of a degree) and describes his study experience and interest in the study as follows:

When l enrolled with [the university], l was aiming to become a Mental Health Nurse. But again midway through my studies, l became more confident in my life that rekindled my original desire to lead and manage any health and social care organisation…Unless power is distributed equally in the society, that is the inclusion of BAME in leadership and management of organisation like NHS and Police Forces there will be always a crush cultures. No culture can be used as a dominant over another culture.

Lameck provides a powerful story which reflects his social and 'educational history' (Stuart 2011) and the 'possible self' (Stevenson 2012b) that he envisions for himself. His motivation for study was to use education to address the disadvantage he observes, exemplified by the lack of support that he experienced in the UK from his employer:

They said no, even if you qualify you won't get a job here as a manager…they might change their mind after …I'm becoming more knowledgeable than someone who just does mandatory training.

Lameck's motivation was strengthened by the apparent lack of confidence expressed by his colleagues in his ability to benefit from higher education. His motivation arose not only from a desire to improve his life chances and job opportunities, it was also strongly linked to a need to regain his status (as a manager) which he had before settling in Britain. These motivations also reflected Lameck's determination to rise above what he saw as the wider societal structural barriers experienced by people from Ethnic Minority communities, which he saw as involving Black people needing to work harder to achieve the same results:

Yeah because especially like BME people they don't see the reason for learning if they can't get those positions they are learning for. They say learning is useless to them because no matter how educated you are if you are Black you will never get that post. Because it was that they're going to fail you in training recruitment or selection, you know, so you need to work twice harder.

Here Lameck reflects his perception of the reason why Ethnic Minority people may feel demotivated, but his response chimes with Steele's notion of 'over-efforting' (Steele, 2010). Motivated by the 'possible self' (Stevenson 2012b) as a manager, thereby re-gaining some of the status that he had in Zimbabwe, Lameck is convinced that he needs to work twice as hard to overcome the disadvantage he anticipates.

During interviews Lameck signposted his ethnic identity as a Black man and his status as an African man. Although confident about accessing and making use of individual tutor and peer support through tutorials, Lameck expressed anxiety about the partial visibility of students' identities in a digital environment. Lameck valued the ground rules in place within the online tutorials which required students to respect each other's comments, but not knowing his peers' background was significant in the online tutorials where student participants were relatively anonymous compared with the student led Facebook groups. The

views of other students on the module forum, in Lameck's experience, failed to appreciate that the academic content of the module was, for Lameck his personal history.

They [students] are [asking] why apartheid happened? .... So me as a Black person, it's very difficult for me to just give my view. It will be challenging because although we are mixed up as students of different backgrounds, to me it's more emotional than just being a module. So that's the most challenging, how to express myself without putting my emotions first. It's not a clear cut line, and I'm afraid that now maybe these students might offend me, because it was my ancestors who were affected by the 1913 land police whereby the white people they were saying that no black man should be [a] citizen unless that black man can produce a passport.

While Lameck was keen to have his views heard, he wanted to do so professionally, without emotion. Lameck's emphasis on putting forward his own argument in a professional manner could be described as a manifestation of stereotype threat (Steele 2010) in the sense of not wanting his social identity to appear as being under threat before an online student audience.

Gabby

Gabby is in her late 40's and she describes herself as follows:

I would describe my ethnicity or culture as African Caribbean, my mother is Caucasian born in Britain and my father was Caribbean and was born in Guyana. I do not use the terminology Black as I feel it can have negative effects as people come from a rich culture that can sometimes become lost or forgotten

Gabby was studying dementia care, joining the university with the equivalent of three Advanced level examinations, representing standard entry qualifications in UK higher education. She worked full time as a Health Care Assistant and lived in the East Midlands

region of the UK with her children. Gabby describes her study experience and interest in the research as follows:

My educational study so far has been liberating, and is a big boost to self-esteem as the knowledge gained helps you to see your own potential. The modules I am currently studying are of interest to me as my work involves health and social care, and hopefully they will help me to progress into other areas of health care. I feel that a lot of young people sometimes don't always get on well at school and as a result never reach their full potential because they felt that they were not capable of academic stuff, but in fact it could just have been that they did not learn effectively and fell behind, or they could have had difficult home circumstances that affected their study.

This positive embracing of education, as a route to employment as given in the online survey, contrasts with her interview data in which she recalled difficult experiences in school and her sense of being different as a dual-heritage adolescent growing up in what she described as a predominantly English area with her mother but an absent father. She described searching for who she was, for her heritage and cultural background. What was also apparent as a constant throughout Gabby's interviews, in that she did not link her life experiences to discrimination but rather a sense of not belonging. Gabby's educational history reflects painful, difficult experiences of exclusion both at school and then subsequently applying unsuccessfully for sponsorship on a pre-registration nursing qualification. Her motivation for studying arose from her wish to have a second chance:

I used to have extra English…I suppose it was positive in a sense she was trying to give you extra help, maybe they thought you needed it, but then again it was taking you out of your classroom and everyone know that you're going for, you know the way they …did single me out…Honestly that is the one thing I remember from junior school.

