LIVING BLACK AT UNIVERSITY

## COMMISSION REPORT 2022/23

Creating meaningful change through collaboration

LIVING BLACK
AT UNIVERSITY

ABOUT THE UNITE STUDENTS COMMISSION ON LIVING BLACK AT UNIVERSITY

In February 2022, Unite Students published Living Black at University, the first research report into Black students' experience in UK purpose-built student accommodation.

Finding evidence of racism, cultural insensitivity and exclusion – all of which had a significant impact on Black students' mental health – the report included 10 recommendations to be implemented by universities, sector bodies and accommodation providers. These spanned areas such as mental health, complaints processes, staff race training and data.
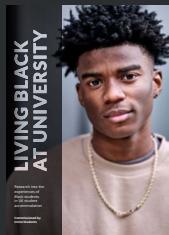
To ensure the 10 recommendations were taken forward and embedded nationally, Unite Students convened a Commission whose members represented national organisations, professional sector bodies and universities working on relevant projects. Chaired by Professor Iyiola Solanke, Jacques Delors Professor of Law at the University of Oxford and founder of the Black Female Professors Forum, the Commission launched in April 2022.

The Commission has met regularly since, with members discussing the recommendations in detail and collectively agreeing actions to take forward. A comprehensive list of Commission actions taken or in progress so far is available within this report.

In its next phase, the College of University Business Officers (CUBO) and Unite Students will oversee the Commission.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to **everyone who contributed to this report** and everyone on the **Unite Students Commission on Living Black at University** – a full list of Commissioners, correct as of September 2023, is available at the end of the report.

We would particularly like to thank **Professor Iyiola Solanke** for her capable chairing of the Commission from 2022-23, **Sam Kingsley** for developing and leading on the implementation of the recommendations, and **Jen Steadman** for her role as Commissioning Editor on this report. We would also like to thank **CUBO** for agreeing to support with leading the Commission in its next phase.

Thanks additionally go to **Dr Nick Cartwright** for creating the EDI Data Maturity Framework, **Newcastle University** for supporting the pilot phase of creating a Black services directory, and Unite Students' **10,000 Black Interns** in 2022 and 2023 for their sterling work on pulling together a Black services directory covering 23 university towns and cities.

We are indebted to the original research undertaken by **'Teleola Cartwright**, **Osaro Otobo** and **Lenny Emanuel** – the Black-led research team at **Halpin Partnership** – for the original Living Black at University report, and the **Black students** who took part in the research, whose courage in sharing their experiences has been invaluable for supporting the sector to address race inequality in UK student accommodation.

Finally, we would like to thank everyone who has downloaded this report with the intention to improve Black students' accommodation experience, whether by taking action in their own institution or sharing with others in the sector who have the power to take these decisions.

Richard Smith
Chief Executive at Unite Students

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Professor Iyiola Solanke
*Jacques Delors Professor of EU Law
at University of Oxford*

When Unite Students approached me last year with an invitation to chair the Unite Students Commission on Living Black at University (LBU), it took me back a few decades, to the time when I was considering where to go for university.

Whilst I chose to stay in London, the city of my birth, I did move away from home. Yet my own experience in student halls was so alienating that I considered dropping out of university in the first term. Thankfully I didn't; had I done so, I would not now be a Professor of Law at the University of Oxford.

When I read the results of the Living Black at University research, I was sad – how could it be that the current generation of Black students living in university accommodation are still experiencing the same issues faced by Black students in the past?

The Commission was committed to ensuring this would not be the case for students in the future.

Student accommodation is a very important part of going to university. For the majority of students, it is the first time they've lived away from the people, places and things that they grew up with. What happens in student accommodation can make or break the whole university experience – it makes a difference to that sense of belonging that we hear so much about in higher education today, that is widely recognised as the foundation of a good experience and has been linked to retention, success and wellbeing.

Feeling like you belong at university, that you're meant to be there – this is something that every student should be able to take for granted. But sadly, many Black students still do not feel this way: the Living Black at University research showed a belonging gap of 18 percentage points between Black and White students.

While developing a sense of belonging is not a straightforward thing, this finding must be taken seriously. What is behind this belonging gap? Which experiences – big and small – contribute to it? What are its implications?

Things that may drive it include: racial homogeneity amongst staff across campus and housing; a lack of clear processes to deal with racist incidents; perhaps even something as simple as not knowing where to get your hair done.

And when it comes to the consequences, we can point to mental health impacts, a lower sense of safety and even the Black awarding gap. We know that providing a supportive living environment for children positively impacts their development, so why don't we consider that a student's living environment can impact their success in tertiary education?

As a sector we must make progress on this issue, and student accommodation has an important role to play. So, what do we do?

Over the last year it has been a privilege to chair the Unite Students Commission on Living Black at University. The Commission was born of a sense of determination to lay the foundations for change. We wanted to do this collaboratively, drawing on existing research, expertise and networks so that this change had many owners.

Over the last year, the members of the Commission have worked through 8 of the 10 recommendations made in the report, looking for ways in which we can help you take action.

We drew on other research and direct evidence to drill down into the issues, and discussed what to do about them. We've broken down some of the recommendations into smaller and more manageable pieces through our sector notes. We've run workshops at conferences. We've produced toolkits. We've written to Professor Edward Peck, the Government's Student Support Champion. And we have started the process of changing the national codes for student accommodation.

In this report you will have an opportunity to hear from the Commissioners themselves, sharing their learnings and guidance on how to embed the recommendations, as well as case studies from those organisations and Higher Education institutions (HEIs) that have already begun to take action inspired by the original research.

Recommendation 1 states:
"Universities and accommodation providers should collaborate to eliminate racism from all areas of the student experience, including student accommodation."

That is why we ran the Living Black at University Conference in March 2023, and why I am delighted that the Commission is being taken forward by the wider sector through Unite Students' collaboration with CUBO.

It's so important that we collaborate if we're to create lasting change. We must ensure that our work in student accommodation contributes to wider diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work by individual institutions and the whole sector.

And what about the final recommendation? This states:

"Accommodation providers [both university accommodation teams and private providers] should work to build a relationship of trust with Black students."

Trust is perhaps difficult to define – but you know if it's not there. It is both valuable and vulnerable; built slowly over time, it can be broken in an instant.

According to the research team from Halpin, trust also: *"...involves demonstrating that we trust Black students by listening to them, believing them and taking their concerns seriously through meaningful and sustainable action."*

We as a Commission are thankful to all the students who took part in the research and who shared their experiences at the conference. We have listened to you, we believe you and we take you seriously. Through the work of the Commission to date, and through the incredible work of the pioneering universities published in this report, we have taken action.

Ultimately, we must make student accommodation a safe and comfortable place for all Black students – so that at university they have a home where they can feel they belong, that can serve as a foundation for their long-term academic success. This is my vision for the future, and one I know is shared by the rest of the Commission, who will continue to take action and honour the difficult truth that they have shared with us.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Jen Steadman
Commissioning Editor, Unite Students

Buoyed by efforts to both widen participation domestically and recruit students from all across the world, the UK's student population has never been more diverse.

With the impact of the student accommodation experience on satisfaction already well-documented, universities are keenly aware of how powerful a tool both their own accommodation supply and that of private accommodation providers can be for enhancing their students' university experience. However, the original Living Black at University research report highlighted some of the ways in which one rapidly growing demographic group of students was being failed in their accommodation experience.

Everyone in the Higher Education sector is on a journey with inclusion. No one has all the answers. There is much to be done, whether at individual, organisational or national level, and in order to move forward we must work together. The response to Living Black at University has shown the sector's desire to learn, to do, and to do more, and these are the reasons why Unite Students – as part of our own journey – convened the Commission on Living Black at University.

