RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring Positive Experiences of Engagement Amongst Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) University Students: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Amanda Bradbury[1] and **Christian van Nieuwerburgh**[2]

Abstract

The Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) university student attainment gap shows little sign of improving in the official statistics. The research into engagement has been primarily quantitative, showing that attainment is strongly linked to engagement. However, there is relatively little qualitative research on how students experience engagement. This study therefore takes a qualitative approach, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to bring to life and make sense of the multi-faceted "lived experiences" of positive engagement of six BAME students at a Business School in London. IPA analysis is based on the double hermeneutic, or meaning-making, of both the participant and the researcher and is built rigorously from the bottom up, focusing idiographically on each participant in turn. This includes a detailed examination of the use of language, before moving onto the development of whole-sample, super-ordinate themes. Six super-ordinate themes were identified in this study: "Thriving with the support of positive relationships", "On a journey of personal growth", "Feeling at ease in the environment", "Investing in the university experience to get the most out of it", "Enjoying the experience of intellectual stimulation and success" and "Driven by ambition and passion". The study supports key dimensions in the literature around belonging, connectedness and positive affirmation, whilst making contributions to the literature regarding the importance of meaning, growth mindset and self-actualisation. By depicting and interpreting their "lived experiences", this study helps us gain a better understanding of what engagement can look like for BAME university students and the factors that can help drive it.

Keywords: BAME, student engagement, student experience, belonging, growth mindset, self-actualisation

Much of the UK BAME engagement literature is in the form of institutional reports commissioned by bodies such as the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPE) (Blackman, 2020; Neves & Hillman, 2018, 2019), the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC) (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015), The Runnymede Trust (Hughes et al., 2015), the Office for Students (Office for Students, 2019) and the Equality Challenge Unit (Berry & Loke, 2011). It comprises largely quantitative data, with very limited amounts of diagnostic qualitative data. Furthermore, the small number of qualitative studies that do exist (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Davies & Garrett, 2013; Forbus et al., 2011; Kelly et al., 2011; Kuh, 2009; Mahmoud et al., 2015; S. Smith, 2017; Steele & Fullagar, 2009) have generally focused on specific aspects of the experience, for instance the negative impact on BAME engagement of living at home and commuting (S. Smith, 2018). This makes it difficult to discern their relative impact on engagement overall.

A review of UK and US engagement literature (Ratliff et al., 2019) underscores the scarcity of qualitative research, the lack of a holistic focus on the overall experience of engagement and, most particularly, the absence of engagement research focusing specifically on BAME students. This gap in the literature is also set out in the UK Student Experience report which states that more qualitative research is needed to help understand the BAME student experience (Neves & Hillman, 2018). Smith (2017:55), in her qualitative research exploring the BAME

[1]Faculty of Business and Law, University of Roehampton, London
[2]Centre for Positive Psychology and Health, Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland

Corresponding Author: Amanda Bradbury, Faculty of Business and Law, University of Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, London.
Email: amanda.bradbury@roehampton.ac.uk

attainment gap at Leeds University, also suggests that "further development of BAME students' success stories" should be the focus of future research.

This current research therefore aims to address the gap around BAME students and a more holistic, multi-faceted, qualitative view of engagement, by focusing on the positive experience of BAME students. The research adopts a qualitative phenomenological epistemology using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to ensure the lived experience of the participants is explored and understood in as much depth and richness as possible. In this way, this study sheds light on the experiences of BAME students who report they are engaged at university.

Towards a Richer Definition of Student Engagement

Most engagement research focuses narrowly on the classroom context. For instance "Transformational Leadership" (Bass, 1985) has been usefully applied to teaching styles, but not to student/lecturer relationships beyond the classroom (Pounder, 2014) and the importance of enjoyment to engagement has only been explored in terms of how enjoyable the teaching is (Frenzel et al., 2018), not to the role of enjoyment in the subject overall and its impact on intrinsic motivation. Where researchers have tried to understand engagement as a more multi-faceted phenomenon, they have focused on both the complexities of the micro level of the university: the learning environment, extra-curricular activities, the social environment and university culture and infrastructure (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Kuh, 2009), as well as on the macro level complexities of the student's home life context, where "commuter" students live at home and hold down paid employment (Burlison, 2015; Maguire & Morris, 2018).

A more complex conceptualisation has also seen engagement as operating at different levels of the person: namely behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively (Fredricks & Paris, 2004; Lester, 2013). Lester's model defines "behavioural" as participation in classroom and social activities, "emotional" as attitudes, interests and values, including feelings of belonging and connection, and "cognitive" as motivational goals and investment in learning, inside and outside the classroom. Kahu (2013:10) also proposed a multi-dimensional conceptual framework by including behavioural, psycho-social, socio-political and holistic perspectives, covering the structural influences of the university and student's background, together with the "distal consequences" of future employment, work success and citizenship. She later revised the model to focus on the interplay between student and institution as a way of explaining why students, especially those from non-traditional backgrounds, have varying levels of engagement. The model is theoretical, however, and does not reference individual qualitative experiences of engagement, nor does it focus on partnerships between individual students and lecturers.

Multi-dimensional elements of engagement have been validated in scales, such as Kraus's work on scales used in Australia with first year university students (Krause & Coates, 2008). Burch et al (2015) also developed a student engagement tool (The Burch Engagement Survey for Students) based on the three domains of emotion, behaviour and cognition in Lester's model (2013). The Burch Engagement Survey for Students was adapted from the job-based engagement research of Rich, Lepine and Crawford (2010). However, this tool does not include engagement beyond the classroom, largely because of its adaptation from the job context, where it is similar to the Utrecht work engagement tool (Schaufeli et al., 2006) in focusing entirely on engagement with work based tasks and activities. Both tools exclude involvement in the wider life of the organisation, and in the case of the Burch tool, in the university outside of lectures and seminars. Both tools are therefore somewhat limited. The Burch Engagement Survey for Students was developed without diagnostic qualitative input and as such suffers from the same limitations as Kraus's work on the Australian engagement scales.