Then you go to senior school and your confidence is already knocked isn't it? ...and I wouldn't ask, I'd never put my hand up and ask for help if I didn't understand there's no way I'm asking, because then you're feeling more stupid in the class. So then you slip behind.

Despite the knocks to her confidence that arose from her school education and subsequently failing to be selected for a pre-registration nursing course, Gabby embraced her studies at university. She relates her failure to gain a place on the nursing course to her prior educational history, and recounts the personal vision and strength needed to move on and attempt to participate in higher education again, potentially confronting and overcoming the 'identity contingencies' (Steele, 2010) that she encountered:

It takes a lot of strength ...because like for me when I didn't get into the nursing programme I was gutted, I was so devastated, because ...from when I was little I always wanted to do nursing, but obviously I thought okay you're in the hospital, but I could have thought oh I'm not going to study forget it, I'll just go to work. But then I thought but why should someone stop me from having a degree? Why should someone stop me from learning more about health and social care, you know, how can she really take that away from me?

Here Gabby's vision of her 'possible self' (Stevenson, 2012b) drives her ambition to overcome the barriers that have arisen from her personal and educational history. She did not explicitly identify any of her difficult experiences as being racially motivated, although they could be inferred through her references to the English support at school and her challenge to herself that '*why should someone stop me?*'. At university Gabby felt supported by her tutor, although she initially had some concerns about appearing 'silly' in front of her peers in group tuition. Overall, Gabby's experience of individual and group tuition was very positive, assisted to a large part by the effectiveness of her tutors:

Sometimes I think the questions I might want to ask I might look silly. And that's not because of the tutor, it's not because of the people…when I first started I perhaps was a bit reluctant because I'm thinking oh I've got a question in my head but I'm thinking how will I look, because the people in that group seem perhaps more advanced…I don't feel like that now because the tutors are all very supportive and that's what made the difference.

Gabby passed her module, but with only a bare pass grade and in her second interview reflected on the gap between her ambitions for herself and the reality that she experienced;

Well I passed… I imagined I could get a really high pass …and then I took things into reality, I thought, but you've passed, imagine it could have been a fail, you know, maybe you didn't get the marks… to get a bit higher, but you have passed it…so that had to do.

This outcome which fell below Gabby's expectationsrepresents a significant challenge to her self-esteem, however despite her disappointment at this set of results, Gabby remains undeterred about continuing with her studies.

Jasmira

Jasmira is in her late 30's and described herself as British Asian, she worked part time in retail and was studying at university in order to change her career as she wants to train as a Physician's Associate. Jasmira was studying a module on health and illness and had less than two Advanced level examinations (representing standard entry qualifications in UK higher education) on first registration. In the online survey, Jasmira describes her study experience with the university and interest in the subject as follows:

So far my experience with the [university] has been a good one and my goal of achieving a 1st in my degree is attainable. My ambition is to become a doctor but I don't think I will get

there because of my age. The study is of interest to me because it does not reflect my own opinion of these minorities that they are low achievers.

This data suggests that Jasmira's motivation to study was driven by a 'possible self' (Stevenson 2012b) associated with her long standing career aspiration to enter medicine. On re-entering education as an adult, Jasmira shifted her ambitions from becoming a doctor to becoming a Physician's Associate[2], a career choice which was more attainable given her age and the break in her studies. Becoming a Physician's Associate still necessitated Jasmira to achieve a good degree in order to gain a place on a postgraduate course. Motivated by her ambition to achieve her career goal, Jasmira demonstrated 'over-efforting' (Steele 2010) by referring to a need to obtain a first class degree in order to give herself the best chance of gaining a place on a postgraduate course. The entry requirements for the two universities local to Jasmira in fact did not require a first, so her determination to aim for this was revealed in her second interview, as she discussed her need to outperform other applicants in order to compete on a level playing field.

Jasmira's educational history (Stuart et al, 2011) up to the end of compulsory schooling was very positive (*I was lucky, I went to a really great school*), up until she progressed to Advanced level examinations she was well supported at school, gaining a General Certificate of School Education's in grades A-C in 12 subjects. Jasmira left school to embark on her Advanced Level examinations with the intention of progressing to a career in medicine. However, Jasmira left her studies due to multiple bereavements which not only affected her

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[2] A physician's associate are healthcare practitioners who work alongside qualified doctors in hospitals and in GP surgeries assisting in the diagnosis and management of patients.

emotionally but resulted in her needing to take up employment to support her family financially.

