



# Learning from the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) university students who withdraw from their undergraduate degree

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## Abstract

Students from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) background are more likely to withdraw from their undergraduate degree in the United Kingdom (UK). It is therefore important to explore withdrawal experiences and perspectives that relate to this population of students to increase both student retention and success. Thirteen UK-domiciled, full-time undergraduate, first-degree entrants from a BAME background, who had withdrawn from a post-1992 university in the West Midlands, took part in a semi-structured interview. The present study explored BAME student experiences of withdrawal which covered personal, academic and social concerns. Using a thematic analysis approach, five themes were developed: (a) academic issues, (b) does anybody even care? (c) balancing part-time employment alongside HE, (d) family perception and pressure and (e) the importance of social integration. Participants often discussed withdrawal as a holistic experience whereby although certain aspects were more prominently spoken about, generally withdrawal was a materialisation of more than one problematic area. There is a need for institutions to further understand the challenges faced by BAME students in order to provide more localised support and intervention to improve BAME retention, success and experiences within higher education (HE).

**Keywords** BAME · University withdrawal · Student experience · Higher education

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## Introduction

Higher education (HE) withdrawal rates in the UK indicate fewer Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students (86.8%) compared to White entrants (91.3%) continue or qualify from university (ECU 2019). As the UK has encountered an increase in BAME university representation rates from 14.9% in 2003/2004 to 23.6% in 2017/2018 (ECU 2019), BAME withdrawal rates have also increased resulting in implications for the individual, institution and society (Bradley and Migali 2017). As students from a BAME background are more likely to withdraw from their undergraduate degree in the UK (ECU 2019), it is important to increase student retention by focussing on this group to succeed in HE. To achieve understanding and responding to withdrawal reasoning of BAME, it is essential to explore withdrawal experiences and perspectives that relate to this population of students.

University withdrawal is a global phenomenon, defined and measured differently across HE institutions in different countries. In the UK, HE student continuation data are measured by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), followed by annual reports by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). The ECU presents the statistical data by HESA with the aim of improving the understanding of equality challenges faced by HE. Full-time first-degree entrants in HE institutions in the UK are tracked and placed in one of three groups one year later; continued or qualified, transferred or absent (ECU 2019). The components used to measure withdrawal, including the allocation of time frames for completion as well as the acceptance of course change, differ across universities (Quinn 2013). For the purpose of the present study, the terms withdrawal and non-continuation will be used to refer to the phenomenon when a student in HE leaves an enrolled course before completion.

Following a transition in the European education system towards mass HE within the last two decades, widening participation policies (with the aim of encouraging individuals from different populations to enter university) have increased the diversity of the student population entering HE, which may influence withdrawal rates (Hovdhaugen et al. 2015). With a national focus upon inspiring wider populations to enter HE (European Commission 2010), less attention has been given to the journey individuals face once entered HE, with a particular lack of focus on how long-term success is achieved (Stelnicki et al. 2015). It cannot be assumed that all students are able to cope with the challenges faced within HE, initially designed as a privilege for the elite few (Reay et al. 2010), which is supported by the difference in withdrawal rates across different populations (ECU 2019). Merely increasing the intake of BAME students into HE institutions with predominantly white populations has been discussed as an ineffective measure to achieve diversity, when institutional changes are not also prioritised (Hiraldo 2010). Therefore, it is important to focus the development of HE practices attending to the needs of a more diverse population which could be facilitated using the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995).

CRT is an analytical framework which explores societal inequity perpetuated through race and racism (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). CRT has developed into an international approach used by scholars to examine educational research and

practice, including societal disparities in HE (Hiraldo 2010; Ladson-Billings 2005; Singh 2018). The tenets of CRT may benefit HE institutions with regard to increasing success of diversity and inclusivity of BAME students. Counter-storytelling is an essential tenet of CRT, which aims to authenticate racial experiences of minority populations through critique of the majority populations, using personal narratives (DeCuir and Dixson 2004). DeCuir and Dixson (2004) used counter stories as an analytical tool based on the CRT to explore experiences of race and racism in education and further demonstrated how CRT can be used in future educational research. Recent discussions around CRT involve the hopefulness of working towards the possibility of a 'post-racial' future, Singh (2018) highlights the importance of exploring novel ways to think about race, where people have the ability to see themselves outside of prior racialised categories. This could be important when thinking about developing pedagogical strategies for eradicating racism within education.

Early theoretical perspectives of student attrition adopted a sociological view suggesting social withdrawal was the significant causative factor of non-continuation (Spady 1970; Tinto 1975). Spady (1970) argued that withdrawal resulted from incongruent values with social groups and a lack of support. Tinto's interactionist theory (1975) modified the constructs created by Spady (1970), incorporating social support into social integration and value congruence into academic integration, which formed the basis of the interactionist theory. Tinto (1975) suggested students who do not socially and academically integrate well were most likely to withdraw due to a decreased commitment to the institution. Both models (Spady 1970; Tinto 1975) faced critique as the sole focus of research resided in the examination of traditional students (Bean and Metzner 1985) with little focus on non-traditional (BAME) students.