Broadening our Understanding of the Specifics of Engagement

Where researchers have used qualitative research to deepen our understanding of individual aspects of engagement, several key themes have emerged, as seen in Table 1.

BAME Student Experiences of University Life and Engagement

According to the HEPE annual Student Academic Experience Survey (Neves & Hillman, 2018, 2019) which measures student satisfaction with university, BAME students generally have less positive experiences of university life, seeing it as poor value for money and a poor match with their expectations. Further BAME students reported feeling that they learn too little and have very little access to teaching staff. Although there is no diagnostic research evidence to explain this, it seems likely this impacts on their levels of involvement and engagement.

Table 1. Broadening our understanding of the specifics of engagement

Theme	Key Aspects
1. **Connectedness, belonging and issues of identity and acceptance**	• Impact of alienation from student life (Ratliff et al., 2019) • Development of positive student identity via connections with students and staff (Kelly, LaVergne, Boone Jr, & Boone, 2011; Ratliff et al., 2019) • Role of social support and positive thinking to address student anxiety (Kuh, 2009; Mahmoud, Staten, Lennie, & Hall, 2015) • Impact of transition from school (Ratliff et al., 2019)
2. **Feelings of autonomy and empowerment**	• Engagement enhanced if students feel competent and likely to succeed (Steele & Fullagar, 2009) • Application of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992) to student engagement (Steele & Fullagar, 2009)
3. **Working while studying**	• Lower levels of engagement amongst students both living and working off campus (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; P. R. Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011) • Reduced emotional attachments to university life (Burlison, 2015) • Amount of time spent working is key determinant (Neves & Hillman, 2018) • Jobs linked to career progression bring greater engagement (Mahmoud et al., 2015; Ratliff et al., 2019)
4. **Commuting to university**	• Amount of time spent on campus correlates with how much they identify with it (Astin, 1984) • Commuter students have poorer experiences of university life (Blackman, 2020) • Commuting more likely among socially deprived BAME students, especially in London (Maguire & Morris, 2018; Neves & Hillman, 2019) • Commuting in UK very different to US where most literature is based
5. **Living at home**	• Family responsibilities and pressures increase stress and distract them (Fairchild, 2003; Wilmes & Quade, 1986) • US literature shows home-based students **can** be engaged, however (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Jacoby, 2014; Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001)
6. **First in family students**	• First in family students often have different experiences of university life (P. Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta, 2011; P. R. Forbus et al., 2011). • First in family students often suffer from lack of family support for or understanding of their studies (Smith, 2018) • First in family students often work longer hours than other students (MEHTA, NEWBOLD, & O'ROURKE, 2011).
7. **Commuter student on-campus experience**	• Improving physical spaces linked with higher engagement (Atkins & Oakland, 2008; P. R. Forbus et al., 2011; B. (2014). Jacoby, 2014; Barbara Jacoby, 2000; Barbara Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Maguire & Morris, 2018)

The link between low engagement and low attainment is clear (Office for Students, 2019), and research shows that when other variables are controlled for, BAME students still under-achieve compared with white counterparts (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). Working while studying, living at home, commuting and being first in family to attend university, are all associated with lower levels of engagement in the literature (Smith, 2018)and are more common amongst BAME students, especially in London (Atherton & Mazhari, 2018; Smith, 2018; Office for Students, 2019). BAME students are more likely than average to live in poorer households where the need to work whilst studying is greater. They are also more likely to have caring responsibilities in multi-generational households or be working in small family businesses. Being first in family to attend university can also lead BAME students into conflicts with parents who do not understand the nature of their university lives. All of these issues can create barriers to engagement and stop BAME students feeling they belong to the institutions they are studying in: a relationship which has been outlined in the BAME literature (Singh, 2009; S. Smith, 2018).

Several British academics (Rose-Adams, 2014; Singh, 2009) have reviewed the literature, including from the US (Stevenson & Whelan, 2013) where BAME student engagement has been studied for longer, and have identified the same issues of identity and self-esteem seen in the general literature. Rose-Adams (2014) focuses on the importance of expectations and finds it is not just expectations students have of themselves that differentiates BAME students, but also the expectations of their tutors. Singh's work (2009), which again draws comparisons with the US literature, also points to the role of negative parental expectations on BAME students' negative views of their own potential. Singh's research review also highlights the importance for engagement of "psychological well-being, sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation" (p.27). It seems clear that empowerment and self-belief are key issues here, with BAME students being held back by feelings of inadequacy, propagated in some instances by both universities and their own families, and which are often completely at odds with their prior attainment.

Smith's research (2017) with BAME students who constituted 13% of the university population found that not feeling "academic" enough made them more anxious than white students about the transition into HE, despite having achieved the same admission requirements. Smith hypothesised this could be due to the university culture being predominantly white, driven by a majority white staff and a curriculum focused on white theorists. BAME students in this "white" environment referenced the lack of BAME role models and feared white lecturers did not understand their perspective or values. It is clear from this research that feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem were being exacerbated by feelings of exclusion.