This report shares the insights we have learned and the actions we have taken over 18 months in the Commission's first phase, with the intention of supporting you to turn the report's 10 recommendations into action. In the pages to come, you will find sector notes – which break down recommendations 2-9 into bite-sized chunks, covering key issues, best practice tips, self-assessment questions and Commission actions – alongside expert commentary, case studies and guidance on taking action at your own institution or organisation.

We hope that this report supports you to implement the recommendations and move closer to race equity within your organisation. However, this is not an exhaustive report; there is much more to be explored within the scope of the recommendations, and more can, and will be, done in future. Every organisation and institution represented on the Commission remains on that journey.

You may notice that there are only eight sector notes, when there are 10 recommendations. By engaging with the work of the Commission, you are already fulfilling Recommendation 1; by doing the work to improve Black students' university experience, you will eventually achieve Recommendation 10.

So, we invite you to join us on this journey. It won't be easy – it will take time and work, persistence and resolve, honesty and accountability. But through collaboration and courage, we can make UK purpose-built student accommodation a safer and more equitable environment for Black students – creating a home in which they can thrive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Universities and accommodation providers should collaborate to eliminate racism from all areas of the student experience, including student accommodation.

2 Improve acclimatisation and integration activities for all new students and extend the period over which these activities take place.

3 Introduce meaningful race training for peers and staff.

4 Accommodation providers should confirm a commitment to tackling racism, both in their internal policies and in their student behavioural agreement or charter.

5 Improve the representation of Black people as employees to reflect the diversity of students.

6 Universities and accommodation providers should work together to create intentionally diverse and inclusive student accommodation.

7 Universities and accommodation providers should collaborate to ensure mental health and wellbeing support is available, accessible and appropriate for Black students.

8 Ensure there are clear and accessible policies and procedures (including anonymous reporting) that deal explicitly with racism in accommodation.

9 Accommodation providers should routinely collect, analyse and publish relevant data on the racial diversity of their residents and employees, as well as outcomes of reporting and investigation of complaints.

10 Accommodation providers should work to build a relationship of trust with Black students.

SUMMARY OF ACTIONS
COMPLETED

Run a 1-day conference to bring together DEI leads and accommodation leaders, to showcase actions and to deliver training.
(*Recommendation 1*)

More than 100 delegates attended the first Living Black at University Conference, held in Newcastle in March 2023 and featuring presentations, DEI training and a Q&A session with a student panel. Following the success of the first conference, a second conference will take place in 2024.

Pilot a Black services guide resource for incoming Black students, and share the template with the sector as part of a toolkit.
(*Recommendation 2*)

To address the much-discussed finding that a lack of culturally relevant services contributed to Black students' sense of isolation, the Commission committed to piloting a Black services guide so that accommodation teams could easily signpost to services like international supermarkets and Black haircare.

Unite Students and Newcastle University ran the pilot in Newcastle during the 2022/23 academic year. The Newcastle guide was compiled by Jessica Eve and Andrew Nartey, who interned with Unite Students through the 10,000 Black Interns programme. Student feedback was resoundingly positive when the guide was launched in October 2022.

For the 2023/24 academic year, Unite Students has rolled out a full Black services directory to cover all 23 of their cities, with the information being compiled by the 2023 intern cohort.

A toolkit to support the wider sector in creating these guides was launched at the Living Black at University Conference, and has already been used by the University of Kent and the University of Leeds to support their 2023/24 student intake.

Write to Professor Edward Peck, the Department for Education's first Higher Education Student Support Champion, to highlight the need for inclusive practice and cultural competence within student support services.
(*Recommendation 7*)

This area is being explored further by Professor Peck's team.

Create and share an DEI data maturity framework.
(*Recommendation 9*)

The *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Data Maturity Framework* was created to help universities and accommodation providers address gaps in their ethnicity data – which can, in turn, highlight gaps in the experiences of minoritised staff and students.

Written by Dr Nick Cartwright (Lecturer in Law at the University of Leeds, Senior Advisor to the Halpin Partnership and Visiting Fellow in Race Equality and Education at the Centre for Advancing Race Equality), the framework shows how universities and accommodation providers can gradually improve how they collect, use and analyse data, in order to support a more inclusive environment.

Based on a simple model to show progressive data maturity practices, the framework includes practical examples across both the staff and student journey.

Create a toolkit pack that enables universities to replicate the Living Black at University research with their own students.
(*Recommendation 9*)

The Halpin research team collaborated with the Commission conveners to create a toolkit for HE institutions and accommodation providers who want to replicate the research with their own students.

SUMMARY OF ACTIONS
IN PROGRESS

Update National Codes to reflect the recommendations of the Living Black at University research.
(Recommendations 3 & 8)

The National Codes have committed to undertake actions including:

- Adding an anti-Black racism learning module to the National Codes online training course

- Providing guidance for members on accessing relevant and meaningful DEI training that is specific within an HE context

- Providing training for staff on receiving sensitive complaints

- Providing information on appropriate support services for students concerned about racism and other forms of discrimination, and additional information on the National Code complaints process.

Create a best practice guide for student behavioural agreements that set out expectations around inclusivity, featuring examples of good practice already in place across the sector.
(Recommendation 4)

So far, we have undertaken a review of student behavioural agreements in the sector to establish best practice.

Create a toolkit about supporting Black students' mental health.
(Recommendation 7)

Create a student guide on making complaints to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.
(Recommendation 8)

These resources are scheduled for publication in 2024.

Meet with Global Student Living to explore the possibility of including diversity and inclusion data, questions and awards in the Global Student Living Index.
(Recommendation 9)

Each year, the Global Student Living Index surveys more than 100,000 students across 15 countries about their experience within their accommodation, and the Commission believed that this data set could offer further insights into the experience of Black students in their accommodation over time.

During a meeting between Global Student Living (GSL) and several Commissioners, the GSL team committed to collect ethnicity data starting in their Q2 2023 survey. However, a major challenge was that standardised UK ethnicity questions would not work across all markets.

To better understand the ways in which people identified their ethnicity across all markets, respondents were asked whether they considered themselves to be part of an ethnic minority and given the option to self-describe their ethnicity in a free-text format. This gives universities and accommodation providers the opportunity to break down the survey findings by ethnicity and identify specific areas of concern.

1

ARRIVAL & INTEGRATION

Melissa Browne
Deputy Director of Commercial Services & Estates at University of Kent

Rebecca O'Hare
Interim Deputy Director of Residential Services at the University of Leeds

1.1
INTRODUCTION

The transition to university can be challenging for new students, who face the stress of adjustment, change in environment and lack of pre-existing social support at the same time as they may struggle to navigate new spaces and discover who they are.[1] The opportunities to socialise and build a community within purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) can sometimes help with these challenges, but for Black students, this can be a difficult and stressful environment.[2]

When Black students have a positive experience of arriving at university and attending orientation events, it helps foster a sense of belonging. Orientation programmes designed for Black students provide a space where they can connect with peers who may share similar experiences, backgrounds and challenges. This can reduce feelings of isolation and increase Black students' sense of community, making them feel more supported and included within the university environment – which, in turn, can contribute to improved academic performance and higher retention and graduation rates.

Positive experiences during orientation – such as being able to engage in activities that celebrate their heritage and access resources which are tailored to their needs – can also empower Black students, boost their confidence and make them feel valued and appreciated. By recognising and amplifying their perspectives, universities can encourage Black students to become active participants in their education and overall university experience.