Jasmira's story signals the complexity of identities including culture, age and gender. In interview data she made little reference to racial discrimination but she does signal her culture (also age and gender) broadly influencing her educational and career choices. She suggests that not only was higher education not the norm in her family, but that it was not expected of Asian women in general. This powerfully signalled the subtle but pervasive impact of cultural assumptions, wherever they emanate from. Jasmira did not refer to any explicit discrimination, but she was aware of the very pervasive impact of assumptions (from within her own family) about what she should do with her life as an Asian woman, despite the availability of different role models from her friends. Jasmira's experiences appear to echo Steele's (2010) comments in relation to stereotype threat being a situational pressure that doesn't require susceptibility to interfere with intellectual performance. In Jasmira's case, her intention to enter a medical career meant that she needed to change her 'identity contingencies' (Steel, 2010) from what she understood to be her family's expectations of her to conform by not entering higher education. Jasmira therefore didn't identify any limitations on her academic progress as being related to societal or institutional disadvantage or discrimination, but instead accounts for them as setbacks arising from her 'personal circumstances'.

As with Gabby, Jasmira didn't explicitly signal racial discrimination in her educational journey, but she refers to her cultural context as an Asian woman:
It [higher education] wasn't within the Asian culture, its mainly the sort if male dominance, like they [men] go and do that type of thing not the women, definitely, but it's all changed,

different now …I knew what I wanted to be, I wanted to be educated. That's one thing I did know, but obviously with my parents there wasn't any encouragement

This signals gendered differences in the experiences of male and female Ethnic Minority students and highlights the importance of being aware of the impact of intersectionality (Bhopal and Preston 2011). As with Lameck and Gabby, Jasmira makes reference to her discomfort in participating in tuition to support with her studies, despite initially attempting to make use of both group and individual tuition. Jasmira found the face to face tutorials helpful but she was less comfortable about the online support as she was anxious about plagiarism and so avoided Facebook groups altogether as they were not moderated. In online tutorials, Jasmira felt intimidated by the other students who she perceived as being more able than her. Her anxiety about participating in group learning was exacerbated by learning in an online environment, which she found intimidating in part due to the lack of visibility of other students:

…because [in face to face tutorials] you can see the other, you can sort of hide behind the online think, I think, but when you're with somebody you can see how everyone is in the same boat and vulnerable.

On the surface, Jasmira's story is reassuring to an educational institution, she felt well supported and that "every bit of help" was available to her; she suggests that any difficulties or setbacks she experienced were due to her own "personal circumstances". Digging a little deeper revealed that her personal circumstances involving culturally embedded assumptions about an Asian woman engaging in higher education. Jasmira identified these as having had an impact on her confidence and that she was reluctant to ask for help as she thought she should be able to manage her studies independently of the tutor and also other students.

Instead, Jasmira relied on a range of strategies that were built on the support of her family, different study techniques and a variety of study patterns.

Discussion

All three case studies highlight the concepts of educational histories (Stuart et al, 2011) and possible selves (Stevenson, 2012b) while at least one of Steele's concepts of stereotype threat, over-efforting and identity contingencies, also appeared in each case study. The significance of personal histories presented here highlight the importance in distance learning of providing opportunities for students to reflect on and share their educational experiences and goals with tutors. The identities of the students in this study were consistently underpinned by their personal educational histories, and in the students own estimation became significant at several points in their learning but most keenly during tuition encounters. As the data showed, identity and personal histories were foregrounded as a result of the online context in which tuition was provided. All three students were highly motivated, but also expressed reservations about participating in tuition, needing reassurances that they could feel safe through sensitive, effective moderation and ground rules employed during tutorials. For example, Gabby was initially worried about looking 'silly' until she overcame the anxiety of her school experiences of being singled out for English support. Jasmira's lack of academic confidence and vulnerability was particularly strong during online tuition where her peers were invisible. Similarly, Lameck's anxiety arose from the expectations of peers for him to talk about personal experiences as a Black man from Zimbabwe.