Stevenson's (2012) research with white and BAME students at two Russell Group universities found discrepancies between their current and future self-images were limiting how much effort BAME students were putting into their studies and how much help they were accessing. Many BAME students, especially black males, were acting out cultural stereotypes of low achievement and laziness, effectively self-sabotaging their academic achievement, despite having achieved high admission grades. In contrast, white students revealed a strong congruence between their current and future selves, finding it easier to apply themselves to their studies and ask for help. This study shows that lack of self-belief, feelings of disempowerment and a view that they were not expected to work hard and achieve based on cultural expectations were limiting both the engagement and attainment of BAME students in these traditionally white environments. There is a gap in the literature, however, around how BAME students in universities where BAME students are the prevailing majority feel and behave. The objective of the study is to bring to life and make sense of the holistic, multi-faceted "lived experience" of positive engagement of BAME students at a London Business School.

Method

This research adopts a qualitative phenomenological epistemology to explore in detail students' lived experience of engagement. It uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), which is based on hermeneutics or interpretation, to make sense of how students themselves make sense of their university-related experiences, using a "double hermeneutic" approach (Smith, 2017). Semi-structured interviews of about one hour were conducted, during which participants were encouraged to talk in depth about their experience of university life, both academically and socially. The focus was on what the experience meant to them.

Participants and Recruitment

The sample consisted of six BAME students from a London University Business School who were domiciled in the UK and classified as "home" students. This sample size is in line with the idiographic principles of the IPA approach which prioritises quality over quantity to allow for in-depth exploration of responses (Smith et al., 2009). Beyond the BAME classification, the sample was "purposive" (Smith et al., 2009), based initially on university attainment data, and then self-selecting based on students' own self-descriptions of being engaged and involved with university life and study.

Potential participants were identified using university module lists which were screened for UK-domiciled BAME students who were generally achieving marks in the 60s and above, using attainment as a proxy for engagement, as this relationship has been established in the academic data (Neves & Hillman, 2019). Those volunteering were screened further to ensure they described themselves as engaged and involved university students.

The sample was focused initially on post-graduate students and the aim was to include students who had progressed from undergraduate to post-graduate studies at the same institution so they could reference any differences. The final sample, however, included a 2020 graduate as well as two students entering Year 3 who had been identified by as "engaged" by their tutors. This final spread of students means the research covers a range of engagement experiences across both undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Table 2. Sample details

Participants	BAME sub-group	Level of study	Subject studied	Gender	Age
1	British Somali	Masters	Human Resources	Male	22
2	British Afro-Caribbean	Masters	Business and Finance	Male	22
3	British Indian	Year 2/3	Business Management	Female	21
4	British Ghanaian	Masters	MBA	Female	49
5	British Muslim Arab	Just graduated	Business Management	Male	22
6	Black African (naturalised British)	Year 2/3	Business and Entrepreneurship	Female	29

Materials

A semi-structured discussion guide was used flexibly during the interviews as a prompt and check list. However, participants were encouraged to talk freely about their lived experiences of being engaged students as the aim of the research was to understand their experiences in their own terms, using their own words and language, as per the IPA methodology employed (Smith et al., 2009). Participants steered the conversation as much as possible, with the interviewer using prompts only where necessary.

Procedure

Hour-long semi-structured interviews were scheduled with the participants at their convenience. Due to the Covid-19 regulations in place at the time of the fieldwork, all interviews had to be conducted via video call, as face to face contact was not allowed. The video calls proved a reasonable replacement for the planned face to face interviews as participants' facial expressions, body language, emotional states and energy levels could all be observed in accordance with IPA analysis and the virtual context did not appear to inhibit them in their narratives. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed the highly detailed, prescribed and systematic IPA approach to the interpretation of the individual lived experiences described by the participants (Smith et al., 2009). The approach began with immersion in the data through the transcription process. Following this, each transcript was closely read repeatedly in turn, during which notes were made in the right-hand margin and, subsequently, emergent themes identified in the left-hand margin. IPA analysis differs from other inductive analyses (e.g. Thematic Analysis) in that analysis is built rigorously from the bottom up, focusing ideographically on each participant in turn and identifying themes for each participant, before moving onto the development of whole-sample, super-ordinate themes, to give the analysis a coherent meaning and structure. The analysis was thus phenomenologically driven by the "in-depth descriptions and interpretations of the research participants' lived experiences" (Alase, 2017 p12), focusing on individual meanings and articulations, including use of language and noting individual differences "to respect convergences and

divergences in the data – recognising ways in which accounts from participants are similar but also different." (Smith & Osborn, 2007 p73). Once super-ordinate themes had been identified across the sample, supporting verbatim quotations were highlighted in individual transcripts to express and bring these themes to life, and to ensure the voices of the individual participants were heard in the findings.

Results

As the students talked about their positive experiences of university life, it was clear that several key aspects of their experiences were driving engagement and commitment to both their studies and to university life in general. Furthermore, even though participants were at different stages of their university journey, and despite a spread of age, gender and BAME background, there was much commonality across these experiences. IPA analysis identified six key themes, which were further divided into sub-themes: "Thriving with the support of positive relationships", "On a journey of personal growth", "Feeling at ease in the environment", "Investing in the university experience to get the most out of it", "Enjoying the experience of intellectual stimulation and success" and "Driven by ambition and passion".

