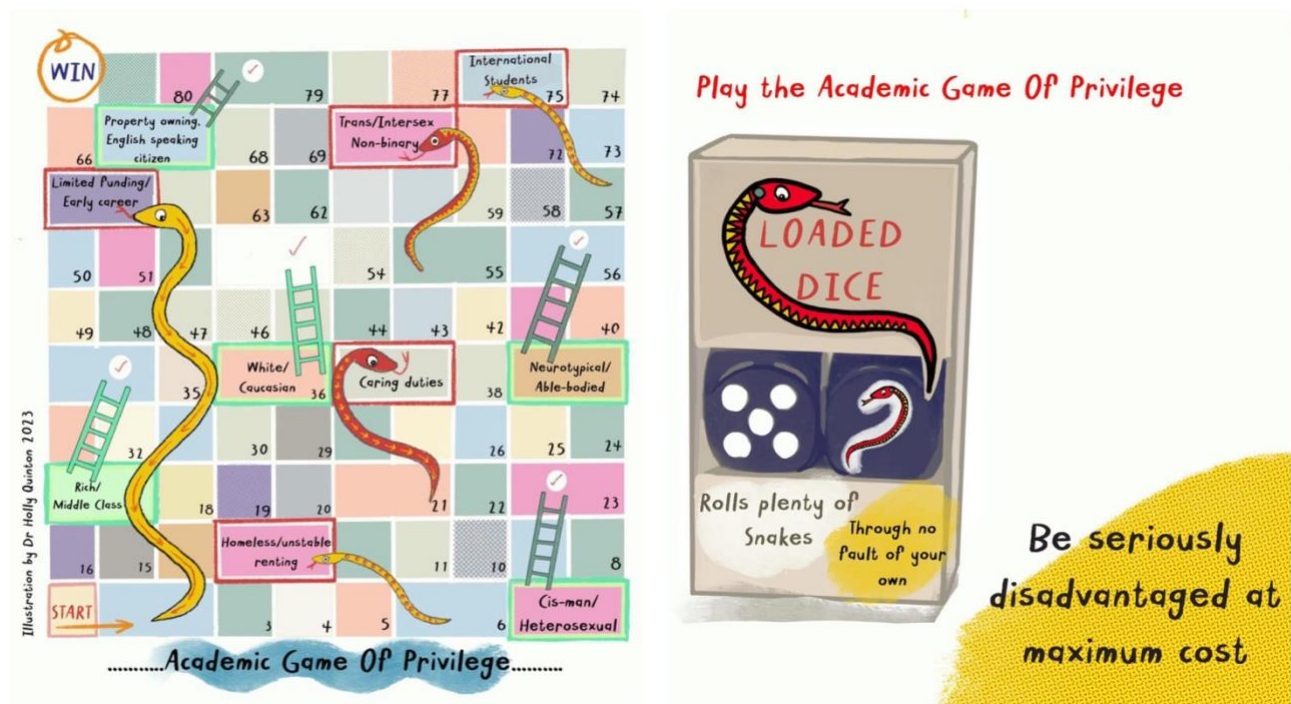# The Game of Academic Privilege: An Exploration of Differential Attainment at the University of Manchester

Final report: 2025

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Table of Contents

Foreword: University of Manchester Students' Union

Looking at differential attainment is extremely important to ensuring that every single student can thrive at the university, with no institutional barriers to attaining academic excellence. The persistent awarding gap in higher education represents one of the most pressing challenges facing our university sector today. Our recent Students' Union-led access and participation plan consultations have laid bare not just the statistical disparities in degree outcomes but also revealed variations in how different student groups experience and access institutional support.

Our data shows that students from certain backgrounds consistently achieve lower degree classifications than their peers, despite entering with equivalent qualifications. This awarding gap, particularly pronounced for Black students, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic students, as well as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, represents a systematic inequality that the university, as an institution, have both the power and the responsibility to address. Degree classifications have an influence on future employment opportunities and access to further education, so not addressing this issue could reinforce social inequalities beyond university. It is therefore very important for the university to work in partnership with the Students' Union to come up with a collective approach to tackling some of the issues presented by this paper, ensuring that student voice is always at the forefront of decision-making that will affect the lives of students.

We are pleased to see that the university has identified student concerns around representation within the institution, specifically in relation to racial diversity and disability inclusion. Additionally, we value the university highlighting that we need to improve financial support for underrepresented groups, which was cited as the top barrier for students in the Student Submission for the Access and Participation Plan (APP). We also welcome the recommendations surrounding international students, highlighting that there are specific challenges faced when it comes to academic support as well as the wider environment within universities, which currently don't prioritise tailored support for international students. We believe all the recommendations set out in this paper will be incredibly impactful in the attempt to reduce differential attainment, with a key focus being reviewing assessment and curriculum content to reflect the diverse student body we have and ensuring we consider non-Eurocentric perspectives as a practice across the institution.

We hope to see the university committed to working in partnership with the Students' Union to implement these recommendations and ensure an overarching commitment to improving the lives of those who currently face barriers within their education, which leads to differential attainment across the institution. We believe that these recommendations will really enrich the lives of our students and reflect the needs and wants of our diverse student body.

University of Manchester Students' Union

List of abbreviations and acronyms

BAME   Black Asian and Minority Ethnic

CMO   Context-Mechanism-Outcome

CMOC   Context-Mechanism-Outcome Configuration

DA   Differential Attainment

EDI   Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion

FtP   Fitness to Practice

IELTS   International English Language Testing System

OfS   Office for Students

PGR   Postgraduate Research

PGT   Postgraduate Taught

TLSG   Teaching and Learning Strategy Group

UoM   University of Manchester

WA   Widening Access

WP   Widening Participation

Executive summary:

The report examines the differential attainment of students within the University of Manchester, with a particular focus on how certain groups' experience varies in terms of academic performance and progression. The University of Manchester is held to account for these 'awarding gaps' by the Office of Students and addressing them must be a priority. Based on a series of interviews with students, academic staff and university support services staff, the research captured diverse perspectives across demographic characteristics and areas of the student experience. Secondary data from workshops, data dashboards, and reports were also considered. The findings highlight key barriers, challenges and opportunities for improvement in fostering an inclusive and equitable academic environment. The analysis of the findings was done using realist methodology to highlight the context, mechanisms and outcomes of the key findings. The findings and proposed recommendations are in line with the Access and Participation Plan (APP) 2025-26 to 2028-29 and are supported by the findings of the National Student Survey (NSS).

Key Findings:

1. **Space and Physical Environment:** The physical spaces available within the University were often not fit for purpose, felt unwelcoming, or were over stimulating for students with additional needs. Thus, students felt discouraged from using these spaces, which affected their well-being and academic performance.

2. **Representation:** There is a lack of diversity in the staff members of the University. Students do not see themselves represented within their learning environment, and do not receive mentorship from people who understand their lived experience. Consequentially, students often do not aspire to progress within academia and the pipeline of racially diverse academics remains broken.