Orientation programmes also connect and network students with faculty, other employees and alumni; establishing these relationships early on can be particularly beneficial for Black students in receiving tailored guidance and mentorship while navigating university for the first time.

Universities that prioritise and celebrate DEI send a clear message that Black students' identities, experiences and contributions are valued. This validation can positively impact their mental health, self-esteem and overall wellbeing, and creates an environment in which they feel supported to grow and succeed – contributing towards a more inclusive and equitable experience.

[1] Dr Lesley Scanlon, Louise Rowling and Zita Weber, *'You don't have like an identity… you are just lost in a crowd': Forming a Student Identity in the First-year Transition to University'*, Journal of Youth Studies, 2007, p.223-241

[2] Zak Foste, *'Oh, That's the White Dorm'*: The Racialisation of University Housing and the Policing of Racial Boundaries', Journal of College Student Development, Volume 62 Number 2, March-April 2021, p169-185

1.2

RECOMMENDATION 2

Improve acclimatisation and integration activities for all new students and extend the period over which these activities take place.

Identified issues

- The welcome period is typically two weeks following arrival, which may not be long enough for new students – particularly international students – to adjust to their new surroundings and make friends

- Opportunities to bring integration and acclimatisation efforts into student residences can be missed as a result of accommodation teams being overlooked in university welcome steering groups

- University welcome steering groups are majority White, meaning events aimed at non-White students may not be considered

- Induction materials for new students do not identify where students can find culturally relevant services, such as haircare, mental health support and international supermarkets

Commission actions

- Develop and pilot a Black services guide resource in collaboration with Black students, to signpost to culturally relevant services in university cities

- Create a toolkit to support the wider sector to use the Black services guide resource in their city

Good practice tips

Rebecca O'Hare, *Interim Deputy Director of Residential Services at the University of Leeds*:

- Review arrival activities with a student working group that includes students' union members, Residence Life Assistants, and members of relevant societies such as Afro Caribbean and faith groups

- Use findings from the working group to create action plans and build into annual objectives; this will centre Black students and create a relationship between students and staff

- Create content designed specifically for Black students, supporting them to navigate university life, the campus and student accommodation, and share this through pre-arrival communications, printed guidance and student-led social media content

- Provide opportunities and budget for Black students to lead activities of interest to them and their peers throughout the academic year

Sharon O'Donnell, *Head of Customer Services & Residences Life at Newcastle University*:

- University accommodation teams, student life teams and the Students' Union should work collaboratively to create a joined-up, coherent induction experience

- Prepare students for induction prior to arrival with a dedicated site, so that they can familiarise themselves with the university and city in advance

- Offer a hybrid induction, giving students the opportunity to engage with content both in-person and online

- Continue to run events throughout the year that recognise a variety of culturally significant dates and festivals

Self-assessment questions

- ☑ Does the diversity of your organisation's welcome steering group reflect the diversity of the student body?

- ☑ Are accommodation teams represented on your institution's welcome steering group?

- ☑ Does your institution's welcome steering group consider events shaped by and organised for non-White and international students?

- ☑ Do your organisation's induction materials consider the needs of students from different countries and cultures, including signposting to culturally relevant services in your town/city?

- ☑ Are your university's international and/or ethnic societies in contact with your accommodation team, and does your accommodation team signpost students to these societies?

- ☑ Does your institution hold 'refreshers' events throughout the year, and for students in later years of study, to offer new touchpoints for making friends and building a sense of community?

- ☑ Does your institution offer a good variety of events without alcohol for students whose faith or cultural background may prohibit its consumption?

1.3

<mark>**RECOMMENDATION 4**</mark>

Accommodation providers should confirm a commitment to tackling racism, both in their internal policies and in their student behavioural agreement or charter.

Identified issues

- References to DEI are sparse in wider university policies, including behavioural agreements

- Some students may not be experienced in, or open to, living in a diverse environment with students from different backgrounds, which can cause issues for minoritised students

Commission actions

- Create a best practice guide for student behavioural agreements that set out expectations around inclusivity, featuring examples of good practice already in place across the sector

Good practice tips

Melissa Browne, *Deputy Director of Commercial Services and Estates at University of Kent*, and Rebecca O'Hare, *Interim Deputy Director of Residential Services at the University of Leeds*:

- Include commitments in the charter that encourage students to both respect and be an active part of a diverse student community

- Promote the charter through pre-arrival communications, induction programmes and welcome packs, any university or accommodation apps and websites, and on social media

- Reference the charter during any conversations about conduct and, if necessary, during disciplinary meetings

Self-assessment questions

- ☑ Does your university or accommodation provider have a student behavioural agreement or charter in place that students are required to commit to?

- ☑ Does your charter outline expectations for student behaviour around diversity and inclusion?

- ☑ How are students held accountable if they fail to meet these expectations?

1.4

<mark>**RECOMMENDATION 6**</mark>

Universities and accommodation providers should work together to create intentionally diverse and inclusive student accommodation.

Identified issues

- Allocation processes can lead to students being inadvertently segregated in accommodation blocks, due to factors like budget and time of booking – this can create a sense of Black students being othered

- Students who are ill-equipped or unprepared to live in a diverse environment may compromise the safety and/or wellbeing of Black students, whether intentionally or unintentionally

- Students from diverse ethnic backgrounds may feel isolated by a lack of representation of their cultural or religious celebrations, particularly international students who cannot celebrate important cultural events with their families

Self-assessment questions

- ☑ Does your allocation data suggest that students of the same ethnicity are being segregated within your accommodation?

- ☑ Have you reviewed your allocation processes and/or policies to explore whether they unintentionally segregate students by race or ethnicity?

- ☑ Do you work collaboratively with private sector accommodation providers to ensure that students have opportunities to mix with a diverse range of people within accommodation

Good practice tips

Rebecca O'Hare, *Interim Deputy Director of Residential Services at the University of Leeds*:

- Develop accommodation allocation policies which work to ensure Black students are not segregated into particular buildings or flats, whether intentionally or unintentionally. While it is encouraged to allocate Black students with at least one other Black student, flat allocations where possible should be as diverse as possible and provide students with the opportunity to meet and mix with others from many backgrounds and cultures

- Where universities are working in partnership with private accommodation providers, include minimum race or multicultural competency training requirements for student facing staff members in service level agreements (SLAs). Records of this training should be stored safely with refresher training delivered every two years, and training should be undertaken as part of the induction plan for new staff members

- Residence Life teams should seek to identify and celebrate a broader range of inclusive events which are relevant to the demographic of students living in your residence

Sharon O'Donnell
Head of Customer Services & ResLife
at Newcastle University

1.5
CASE STUDY:
NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY

At Newcastle University, we had already implemented Residence Life (ResLife) initiatives to improve the student experience through a DEI lens prior to the publication of Living Black at University. However, this report and the Commission's work has emphasised the need for collaborative work – both internal and external – to create change that improves the Black student experience and, as a result, the experience of other minoritised groups.

Work undertaken by the ResLife team at Newcastle so far includes:

- **Implementing a ResLife curriculum that is diverse, transparent and accessible:** By fully embedding DEI into the curriculum, we are not only addressing racism and the importance of race-related inclusivity, but providing an offer that is inclusive of gender, disability, LGBT, religion and belief, families and carers.

- **Making our ResLife offer fully inclusive:** We continue to strive towards a fully integrated student body by providing varied Freshers activities to create opportunities for all students to make new friends. Black students contribute ideas for our social programme and by operating a 'You said, we did' approach to our inclusion work, we hope to build trust with Black students and create a sense of belonging and community.

