

CULTURAL SERVICES TOOLKIT

A guide to supporting acclimatisation and belonging



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Foreword

Culture is an intangible term to pin down and define, and often works as an umbrella to bring together perceptions around social behaviour, norms, and institutions. However, it has a very real and immediate bearing on the experience of students when they leave their familiar surroundings and venture out into the big bad world. The food that we eat, the languages that we speak, the patois that we are familiar with, all become even more meaningful and relevant when we are not around them anymore.

We know that Higher Education and associated services remain the key settings for students' social and human interactions; therefore, the inclusivity of such environments, or the lack thereof, can have major implications for their physical, mental, and social wellbeing. For those students who are from minoritised groups, these factors become even more relevant in creating a sense of belonging. In this context, the provision of culturally relevant information for such student groups can be a powerful tool for inclusion. The importance of this toolkit should not therefore be underestimated – it creates the sense of a 'home away from home', bringing those intangible elements of culture together to give a sense of familiarity and comfort in new and strange surroundings.

It is important to acknowledge that the activity surrounding this toolkit is firmly rooted in an evidence-based approach. A key piece of research commissioned by Unite Students focussed on the experience of Black students accessing University (Living Black at University), capturing their differential experience when compared to majority White groups, and focussing on systemic elements that contributed to this. However, the focus on the lived experience of these students also brings into sharp focus the significant influence of non-academic factors on academic achievement and future outcomes.

Unite Students has been working very closely with Newcastle University on a joint project which links the findings of this research to the race equity work at the university, aligned to activity geared towards a Race Equality Charter (REC) award from Advance HE. The need for bespoke and culturally sensitive interventions for students with a specific focus on race has also been recognised in current research and activity across the University and the sector.

We hope that this toolkit is used and disseminated as widely as possible, and that all participants engage with it to keep on augmenting its relevance. We would also like it to be a template for creating other culturally relevant toolkits for other student groups, which speaks to the heart of providing an inclusive and meaningful student experience at Newcastle and beyond.

Malasree Home

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(on secondment from substantive role as Race Equality and Accreditation Advisor)

INTRODUCTION

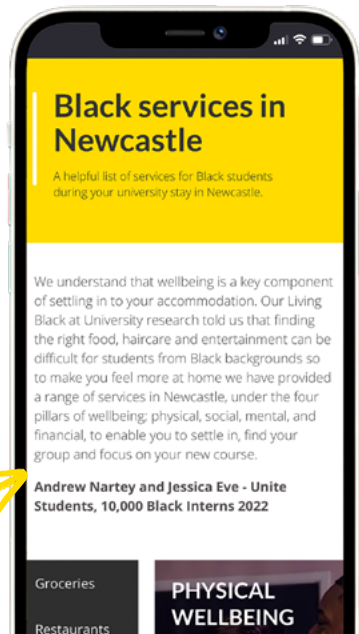
To respond to the recommendations made by the Living Black at University report, published February 2022, Unite Students and Newcastle University began to collaborate on how to implement the recommendations along the university's Race Equality Charter submission.

In the research Black students reported a lower sense of belonging than their White counterparts with a range of reasons stated including poor mental health due to experiences of racism, difficulty acclimatising, and isolation. One of the objectives of our collaboration was to understand how we might better help students to acclimatise and find their tribe by improving communications and developing a list of services that would support them with finding what they need in a new city more easily.

Designed by students for students.

Unite Students' commitment to supporting the student lifecycle doesn't end post-graduation – it extends right through to early careers, a key component of diversifying our talent pipeline and this summer we hosted nine interns from the 10,000 Black Interns programme. Two of those interns, Jessica Eve and Andrew Nartey, took the lead on this project to ensure that Black student voices remained front and centre of the finished resource.

unitestudents.com/newcastle/black-services



THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING FOR BLACK STUDENTS

The Living Black at University report opened a new front on which to fight a grave inequality: the Black awarding gap. There is currently an almost 20 percentage point gap between the proportion of Black students and White students who are awarded a first-class degree. According to figures from the Office for Students, this gap is at an all-time high and has widened over recent years, despite efforts to reduce it.