In the last two decades, several attempts to explore withdrawal from BAME backgrounds have been made (Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann 2015; Quinn 2013; Singh 2011; Stevenson 2012), with little agreement on the causative factors of HE withdrawal. Quinn (2013) focused upon the examination of students from underrepresented groups (including BAME) which formulated a perspective more inclusive to students from non-traditional backgrounds. Data indicated six key factors lead to withdrawal: institutional, learning, personal, structural, sociocultural and policy dynamics. These factors will be explored in more detail in the next segments, highlighting the research that has been conducted in the field.

Several institutional regulations act as barriers to student success and may contribute to BAME withdrawal including limited course flexibility and course expectations (Bradley 2017). Evidence suggests that many BAME students withdraw from HE because they feel that they have chosen the wrong undergraduate course (Vossensteyn et al. 2015). In the UK, HE programmes provide little opportunity to support the changing needs of individuals and offer limited flexibility as the transfer of course credits from one degree to another is not widely recognised (Hovdhaugen et al. 2015). HE institutions are encouraged to not only improve the match between student and programme choice, but also prior course knowledge as a lack of clear expectation and knowledge before enrolment increased withdrawal likelihood (Hamshire et al. 2013; Thomas 2012).

Closely aligned to the institutional inflexibility is a lack of recognition and acknowledgement of how learning experiences prior to entering HE may impact. Learning factors which influence the decision of BAME students to withdraw from HE includes prior education and teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) practices (Thomas 2012). Differences in the prior education of BAME students particularly from low achieving, disadvantaged or state schools may impact upon the academic integration into HE. Evidence demonstrates that the unfamiliarity of HE practices upon entering university hinders academic development and student success due to differences in academic writing style, proficiency of subject-related equipment (for example, scientific lab apparatus) and assessment methods (Stevenson 2012). High-quality TLA practices aimed at decreasing student HE withdrawal focus upon student-centred learning, stimulating teaching, assessment support and feedback (Thomas 2012). For example, it has been suggested that an increase in student-centred approaches should be implemented during the design stages and the delivery of HE courses to ensure the needs of students across all populations are met (Wanner and Palmer 2015). But poorer prior teaching frequently indicates problematic personal and sociocultural factors that require further attention.

There are numerous personal factors which may occur throughout a BAME student's journey which include work or family-related commitments, religious responsibilities, challenging experiences and factors influenced from outside sources for example, family, friends or partners (Quinn 2013). It is important to recognise that many personal factors are beyond the control of the HE institution, although institutions may be able to provide facilities to help students cope with challenging personal situations, increasing the chance of BAME completion (Singh 2011). In recent years, additional support available to HE students has been increased through initiatives such as personal tutoring and mentoring sessions which encourages a sense of belonging to the university, improving the chance of completion (Thomas 2012; Vossensteyn et al. 2015). Personal tutor measures provide support for all students; however, they offer the opportunity for BAME students to seek out extra support which reduces the chance of feeling singled out as a minority, a concern discussed by Stevenson (2012) which reported how BAME groups desired extra support without feeling targeted.

Sociocultural factors which consider the role of society upon the student may influence withdrawal for some BAME students. Encompassing a self-fulfilling theoretical perspective, whereby a societal expectation of BAME non-continuation influences self-perception, normalises withdrawal (Quinn 2013). As students are consciously aware of their position held among society due to an ethnic minority background, the belief of successfully completing HE as well as educational motivation is weakened (Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann 2015). Further, a healthy level of family support is an important aspect of student continuation, as when families are overinvolved, a pressure to meet high standards and achieve good marks impacts upon the chances of successfully completing university (Stelnicki et al. 2015). A lack of parental HE knowledge and experience within families makes it difficult to aid the process of withdrawal when students seek out guidance (Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann 2015). Overall, a low socioeconomic background, coupled with a BAME background, leads to a lack of self-confidence

in the potential to successfully complete HE and constitute structural factors that impact on student experiences.

Structural factors undeniably reflect the students' position among society, and influence BAME withdrawal across HE institutions, including socioeconomic factors such as culture, class and poverty (Manstead 2018). Ethnicity interacts with low socioeconomic status to produce additional inequalities to HE students, reducing the chance of successfully completing HE (Quinn 2013). A qualitative study by Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann (2015) revealed how growing up in a low socioeconomic household reduced early opportunities to good schooling. Consequently, students failed to develop the knowledge needed about social interaction and time management which led to feelings of reduced motivation and self-blame once entered HE. Compared to students from privileged backgrounds, BAME students often lack economic and social capital which requires increased efforts to equalise with their advantaged peers, possibly leading to reduced motivation and an increase in the likelihood of withdrawal (Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann 2015). As BAME students who withdraw from HE often reside from working or lower-middle class backgrounds, informed guidance is limited due to a lack of parental and institutional support (Milburn et al. 2015). Students from working-class backgrounds communicated concerns that parents were unable to assist in degree or university choice (Bradley 2017). Therefore, and in consideration of all factors that may influence decision making around discontinuation, an increase in BAME preparedness across HE institutions is needed, which could be achieved through policy reforms.