3. **International Students:** International students reported feeling uncomfortable seeking help from university and external support services because of cultural taboos. They also felt additional pressures from sponsorship obligations, studying in a second language and caring responsibilities.

4. **Basic Hierarchy of Needs:** Students reported struggling to afford reasonable accommodation, a lack of institutional support in resolving issues, and the anxiety and financial implications associated with fines for breaches. Furthermore, students reported difficulties associated with the cost of living which resulted in most having to work and yet still struggling to pay for necessities like food and heating.

5. **Curricula and Assessment**: Inconsistent teaching, assessment, and feedback including variations in marking criteria, feedback clarity, and faculty assumptions about prior knowledge and academic skills mean that students have misaligned expectations of assessments. International students feel disadvantaged and discriminated against because of the unfamiliarity of the UK education system. Underrepresented groups feel disadvantaged because the curriculum is overwhelmingly Eurocentric, and they do not see themselves represented.

Recommendations:

1. **Improved facilities for disabled students and staff:** Ensure that spaces that are meant to be inclusive are developed in a manner that takes into consideration the neurodivergent community as well as those with physical disabilities. This can include, for example, making study spaces silent and well lit, whilst assuring that these do not trigger the sensory issues of neurodivergent individuals. It is imperative to shift institutional attitudes to accommodate diverse learning needs rather than expecting students to conform to abled norms.

2. **Increased representation of underrepresented communities:** Promote greater diversity within the faculty and leadership teams, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds can see themselves represented at all levels of the University. Mentorship and leadership development programmes should be tailored to provide guidance to underrepresented groups.

3. **Address cultural and linguistic barriers for international students:** Introduce more targeted academic mentoring and support schemes which provide assistance and guidance to those who are new to the UK education system and those who do not see themselves represented within the higher education system. These should be designed to address the barriers that students face including access to resources, fostering a sense of belonging, English language support, financial guidance, etc.

4. **Address student accommodation concerns**: Students expressed a concern with adequate housing and not being able to afford the cost of basic needs such as heating. Housing maintenance issues should not cause the students an inordinate amount of stress, thus the process may need review.

5. **Provide transparent, targeted and useful feedback for assessment**: Students require clear, consistent and concise feedback that they can use to progress throughout their academic career. Essentially students should be given feedback that aids in the development of their writing and study. To enable this, academics should be given adequate time and resources to provide such feedback.

1. Addressing awarding gaps

1.1 Introduction

The term Differential attainment (DA) is bandied about within Higher Education (HE), often being used interchangeably with the term 'awarding gaps'. Differential attainment is the variation in attainment between groups of students who share a protected characteristics and those who do not share the same characteristic, for example, Black and White students, or those with and without disabilities (de Bere, 2015). The variation is often unexplained, i.e. remains unaccounted for even after controlling for prior attainment and background characteristics (Morrison et al., 2005). DA is often spoken about in terms of degree awarding gaps, which is the difference in the proportion of 'good degrees' (a First or 2:1 classification) awarded to different groups of students. However, DA is wider: it can occur on several axes, such as employability, or graduate outcomes (Ng et al., 2005), as well as degree outcomes. With respect to awarding gaps, the biggest differences are found by ethnic background (Woolf et al., 2013). For example, Black students are less likely than White students to achieve a top degree (Stevenson, 2012). Universities are held to account for our awarding gaps by the Office for Students (OfS) and we are also expected to propose remedies and targets through the APP.

DA is poorly understood; many institutions assert that they will close their awarding gaps without truly being able to articulate the causes of such gaps. It is often assumed that differences in performance might relate to language skills, prior academic performance, socioeconomic status, or even examiner bias (Mountford-Zimdars, 2015). Most rhetoric around causes of DA focuses on assessment (Woolf et al., 2013). However, extant research has also focused upon many characteristics of differing student outcomes, including ethnicity (Woolf et al., 2013; Woolf et al., 2011), race (Fyfe et al., 2022), international versus home students (Gemmell and Harrison, 2023). Further, research has previously addressed DA in different settings, such as postgraduate courses (Shah and Ahluwalia, 2019), online courses (Gemmell and Harrison, 2023), and surgical students (Jones et al., 2024).

This report examines the issues surrounding differential attainment at the University of Manchester. Despite the institutional focus on creating an inclusive learning environment, disparities in academic outcomes persist, disproportionately affecting Black, Asian and Disabled students.

Differential attainment is influenced by a range of contexts including the economic, political, and sociocultural, and that many numerous mechanisms, overt and tacit, influence the outcomes of students (General Medical Council, 2015; Mountford-Zimdars, 2015). The study explores the underlying causes of differential attainment, using interviews conducted with students, academic staff and support services. Interview data was triangulated with routinely collected data such as malpractice case demographics, and reports on access, progression and success (summarised in Figure 1).

The interviews conducted for this report offer an in-depth examination of the student and staff experience. As a result, several key themes emerged, including: a lack of representation of underrepresented groups, deficient accommodations for disabled students, increasingly difficult financial situations, and ineffective assessment and feedback mechanisms. This report provides evidence-based recommendations for how to address these inadequacies. To ensure that the University of Manchester is providing an inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students, the issues found within this report should be addressed.

The following sections provide an in-depth overview of the theoretical basis for the work, the methodology used, the findings and the recommendations.

2. Research Methods

The project has involved a mixture of research methods (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) to answer the research questions utilising a realist approach (see Table 1 and Figure 1 for more detail), including:

- Scoping phase - development of the remit of the study in consultation with Teaching and Learning Strategy Group (TLSG) colleagues, rapid literature review, initial interviews with UoM staff and students.
- Document reviews - looking at any existing documentation pertaining to student awarding gaps, access, participation, progression and success.
- Qualitative interviews - realist interviews with staff and students across the spectrum of the institution (see Table 2 for demographics).
- Learning events – the research team presented at several learning events to share and triangulate emerging findings (e.g. Heads' Meeting, Teaching and Learning Forum)