Table 3. Key themes and sub-themes identified in the data

Key Themes	Sub-themes
1. Thriving with the support of positive relationships	a) Supported by fellow students and family b) Feeling they belong and fit in c) Feeling they make a difference to the university
2. On a journey of personal growth	a) Broadening their perspective on life b) Discovering themselves c) Developing themselves d) Nurturing their wellbeing
3. Feeling at ease in the environment	a) Getting used to the system b) Feeling comfortable in the environment
4. Investing in the university experience to get the most out of it	a) Proactively changing their mindset: goal setting and self-discipline b) Getting into the zone c) Actively contributing and collaborating d) Valuing education
5. Enjoying the experience of intellectual stimulation and academic success	a) Loving the challenge b) Interest in what they are studying c) Pride in their achievements
6. Driven by ambition and passion	a) Driven by competition b) Finding and following their passion

1. **Thriving with the support of positive relationships:** positive relationships were at the heart of all participants' experiences of engagement. Relationships with both lecturers and student peers were delivering practical and emotional support, as well as recognition and self-validation. They were also creating a sense of belonging and promoting the feeling that their presence made a difference. Some participants also spoke of the importance of the support and encouragement of their families.

   a) ***Supported by fellow students and family:*** *most* participants spoke about the importance of having friends who were always there for them *'Like everyone's got their own friends and you just have people you can rely on and bounce your ideas off, um, ask for help.' (P1)*. This support extended to practical advice with their study via teamwork and general collaboration: '*Taking benefit from group work (in seminars) [...], a very good way to learn. And I think that would be greatly missed if Covid continued.' (P2)*. Such mutual support was seen as creating a positive climate of support at the university, where the prevailing atmosphere of friendliness helped them commit and progress: *'We all want to get a really good job, you know, but we want to do it in a nice diplomatic way where we support each other' (P4)*. One participant (P5), however, whilst valuing his friends in terms of leisure time spent with them, felt he could work better alone and felt distracted by them in the library and dragged down by them in seminar group work. This participant was very focused on his personal growth and achievement in a much more individualistic way: *'it didn't work (in seminars) because there was a lot of students who I work with in groups who go, go off*

topic. And, um, that's a very, very, it was a very disadvantaged thing, it was a bad thing.' Several participants were following in the footsteps of family in studying at university and spoke about how this had given them the confidence to commit to study themselves. Many, however, were part of the first generation of university students in their family: *'So, my one brother and sister both did a Masters. I think that's the first thing that sort of encouraged me or allowed me to feel that I was capable to do such a level of study.' (P2)*

b) **Feeling they belong and fit in:** positive feelings of belonging were driven by feeling recognised and understood by the validation of friends they shared values with, and by lecturers who appreciated and supported their academic success: *'There's friends you choose because [..]you feel they get you.' (P1). 'It's having friends that can actually understand you. That helps a lot.' (P6). 'I've made some really good friends out of uni that even now (during Covid-19) we support each other.' (P4)* Such positive affirmations meant they felt safe to express themselves: *'In the library, you sort of have your own set of friends or classmates that you like, you can talk to them about any problem that we face in the class, in the seminars.' (P2)*

c) **Feeling they make a difference to the university:** personalised and tailored support from tutors meant they felt they really counted and were not just a name on a class list. Beyond this, having their abilities recognised and praised by tutors, and sometimes by other students, left them feeling encouraged and good about themselves, and spurred them on to make even more effort: *'I feel like the teachers, they take a bit more interest in you, if you put yourself out there a bit more, which is good. Um, so that was positive because I've actually got to know many staff on a more personal basis than I did at (my previous university), which was very sort of, uh, distant relationships.' (P3); 'It's seeing (lecturers) wanting you to actually achieve the best you can, you know. So, it's not like they try to make it difficult for you or to set a trap. Being able to see it from that perspective, that's what changed everything for me' (P6)*. Such personalised help and recognition from lecturers was seen as developing over time, as relationships grew, and in this sense they experienced their engagement as growing over the course of their study: *'I even have teachers now on Masters that I had in First Year, so we've built a sort of relationship. I think it's good because the teachers sort of, um, they know your strengths and weaknesses and then they're better able to help you once they know you better.' (P2)*

2. **On a journey of personal growth:** all participants were united in seeing their university experience in terms of personal growth, acknowledging the journey they had been on since the beginning of their studies. Such growth centred on both knowledge of themselves and their emotional needs and strengths, as well as knowledge of the world around them, and was driven by both access to new and different people, as well as to new knowledge and skills, both academic and social. This journey of growth was the motivation and driver for much of their commitment and engagement in their studies, by making the experience meaningful.

a) **Broadening their perspective on life:** Meeting people from different backgrounds to themselves was seen as an important aspect of personal growth by several participants who felt that without access to university their world view would have remained blinkered: *'(People) share their life experiences and their differences and it's positive and good because it teaches you the different things. I'm from West London so I think the violence isn't so bad, but other people I've met, they're from other areas in London where they say, oh, this happens, and it's different reasons. So, you think to yourself, they're not very different to my area. So it's an interesting view whereas before I went to university you just think everywhere's the same.' (P1), 'It's broader knowledge, getting to learn new things, outside of what I had previously learned so that, um, getting to see and relate with people from different walks of life.' (P6)*

b) **Discovering themselves:** personal growth is not limited to understanding others better but also to understanding themselves better. In this way they described self-knowledge as being about experiencing a clearer understanding of what they want from life and more precisely what direction to take: *'it opens up your eyes to what you actually want to do [...] and you're not focusing on what you don't want to do.' (P6)*

c) **Developing themselves:** personal growth is also experienced as the development of skills and strengths for the future, with participants talking about building confidence, improving social skills and developing self-reliance and self-discipline: *'I think the experience was more valuable than the degree itself for me, because [...] like I have aspirations, you know, to open a business, become entrepreneurial and stuff like that. Although I didn't need a degree, I still believe those three years helped me improve as a person.' (P5), 'The good thing was I did learn a lot in terms of leadership skills. I think I also learned a lot about myself. So, it was a good experience' (P3), 'You kind of like build yourself, in first, second and third year, you're always, I'd say mentally preparing. So before [...] when I applied for a job I didn't think I would get it, but*

now I would say like, I can get that job, through the new skills I've gained or through the experiences I have. (P1)

d) **Nurturing their wellbeing:** in the context of personal growth, most participants talked about the need to balance their lives between paid work, study and relaxation, to promote their wellbeing and be able to study and focus without getting stressed and burning out: *'You're thinking about […] different assignments or how to work this or how to do that. You're in your mind all day but when you're working (on paid work), you can think of other things. So that rests your mind a bit.' (P1).*