Several policy factors have had secondary impacts upon HE students, which include decisions made to institutions such as financial cuts and reducing available resources. Bradley and Migali (2017) revealed how a continuous raise in tuition fees since 1998, alongside a shift towards an increase in tuition fee loans and a decrease in tuition fee grants since 2006, has left HE students with substantially higher debts. Disadvantaged groups are suggested to be discouraged from entering, completing or re-entering HE, due to increasing financial pressures (Bradley 2017). When an institution does not offer adequate additional funding, BAME students are often required to work alongside studying to afford university expenses (Ahmed et al. 2015). Both female and BAME populations were reported the most likely to be employed during HE (Moreau and Leathwood 2006). Further evidence suggests BAME students are more likely to live at home with family while studying at university, a choice often influenced by cultural attitudes, caring responsibilities and finances, further reducing opportunities for social interaction and extra-curricular activities (Smith 2018).

The present research addresses the issue of the increase in BAME withdrawal from HE each year (ECU 2019) by exploring BAME student experiences. The research to date has focussed on quantitative methodology examining which factors, and to what extent, they contribute towards withdrawal. Despite the importance of the subject, there remains a paucity of qualitative research focusing on the meaning, experiences, interests and views of HE withdrawal individuals. The current study goes beyond the statistical data indicating the significance of BAME withdrawal, and attempts to explore the thoughts, feelings and emotions regarding the experience. The reoccurring areas concerned with BAME student

withdrawal consist of personal, academic and social challenges that led the present research in identifying focus areas (Quinn 2013; Spady 1970; Stevenson 2012; Tinto 1975).

## Methodology

### Participants

Participants included thirteen UK-domiciled, full-time undergraduate, first-degree entrants from a BAME background (see Table 1). Snowball sampling was used to recruit participants, involving existing participants, recruiting further participants through acquaintances, which continued until completion (Naderifar et al. 2017). All participants were aged above 18 and had withdrawn from post-1992 universities in the West Midlands within two years of the interview taking place.

### Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences of HE, allowing BAME withdrawn university students to openly explain their individual perspective for withdrawing from university. A semi-structured design was used due to the flexibility and open nature of the method which allowed for follow-up questions when needed, to explore participants' realities and experiences of certain topics in more detail, leading to a greater understanding of BAME university withdrawal (Turner III 2010). A semi-structured interview schedule was created which included three sections: before, during and after withdrawal to ensure a holistic experience of university withdrawal was captured. Academic, social and personal experiences were explored in line with previous literature suggesting these as key factors. The topics covered the exploration of personal student experiences of the journey into HE, expectations, transition, course content, finance, support, withdrawal and the future, all of which have been shown to be of concern in the available literature.

The interviews were conducted by two researchers and took place in a private room within a public library. The interviews lasted on average 20 min and were recorded using an audio-recording device. The right to refrain from answering questions, to withdraw and to remove personal data, was outlined both before and after the interview. All participation was voluntary and confidential where pseudonyms were used when transcribing and potentially identifying information was removed.

### Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained by the Ethics Committee in the HE institution located in the West Midlands.

**Table 1** Participant pseudonyms and demographic data

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Course	University	Year of withdrawal	Residency
Sarah	Pakistani and White	F	19	English Literature	Birmingham City University	First year	Family home
Hassan	Pakistani	M	22	Criminology	Birmingham City University	Second year	Family home
Amira	Bangladeshi	F	20	Psychology	Not disclosed	First year	Family home
Layla	Yemini and White	F	19	Fashion design	Coventry University	First year	Family home
Mona	Pakistani	F	20	English Literature	Birmingham City University	First year	Family home
Adam	Lebanese	M	21	English	Not disclosed	First year	Family home
Reece	Pakistani	M	21	Accounting and finance	Birmingham City University	First year	Family home
Aisha	Black African	F	20	Psychology	Coventry University	Second year	Living in student accommodation
Tristan	Pakistani	M	20	Sociology	Birmingham City University	First year	Family home
Kyle	Indian	M	21	Accounting and Finance	University of Wolverhampton	Second year	Family home
Haroon	Pakistani	M	20	Mathematics	Not disclosed	First year	Family home
Rebecca	Black African	F	22	Business and Marketing	Coventry University	First year	Family home
Salina	Pakistani	F	20	Sociology	Not disclosed	First year	Family home

## Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed by the two researchers and were conducted by hand. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data by reporting dominant themes and patterns which described the experience of BAME withdrawal using the six-step process (Braun and Clarke 2006). Initially, familiarisation with the data was achieved by reading over the transcript numerous times. Codes were then generated manually by the researchers, representing important aspects of the data, and were then clustered together to form themes which were reviewed, defined and named accordingly within Microsoft Word. Both researchers agreed upon the initial codes and the interpretation of the findings, ensuring validity through triangulation. The final stage consisted of the analysis write up of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

## Results

Thematic analysis identified five themes which were developed from the interview transcript datasets (see Table 2). The first theme ‘academic issues’ highlights the significance of a bad academic experience as a central aspect in the decision to leave university, with reference to TLA practices, course content, preparation and attendance. Theme two ‘does anybody even care?’ explores how a perceived lack of staff, academic and personal support can impact upon student’s overall experience of HE, leading to students often feeling ignored and overlooked. The third theme ‘balancing part-time employment alongside HE’ discusses participant’s experiences of how finance had impacted upon both academic and social experiences. Theme four ‘family perception and pressure’ reveals how students feel a pressure from families to stay in HE due to the perception families have of HE and of obtaining a degree. The final theme ‘the importance of social integration’ explores the social experience of making friends and the importance of having friends on the same course to provide peer support and aid the overall HE process.