Table 1. Using the realist approach

Realist approach
- We have employed realist evaluation techniques to elicit student experiences of their learning journey to identify key mechanisms that may lead to differential attainment.   - We have ensured that a diverse range of individuals were interviewed relating to various demographic characteristics, and areas of the student experience.   - Realist techniques have ensured that we pay close attention to the mechanisms of action to track how individuals in different contexts may require and experience different support needs.   - We worked with the University of Manchester key stakeholders to produce a series of learning events in which participants gave feedback on and discussed ways to utilise our findings.   - The purpose of a realist evaluation is to inform and develop a programme theory which seeks to unpick the various components of the experiences and understand how they may or may not lead to certain outcomes at different times.   - The programme theory therefore will provide a rich source of evidence which can form the bedrock of ongoing scholarly and pragmatic inquiry to test and refute the programme theory.   - Avenues of investigation for further data collection and guidance on types of data have been identified based on existing sources.
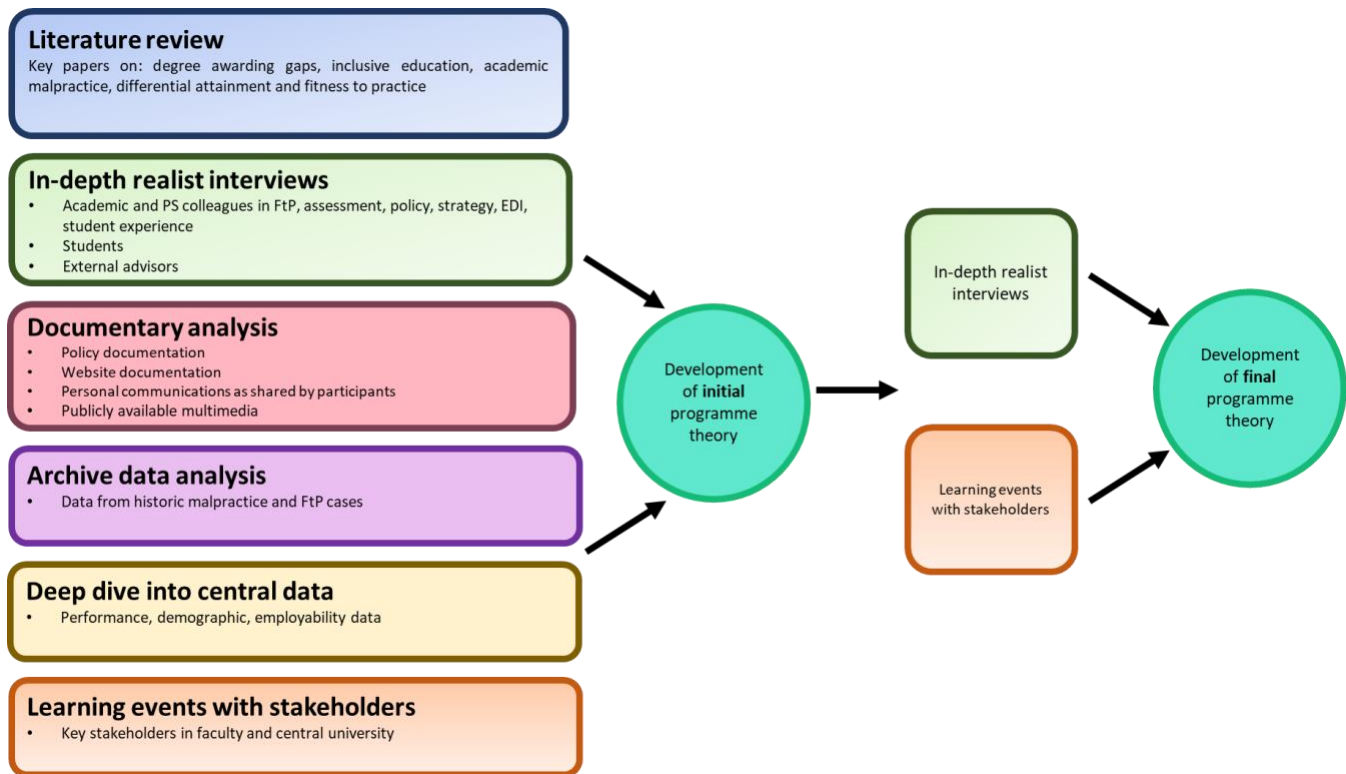
Figure 1. Overview of methodology.

2.1 Research questions

To address the overall research aims, the overarching research questions were:

How does students' attainment relate to their protected characteristics (e.g., WP, ethnicity, religion, domicile/international, in care, ability etc.)?

Why is there a gap in attainment? What are the contributing factors to this gap?

What privilege exists within the system? How can we counter it/ build awareness?

How can UoM help students improve their attainment?

What are the experiences of students with different protected characteristics?

As described above, the realist approach employs a suite of methods. However, interviews were the primary mode of data collection and thus are described below.

2.2 Sampling, framing and interpretation

Purposive sampling was applied to this research, which results in skewed views reflecting often negative opinions (Ahmad and Wilkins, 2024; Guarte and Barrios, 2006; Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling is a measured approach to selecting the participants wherein their potential experiences and views are taken into consideration to ensure that they are relevant to the research questions (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This sampling methodology was chosen because of the research questions being asked, which required the participant to have an understanding or experience with

differential attainment in the higher education sector. The framing of the questions resulted in the opinions and views of participants being asked about an inherently negative topic, i.e. differential attainment. The choice to address differential attainment requires the understanding of participant views that result in different experiences and outcomes for students, which tend to be negatively skewed. As a result, the findings in this report tend to reflect negative experiences of students and staff that they felt result in differential attainment. These views and opinions are individual to participants and although the university may have resources or solutions to the problems described in this report, the participants were either unaware or unable to utilise those resources. Because participants were unaware or unable to utilise resources, this results in their lived experience and there being no attainable solution for them, which validates their experiences and thus should be addressed by the University. Whether the solutions are simply improving the communication of resources or the development of new initiatives, the University should address the recommendations discussed here because they are valid to the individual experiences of students and staff at the University.

Although primarily the views expressed by the participants are negative, there were elements of their university experience that were positive. For example, one participant expressed a facilitator to their attainment being their involvement with the counselling service, which showcases that via university resources they were able to improve their attainment. Another participant was content with the level of university resources and the support that they were offered. Further, others expressed gratitude at the financial support (e.g. the Cost-of-Living Payment) offered by the University. There were further examples of positive experiences that individuals had, however, for the purposes of this research, these experiences did not explain the differential attainment of students and therefore are not the focus of this report.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Staff were approached directly based on their positions within the University. Students were recruited through announcements, referral, and social media posts. Realist interviews were conducted either in person or via video conferencing, utilizing an interview guide. Consent was also re-confirmed at the start of the interview. Snowball sampling was also used, where participants were able to refer others for interviews. Participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms. All participants were informed how their data would be used and stored, as well as of their freedom to withdraw at any point up until the production of final dissemination materials e.g. reports, videos etc. Data were analysed in accordance with realist methods and CMOs were identified and configured.

2.4 Data Characteristics

There were 123 participants who were interviewed, 91 of which were students. Participant demographics are provided in Table 2. A large proportion of participants fell into these categories: female, international, white ethnicity and not disabled.

Table 2. The demographics of the interview participants.

Category		Count	Percentage
Gender	Female	74	60.16
	Male	46	37.40
	Not Provided	3	2.44
Disability	N/A	98	79.67
	Yes	20	16.26
	No	5	4.07
Home/International Student	International	64	70.33
	Home	27	29.67
Staff	No	84	68.29
	Yes	32	26.02
	RA/GTA	7	5.69
Ethnicity	White - English/Welsh/Northern Irish/British	31	25.41
	Asian or Asian British - Indian	18	14.75
	Chinese	15	12.30
	Other White Background	11	9.02
	Other Asian Background	10	8.20
	Black or Black British - African	10	8.20
	Not Provided	8	6.50
	Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	5	4.10
	Arab	4	3.28
	Other Mixed Background	3	2.46
	Other Ethnic Background	3	2.46
	Black or Black British - Caribbean	1	0.82
	Asian or Asian British - Bangladeshi	1	0.82
	Mixed - White and Black Caribbean	1	0.82
	Mixed - White and Black African	1	0.82
Faculty	Humanities	47	38.21
	Biology, Medicine and Health	38	30.89
	Science and Engineering	24	19.51
	Central	11	8.94
	Not Provided	2	1.63
	External	1	0.81

2.5 Programme theory development

In line with realist methods (Pawson and Tilley, 1997), an initial programme theory was developed following a rapid review of the literature and initial scoping interviews. The initial programme theory is delineated in Figure 2.