3. **Feeling at ease in the environment:** All participants talked about feelings of comfort and ease as they gradually became "embedded" (P2) in university life. The only student who did not feel totally at ease was a Hindu student who felt Muslim students were given preferential treatment, with their own prayer rooms. She spoke about cultural clashes between these two religious groups which left her feeling uncomfortable on occasions. Nevertheless, for this student, as well as the other participants, feelings of being at ease in the environment manifested themselves in knowledge of the systems as well as feelings of physical comfort as they found ways of working that suited them.

a) **Getting used to the system:** gaining confidence as they became familiar with both the university environment and its systems helped participants feel involved as they progressed from Year 1: *'With each year of doing university, you get more and more experience. You build a system in place, so you understand how everything works […] who to go to, what to do and what you submit in assignments. First Year you're trying to break the decipher code and then before you know it, you understand the whole thing' (P1), 'First year in halls, that introduction is closer to the university culture, then from there you could commute because you're already embedded.' (P2), 'Knowing that you can (ask for support from tutors) and how much help you can ask for, I suppose it's something you've had to learn […] it sort of like opens up the pathway to your studies.' (P6)*

b) **Feeling comfortable in the environment:** for most participants feeling relaxed and comfortable working at the university and being able to work flexibly, in ways that suited them, underpinned their experience of engagement in their studies. In this respect the role of the university library was a major driver of engagement as it was seen as a pleasant and comfortable environment and was highly valued by all participants*: 'I love the library. Yeah. I like the fact that, um…you could actually just be in a little corner with your laptop, just getting on with it, and everybody can kind of see that you're doing your work and they all just get on with whatever they're getting on with' (P4)*

4. **Investing in the university experience to get the most out of it:** all participants shared a commitment and engagement to their study which was driven by the knowledge that they would only get out of it what they were prepared to put into it. All had made a definite decision to study, albeit driven by different circumstances: two had had negative experiences and false starts at other universities (P3 and 5), two had decided to study as a mature student (P4 and 6) and two had decided to continue their studies with a Masters degree (P1 and 2). All were living at home with families, but all were making the effort to commute to campus three or four days a week, spending extended periods of time there in lectures and seminars, and in the library studying. Most were also juggling jobs with university study, organising their lives, setting goals and disciplining themselves so that they could focus and spend long days at the university when they had the opportunity. This research took place after the first Covid lockdown when the participants had experienced not being able to be on campus and all had missed contact with friends and tutors, as well as the ability to work in the library. Most importantly, the ability to spend time at the university, away from their home environment, with all its distractions, was appreciated more than ever once the campus was reopened. The importance of setting goals was highlighted as even more important during the pandemic due to the challenges of remaining focused at home.

a) **Proactively changing their mindset: goal-setting and self-discipline:** several participants had made a determined effort to adopt a particular approach and way of viewing their study to get the best results possible: *'And so I got into it and I said, okay, I'm going to do this full time. That means I'm going to devote my full time into this no matter what and if I don't like it tough, you know, it's all about hard work. So, living with that mindset the first year really helped me get good grades. (P5); 'So (in the workplace) you sort of know what you're working towards […] it's like one, two, three, you're going to get that much. You know? Whereas with assignments, you're having to think harder and you have to reflect on modules. That's a lot of reflection […] compared to accounting […] So definitely different mindsets are*

necessary.' (P6); '(I've learnt) you've got to look at glass half full kind of thing.' (P1). Most spoke about keeping focused by applying structure and self-discipline to their lives at university to ensure their study came first: *'I have made a few friends actually, which is really good [...] but sometimes I do sit on my own, and it doesn't bother me because sometimes it's better to just stay on your own. You don't get distracted' (P3),* while others were setting themselves specific goals: *'(During Covid-19) I set myself goals, like to complete 200 words per day until the deadline date. It was good because having to write only that many words each day allowed me to focus on the quality of those words [...] and when I would complete them on time, as I'd have the freedom to do whatever I liked for the rest of the day.' (P5)*

b) **Getting into the zone:** making sure they were in a productive work environment, conducive to concentration, application and the right state of mind was also important for dedication to their study: *'(The library) feels like a study environment, you naturally feel more productive. (P3); 'I know in the library, I'm going to work, [...] my mind is set. It's the environment that sort of creates the productivity for me.' (P6)*

c) **Actively contributing and collaborating**: working together with lecturers as a team and recognising the importance of their own contribution to learning was expressed by several participants who did not see themselves as passive recipients of knowledge but rather as active creators of their own academic success: *'And I think, um, [...] you're like a canvas that the university tries to build a portrait of or an artwork. You have to try to engage with that [...] because even though they're the ones trying to make the portrait, you've got to really support them [...] because if you help them, you could make an amazing piece of art together.' (P1).* Becoming self-reliant and autonomous, and developing self-motivation was seen as critical for becoming an equal participant in their educational journey: *'I think it's important for (students) to understand there's a lot of independence at university. You have to take initiative by yourself. You can't just rely on [...] lecturers and teachers just similar to high school and, Sixth Form. I think there's a lot of self-motivation, if I was to use the word.' (P5)*

d) **Valuing education**: for one participant a culture of valuing education, embedded in his BAME family background, was an additional reason for engagement and application: *'So setting aside religion, some of it was probably from culture, uh, you know, my family being Muslim, there are a lot of values we hold, right [...] one of them being integrity and having morals and stuff like that [...] knowledge is really valuable for us [...] like my dad's dad will tell him, uh, the importance of education and his dad was telling him the tradition and they'll just go on from there (P5)*