In the recent follow up to their Closing the Gap report, Universities UK called for more work to be done on creating racially diverse and inclusive campuses, saying:

If students don't feel a sense of belonging at their universities, their experiences at university and the grades they're awarded for their degrees can suffer.

Taking steps to create a sense of belonging in accommodation for Black students is not just a nice-to-have; it is an essential step towards addressing the life-changing inequality represented by the Black awarding gap.





SCOPE

The scope of the original project was to provide information and guidance on culturally relevant services for Black students in Newcastle. The purpose of this was to respond to Recommendation 2 of the Living Black at University report, to improve integration and acclimatisation activities. By creating these resources, we wanted to offer an improved welcome experience for Black students, supporting them to acclimatise to life at university, helping them to develop a sense of belonging in their accommodation, and to demonstrate clearly that they are welcome and that their needs have been considered.

The steps that were taken in order to create these resources are set out below and can be followed by any institution or accommodation provider wishing to offer similar information for their Black students – or indeed students from any minority/minoritised group.

Objectives

- ✘ To reduce the lack of culturally relevant information available which is a key issue for Black students moving in and hinders acclimatisation.
- ✘ To improve the overall experience of Black students in their student accommodation.
- ✘ To ensure intentionally diverse accommodation that is a safe place for Black students.
- ✘ To help reduce prejudice against Black students so that they can live in harmony with other students.
- ✘ To provide better comfort, safety, and security for Black students in accommodation.
- ✘ To create an environment or system that leads Black students to come forward for help or support.
- ✘ To regain the trust of Black students by making sure culturally relevant support is available within mainstream services.





Deliverables

The deliverables should fit comfortably into existing welcome and acclimatisation communications, and may include:

- ✓ Flyers and leaflets in the accommodation
- ✓ Pre-arrival emails
- ✓ Social media content
- ✓ Online directory
- ✓ Inclusion in welcome packs
- ✓ Inclusion in general welcome and orientation events, and/or specific events for Black students

Making these materials visible to all students signals that the accommodation is intended to be an inclusive and welcoming space.



ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

- ✓ Improved acclimatisation, sense of belonging, mental health, and wellbeing among Black students.
- ✓ Greater attractiveness of the accommodation and the university to Black students – Black students feel that they have more options available to them.
- ✓ Improved attainment and progression among Black students due to higher sense of belonging and wellbeing.

QUESTION LIST

The following list of questions were developed by the student researchers in preparation for creating the resource.

Physical wellbeing

- Where can you find Black barbers?
- Where can you find Afro-Caribbean hair salons?
- Where can you find Afro-Caribbean grocery shops?
- Where can you find Afro-Caribbean restaurants?
- Where can you find Afro-Caribbean takeaway/food delivery?
- Where can you find Afro-Caribbean meal prep/grocery delivery options?
- Where can you find diverse fitness classes or online fitness classes run by Black people?

Social wellbeing

- Where can you find diverse/Black centred places of worship?
- Where can you find afro festivals or carnivals?
- Where can you find diverse entertainment venues like bars and clubs that play diverse music such as Afrobeats, dancehall, RnB, hip hop, and centre Black and Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC)?
- Where can you find societies like ACS or country-specific societies and sports groups?

Financial wellbeing

- Where can you access financial advice or financial advisors?
- Where can you find help for visas and immigration especially for international students?
- Where can you find help for setting up bank accounts as a new arrival to the UK?
- Where can you access scholarships and bursaries for Black students at this university?

Potential sources of information

- Existing Black students at the university or accommodation, including postgraduates
- Black staff at the university or accommodation provider
- Afro-Caribbean Society at the university
- Relevant community organisations
- Internet search
- Local directories

Verification

We recommend carrying out some basic due diligence on any organisations featured in the guide and asking students for any feedback throughout the year.

For further information please contact:

LBUresearch@unitestudents.com

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