The programme theory was refined as data were collected and analysed, and iterations were consulted upon at learning events, **r**esulting in the final programme theory seen in Figure 3. This figure delineates the vast range of factors that are associated with differential attainment, showing the contexts in which it occurs, the mechanisms which contribute to it, and the outcomes that result from it. Due to the complexity, it was not possible to illustrate the connections between each context, mechanism, and outcome. Instead, additional representative graphics were produced, these will be presented within the results section. However, the programme theory is best illustrated by the graphic representation in Figure 4, which depicts the game of Snakes and Ladders, and loaded dice as a metaphor for the academic privilege or disadvantage some student groups face as a result of their intersectional identities and the associated co-dependencies. The programme theory and some illustrative quotes were shared with a visual artist who worked with Gabrielle Finn to develop the diagram as an analogy for the experiences students described.

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-

Culture
• International students
• NHS alien
• UK context is alien
 	
Student experience
• Place
• Belonging
• Loneliness
• Customer/consumer
 	
Societal issues
• Systemic racism
• Misogyny
• Ableism
• Impact of Covid
 	
Institutional context
• Russell group
• Widening access agenda
• Underfunded and under resources
 	
International students
• 2nd language issues
• Different background
• Lack of research-led teaching and exposure
	• Negative institutional culture
	• Systemic racism
	• Insufficient induction
	• Poor support
	  • DASS, student support, academic advice
	• Personal attributes and abilities
	  • internalised inferiority/deficit and stereotype threat
	• Underlying assumptions
	• Inconsistent assessment experiences
	• Assessments bound in culture and value
	• Time, priorities, and conflicting agendas
		• Poorer degree outcomes
		• Students withdrawing
		• Increased malpractice/ FtP referrals

Figure 2. Initial programme theory

Contexts

- **University**
  Size and shape of UoM / Russell Group/ UoM as an entity
- **Working/ learning environment**
  Remote working / commuter students/ hybrid and distance learning
- **Space and physical environment**
- **Cultural and societal**
- **Protected characteristics & intersecting identities**
- **International student**
  Sponsorship/ visa/ first language
- **COVID-19**
- **Economic and political**
- **Curriculum and assessment**
- **Life outside the institution**

Mechanisms +/-

- **Cultural awareness**
- **Institutional support**
- **Student voice**
- **Financial aid and income**
  Cost of living crisis / bursaries/ scholarships/ hardship funds / employment
- **Communication**
  Service/ initiatives / support
- **Culture**
  Blame/ accountability/ support / value
- **Imposter syndrome**
- **Additional responsibility**
- **Representation**
- **Pressure**
  Internal and external
- **Mental and physical wellbeing**
- **Bias and discrimination**
- **Hidden curriculum**
- **Inclusion and exclusion**

Outcomes +/-

- **Progression**
- **Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities**
- **Attainment / good degree outcomes**
- **Mental and physical well-being**
- **Inclusion**
- **Academic malpractice/ Fitness to Practice case**
- **Racist incident**
- **Withdrawal from programme**
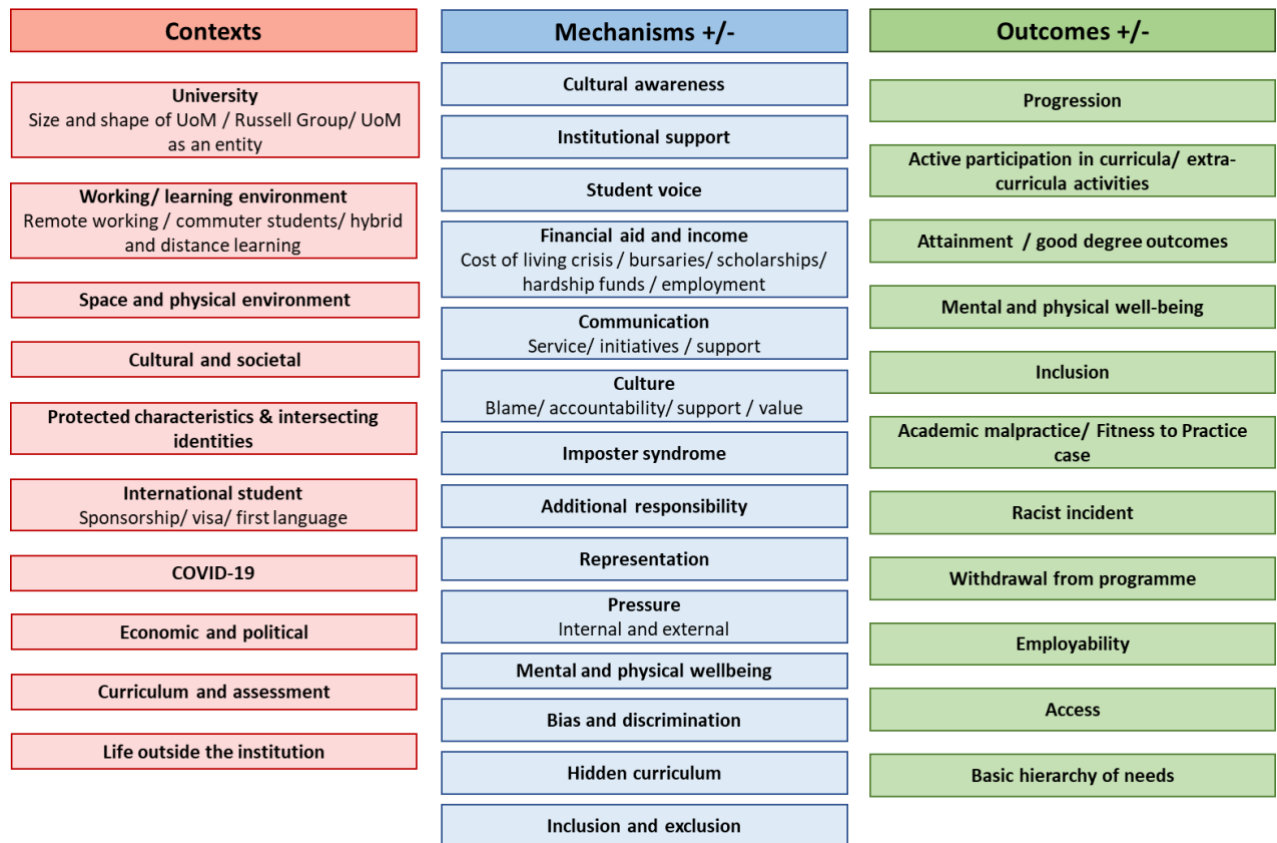- **Employability**
- **Access**
- **Basic hierarchy of needs**