### Academic issues

For several participants, a bad academic experience largely influenced students’ decisions to leave HE. When participants were asked about TLA practices, responses revealed how the course failed to satisfy students’ needs, often with reference to a lack of enthusiastic teaching and staff inability to create stimulating learning and teaching environments for students. Most students entered HE with high levels of enthusiasm for their chosen course, often due to having previously studied and enjoyed the course at further education (FE) institutions and in many cases, this was lost when they attended HE. A common belief that staff failed to provide high-quality teaching due to a lack of enthusiasm and engagement was highlighted:

**Table 2** Development from codes to themes

Academic issues	Does anybody even care?	Balancing part-time employment alongside HE	Family perception and pressure	The importance of social integration
TLA practices	Lack of academic support	Unsuitable work schedule	Family pressure to stay in HE	Social integration
Course content choices	Staff support	Difficulty balancing part-time employment and HE	Withholding information from family	Minimal friends on course
Misinformed about course content	Student needs are unnoticed	Work commitments as hindrance to social activities	Family financial situation	Peer support
Lack of attendance	Limited awareness of support services			

**Mona** *The people that were teaching English # didn't seem like they were doing it because they actually loved # the course they did it because it was their job...I'm easily like demotivated like that*

It was understood that participants found difficulty adjusting to the change of teaching style at HE which involved both lectures and online teaching methods. The challenge of engaging with the lectures and understanding the content being taught were attributed by some, to the large number of students present in the lecture halls which made it difficult for the participants to communicate and interact with lecturers. This form of teaching made participants feel like a number and spoken at rather than spoken with:

**Rebecca** *I didn't like the teaching style...there was quite a lot of us in the lecture room and the lecturer was right at the front and then I would be at the back and I just couldn't understand and then I didn't feel like listening at the end or going in like it was hard enough anyway because it was such a big change*

**Adam** *preferred the teaching at college because it was more classroom based*

Attendance upon course commencement was often described as high; however, over time this progressively decreased as most students admitted to having below average attendance which eventually led to withdrawal. Many students voluntarily chose not to attend classes due to lack of effort and for social reasons, as at the time, outside influences were perceived as more important. Although, for some, the choice was not so straightforward as low attendance derived from factors which were beyond the individual and institution's control. Such factors included health and family complications:

**Aisha** *My attendance was very low...I just couldn't be bothered cus after a night out it just was hard to get up...then you'd go out the next night as well so it was just like # oh I guess uni is just the...second thing*

**Layla** *Sometimes I had to leave early because of...family issues and stuff*

During the discussion of assessment methods, participants often felt more confident and identified a preference for either exams or written assignments which was commonly based on achieving higher grades in one. Interestingly, some participants reported feeling unable to successfully complete the course, regardless of the topic area or module content but purely based upon the method of assessment. When the course did not offer students preferred assessment method, feelings of dissatisfaction were experienced:

**Reece** *The coursework's I done # very well...in actually but just the exams I just # can't ## sit there for three hours and just sit there my mind goes blank when I go in exams*

The method in which assessments were graded had devastating effects on participants' self-efficacy and self-confidence. The grading system was discussed by some as unfair, especially when concerning group work. When participants felt that their desired grades were unachievable, they stopped pushing themselves to complete assessments and achieve better grades. The decision to withdraw from HE was confirmed for some students following an inability to cope which derived from a perceived lack of academic control:

**Salina** *they're not marking you they're marking you guys as a whole which isn't your capability which was annoying and really unfair...you couldn't show your true*

*understanding or knowledge like I just felt like I had no control when it came to my assessments*

Several participants believed they had been misinformed about the course content, often prior to commencing the course. Participants commonly referred to induction days and discussed discrepancies between what they were told prior to enrolment compared to the reality of HE. Participants suggested that had they known the facts beforehand, they would not have chosen to enrol onto the course:

**Layla** *It's just living up to that information...not lying about that information because they gave us information...then # it seemed like when I got there none of it was true*

One participant (Tristan) further discussed how open days were an ineffective measure for HE course preparation due to the time of year in which they were allocated. Tristan recommended a 'taster day' closer to enrolment would have been a more efficient method to allow for preparation and could possibly have even avoided HE withdrawal:

**Tristan** *If I knew that the course was gonna be like that I wouldn't've even gone...I feel like a taster day or some kind of class # like a prep class...or something like that before you lock in your selection # that would probably have been a lot more help to me...the open days like # they're way too early...but with a taster day like a week or two before you start...it just kinda gets your mind going*

The above data tell a clear story of how a negative HE academic experience can influence a student's decision to leave HE, drawing upon many interrelating factors which include disengaging TLA practices, reduced attendance and prior misinformation. Students' academic experience was further affected by support, finance, family and social factors which will be discussed in the following themes.