5. **Enjoying the experience of intellectual stimulation and academic success:** feeling pleasure and enjoyment in their university experience was, not surprisingly, a motivation for all participants to engage with it:

    a) **Loving the challenge**: several participants clearly enjoyed the challenge of academic learning: *'I enjoy learning because you can see the results very clearly [...] you see a grade or a classification or you see a result, right in front of you.' (P2)*

    b) **Interest in what they are studying**: for some participants engagement is driven by a very real interest in the subject matter of their course which facilitates good results and in turn promotes further engagement in their studies: *'During my second year, um, I took on modules that I really liked. I then got amazing grades. I got 83 for one of my modules that I really enjoyed. (P5); 'I hadn't done project management, you know, and so everything I was learning was fresh information. I found it really interesting.' (P4)*

    c) **Pride in their achievements**: pride also plays a part in positive and pleasurable feelings of involvement and achievement, with enjoyable rites of passage such as graduation or selection for programmes or key roles clearly promoting this: *'I'd say (at graduation) everyone even talked about this. All your hard work and yeah [...] you'll remember it, a sense of pride and happiness (P1); 'I was so happy when the staff selected me for the consulting module this year [...] I was happy...that I'm seen as somebody committed and wants to do well (P3); '(Being President of the Business Society) was the most positive, being able to lead a team, that opportunity [...] in terms of everyone coming to you and looking up to you to, to make a final decision and also even have, um, the Director of the Business School inquiring about the business society. So, [...] that was a great personal experience for me' (P6)*

6. **Driven by ambition and passion:** most participants were clear about where their study fitted on their life plan and were driven by commitment to their goals and life ambitions. Study for these participants was as much about a means to an end as it was about the experience itself and this kept them engaged in their study:

a) **Driven by competition**: some participants were highly ambitious and determined to be the best, and the experience of competing was driving them forward: *'I really want the First for that, when I come out [...] I hope I can get into, um, a graduate job with, you know, a good company or something that's prestigious and in something that I really enjoy, that's the motivation.' (P3); 'Um, it's knowing what my end goal is. I've decided ... I'll be going into management consultancy and to do that I've got to do something within my expertise. I've got to be (the best), an expert in an area so to be enabled to do that, I've got to deliver.' (P4).*

7. **Finding and following their passion**: for participants who had lost their passion before university, the experience of finding a new passion was a powerful motivator to concentrate on their studies *'(My job) was no longer challenging for me [...] I no longer aspired to it [...] in (the) future. And I no longer looked up to people that I used to look up to who were like in the accountancy world [...] So I sort of lost that passion completely. (Now I've regained passion) for something totally different which I always knew I had, but I never really thought I could get into [...] as a career or something, you know?' (P6).* However, the two Masters students (P1 and P2) were more focused on the social experience of studying and the impact of supportive relationships on their wellbeing. These two students had decided to continue their study at the university due to the quality of relationships with fellow students and staff and, despite the decision to take a Master's degree, were less ambitious and driven than the other participants.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of engaged British BAME students at a London university Business School and the data revealed a high congruence between the experiences of the participants, despite their varying ages, genders and cultural backgrounds. Six superordinate themes were identified which support the existing engagement literature in the context of the micro-environment of the university and the importance of emotional and socio-cultural issues of belonging, identity and empowerment to engagement (Kelly et al., 2011; Kuh, 2009; Mahmoud et al., 2015; Ratliff et al., 2019). The findings differ from the existing literature (Alfano and Eduljee, 2013; Burlison, 2015; Fairchild, 2003; Forbus et al., 2011; Jacoby, 2014), especially institutional reports (Maguire & Morris, 2018; Neves & Hillman, 2019), in terms of the negative impact of the macro-environmental aspects of the students' home, work, travel and family life. These engaged students were all subject to the macro-environmental drivers of disengagement highlighted in the literature. In addition, all were home-based and commuting, and most were juggling paid work or family commitments or both. However, this group of students did not report that these factors were leading to disengagement. This suggests that some BAME students are able to overcome such structural barriers and experience high levels of engagement and involvement in their studies and university life.

The key difference for these students appears to be their commitment to their study, a commitment driven partly by false starts or by being mature students and facilitated by the understanding and support of their families. This links to research conducted in the US (Kuh et al., 2001), which found that mature commuter students were in fact more engaged than the average. The negative impact of being a "commuter" student in the literature is generally linked to a reluctance or inability to travel to campus, with the result that students fail to engage emotionally, as well as practically, with both study and student life (Astin, 1984; Maguire & Morris, 2018). The participants of this study have not let the need to travel to campus deter them. Instead, they found ways to ease the journey, such as traveling early in the morning (P5), or deliberately choosing to study at a university closer to their home (P3 and P4).