Figure 3. Final programme theory

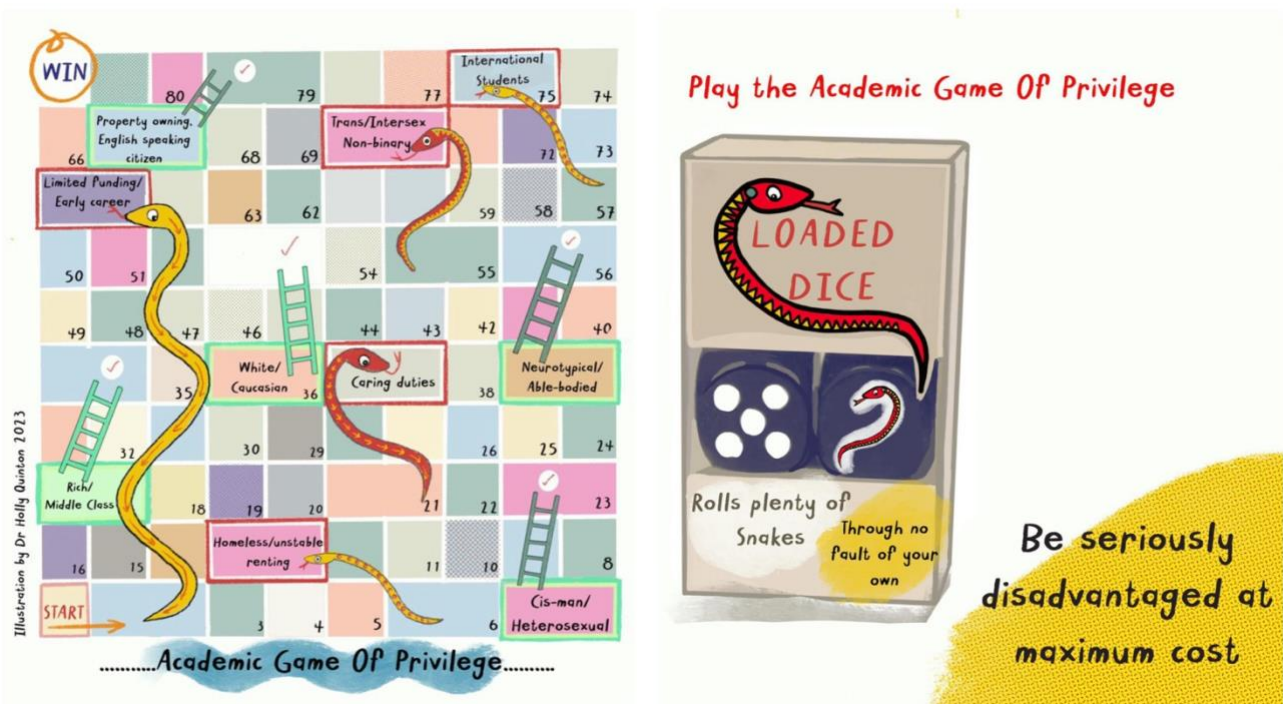*Figure 4. Snakes and Ladders: The Academic Game of Privilege*

3. Contexts, Mechanisms and Outcomes

As per the final programme theory, ten contexts were identified:

1. **The University** - the size and shape of UoM/Russell Group/UoM as an entity
2. **The working and learning environment -** including remote working, commuter students, and hybrid delivery
3. **Space and the physical environment**
4. **Cultural and societal contexts**
5. **Protected characteristics & intersecting identities**
6. **International student status** – including sponsorship, visas, and language
7. **COVID-19 pandemic**
8. **Economic and political contexts**
9. **Curriculum and assessment**
10. **Life outside the institution**

Due to the intersectional identities of students, the mechanisms operating within each context are not mutually exclusive. There are many co-dependencies.

The mechanisms leading to differential attainment identified were the absence or presence of:

1. **Cultural awareness**
2. **Institutional support**
3. **Student voice**
4. **Financial aid and income** – including the cost-of-living crisis, bursaries, scholarships, hardship funds and employment
5. **Communication** – particularly around services, initiatives and support
6. **Culture** – including blame, accountability, support and value
7. **Imposter syndrome**
8. **Additional responsibility** – caring, children etc.
9. **Representation** -particularly concerning race and disability
10. **Pressure** - internal and external
11. **Mental and physical wellbeing**
12. **Bias and discrimination**
13. **Hidden curriculum**
14. **Inclusion and exclusion**

The mechanisms within each context resulted in several outcomes that were associated with attainment. Students frequently experienced more than one outcome. Outcomes were differently experienced in that for some students they occurred, and others they were absent. The outcomes identified were:

1. **Progression**

2. **Active participation in curricula and extra-curricular activities**
3. **Attainment or good degree outcomes**
4. **Mental and physical well-being**
5. **Inclusion**
6. **Academic malpractice or Fitness to Practice case**
7. **Racist incidents**
8. **Withdrawal from programme**
9. **Employability**
10. **Access**
11. **Basic hierarchy of needs** - e.g. food, shelter, warmth etc.

Due to the vast nature of the data, it is impractical to provide examples of each CMO. Thus, the most pertinent examples are included. The Context-Mechanism-Outcome Configuration (CMOC) is shown for each example in the following section and examples from interviews provide an additional illustration that reinforces the research results. Table 3 summarises the key issues by student group (Black, Asian, Disabled) and some pertinent themes (AI, malpractice, mental health and wellbeing, curriculum and assessment). It is important to note that these are brief headlines, and that the issues are not mutually exclusive due to students' intersecting identities and experiences.

Summary of headline issues based on themes and student populations

Table 3. Key issues by student group or major theme:

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING ISSUES:	CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT ISSUES:
• Long waiting times for counselling and therapy services. • Limited availability of culturally competent mental health support. • Lack of awareness about available university mental health resources. • High levels of stress and burnout, particularly during assessment periods. • Pressure to succeed, especially among first-generation and international students. • Impostor syndrome, particularly among Black and minority ethnic students. • Delays in accessing ADHD, autism, and other disability assessments. • Inconsistent implementation of reasonable adjustments. • Sensory overload issues in lecture halls and campus spaces (e.g., lighting, noise). • Some students, particularly from Asian, African, and Middle Eastern backgrounds,	• Inconsistent grading criteria across departments and modules. • Lack of clear feedback, making it difficult for students to improve. • Perceived biases in marking, particularly affecting minority and international students. • Over-reliance on traditional exams, disadvantaging neurodivergent and disabled students. • Limited use of alternative assessments (e.g., coursework, presentations, portfolios). • Rigid deadlines that do not consider students' diverse needs (e.g., chronic health conditions). • Large lecture groups limit student engagement and personalized support. • Limited one-on-one interactions with lecturers, making it harder for students to seek help.