This is part of a wider programme of work which saw Newcastle University earn its Race Equality Charter Bronze Award in November 2022.

"
We will continue to strive towards a fully integrated student body.

University of **Southampton**

Laura Palmour
Associate Director of Residences
at University of Southampton

1.6
CASE STUDY:
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

Following the publication of the Living Black at University report, the University of Southampton conducted a self-assessment on progress towards embedding the recommendations, and additionally considered the recommendations made in Osaro Otobo's HEPI blog on complaints in accommodation. Our self-assessment highlighted areas that required focus to improve sense of belonging, and how accommodation can contribute to narrowing the awarding gap.

A cross-university working group was established, including leads from teams that deliver services or activities in halls, while the 'Awarding Gap' project student group were consulted in order to hear students' lived experience and the actions that were most important to them. Funding was secured for a team of students to redesign the halls welcome guide. The university worked in partnership with CampusLife to design a brand new e-induction for halls, with expectations and messages about belonging at the forefront.

Our Residences directorate attended the university-wide Equality and Diversity Committee to raise awareness of the research outcomes and the Southampton action plan, building connectivity with other departments in understanding Residences' training needs. Attending the Living Black at University Conference to understand the national response was also incredibly valuable for developing our approach.

This work enabled the Residences and the Widening Participation and Social Mobility teams to connect, and to address the awarding gap. Through the Living Black at University and Awarding Gap projects, a student panel co-created the Black Freshers guide and Residences have promoted these guides in halls for September 2023 arrivals, as well as including content in the Halls Welcome Guide; this has been reviewed by students to provide content that celebrates our diverse community for September 2023.

A Student Charter was already in place at Southampton: as a result of the Living Black at University report, Residences have raised further awareness of the Charter through the Halls Welcome Guides, e-induction and halls welcome events. The student wellbeing team at Southampton were already providing access to counsellors from Black and minoritised ethnic backgrounds prior to the report's publication.

In response to Recommendation 3, Residences are discussing research and training opportunities at directorate-led, all-team sessions to encourage conversations about building inclusive environments. Residences already deliver training to all team members, including active bystander and unconscious bias training, as well as training through ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) to understand the skills required to ensure fair investigations are undertaken.

We are currently developing 'DEI toolbox talks' with the university Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team – which provide regular bite-size training to the teams in Residences and our contractors – and are also developing pathways training for security teams.

Finally, Residences are closely monitoring data on sense of belonging in halls and university surveys, and data teams are widening access to data by building new reports to help us to make and monitor change across the university.

2

MENTAL HEALTH

Nicola Frampton
Insight Manager, Student Minds

2.1
INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the HE sector has become increasingly aware of, and concerned about, students' mental health. Evidence suggests that a large proportion of students are experiencing poor mental health,[3] with particularly high rates of anxiety and loneliness reported during the COVID-19 pandemic,[4] in addition to symptoms of depression and issues with food and body image.[5] The impact of poor mental health at university is clear: students experiencing mental illness are more likely to drop out or underperform, and less likely to secure higher-level employment or postgraduate study.[6]

Although the sector's approach to supporting mental health has developed substantially, there has been limited progress in understanding the role of inequalities in shaping mental health and support, including the relationship between race and mental health within HE. Some research, including that carried out by Student Minds, has found that Black students report lower rates of mental distress than Asian and White students,[7] whilst also reporting disproportionately high rates of loneliness.[8]

Stoll et al. identified several key themes shaping the mental health of Black students in the UK:[9] academic pressure; learning environments; Black gendered experiences; culture shock; alienation and isolation; racism; and support. The study highlighted that "for Black university students, their mental health... may be deeply rooted in institutional factors or dimensions, largely racism, which negatively affects most aspects of their higher education experiences." This is echoed by the Living Black at University research, which found that 75% of Black students surveyed had experienced a negative impact to their mental health because of racism.[10]

Good student mental health requires a whole-university approach, and that includes understanding and dismantling barriers created and sustained by inequalities. This chapter highlights some of the good work happening across the sector that is specific to mental health, but it is important to remember that the work highlighted in other chapters will also have positive wellbeing impacts too. As a sector, we must strive to not only respond to mental illness effectively, but also to proactively create mentally healthy environments for all students.

[3]Student Minds, *February 2023: new research findings on student mental health*, February 2023

[4]Office for National Statistics (ONS), *Coronavirus and higher education students*, March 2022

[5]ONS, *Coronavirus and first year higher education students, England: 4 October to 11 October 2021*, October 2021

[6]Gareth Hughes and Leigh Spanner, *University Mental Health Charter*, 2019

[7]Cibyl, *Student Mental Health Study 2022*, October 2022

[8]HEPI, *Student Academic Experience Study*, 2022

[9]Nkasi Stoll, Yannick Yalipende, Nicola C Byrom, Stephani L Hatch, Heidi Lempp, *Mental health and mental well-being of Black students at UK universities: a review and thematic synthesis*, 2022

[10]Unite Students, *Living Black at University*, February 2022

2.2

RECOMMENDATION 7

Universities and accommodation providers should collaborate to ensure mental health and wellbeing support is available, accessible and appropriate for Black students.

Identified issues

- Black students are less likely to report concerns about, or access support services for, mental health despite recording lower scores on wellbeing

- Poor mental health is often stigmatised in Black communities and cultures, creating a barrier for Black students in seeking help

- Black students have often experienced racism in educational settings from an early age, meaning that by the time they reach university there is already an ingrained lack of trust in support services

- University support services are predominantly staffed by White professionals, whose understanding of and approach to mental health is White-centric

- Black students feel safer using informal Black-only student support systems, but supporting others' mental health is in turn is fuelling burnout among Black students

Commission actions

- Write to Professor Edward Peck, the Department for Education's first Higher Education Student Support Champion, to highlight the need for inclusive practice and cultural competence within student support services

- Create a toolkit to help accommodation teams support Black students' mental health

Good practice tips

Andy Owusu, *former Office for Students (OfS) Mental Health Project Officer for Black Students at London South Bank University*:

- Building a physical presence for Black mental health services on campus during the arrival period is important, as it highlights and normalises the service

- University lecturers can be useful for signposting to university welfare services, as they are a visible point of contact for students

- A scheme that matches students with a support service staff member of the same ethnicity can support Black students to feel more comfortable about approaching these services

- Student confidence in positive outcomes can be built by displaying testimonials on the support service's website and social media channels

- Universities should co-create relevant, tailored resources with students which cover topics that are specific to Black students, including those who identify as LGBTQ+ and/or have a disability

Dr Nkasi Stoll, *Co-Founder of Black People Talk*:

- Universities should have procedures in place to check in on students who regularly miss classes, to make sure that this isn't a manifestation of poor mental health and wellbeing

- Universities and accommodation providers should signpost to specialist, culturally relevant mental health resources on their websites

Self-assessment questions

☑ How does the ethnic make-up of your organisation's support team compare to your student population?

☑ What percentage of Black students access your organisation's support services compared to White students?

☑ Does your organisation offer any tailored wellbeing support or resources to Black students, and were these resources created in consultation with Black students?

☑ How do you signpost students to this support online and in-person?

EST 1892 **LSBU**

Andy Owusu
Former Office for Students Mental Health Project Officer for Black Students at London South Bank University

2.3
CASE STUDY:
LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY

Funded by the Office for Students, London South Bank University (LSBU) ran the Black Students Mental Health Project, working with Black students to understand their views on and experiences of mental health and related services in order to build services and resources that were culturally competent.

Concluding in June 2023, the methodology, learnings and outcomes of this ground-breaking project have been shared in a case study on the Office for Students website.