### **Does anybody even care?**

When asked whether participants felt supported during HE, responses generally indicated a lack of staff support regarding academia and personal concerns. Students gave examples and explained experiences which, although differed in nature, generally related to students having felt overlooked by staff. Many participants spoke about how although academic guidance was sought, staff were reluctant to help:

**Layla** *Whenever I ask for help at university # or from my tutors they don't seem that interested in helping me*

**Reece** *When I'm confused I like to ask questions # loads of questions and some teachers they actually get annoyed but I actually wanna know # what's going on with the work # so if that teacher says look you need to find out yourself you're not in college...or school anymore that's # I don't find that fair*

Not only did a lack of academic support raise concern but issues related to a lack of timely responses from staff were also evident. Several students discussed the importance and need for faster staff responses when seeking course-related help which in some cases eventually led students to refrain from seeking help:

**Hassan** *Every time I did ask for help from the tutors either they would # kinda delay in their emails or...wouldn't really # get back to me so I kinda just left it*

One participant (Sarah) also discussed how university reach out measures were too late to recognise student problems:

**Sarah** *By the time they realised that something was wrong it was too late*

Many students mentioned feeling unnoticed by staff at some point, particularly during classes and at the time of withdrawal. Students discussed how they believed that staff knew about their personal challenges but chose willingly to ignore the reality of the situation and not to support the individual through this period:

**Hassan** *Knowing that I was struggling knowing that I wasn't er being able to kind of # focus or take part in lessons # er they didn't really help much they didn't really take notice*

**Layla** *The fact that she didn't persuade me or wasn't interested as as to why I wanted to leave...made me just think you know what just leave that is it...if she said you know what I can support you and stuff like that then that would have been ok # but she didn't wanna support me and that just gave me my answer as well sort of pushed me on to just # leave*

As can be seen in the above extract, Layla felt very strongly about the lack of support received during withdrawal which she described as influencing her decision to leave HE, demonstrating the significance of staff support. A few participants further spoke about how they simply just wanted reassurance and someone to speak to during times of difficulty:

**Tristan** *If there was someone there that could've said to me...it's fine everyone goes through this stage where they feel like university is not for them I would've been a lot more # reassured*

A lack of awareness of university support services resulted in numerous students feeling confused and therefore unsupported. Although some students acknowledged the institution's support services, due to a limited knowledge on where and how such services can be found and used, students were unable to seek support:

**Kyle** *If they do already provide scholarships make it more known to students because not many students # may be aware of it because I certainly wasn't # and I certainly still aint*

When asked about what improvements could be made to HE, many students suggested they would like to see more support services to aid individuals academic and personal needs. Responses related to academic support from staff in the form of extra seminar classes, drop-in sessions, more class activities and mentoring. Counselling services were also suggested by one participant which covered more of a personal support approach:

**Sarah** *They could have like...a counsellor if anyone's got any issues*

In general, participants often described a rather negative experience of the academic and personal support received within university. The next theme considered how external sources (finance) can further impact upon students HE experiences.

## Balancing part-time employment alongside HE

Many participants described going through a difficult financial experience during HE due to inadequate financial funding which often led to students seeking

part-time employment. Several participants had at some point during HE worked part-time alongside studying, the majority of whom lived with family, although both participants living with family and living in student accommodation faced financial difficulties. Participants discussed how they felt unable to cope with the pressure of working while attending university, many of whom were male. For some, the hours spent working, often shifts during the evenings and nights, was described as too much alongside the requirements of an undergraduate degree:

**Reece** *I was thinking exam revision at the same time I was thinking er # like I gotta go work in the evening it was just...stressing me both out*

The inability to allocate time towards both revision and work corresponded with one of Reece's decisions to leave university as he mentioned he would 'rather do one thing work or uni', so in the end withdrew from HE with the intention to work full-time. Balancing part-time employment alongside university also proved difficult for several other participants. The problems discussed ranged from coping with the academic workload to an inability to find time to revise for course assessments because of having to attend work:

**Kyle** *It would be sometimes be hard to manage my workload because # I couldn't do my work on the weekends because when I come back from work I'd be tired*

Part-time employment restricted students from participating in extra-curricular activities such as university societies. Participants generally perceived working part-time as more necessary than pursuing social activities. Although students showed interest in societies, due to a lack of available time outside of university hours (largely because of work commitments), students felt unable to participate. Despite this, a minority of individuals managed to sign up to a society during their time at HE, however, often only took part in a few sessions and eventually ended up not attending:

**Amira** *I did go to the climbing society but it wasn't quite as well organised, people would more go at weekends so I couldn't do that because of work*

Interestingly, non-engagement in extra-curricular activities is not necessarily due to lack of interest or motivation but partly due to a lack of available time. For many students, the importance associated with part-time employment alongside university may not have been a direct factor influencing the decision to withdraw. However, when correlated with additional factors such as social and family experiences which will be discussed in the following themes, part-time employment did contribute to the overall (often negative) experience of HE.