- face stigma around seeking mental health support.
- Fear of disclosing mental health conditions due to perceived academic consequences.
- Lack of peer support networks for mental health and well-being.
- Cost-of-living challenges impacting food security and housing stability.
- Students working part-time jobs face time management challenges, reducing their ability to engage in well-being activities.
- International students face additional financial stress due to visa restrictions on work hours.
- Well-being programs are often underpublicized, leading to low engagement.
- Reactive rather than proactive approach to mental health support.
- Lack of integration between academic, disability, and mental health services.

- Some students feel disconnected from their learning experience due to passive teaching methods.
- Some students struggle with adapting to critical and discursive writing styles in UK universities.
- Lack of clarity around plagiarism and referencing expectations.
- First-generation students may lack guidance on how to navigate academic expectations.
- Curriculum content does not always align with industry needs, reducing employability.
- Lack of practical, skills-based learning in some degree programs.
- Limited opportunities for interdisciplinary learning.
- Unequal contributions in group work leading to grade inflation for some students.
- Language barriers and cultural differences affecting group collaboration.
- Some students feel forced into leadership roles in group assessments.

AI ISSUES:
- AI-generated essays, unreliable detection tools, pressure to use AI due to peer behaviour, evolving contract cheating.
- STEM subjects highly vulnerable, humanities somewhat protected, medical/applied sciences in between, traditional assessments becoming outdated.
- AI aids learning but may replace critical thinking, AI-powered feedback has pros and cons, AI improves accessibility.
- Universities struggle to create AI policies, shifting towards AI literacy, detection software has flaws.

BLACK STUDENTS:
- Persistent attainment gap, lack of Black lecturers, implicit bias in assessment, limited representation in the curriculum.
- Racial profiling, lack of trust in institutional support, microaggressions, segregation in accommodation.
- High impostor syndrome, focus on survival rather than success, lack of Black counsellors, limited awareness of support services.
- Few Black professionals in certain industries, underrepresentation in leadership roles, lack of tailored career services.

ASIAN STUDENTS:
- Struggles with academic writing, language barriers, cultural deference to authority, difficulty adapting to UK-style assessments.
- Social isolation, lack of representation among faculty, microaggressions, difficulties integrating with domestic students.
- Limited internship opportunities, high parental expectations, strong focus on structured career planning from an early age.

DISABLED STUDENTS:
- Poor building access, inadequate disability-friendly spaces, issues with signage and navigation.
- Long waits for diagnoses and accommodations, slow implementation of disability plans, invisible disabilities overlooked.
- Rigid deadlines, lack of alternative assessments, difficulties with group work and presentations.

• Cultural stigma around mental health, increased stress levels, preference for native-language counselling services. • White-Asian attainment gap is shrinking, but South Asian males perform worse in some courses like pharmacy.	• Fear of disclosure, long waiting times for services, transition gaps in mental health support. • Barriers in internships, competency-based course restrictions, lack of role models in academia.

MALPRACTICE ISSUES:
- Increasing use of AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT) to generate essays and reports.
- AI-generated content is difficult to detect with traditional plagiarism checkers.
- Universities lack clear policies on AI-assisted writing and academic integrity.
- AI-generated essays are replacing human-written papers from essay mills.
- Students can now refine AI-generated work to evade detection.
- Contract cheating services are incorporating AI to make their services more difficult to track.
- Some students manipulate peer-assessed scores to inflate grades.
- Unequal group work contributions, with some students benefiting from others' efforts.
- Pressure in group assessments leads to students outsourcing their work.
- Increased cheating in online exams due to access to external resources.
- Use of unauthorized communication tools during remote assessments.
- Difficulties in proctoring and monitoring students in digital environments.
- Cultural differences in understanding plagiarism and citation norms.
- Some students engage in academic malpractice due to a lack of training on proper research methods.
- Faculty members report inconsistent enforcement of integrity policies across departments.
- Some students feel pressured to use AI tools because peers are using them.
- Lack of AI literacy among students and staff leads to uncertainty about appropriate AI usage.
- AI detection tools are unreliable, leading to potential false accusations of misconduct.

Summary of main themes within data

Figure 5 summarises the main themes found within the interview data. There are also examples of specific instances found which highlight the main ideas that participants expressed.
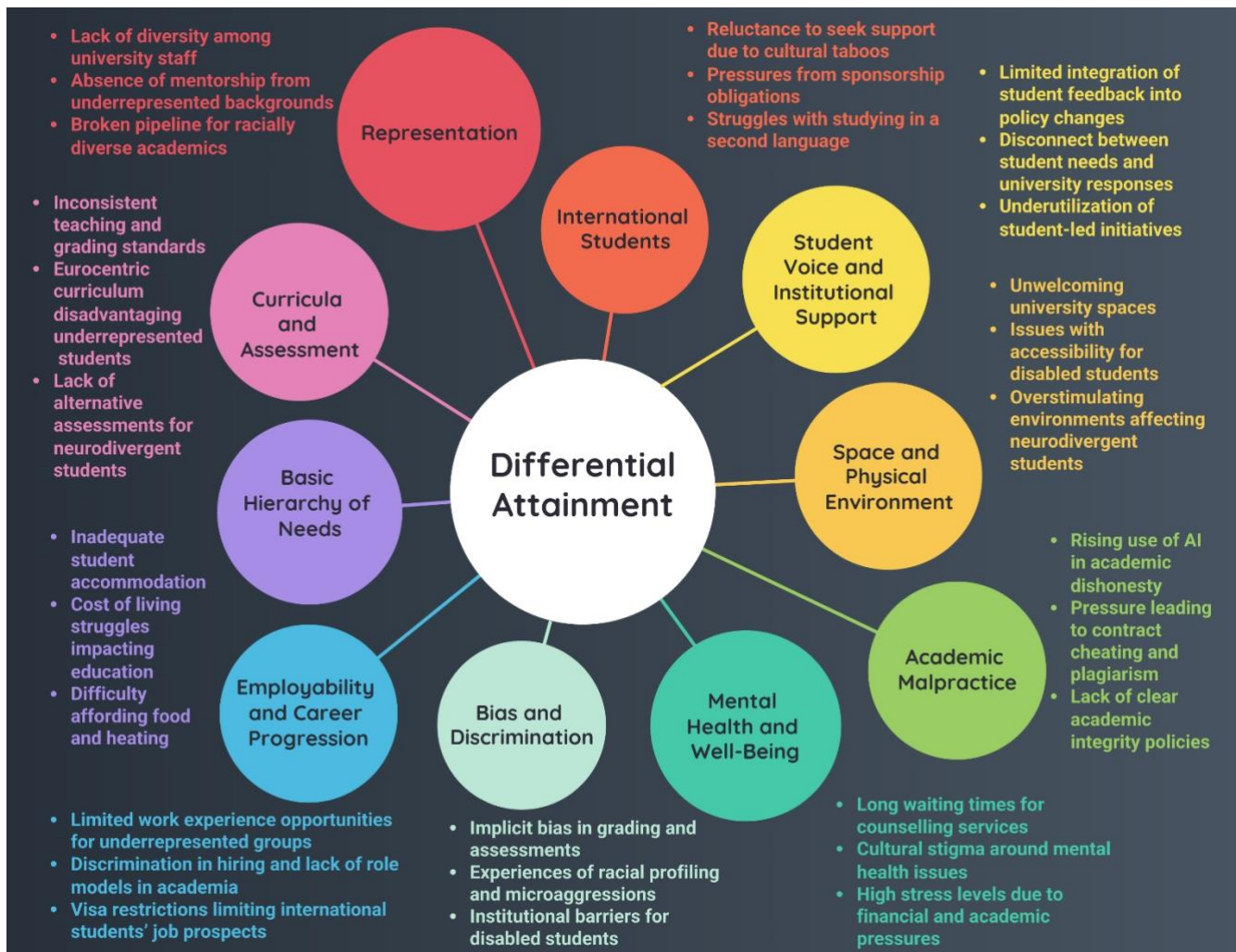
Figure 5. Summary graphic of the main themes found within the interview data.