Moreover, those juggling several days a week of paid work with their study (P1, P2 and P5) were organising their lives such that they could spend whole days on campus when not working, something which BAME students in the literature have appeared unable to do (Alfano & Eduljee, 2013; Forbus et al., 2011; Mehta et al., 2011; Neves & Hillman, 2019). Furthermore, these students demonstrated feelings of autonomy and self-determination around their jobs, choosing when to work (P1 and P2), rejecting jobs that were proving too stressful and distracting (P3), as well as the type of work they could engage in. This suggests that working while studying is not necessarily a block to engagement, even if the work is not linked to their future profession or takes up more than ten hours a week, aspects which previous research has linked to disengagement (Ratliff et al., 2019). It could be argued, however, that as Business students, any paid work is a good foundation for understanding their chosen subject.

Furthermore, despite living at home with family commitments and distractions, both of which have been linked with disengagement in the literature (Fairchild, 2003; Jacoby, 2014; Wilmes & Quade, 1986), the participants in this study managed to mitigate the impact of this by spending long days on campus, with some even spending nights in the 24-hour library. This supports the importance of the university infrastructure, seen in the literature, in providing positive spaces for commuter students to study and feel at home (Atkins and Oakland, 2008; Forbus et al., 2011; Jacoby, 2000, 2014; Jacoby and Garland, 2004; Maguire and Morris, 2018). Indeed, all participants referenced the challenge of remaining engaged and focused during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, when they could no longer access the campus and the library, underlining the importance of time spent on campus for engagement, referenced in the original student engagement research of Astin (1984). The challenge of remaining focused during home working is also supported by the working from home (WFH) literature which underlines how distracting it can be trying to focus on work in the home environment (Serhan, 2020; Eddleston and Mulki, 2017)

Only one participant spontaneously referenced their "BAMEness" during their interviews and, when prompted, most felt it was an irrelevance, or at the very least something they were not consciously focusing on, as they did not feel BAME in an environment where BAME was the norm. This was even more surprising given the research was conducted during the height of the "Black Lives Matter" movement (*Black Lives Matter*, n.d.). One participant (6) did say it was "refreshing" to find herself in a BAME environment, versus her home town, where she was used to being the only Black person present, in contrast to the other participants who had all grown up in multi-cultural London.

The importance of feelings of belonging, connectedness and positive affirmation of self-identity in driving engagement, which emerged in this research, is well supported in the literature in terms of the importance of positive attitudes towards, and positive relationships with, both peers and lecturers (Arslan & Coşkun, 2023; Fredricks & Paris, 2004; Kelly et al., 2011; Kuh, 2009; Lester, 2013; Mahmoud et al., 2015; Ratliff et al., 2019). This research builds on the findings of previous studies which identified the importance of the support of lecturers and family in driving engagement by bolstering self-esteem and empowering students to feel competent and able to succeed (Rose-Adams, 2014; Singh, 2009; Smith, 2018; Steele and Fullagar, 2009). This study adds to the literature by demonstrating that if this support is tailored to the individual student and delivered through a personalised and informal relationship which develops over time outside of the classroom, it can lead to high levels of engagement, with the student feeling supported both practically and emotionally in an environment where they feel their achievement matters. The emotional and practical support of like-minded fellow students who understand each other, detailed in this research, adds a further dimension to the importance of connection in driving engagement in their studies. It also supports research in the Working from Home (WFH) literature (Xiao et al, 2021; Grant et al, 2013) which underlines the importance of relationships with one's colleagues for mental health and wellbeing when working alone from home, as these participants had had to do during the first Covid-19 lockdown. Having a support network in place appears to have stopped participants in this study feeling isolated and helped them to remain emotionally connected and engaged with the university.

The themes of "Investing in the university experience to get the most out of it" and "Driven by ambition and passion" support the "cognitive" level of engagement referenced by Fredricks and Paris (2004) and Lester (2013), whereby engagement is driven by investment in learning and motivational goals. Goal clarity, together with feelings of empowerment and autonomy, referenced by Steele and Fullagar (2009), and to which the researchers applied the concept of Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992), were also seen in this study in the way participants talked about working in the university library and feeling "in the zone", losing track of time, as they made progress with their work. This ability to experience Flow, and thereby total engagement, was brought into sharp relief for them during the Covid-19 pandemic, when they were forced to work from home, with all its distractions and practical limitations.

Previous research has identified the importance of behaviour in driving engagement (Fredricks & Paris, 2004; Lester, 2013), especially around participation and involvement in learning. This study builds on this by identifying the importance of active collaboration between student and lecturer. Several participants, when talking about investing in the university experience, referenced how they had enjoyed such collaboration and how taking responsibility for their learning, rather than seeing themselves as passive recipients of knowledge, had helped them become more proactive and self-reliant, developing confidence in their ability to succeed and improve, and adopting a positive "growth mindset" of self-belief (Dweck, 1999). This links to Self-determination Theory (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000) whereby intrinsic motivation, which occurs when we take ownership of work, receive support,

feedback and appreciation, and feel we have a degree of autonomy over our work, results in high levels of engagement and performance, as well as higher levels of wellbeing. According to the theory, such motivation can be promoted by "Transformational" leadership (Bass, 1985) where the leader, in this case the lecturer, is inspiring, encouraging and empowering. This is in contrast to "Transactional leadership", where the leader seeks to control through monitoring and rewards. The existing literature has applied "Transformational Leadership" to the classroom context (Pounder, 2014), but has not considered its relevance beyond the classroom. Furthermore, "growth mindset" has been applied mostly as a way of overcoming adversity (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015) rather than as a tool for self-actualisation. This study points to learnings in terms of how lecturers might use these constructs to motivate and empower students and encourage engagement and involvement beyond taught sessions.