A bank of resources co-created with Black students at LSBU has been shared on the NHS-approved Good Thinking website for wider use within the student population.

student minds

Nicola Frampton
Insight Manager at Student Minds

2.4
CASE STUDY:
STUDENT MINDS

Student Minds recognises the clear ways in which a student's race or ethnicity shapes their mental health, wellbeing, access to support and overall university experience. Taking a whole-university approach to mental health, our aim is to build higher education communities where no student is held back by their mental health – but we know that to achieve this aim, we must be active in dismantling the barriers to good mental health which exist through inequalities like racism.

Our work to improve the mental health of Black students has developed over time. It became increasingly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic that existing inequalities were being exacerbated. In 2021, through our newly-developed digital support platform Student Space – supported by the Office for Students and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) – we launched funded partnerships with organisations that offered tailored support for students who had been disproportionately impacted. One organisation that we collaborated with was Black People Talk, who offered peer-support groups for Black students to come together and share their experiences.

Since this partnership ended, we have continued to explore how we can provide tailored support for Black students through our programmes. We have recently committed to co-producing a new package of psychoeducational content, aimed specifically at supporting Black students during their time at university; we plan to publish this content on Student Space in 2024.

We have also actively shared the learnings of the Living Black at University research, and work of the Commission, with members of our **University Mental Health Charter programme** and training networks, with the hope that universities and accommodation providers will learn from this work and improve their own practices to support Black students.

Student Minds itself is committed to becoming a truly anti-racist organisation. We are working with an external consultant to develop and embed an anti-racist approach across our whole organisation and have established an Anti-Racism Council, which includes representatives from the Living Black at University Commission, to scrutinise and steer us whilst ensuring ongoing accountability.

Recommendation 7 of the Living Black at University report notes the importance of collaboration on mental health support. Our experience has demonstrated its immense value, and has enabled us to learn, develop and importantly, improve our support for Black students. We look forward to continuing our learning journey and further improving our approach in the years to come.

> We have continued to explore how we can provide tailored support for Black students through our programmes.

3

STAFFING

Victoria Tolmie-Loverseed
*Assistant Chief Executive of Standards
at Unipol*

3.1
INTRODUCTION

Get a group of PBSA managers together, and conversation will usually turn to how they got into the sector. The majority will confess they "fell" into it, but are now hooked, because working with students is exciting, energising and often very challenging. They play a complex role, balancing technical knowledge with the need for sensitivity and empathy for students at a point of transition and deep importance in their lives.

Despite this, many working in PBSA are unprepared and often inadequately trained to deal with incidents involving mental health, harassment, and discrimination. The Living Black at University research brought the experience of Black students into focus and underscored how without careful and skilled management, PBSA can be an excluding and unsafe place for them.

But how as a sector do we select, induct and support PBSA staff to rise to this challenge and respond to the issues identified? How do we create rounded professionals that can foster diverse and supportive communities, tackling issues head-on?

The original report provided clear recommendations and pointers for the sector to adopt, and PBSA providers that wish to distinguish themselves over time will:

- Equip their staff with the skills and support structures to address racism and other forms of discrimination that occur in PBSA both from staff and between students

- Go beyond the basics of an off-the-shelf learning and development package, investing in sector-specific induction and training that encompasses the values of the wider higher education endeavour including equity, belonging, internationalism and community

- Provide support, briefing and ongoing CPD (Continuing Professional Development) to all staff, tapping into research that aims to improve the experience of students such as this Report, using it to inspire and spur change

- Empower and enable local teams work with institutions on matters of student support and DEIB to enable joint initiatives and effective signposting, even outside of formal relationships

- Finally, accept there may be systemic issues within their organisation that allow racism to hide in plain sight, and have the maturity to tackle these.

3.2

<mark>**RECOMMENDATION 3**</mark>

Introduce meaningful race training for peers and staff.

Identified issues

- To access meaningful race training, university accommodation teams require wider organisational buy-in – which may not be present

- Training can be expensive to facilitate for large organisations, exacerbating the need for buy-in at a high level, while small organisations may struggle to find resource to pay for training

- Take-up of, and/or genuine engagement with, training can be low – especially if it doesn't carry accreditation

- Training is often a one-off, mass-produced programme which lacks meaning and relevance to a student accommodation environment, while there is a limited pool of suitable training facilitators within the sector

- Race training rarely goes beyond unconscious bias

Good practice tips

Sam Kingsley, *Head of Belonging & Engagement at Unite Students*:

- For race training to be meaningful, it must demonstrate its connection to a greater purpose – its value and impact for the wider community

- Facilitators need to be experienced in delivering training on diversity, equity and inclusion so that it can be delivered safely and effectively

- Training should be specific to the institution and/or role, with case studies and real-life examples so that people can really connect to the material and understand how it affects their day-to-day role

Commission actions (to take forward in Phase 2)

- Create a free anti-racism e-learning module for Unipol

- Create a best practice guide to outline what should be covered in meaningful race training, including a facilitator assessment form

- Explore inclusion of meaningful race training into Race Equity Charter guidelines

Self-assessment questions

- ☑ Is your race and equity training accredited, and if so, could this training be recommended to others in the sector?

- ☑ Is your race and equity training tailored to the experience of working in the student accommodation sector?

- ☑ Does your race and equity training programme require ongoing commitment, action or effort throughout the year?

- ☑ Do you have data on take-up of race and equity training within your student accommodation teams?

3.3

<mark>**RECOMMENDATION 5**</mark>

Improve the representation of Black people as employees to reflect the diversity of students.

Identified issues

- Black students can feel uncomfortable approaching White members of staff, particularly when reporting racist incidents

- A non-diverse staff base can negatively impact on Black student recruitment

- Staff recruitment is often carried out centrally, rather than by accommodation teams themselves

- Universities based in areas with non-diverse populations can struggle to recruit a diverse staff

- It can be challenging to retain Black employees in non-diverse environments

Good practice tips

Rhiannon Thomas, *Learning & Early Careers Manager at Unite Students*:

- Data can highlight issues, gaps and opportunities – consider running a DEI survey for your employees and/or collecting employee ethnicity data if you don't already

- Targeting under-represented groups in early careers recruitment can widen the pool of diverse talent within an organisation

- Collaborate with local councils who often have workplace support pathways to reach under-represented communities where people may be struggling to find work

- Many recruitment platforms include programmatic display advertising, which can be used to advertise roles to applicants from marginalised groups using browser cookies

Commission actions (to take forward in Phase 2)

- Build a competency framework/model for student accommodation staff which outlines/recommends what the minimum training should be and provides resources for training

- Create a shortlist of recruitment agencies that will support diverse recruitment

- Create a model recruitment brief outlining expectations of recruiters on diverse recruitment

- Explore inclusion of diverse recruitment into Race Equality Charter application guidelines

Self-assessment questions

- ☑ Does your organisation have data on employee diversity?

- ☑ What action is your organisation taking to support diversity in recruitment?

- ☑ Do Black employees feel comfortable and supported when discussing racialised incidents with White colleagues?

- ☑ Do you have access to ethnicity data for employees leaving your accommodation teams, including reasons for leaving?

4

COMPLAINTS & DATA

Jo Nuckley
*Head of Outreach & Insight at Office of the
Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education*

4.1
INTRODUCTION

Student complaints can be a fantastic resource for people working to improve Black students' experience within the student accommodation sector: complaints are fundamentally a form of feedback. When students have taken the time and trouble to raise a concern, we should respect that engagement and understand it as an opportunity to take a fresh perspective.

Taken individually, each complaint has the potential to offer learning from a student's lived experience. Listening to what an individual student says can help us to identify practical steps that may improve the experience for everyone.