3.1 Example 1: The impact of space and the physical environment, and the context of Manchester
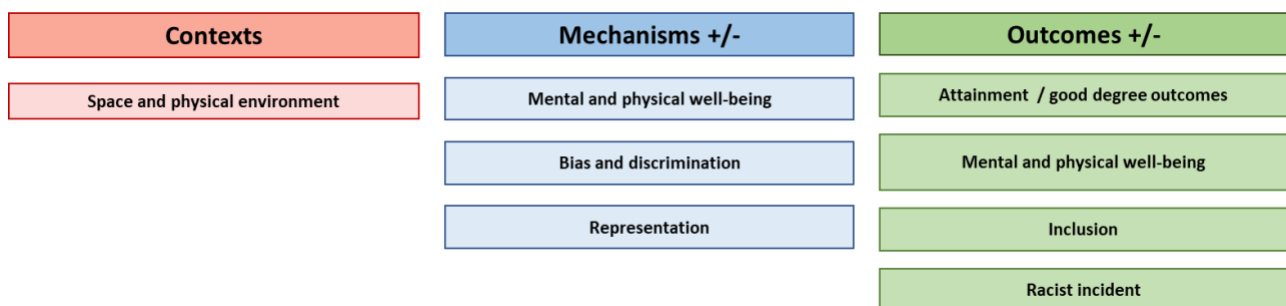
Staff and students described the negative impact that space and the physical environment had on learning [C]. The physical space was often not fit for purpose, felt unwelcoming, or was over

stimulating for students with additional needs [M]. There was a lack of representation [M] within the portraiture and artwork that cemented the notion of otherness or different ethnicities not being welcome within a space. The resulting impact was that students did not feel included, their mental health declined, and this adversely effected their attainment and degree outcomes [O]. The discussions highlighted neurotypical assumptions [M] regarding the suitability of learning spaces for those with disabilities.
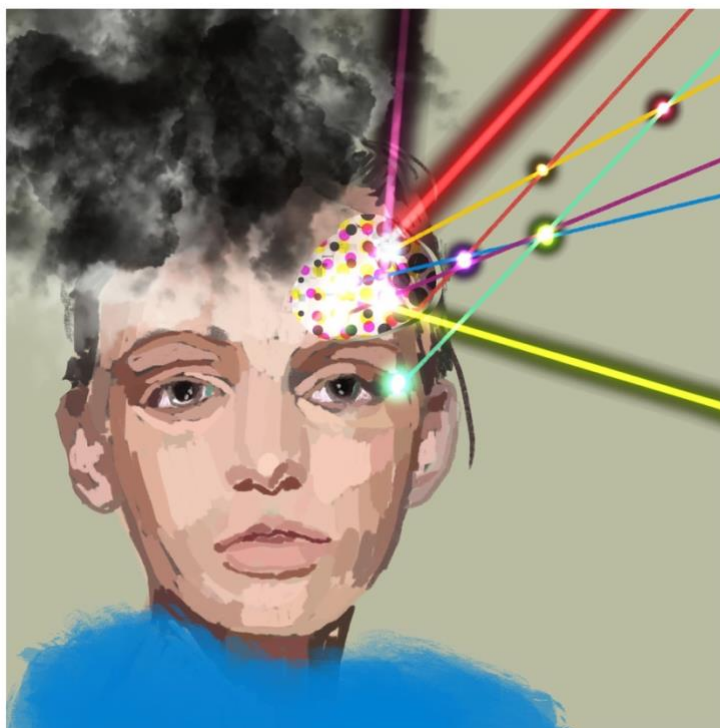
Figure 6. Illustration portraying the effect of external stimuli for neurodivergent individuals.

Interview Quotes:

"I was in [UoM building], which is really echoey. And I was just, you know, I was getting a bit tired, because it was towards the end of the lecture… and then some noise happened in the corridor. And I couldn't process what I was trying to say and the noise at the same time, and I just stopped speaking, because I didn't have any kind of cognitive capacity to get the words out. And it's things like that, which it would be helpful for staff and students if there was a broader kind of understanding."

[Disabled Staff member]

"Let me just think so in terms of like students with disabilities… I think there was one person with a wheelchair in one of my modules in first year, which must have made it difficult in terms of access and getting around campus and stuff. And like I remember my friends saying, this may not directly related but they dropped out and [I thought of] for example… the disabled door in Crawford house has been… broken for like three weeks and I tried to email so many people, and I finally got it fixed but it's things like that, like you can't access [buildings]."

[Disabled Black Student]

"…everyone would think that a library is a great place for an autistic person, because it's nice and quiet. And you there's no expectation of a lot of social interaction. But actually, it's got whacking great big fluorescent lights in it, which autistic people, sometimes not always, but I certainly do have trouble processing fluorescent light it so if I spend too long, and I ended up having what looks like a panic attack, feeling really dizzy and sick and faint."

[Disabled Staff Member]

"There are no silent workspaces. Library is meant to be a silent workspace, but it isn't because people talk and like, doesn't have to be loud talking, it's any talking… I'm not good at filtering conversations, like filtering out sounds like hearing things at once… I'm listening to all these conversations, I'm trying to do my work, listen to the events and listening to you know, people take phone calls and walk through the library on the phone to do through like a silent."

[Disabled Student, Home]

"Stuff like the library…enforcing silence in silent spaces is really important as well, because [people] don't have somewhere quiet work. I've seen many numbers of people like me, like, every time I go to the library, pretty much without fail I have to tell somebody to be quiet. Because they're having chats with their friends or socialising… on the phone."