Effective participation in online tuition is a challenge in all contexts (Wise Sper and Marbouti, 2013) but issues of Ethnic Minority student identity added a sensitive dimension, with implications for supporting students in distance learning. Learning at a distance risks

delivering an impersonal experience where Ethnic Minority students feel excluded, marginalised or "othered" (Stevenson 2016, p.207) even where there is no explicit discrimination. This can arise from stereotype threat and identity contingencies, both arising from conscious or unconscious stereotyping (Steele 2010). Stevenson's research on possible selves (2012a, 2012b) provided a particularly useful lens for the stories provided here. The portrayal of strong, hoped for possible-selves, demonstrated students' commitment and resilience in trying to attain them. Jasmira and Lameck in particular could be described as having ambitious hoped for possible-selves. Consistent with Stevenson's research (2012a; 2012b), all three students focus on their own personal circumstances, including the impact of individuals on their journeys, rather than the service offered by the University as blocks to their attainment and Jasmira and Lameck both demonstrated a reluctance to fully engage with educational support, for example tuition. Explicit reference to culture, ethnicity or issues of discrimination also appeared in the data but, as suggested by Steele (2010) students did not claim direct or overt discrimination, but from an analytic research perspective it was apparent there was a significant impact. Steele's concept of identity contingencies was also apparent in Gabby and Jasmira's stories, both students responding to the (stereotypical) assumptions and beliefs of others about their potential educational and vocational capabilities. One particular response to identity contingencies is over-efforting, this was evident in Lameck and Jasmira's description of setting very high targets for their performance in order to enhance their chances of success in a context of perceived implicit disadvantage as Black students. Study support and advice offered by Universities could provide support to students to help them set realistic and attainable study goals.

Conclusion

This study has reinforced much that we are already aware of about the individual experiences of Ethnic Minority students in higher education. However, our focus on stories of study in the context of three case studies has added additional insight in relation to these issues in distance learning. Not only are individual identities and personal educational histories important, but great care is needed when providing tuition to ensure that such histories are managed with sensitivity, both to understand where additional support is needed, and to manage peer relationships in the context of group tuition so that all students can fully participate. Tutors and study support can play a vital role in enabling students to reflect on and articulate personal goals and histories. This needs to be an explicit activity within distance learning; students may provide clues about their personal histories, and educators need to listen and learn to provide support to students in response to these. An important aspect of this work is enabling students to identify the 'hoped for self' and provide support to reduce any lack of congruence between the 'hoped for' and 'true' possible selves (Stevenson 2012a; 20112b). Finally, the study supports Steele's supposition that limiting measures intended to overcome underperformance to explicit, conscious discrimination overlooks the importance of implicit but deeply entrenched behaviours arising from unconscious stereotyping. The point of impact can be very specific, such as a particular tutorial encounter, but the the behaviour of the all participants emanate from broader, complex socially embedded assumptions which need to take into account intersectionality. Addressing the awarding gap for Ethnic Minority is students is therefore unlikely to be successful through policies or training to prevent discriminatory actions alone. This does not imply an acceptance of complacency in relation to explicit prejudice or discrimination, but rather a recognition that stereotyping is a deeply embedded social phenomenon unlikely to be extinguished simply by a range of high profile, time-limited institutional educational policies. For example, the specific impact of participating in online tutorials, where the visibility of

identities can be partial, needs to be managed carefully by tutors. The contribution that education can make is to recognise the important association between identity and academic performance identified by Steele (2010) and reflect on how this understanding can be used in all aspects of teaching and learning.

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Table 1: Themes identified across the three case studies.

	Theme	Lameck Interview:	Jasmira Interview:	Gabby Interview:
1	Motivation, confidence, aspirations and expectations	1 & 2	1 & 2	1 & 2
2	Engagement with educational support and advice	1 & 2	1 & 2	1 & 2
3	External pressures including family and employment	1	1 & 2	1 & 2
4	Support from family, friends, employers	1 & 2	1 & 2	1 & 2
5	Explicit signposting of Black identity	1 & 2	1	1
6	English as a second / dual language	1	No Mention	1
7	Prior educational experiences	1	1	1 & 2

Table 2: Completion by ethnic group

	Sample		University wide	
	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
Asian	100%	2	65%	4701
Black	73%	11	62%	4738
Mixed	100%	4	63%	3051
White	-	-	72%	119226

All BAME	82%	67%

Table 3: Pass rate by ethnic group

	Sample		University	
	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
Asian	100%	2	53%	3929
Black	63%	10	48%	3563
Mixed	100%	4	57%	2687
White	-	-	66%	109290
All BAME	79%		55%	

Table 4: Percentage of students gaining a 'Good pass'

	Sample		University	
	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number
Asian	0	0	36%	2503
Black	19%	3	19%	1352
Mixed	0	0	42%	1870
White	-	-	49%	77198
All BAME	79%		32%	

Table 5: Three case studies

Name	Ethnic origin (as self-selected based on University groups offered)	Age	Gender	Prior Qualification	Socio-economic status
Jasmira	Asian	30-45	F	Less 2 A levels	Low
Lameck	Black	40-49	M	HE Qualification	High
Gabby	Black	40-49	F	A level equivalent	High