## Family perception and pressure

Family pressure to obtain a degree was evident across many participants. The importance and value associated with having a degree from the family's perspective were often mentioned and on occasion students related this importance back to their ethnic background:

**Sarah** *My family did pressurise me like my grandparents especially # they would say to me like you # can't stand up on your own two feet unless you have a degree... you had to go like everyone else goes in my family*

Some participants, particularly Sarah and Hassan, further discussed how university was common within the family, setting a standard for the participant which they believed was essential to follow:

**Hassan** *Coming from an Asian background erm it was kinda known my since a young age that I'd have to go to university have to get a degree*

Despite several students having recognised a dislike towards the course and having admitted to wanting to withdraw from the degree at a much earlier stage, due to family pressure the participants ended up remaining on the course longer than desired, regardless of personal views:

**Hassan** *Your parents tryna say to you no stay at uni but you know uni wasn't for you...I kinda knew I wanted to leave ages ago but my parents kinda made me # because of my parents I just stuck at it*

Obtaining a degree was often associated with good future prospects, including a good career and money which resulted in students feeling internally pressurised to complete HE:

**Kyle** *I felt there was a big pressure on to deliver and be able to take get a degree so I can provide for them in the future*

Often the students who described feeling a pressure to continue in HE due to future family prospects also discussed family-related financial difficulties. Participants described feeling pressured to support financial needs through part-time employment and government funding, which was commonly used to contribute towards household bills and further necessities. One participant (Hassan) disclosed how he came from a 'poor household' indicating the pressures faced by BAME students who enter HE from low socioeconomic backgrounds:

**Hassan** *Coming from like a poor household and my dad wasn't earning much # like finance was a really big issue and that was another stress on my head...my grant # cus it went straight to helping pay off like my dad's debts # er other bills around the house*

Due to the high expectations families had about completion of a university degree, some participants felt pressured to lie and withhold information from their families regarding their withdrawal. The family reaction to withdrawal was generally described as a negative experience where feelings of anger and disappointment were displayed. Participants identified how family perceptions were considered important during the withdrawal process:

**Sarah** *I sort of lied to them...I told them oh I failed cus if I told them I wanted to drop out...I'd get it in LOTS of trouble*

Despite Sarah's challenging experience with her family during the withdrawal period, Sarah considered her experience as a great learning curve and although her family thought she wasted a year of her life, Sarah believed she made the right choice. On the other hand, some participants were supported by their families in their decision, and they described that the families decided to accept and support their decision to withdraw especially, if the participants felt 'their heart wasn't in it'. Participants reported receiving general advice from their families such as, 'keep going to the lectures' and to just 'try'. However, given that all the participants opted to withdraw from university, it is reasonable to suggest that this perspective was not helpful:

**Rebecca** *Yeah of course I had to talk to my mom about it and erm she said to just try and keep going to the lectures to get used to it*

Family pressure was identified strongly as a factor in the withdrawal process as was the social experience which is further explored next.

## The importance of social integration

Social integration was a significant factor that occurred repeatedly across all interviews. A common expectation shared by participants was that ‘social integration would be easy at university’ which failed to align with the realities of HE. This was well documented by Haroon, describing an initially enthusiastic view that university is an enjoyable social experience although in reality, Haroon had not made any good friendships but instead experienced loneliness:

**Haroon** *I was looking forward to the social side because everyone makes out that students have the best social life...but it wasn't like it was really hard to make friends which was horrible because I'd be alone and no one to really talk to*

Making friends at university was an important concept as every participant spoke about the experience of forming friendships. For several participants making friends was a challenge, especially during the early stages of HE:

**Mona** *On my first day when I had to go sit with people and try and make friends # it was really awkward*

However, this was not the case for all individuals as some participants described a positive experience of making friends through socialising. For these students, making friends had improved the overall HE experience:

**Sarah** *Once I made friends and realised like everyone is going through the same experience it sort of became # it was normal to me*

Sometimes, participants reported having focused too much attention on socialising, demonstrating an inability to balance both the student social lifestyle alongside the academic requirements of HE. Students mentioned how spending a large amount of time socialising had impacted upon their academic experience, as students reported missing lessons and favoured going out with friends rather than studying:

**Aisha** *I was too focused on kinda just # going out and having fun rather than... actually doing uni work*

**Reece** *I was just too much in the social side like I just # hanging around with my mates going out to eat...too like busy chilling around rather than doing my work*

Culture was described by several students as a hindrance to social integration. Participants reported how being part of a minority ethnic group led to feeling different compared to the majority population. Variation between minority and majority ethnic groups was further highlighted as students reported differences regarding student treatment and the ability to voice opinions:

**Layla** *I just think cus of my culture and my religion that made me feel different # and I thought that I got # treated differently*

**Mona** *They could be outspoken more whereas we had to like # stay a bit quiet... in case we felt a bit out of place if we said anything wrong...or just finding friends*

*and being comfortable was a bit # hard...they were predominantly white they had very # narrowminded perspective*

Several students recognised their minority ethnic background within the course studied and indicated that the lack of social integration and friendships formed, resulted from differences in cultural background. Other ethnic students were perceived as ‘reserved’ and unwilling to socialise with the participants:

**Sarah** *The majority of my students on my course were white...English students so they # I felt # wasn't not exactly racism but I felt like they didn't wanna converse with us*

The majority of participants mentioned how they believed peer support and academia were related. Some students discussed how they felt socially supported due to having friends who studied the same course which enabled individuals to seek academic support from peers when needed. These students also generally reported having a good social experience during HE:

**Kyle** *It was easy to make friends in the course and I got along # with most of the class...every time I was # stuck they would tend to help...we would get on very well*

Even for those students who had no friends on the same course, peer support was suggested to be a big part in aiding the academic experience. The conflict between a lack of peer support and a lack of friends studying the same course resulted in participants describing a difficult academic journey:

**Mona** *I didn't have that many friends it made # like my like work life a lot harder cus I find it harder to ask for help*

Further, the participants who reported having minimal course-related friends discussed how having more friends on the same course would have improved their overall academic experience:

**Aisha** *It woulda been better if I made friends on my course...I would've # like even felt more comfortable going to lectures*

Students highlighted the importance of social integration and peer support during HE regarding feeling confident enough to attend lectures and seek support when needed. Overall, findings demonstrate a lack of a sense of belonging and cohesion, which manifested in a reluctance and hesitation in verbalising needs and dissonances within the student experience.

## Discussion

The five themes offer some support to the understanding that BAME withdrawal is a process involving several interrelated HE factors including academia, finance, support, integration and family. Participants often discussed withdrawal as a holistic experience whereby although certain aspects were more prominently spoken about, generally withdrawal was a materialisation of more than one problematic area.

For the first theme ‘academic issues’, many participants described how teachers failed to engage students in lessons, resulting in a dissatisfied learning experience which demonstrates the importance of high-quality TLA practices and a need for stimulating teaching (Thomas 2012). Despite recommendations regarding the promotion of realistic course requirements to prospective students

(Hamshire et al. 2013), many participants described feeling unhappy with the way in which the course was presented to them prior to commencement. Overall, this supports previous literature suggesting how a lack of clear expectation and course information influences withdrawal (Hovdhaugen et al. 2015).

Even with additional university support initiatives (personal tutors and mentors) designed to address both academic and pastoral areas (Vossensteyn et al. 2015), many students discussed how the available support measures were inadequate. Students often described feeling unnoticed due to the perception that their needs were being overlooked or missed by staff. Even when participants actively sought help from staff, they were unhappy with the responses received, particularly those who had been directly told that they needed to behave more like university students. In line with the literature (Stevenson 2012), participants desired additional support services during HE, without feeling targeted. Additional support services discussed within the current findings included extra seminar classes, additional drop-in sessions, mentoring, more class activities which allow students to work on tasks together and counselling services.

There was often a parallel between the importance associated with HE and employment which students found difficult to cope with at the same time, supporting Ahmed et al. (2015). For some, the pressure influenced HE withdrawal as participants left full-time education to move into full-time employment demonstrating the inability to cope with the requirements of HE alongside work commitments. The present research indicated that both, participants whom lived at home with family or in student accommodation, faced financial difficulty to fund the student lifestyle, with regards to personal, social and familial financial responsibilities. Only one participant was supported through parental financial means which is similar to previous findings, as Bradley (2017) reports students from disadvantaged BAME groups feel stressed in comparison to their majority White middle-classed peers who are often able to seek financial support from parents while BAME students are often required to work in order to earn money. Therefore, the current findings also highlight the effect of class, as BAME students who enter HE from more middle- or higher-class backgrounds may not suffer from the same financial challenges and pressures as BAME students entering HE from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The familial pressures discussed by participants involving the fulfilment of parental desires, reinforced a problematic area of family over involvement which was also highlighted by Stelnicki et al. (2015). Participants expressed how family members often encouraged students to remain in HE, despite wanting to withdraw, putting participants in a difficult situation which demonstrates the importance of a healthy level of family support (Stelnicki et al. 2015). Contrary to the literature (Moreau and Leathwood 2006), more males compared to females reported working during term-time and further described feeling pressurised to support families financially while studying, suggesting gender roles played a part in BAME students HE experience. Male participants discussed how they felt responsible for being able to provide for their families, often involving financial contribution towards household bills and groceries. Essentially, taking on the role of the breadwinner while studying in full-time education contributed to feelings of stress and pressure.