Taken collectively, complaints offer us information about the prevalence and impact of an issue. Thorough analysis of the complaints that students make, and how those complaints have been resolved, should be a routine element in defining and evaluating success in the provision of accommodation for students.

But learning from complaints is much harder if students do not bring their concerns forward. It can be difficult for students to know who can help with a problem, how and when to raise it, and what may happen when they do. There is no universal answer to these questions. Much will depend on local context, who the accommodation provider is, whether they follow the ANUK/Unipol Codes of Practice, or whether the issue is something that the university or college itself has some responsibility for.

It is essential that, wherever students are living, they can easily find clear advice about how to seek help with a problem or how to make a complaint. We hope the resources developed by the Commission, such as Dr Nick Cartwright's excellent *EDI Data Maturity Framework*, are a useful model for accommodation providers to develop their own materials for students and staff.

4.2

RECOMMENDATION 8

Ensure there are clear and accessible policies and procedures (including anonymous reporting) that deal explicitly with racism in accommodation.

Identified issues

- Complaints processes are not always well signposted or explained, meaning that Black students may be unclear on how to submit or escalate a complaint about their experience in student accommodation

- They may also be reluctant to submit a complaint in case it leads to further negative outcomes within their accommodation, particularly where the complaint involves flatmates or neighbours

- A lack of transparency around outcomes from previous complaints can make complaint processes appear ineffectual, deterring students from going through the process

- Universities or accommodation providers may have limited options for resolving complaints, in particular where there is a lack of supply to facilitate room moves, while it can be a challenge to resolve complaints that involve students from different universities

- Submitting a complaint may be an alien concept to students from some cultural backgrounds

Commission actions (to take forward in Phase 2)

- Create a one-page flowchart resource to outline a complaints escalation process for students

- Update National Codes to reflect requirements for sensitivity training around race-related complaints

Good practice tips

Jo Nuckley, *Head of Outreach & Insight at the Office of the Independent Adjudicator*:

- Reframe how complaints are viewed within your organisation – complaints are proof that students feel safe to disclose their concerns; a lack of complaints doesn't mean a lack of issues

- Explore data around complaints to see recurring issues, which issues make it through the process and which issues have been rejected

- Look at website analytics for digital complaint forms; if there is a frequent exit point midway through the process, students may not understand how the process works – or it may not work for them

- Assign a human name to a complaints email address to humanise the experience and build trust in the process

- Stay solution focused; apologies are powerful, and accepting responsibility for finding a resolution is not the same as accepting liability

Self-assessment questions

- ☑ Does your organisation have clear signposting to your complaints process?

- ☑ Is it clear on your university's website that complaints processes are not solely for academic complaints?

- ☑ Does your website explain to students that their complaint will only be shared with people who need to know about it?

- ☑ Does your organisation share examples of complaint processes and outcomes on your website?

- ☑ Is there a process in place in your organisation to signpost complainants to student support services?

- ☑ Does your university work with neighbouring universities to resolve complaints involving students from different institutions?

4.3

RECOMMENDATION 9

Accommodation providers should routinely collect, analyse and publish relevant data on the racial diversity of their residents and employees, as well as outcomes of reporting and investigation of complaints.

Identified issues

- Systems for collecting ethnicity data in a student accommodation context are often poor, and there is limited interoperability with other organisational data – meaning that time-consuming manual processes need to be used

- University DEI data strategies are at different levels of maturity, and there is no current consensus on what a mature strategy looks like

- There is a reluctance among students about sharing data on their protected characteristics with accommodation teams

- Ethnicity data is not routinely collected in relation to accommodation complaints

Commission actions

- Create and share a DEI data maturity framework

- Meet with Global Student Living to explore possibility of including diversity and inclusion data, questions and awards in the Global Student Living Index

- Create a toolkit pack that enables universities to replicate the Living Black at University research with their own students

Good practice tips

Sammy Li, *Assistant Director of Student Affairs at the University of Birmingham and Executive Member of AMOSSHE*:

- Include clear information about data collection as part of the student induction to explain how it can be used to support the student experience

- Reassure students that the data will be held safely and used appropriately

- Illustrate how the data can be used to create useful insights – for example, showing a breakdown of demographics within the student body

Andy Owusu, *Office for Students Mental Health Project Officer at London South Bank University*:

- Establish one person involved in data collection as the 'familiar face' of a project, and introduce them to students in advance with a headshot and short message to create familiarity

- Have a physical presence on campus – for example, enlisting students to explain the purpose of your work, organising drop-ins led by the 'familiar face'

- Include a front page on the survey explaining the purpose, what data you are collecting, why you are collecting it, how it will be used – for example, what changes you're hoping to make within your organisation

Self-assessment questions

- ☑ Are students at your institution/organisation happy to share their diversity data?

- ☑ Can you easily access diversity data on students within the accommodation service, from application through to leaving?

- ☑ Do you have access to ethnicity data for students raising complaints or involved in conduct processes within accommodation?

- ☑ Do you have access to ethnicity data for students leaving their accommodation early, including reasons for leaving?

- ☑ Is there a process within your organisation to signpost complainants to student support services?

- ☑ Does your university work with neighbouring universities to resolve complaints involving students from different institutions?

The University of Nottingham

4.4
CASE STUDY:
UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

Adele Ruston
Student Living Access & Participation Research
Manager at University of Nottingham

The University of Nottingham is completing research into the experiences of Black students in their halls of residence, to understand how we can create diverse communities and best support Black students to get the most out of their time at university.

Our recent research has looked at how Black students choose where they want to live, and this has provided us with important information about key factors and influences that determine applicants' choices in selecting their accommodation needs prior to starting university.

Matching Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data with student allocation information allowed us to segment the data and create average trends which reflected living patterns and student decision-making. A four-year data analysis of student accommodation allocations showed us that Black British students were applying to a small subset of halls of residence at the university. This analysis was followed up with student focus groups to explore why they chose this accommodation.

The results demonstrated that for Black students, it was important to know that people like them lived in their accommodation, and they would research the best places to live to suit their lifestyle choices. All students that took part in the research mentioned the importance of a diverse community, and engaging with events and activities that reflected their values. Many commented that students living in less diverse accommodation had to work harder to seek out their own community; some students were happy to do this, but for others, this affected their ability to find their place at the university.

The research and data analysis will allow our Student Living Team to consider the needs of Black students in more detail and develop and co-create events and activities that reflect their values. By creating a dashboard of students' key characteristics, the team can access data that supports the creation of an inclusive events programme that students from all backgrounds want to attend. This has also allowed us to consider our support provision in halls and introduce new wellbeing and support programmes.

The data has also been used across the university to highlight the impact of accommodation on certain communities. We have provided our senior tutor network with information about the barriers that Black students might face. This both educates them on the diverse needs of students from different backgrounds and enables them to consider how they can better support these students.

This research is a key part of the future residential strategy at the university, underpinning a diverse and inclusive accommodation offer. Further work with Black students will explore belonging, satisfaction and attendance with the goal of improving attainment.

"

The results demonstrated that for Black students, it was important to know that people like them lived in their accommodation.

5

CREATING MEANINGFUL CHANGE

5.1
WHITE ALLYSHIP: WILL YOU STAND UP?

Jenny Shaw
Higher Education External Engagement
Director at Unite Students

As I stood up, my mind was filled with a thousand questions.

'How can I talk about racism when I've never experienced it?'
'Am I appropriating someone else's experience?'
'Am I taking an opportunity away from a Black colleague?'
'What if I get it wrong?'