The importance of goals for driving involvement, which also emerged in this study, with participants talking about finding and following their passions, underlines the importance of goals in giving meaning and positivity to their experiences. According to Hefferon and Boniwell (2011) striving towards a goal can create greater feelings of wellbeing than achieving the goal itself, which explains the level of energy and engagement participants were bringing to their study. The importance of enjoyment and positive emotions was also seen in how participants spoke about their love of the intellectual challenge of learning, becoming visibly energised in the interviews. This dimension of enjoyment has been limited in the literature to enjoyment in the classroom and future research could profitably focus on enjoyment with study overall to understand its relative importance to engagement.

The emotional dimension of engagement (Fredricks & Paris, 2004; Lester, 2013) also relates to feelings of ease and comfort, and this study builds on this construct by revealing the importance to the student of becoming "embedded" in the university system. Previous research has shown that anxiety levels are highest and self-esteem lowest at the beginning of the university journey (Ratliff et al., 2019), when students are transitioning from school and are unfamiliar with the university environment. Most participants in this study spoke of gaining confidence and feeling increasingly comfortable as they progressed beyond Year 1, such that they felt more able to apply themselves to their work. There are clear implications here for the way in which induction programmes operate within universities and future research could focus on how such programmes can continue to give support beyond the traditional induction period.

Finally, this study identifies a key driver of engagement which is largely absent from the literature, namely the importance of personal growth. Almost all participants talked about their journey of self-discovery and self-development, whereby they felt they were broadening their perspective on life and developing key skills for their future, underpinning the meaning and purpose of their university life. The importance of meaning and purpose to engagement can be explained by the Meaningfulness of Work literature, which emphasises the importance of self-development and the expression of one's full potential to wellbeing, which in turn facilitates involvement and engagement (Lips-Wiersma, 2002a, 2002b; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Lysova et al., 2019). Meaningfulness of Work also emphasises the importance of belonging, identity and self-efficacy (Rosso et al., 2010; Steger, M. F. & Dik, 2010; Steger, 2017) which, as we have seen, emerged as important factors of engagement in this study. Future research into student engagement might fruitfully explore the construct of Meaningfulness of Work in an academic, rather than work context, to determine if its application can shed more light on the determinants of student engagement.

Limitations

The research had to be conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions when the university campus had been closed for several months and students had not had face to face access to fellow students or staff, to campus taught sessions or to the library for some time. Initially, the researcher was concerned that this might limit participants' recall and stop them accessing their engagement experiences fully, as they would be relying on memory for some aspects of the experience. However, this turned out not to be the case, as their experiences were not only emotionally and cognitively fresh, but were also brought into sharp relief by the Covid-19 restrictions, allowing them to appreciate the full range and depth of engagement and involvement they had had with the university prior to its lockdown.

In order to focus on the experience of minority ethnic students the researcher y had to use the Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) classification and definition, as this is used in the existing literature and statistics. The classification was developed from the original "BME" classification, to include "Asian", alongside "Black and Minority Ethnic" to encompass a broad range of different nationalities, cultures and religions. However, this definition is problematic (Panesar, 2017) not only because it categorises all these diverse ethnic groups into one single whole, but also because significant attainment differences can be found between the different BAME sub-groups. For instance, the Black attainment gap is currently around 23%, whereas British Indians and those of Chinese descent are only 5% below the white British attainment level of 81% (Advance HE, 2019). This is a potential issue as attainment has been seen as a proxy for engagement in the literature, suggesting the student experience could also be different among these groups. Thus, focusing research on a BAME sample and treating it as homogeneous has drawbacks. Nevertheless, as a way of distinguishing this group from the prevailing white British majority, the BAME classification serves a pragmatic purpose. Future research, however, might potentially look in more detail at the different BAME sub-groups, to identify any differences in experiences that did not emerge in this study.

Conclusion

This study has given voice to engaged BAME university students and has shed light on the nature of their experience, demonstrating that engagement can exist for BAME home-based commuter students, despite its absence in the literature. The importance to engagement of the emotional dimensions of belonging and connectedness, seen in the previous literature, has been confirmed in this study, and for these BAME students, attending a university where most students are BAME, has facilitated this. An interesting question for future research is whether BAME students in white-dominated university environments can experience the same levels of engagement.

The study has revealed the importance to engagement of the role of "growth mindset" as a tool for self-actualisation and not just as a way of dealing with adversity. The committed students in this research had developed intrinsic motivation based on the desire to develop and improve themselves through their university careers. The study also highlights the importance of purpose and meaning to engagement, linking to the Meaningfulness of Work literature. Future research might fruitfully explore to what extent these ideas from the world of work can be applied to the academic context to shed light on the experience of student engagement overall.

Finally, this study has implications for how universities can promote engagement and help students become "embedded" in university life, where they feel their presence and performance matter. It points to the potential application of the principles of "Transformational Leadership" beyond the classroom context, as a way of inspiring and empowering students to take charge of their own learnings. A better understanding of how BAME students experience university life is critical for developing strategies to address their persistent under-attainment and this study contributes to this understanding by highlighting what a positive experience of university engagement can feel like for these students.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Standards
The authors declare that this study has been conducted within the strict guidelines of the Ethics Boards of both the University of East London and the University of Roehampton, following the granting of ethics approval.

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Author Contributions

AB was the main research coordinator of the study and contributed to all steps of the research process. She conducted the research, ran the analysis and wrote the manuscript. CvN oversaw the study, contributed to the analysis and edited the manuscript. Both authors approved the submitted version.

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