In the final theme ‘the importance of social integration’, participants identified how having a lack of friends on the same course resulted in a difficult academic journey due to an inability to seek academic guidance from peers (lack of peer support), a primary example of Tinto’s interactionist theory (1975). For some, the difficulty in relating to other people on the course affected students’ confidence regarding class participation, seeking help and even attending lectures which demonstrates the importance of encouraging social relationships with peers (Vossensteyn et al. 2015). Additionally, some participants described how they felt when experiencing the effects of ethnic disparities within the classroom, between minority and majority ethnic groups. For example, Mona described feeling that as a student of colour it was imperative for her to remain reserved in class, where herself and other BAME students would allow the majority ‘white’ population to be outspoken and have their voices heard. Overall, this supports the ethos of CRT where the status quo is persevered through allowing the majority ‘white’ population to maintain its influence, in this case within HE, and more specifically within the classroom (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). The current research supports previous literature which indicated BAME students’ reduced ability to socially integrate into HE (Nairz-Wirth and Feldmann 2015) and further supports Tinto (1975) who suggested students who do not socially and academically integrate well into the institution were more likely to withdraw.

The current research highlights some gender differences, roles and expectations between students’ experiences of university withdrawal. Future research may seek to explore the effects of certain aspects of part-time employment upon HE experiences as males often mentioned working unsociable hours and generally described an inability to cope with the pressure of balancing part-time employment alongside university. It may be useful to consider that the present sample only accounts for the experiences of thirteen individuals whom consist mainly of British Asian students. Therefore, the current findings are largely specific to the British Asian population and additional research is needed to explore this phenomenon in a greater detail. Further, all participants had withdrawn from post-1992 universities with high BAME intake and withdrawal rates. Future research could attempt to recruit individuals within specific universities and cultures, including pre-1992 universities. This would allow for the exploration of trends within and between certain ethnic groups and/or universities, enabling universities to create more localised interventions and prioritise financial distribution towards the groups of students most in need.

The evidence presented in this research has practical applications for HE. It is important for universities to identify individuals, and in particularly BAME students, who are facing academic, social, financial or personal challenges throughout their time at university. The current research indicated that students felt unnoticed and overlooked by staff. Therefore, focussing upon taking steps to retain these BAME students who ‘stick it out and struggle’ by improving communication and relationships between students and staff through enhanced personal tuition and increased collaborative talks may partly resolve this issue in facilitating the identification of individuals who require extra support (Egan et al. 2020). A focus upon increasing support service awareness to students through several platforms such as emails, posters and presentations, outlining where, when and how such facilities can be

used, would be a supplementary operative to enhance student knowledge about HE support services. Additionally, with a large focus on HE institutions financially supporting students living in accommodation, providing financial support for students living with family should be increased equally, as the present research identifies how both groups face similar personal, social and financial requirements. Together, HE is in need of identification of students in need, awareness of services and ongoing care that is tailored to the population, rather than assumptions of generalisability of findings across nations and universities. In the UK, participants withdrawn from universities with a high BAME intake (post-1992 institutions) appears to be a population that is separate from students in universities with a lower BAME intake (pre-1992 institutions), indicative of other factors that are relevant to progression and retention, and of high significance in determining institutional policies.

Despite efforts made by HE institutions to increase BAME diversity, it is clear that HE institutions are still finding it challenging to manage this level of diversity which inevitably impacts upon the HE experiences of BAME students. Although race may not directly be the only influential factor which leads to BAME withdrawal, CRT helps us to recognise race is fundamental to the understanding of BAME educational inequality and therefore, also BAME withdrawal from HE. CRT recognises that racism is embedded into the structure of society, where racial inequalities often get misconstrued as an ordinary process, as opposed to a consequence of racial domination (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). This may make pinpointing racial inequality within HE even more difficult and therefore, more could be done within universities to educate staff regarding the ethos of CRT to ensure that HE institutions better facilitate complications that race and racism may present. As discussed by Hiraldo (2010), prioritising institutional changes alongside efforts to increase diversity, is important in achieving success across HE institutions, following the tenets of CRT. For example, increased use of the counter-storytelling CRT framework can enable universities to better understand the experiences of BAME students, providing more opportunities to create localised systems to support these students through HE, with the overall aim of improving inclusivity and not just diversity. Similar to the idea of a 'post-racial' future, proposed by Singh (2018), this paper works towards achieving the possibility of a brighter future with regard to race and racism within education. Increased efforts made by HE institutions to implement the notions of CRT may help universities reduce the deep-rooted societal inequities which support a system of injustice and privilege.

The current analysis usefully contributes to the educational research which focuses on BAME student withdrawal. Prominent areas of concern highlighted by this research indicate that BAME students who withdrew from university experienced challenges regarding several interrelated HE aspects including academia, support, finance, family and social integration. Participants felt that they were under-prepared for the transition from FE into HE and that universities were unable to adequately support them either academically or emotionally following the changes and increased demand of university life. With a national focus upon encouraging widening participation across HE, institutions must begin to further understand the challenges faced by BAME students in order to provide more localised support and intervention to improve BAME retention, success and experiences within HE.

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**Data availability** The data and material of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

**Code availability** Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

#### Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest or competing interests.

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