But the alternative was to remain seated while a grave inequality continued to play out on my watch, and I didn't want to do that. So I stood up.

As a White person, I recognise that I will never have the lived experience of racism and discrimination that Black colleagues and students have. But I also know that I have a responsibility to use this privilege to help create positive change. This involves actively listening to and learning from the perspectives of Black colleagues and students, and using my position to amplify their voices. It also means taking action, even when it feels uncomfortable or challenging.

As an ally, I have a responsibility to stand up and lead the charge on creating a more equitable and inclusive community, one that supports better mental health and a sense of belonging for Black students in their accommodation. I must do this in the knowledge that I will inevitably get things wrong at times, and that I must be willing to both take feedback from Black colleagues and students, and educate myself.

This is hard – it's hard to lead when you're constantly doubting yourself. But what's harder than this is experiencing racism. So instead, I'm going to talk about the work that we as White people need to do to help our Black students and colleagues.

First and foremost, we need to summon our courage to (speaking frankly) get over ourselves – push past the discomfort and do the right thing. As a close second, we must educate ourselves so that we don't place the burden of our education solely on our Black colleagues and friends. Then we need to stand up and create change.

The UK's student accommodation sector, like many other sectors including higher education itself, has a disproportionately low number of Black leaders. It would be unfair to expect all the change to come from this small group, yet it is easy to sleepwalk into this assumption and fall into a state of lethargy ourselves.

We should listen to Black students and promote their perspectives. We should support and sponsor Black colleagues. We should give opportunities to current and future Black leaders in our sector. But to be a true ally we also have to stand up, despite our own insecurities, and make this our cause.

If you've made it this far and you're a White person then I'm asking you to stand up with me, because I can already tell that you're going to do a fantastic job.

Standing up isn't just about calling out racism and injustice – it's about taking ownership of the need for positive change. This could mean taking on tasks such as commissioning or undertaking research with your own students, convening and leading a working group, preparing a business case, reviewing policies or initiating a change project. It might even be as simple as sharing this report with your manager.

I can't promise it won't feel uncomfortable to do these things, because it probably will. But you'll be standing up and fighting for a sector that better serves Black students, and contributing to a kinder and more equitable society.

So, what do you say – will you stand up?

Sam Kingsley
Head of Belonging & Engagement
at Unite Students

5.2
CREATING A BUSINESS CASE FOR CHANGE

For organisations to develop authentic inclusion practices, they must first recognise the ways in which such practices can truly elevate their purpose and align with their ambitions.

By now, most organisations are aware of the data about how inclusion brings with it increased profitability, productivity and retention, fewer sick days and increased employee confidence and wellbeing.

But even with all of the research, what has changed? People still put DEI work – beyond legal compliance – as being in the 'too tough' pile, or something they will tackle later. Even in the case of legal compliance, the Equality Act 2010 is now over 10 years old. The world has changed, and we should change with it.

The Act initially pushed institutions and organisations to review their policies and look further than they ever had to become inclusive. It was the gold standard, and for many who had previously experienced discrimination, for the first time, they felt a sense of being heard. But as we know, treating everybody equally isn't enough, and years later the Act just about constitutes the bare minimum required to promote inclusion in a modern world.

It is important to remember that DEI work and anti-Blackness, or indeed anti-racism, work are not the same thing. Strategies and initiatives should be intersectional and comprehensive. This means not just referencing the broader spectrum of belonging, but identifying specific areas for action. Developing a good collective understanding of DEI, conscious inclusion and inclusive leadership provides a foundation and springboard for development of anti-racist practice. To properly educate on anti-Blackness and therefore include Black students, we need to first develop a broader understanding of inclusion and create an environment of belonging.

The real work, then, becomes understanding what moves us forward – how to engage organisations to commit to a programme of work that puts belonging first. It requires us to consider who, what and how people are excluded in every decision made.

Developing a business case for change requires a change in approach. Aligning your financial requirements with the moral case for DEI and giving them both an equal weighting in importance ensures that inclusion isn't left behind.

So, with that in mind, here are some things to consider:

1 **People: *students, applicants, employees and your local community***: The best, brightest and most loyal know what they want and what they are looking for. How does inclusion improve your ability to attract and retain them? How can it encourage them to invest in their future with your organisation?

2 **Value alignment**: Aligning what you say with what you do is a true mark of authenticity and helps to build trust with stakeholders. Ensuring your values align to the people you engage with – or want to engage with – can be a regular reminder to keep the pace on your journey towards greater belonging.

3 **Understand the commercial (risk and value)**: Inclusion work is not a direct revenue generator, but if you do it, you will become more successful. There is plenty of research that shows that diversity and inclusion is good for business.

4 **Golden thread**: Innovation and creativity is bred in cultures that put effort into belonging. True inclusion is not a standalone strategy but a pillar in every strategy within your organisation, all the way to the top.

5 **Sustainable futures**: Think about what impact your organisation wants to leave on the world. Most organisations have a sustainability strategy by now and the good ones include environmental and governance factors that promote sustainable operations and impact. However, the 'S' – 'social' – in ESG seems to be the bit that everyone struggles with. DEI is the foundation of great social sustainability: increasing representation, supporting those who are marginalised and providing equitable opportunities will help to create a better future for both your organisation and wider society.

6 **Check yourself**: No one person has all the answers, so keep learning and keep checking in. Look around the room, bring in those with lived experience (and pay them!) and use advisory groups and consultants. Keep up-to-date with contextual research. Make data-informed decisions; don't just rely on anecdotal stories or one (usually loud) voice.

7 **Determination and resilience**: DEI work is hard and making mistakes is inevitable. An ability to dust yourself off and try again is key. You have to keep pushing forward, even when it's tough or it feels like you're not making much progress – because you are having more impact than you think. Even if it's just for one person, you are making a difference.

University of Kent

Laura Maclean
*Head of Accommodation &
Customer Services at University of Kent*

5.3
CASE STUDY:
UNIVERSITY OF KENT

At the University of Kent, we wanted to respond to and act upon the findings of the Living Black at University report, so we set up a 'Living Black' working group comprising stakeholders from across the university. This included teams such as EDI, student experience, student support, campus security, catering, comms, training and development, and our student union. The purpose of this group is to respond to the findings and recommendations in the report, thereby improving and enhancing the lived experience for our Black students.

We are taking each of the recommendations in turn, with each one being the focus of a different meeting. A starting point is always the good work that already goes on at Kent and we look for ways that we can improve on it or better communicate it, as well as implementing new initiatives. As the group includes such a wide selection of skill sets and influence from across the university, it's a great opportunity to make positive and impactful change, and the excitement and the dedication of the group is really inspirational.

So far, we have looked at our acclimatisation and integration activities to ensure that we offer a diverse range of options during our welcome period, and we are making this a real focus for our ResLife programme to ensure that this continues throughout the academic year.

We've also looked at our student demographics to make sure that we are providing culturally relevant services. We've considered our catering options as part of this and invited students and suppliers to a food tasting event, which was really well-received, where we gathered feedback about the food on offer using surveys. As a result, in September 2023 we launched an on-campus West Indian micro-brand called Three Little Birds, while we are also offering a selection of African and West Indian drinks and snacks in our catering outlet.

In terms of other culturally relevant services in the area, we spoke to our current residential students about what advice they would give to new students moving to Kent for the first time. We've created a welcome booklet called 'Living Black' which features peer-to-peer advice from our current students, signposting to where students can find global food suppliers, Afro-Caribbean hair salons, and also suggestions for student societies and faith groups.

As the Living Black at University report is a national piece of work, we wanted to ensure that the work we do is really relevant for our student body at Kent, and so we included the original research questions in our 2022/23 end of year student survey using the Commission's Research Toolkit.

We had a fantastic response rate, which shows that our students are engaged and open to this discussion, and are currently analysing the data, which we will compare against the original report findings so we can address specific areas at Kent, as well as targeting both our staff training and our support for students.

We plan to repeat this survey in future, so we can measure the impact of our initiatives. It's so important to be open to the findings and embrace change to make a positive impact for our Black students; with our working group and through continued collaboration with our accommodation partners, we look forward to seeing the results and how they evolve over time.

> "We had a fantastic response rate, which shows that our students are engaged and open to this discussion.

5.4
WHAT NEXT
FOR THE SECTOR?

'Teleola Cartwright
Consulting Fellow at Halpin Partnership

As lead researcher on the Living Black at University project, I was sceptical before the report was published that it would be well received by the higher education sector.

However, my fears were allayed once the report came out: the response was amazing. There was an immediate appetite to do something about the issues, despite the almost universal initial shock to the findings that Black students were having such a tough time in their accommodation. Many universities and PBSA providers took on the challenge of improving the experiences of their Black students.

One of the most difficult findings to remedy was the lack of trust, because there has been a breakdown of trust over such a long time. We found that when it comes to reporting issues of discrimination, micro-aggressions and micro-exclusions, Black students did not trust the reporting processes. We found that some universities and PBSA providers were slow in responding to these complaints, and others did not even have clear systems by which these incidents could be reported.

Building trust will take time and effort – so the challenge now is to ensure that the momentum is not lost before progress is made. As we saw with Black Lives Matter, once the topic is no longer a news headline it seems to go to the back of the pile and is no longer a priority.

The sector, however, will not rebuild trust simply by putting better policies and procedures in place: there needs to be a follow-through. So even if solutions to the problems cannot be found quickly, the sector needs to be acting, and needs to be seen to be acting. Therefore, feedback loops need to be explicitly built into policies and procedures. It is, I believe, one of the main paths to rebuilding that trust.

Trust will also develop as universities and PBSA become more racially diverse spaces. There is a need for institutions with a growing population of Black and minority ethnic students to think about how to employ more staff who look like their students, who know what micro-aggressions and micro-exclusions look like. We know students gravitate to members of staff who look like them, because there is an assumption of understanding and the issues

"

Building trust will take time and effort – so the challenge now is to ensure that the momentum is not lost before progress is made.

of race and racism, and that this creates invisible workload. As much as we want our White allies to be well versed in the issues, we also know that they cannot fully understand what racism feels like.

While the sector thinks about how to rebuild trust, it must also recognise the immediate symptoms of this problem: the growing rate of mental health issues among Black students, with a lack of mental health support that is specifically tailored to deal with the impact of race and racism. The sector must urgently address this challenge, as making a student or member of staff retell their stories may result in the victim experiencing trauma.

So, whilst the sector can and should be proud of the advances it has made since this report was published, it must continue to build trust – which will take time and resources – whilst doing more in the immediate term to address the mental health crisis amongst students who experience racism.

Osaro Otobo
Consultant at Halpin Partnership

Living Black at University – born out of a desire to understand the experiences of Black students in accommodation in higher education – has since evolved into a catalyst for change, a resource for institutions across the UK, and a testament to the power of research to drive progress.

This was both a challenging and rewarding piece of research to conduct, at a time when many people in the sector were trying to engage with Black students due to the Black Lives Matter movement's resurgence in 2020. Black students were experiencing consultation fatigue, and many would have given their thoughts on racism before without knowing or seeing how their feedback had helped shape change.

Writing the report in the best way possible, ensuring that Black voices were heard throughout, was a top priority for us. As a research team we had to be firm and have strong conviction in not watering down our findings or recommendations on behalf of the sector.

> "
> Since the publication of the report, it has become clear that building trust is an incremental process.

Trust isn't something that sprouts overnight. It requires patience, care and persistent nurturing. Since the publication of the report, it has become clear that building trust is an incremental process. It begins with listening, as we did when we gathered the stories and experiences of Black students. It continues with action, as universities take steps to address the challenges and inequities uncovered by the research.

As a researcher and the project manager for this research, I witnessed first-hand the mistrust and scepticism Black students and others feel. Yet I've also seen how trust and hope can start to build when promises are transformed into tangible actions.

One of the most encouraging aspects of this journey has been witnessing the ripple effect of our research. The Living Black at University report has not been a static document; it has become a dynamic force for change, especially through the work of the Commission. We've seen that some universities and accommodation providers have embraced its findings as a call to action, and it's been inspiring to see our work spark conversations, ignite debates and catalyse further research and initiatives.

While it's essential to celebrate the progress made, we must also acknowledge that our work is far from complete. The Living Black at University report was a starting point, but it is not the end of the journey. There's a long road ahead, one that requires continued dedication, innovation, and collaboration. We must be prepared for moments of frustration and setbacks, but resolute in our determination to continuously change things for the better. We must keep pushing forward, advocating for policies that address systemic inequities, challenging discrimination wherever it exists, and amplifying the voices of Black students and staff. Trust must be at the heart of it all.

OUR COMMISSIONERS

Chair

Professor Iyiola Solanke
Jacques Delors Professor of EU Law at University of Oxford and Founder of the Black Female Professors Forum (BFPF)

Convenors

Sam Kingsley
Head of Belonging & Engagement at Unite Students

Jenny Shaw
Higher Education External Engagement Director at Unite Students

Communications Partner

Jen Steadman
Higher Education Communications Executive at Unite Students

Co-ordinator

Amelia Pulvertaft
Belonging, Equity & Engagement Co-ordinator at Unite Students

Commissioners

Melissa Browne
Chair Elect at CUBO and Deputy Director of Commercial Services and Estates at University of Kent

Nicola Frampton
Insight Manager at Student Minds

Tara Leach
Head of Race Equality Charter at Advance HE

Dr Sammy Li
Executive Member at AMOSSHE and Assistant Director of Student Affairs (EDI) at University of Birmingham

Jordan Meates
Communications & IT Officer at ASRA and Campus Services Manager at Sheffield Hallam University

Sharon O'Donnell
Head of Customer Services & Residences Life at Newcastle University

Rebecca O'Hare
Interim Deputy Director of Residential Services at the University of Leeds

Andy Owusu
Psychology PhD student & former Office for Students Mental Health Project Officer for Black Students at London South Bank University

Victoria Tolmie-Loverseed
Assistant Chief Executive of Standards at Unipol

Associate to the Commission

Jo Nuckley
Head of Outreach & Insight at the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA)

"

(The Living Black at University Conference) has been such an impactful experience because everyone is here for someone like me. I think that's an amazing feeling that not many people get to have. If it was possible, I would want every other Black student to be in this room and realise just how much we are trying to change what's going on.

Seyi Gachegua
Law student at the University of Birmingham

"

I feel like (the Black services directory) would help many Black students to know that their skin colour is not a reason to not go to a desired (university) for them in the future… They can aspire to attend any university and not allow their skin colour to be a limit to where and where they can't go.

Nanu Viatoshir
History & International Relations graduate at London School of Economics & Political Science

"

I've realised that there are a lot more services available to help Black students than I thought there were. Knowing all of this would've been very helpful a year ago. That's why I think (the Black services) guide is something that's going to be very useful.

Oluwatobi Adeleke
Mechatronics student at the University of Manchester

LIVING BLACK AT UNIVERSITY COMMISSION REPORT 2022/23

Creating meaningful change through collaboration

Commissioned by

UNITE
STUDENTS