[Disabled Student, Home]

3.1.1 Sense of Belonging

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
University Size and shape of UoM / Russell Group/ UoM as an entity	**Cultural awareness**	**Progression**
Working/ learning environment Remote working / commuter students/ hybrid and distance learning	**Institutional support**	**Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities**
Space and physical environment	**Communication** Service/ initiatives / support	**Attainment / good degree outcomes**
Cultural and societal	**Representation**	**Mental and physical well-being**
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	**Culture** Blame/ accountability/ support / value	**Inclusion**
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	**Pressure** Internal and external	**Withdrawal from programme**
	Mental and physical wellbeing	**Access**
	Bias and discrimination	**Basic hierarchy of needs**
	Inclusion and exclusion	

The student experience at the University of Manchester in conjunction with their personal identity (e.g. international or ethnic minority students) influences their experience and sense of belonging as a student [C]. The size of the university and the diversity of the student body [C] combined with

structural factors, e.g., social segregation and cultural differences [M] influences their well-being and overall attainment [O]. A student's sense of belonging can result in feelings of isolation, discomfort, and a lack of integration into the university community [O], despite efforts to engage. Ultimately this can lead to a lack of attainment and progression.

"That sense of belonging and second language and being a foreigner, no matter how much you get engaged, you still feel an outsider."

[International PGR Student]

"I think that engaging in social and community activities requires a degree of confidence. And I think confidence comes from a sense of belonging, knowing that I'm good enough and I'm here and that's that. And I think that there are some students that just feel that they don't belong in a university like the University of Manchester."

[British, Male Member of Staff]

"International students and in particular Chinese students seem to present with higher levels of wellbeing problems. And it makes sense they can't pop home for the weekend and go and see the cat and the family and, you know, catch up with mum and dad and have some home cooked dinner. They're really on their own."

[British, Male Member of Staff]

"I think without a real sense of belonging, then people can become very isolated, particularly on the larger courses."

[British, Female Member of Staff]

"I do not have enough sense of belonging at uni. Like…it's hard to tell. I just think sometimes I want to go to some events or some something and I don't feel very comfortable or as an international student or like, it's hard to explain this. If you don't belong there, it was not for you. Sorry. If it is not for you, you don't belong there."

[International Student]

"I do think having a sense of belonging, so building friendships, on your course is related to attainment. I think that's not just about being around people that you can then ask questions of, I think it's finding a sense of friends and a sense of belonging, I think makes you feel like you're in the right place, and you're doing the right course, and you'll engage more."

[Asian British Staff Member]

"It does make perfect sense, to sense to develop a sense of belonging and community. But I do notice in most of my lectures, like it's all like, grouped by ethnicity, so have to like the seminars and like all the lectures, you just see, like, groups of like different, like racism, like whatever. And like, it's

all like, quite segregated. And obviously, it's no one's fault, because you just…sit towards the people that you're most familiar with. But if you go into a lecture hall, and there's no one like you, then you'd be the one left out if that makes sense."

[Black British Student]

"Every country [has a different] education system. And yeah, this city is home to I mean, a lot of students from different countries…I guess, doing more workshops for the transition period [into university life], cultural awareness, workshops, and even a transitional workshop [would help integrate students]."

[International Student]

3.1.2 The size and shape of Manchester

The University of Manchester is a large, diverse, and elite institution [C}. The size and shape of the university entity fosters both high academic expectations and bureaucratic complexity [M]. This environment leads to feelings of alienation among students, especially international students and those from widening participation backgrounds [O], due to perceived lack of personalisation, cultural misunderstandings, and the intimidating environment [M]. The University's pride in its prestige [C] can result in students feeling unworthy of being at the University [M] and thus withdrawing, not seeking assistance, or poor performance [O]. For staff, size and shape [C] adds bureaucratic complexity [M] and delays or prevents meaningful change [O].

"Manchester uni is really taking the cake actually a little bit when you also add in the size of them as well. I guess I really hadn't considered but I think the other thing that I potentially had a misconception about before coming was I expected that because Manchester is such a, generally speaking, a progressive city."

[Asian, international student]

"Even to effect certain changes at faculty level, the number of people you had to ask, the number of meetings that had to happen, people that had to approve Senate meetings, all of that. And students do not see that."

[Black international student, Former student representative]

"The negative impact of the size and scale of Manchester is that students are sort of floating freely… it's blanket emails, it's generic feedback that could be put into anybody, not just them."

[White British Senior Leader]

3.2 Example 2: Representation matters

3.2.1 Race

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Cultural and societal	Cultural awareness	Progression
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Representation	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
		Attainment / good degree outcomes
		Inclusion
		Racist incident
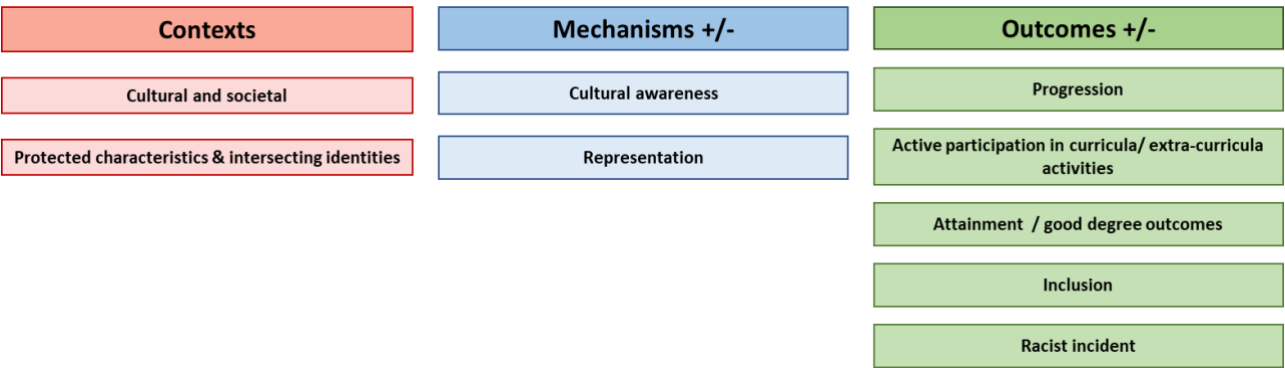
The University lacks diversity in many areas of the workforce [C], and students report not having been taught by members of staff who are people of colour [C], coupled with the lack of diversity in support service teams. As a result, students do not see themselves represented within their learning environment, and do not receive mentorship from people of colour who understand their lived experience [M]. Consequentially, students no longer aspire to progress within academia, thus the pipeline of racially diverse academics is lost [O]. Students have increased perceptions of institutional racism and their feeling of being in out-group/othered is further cemented [O].

Figure 7. Illustration portraying the impact of lack of representation in universities.

Interview Quotes:

"…for a British black student, that issue of the lecturers [that] don't look like me and the other students don't look like me is probably quite pronounced because they are in their home culture and home environment, and they don't sort of feel included as part of that. But for an international student, they're consciously coming into another culture and another environment."

[Black Member of Staff]

"Quite often I'll, if I go into a… meeting… and it'll be a room of middle-aged white male men, male and white males. And it's, I instantly fear feel. That was a Freudian slip fear, which is what happens quite often, you know, there's, there's that feeling of otherness straightaway."

[White Female Staff Member]

"This was shared with me by a law graduate. Black law graduates, who hadn't had, not a single person of colour stand before them as a lecturer throughout their years on our very campus. What does that tell them about the profession? Talk less of them as an individual having an aspiration when they leave university and going out into that space, or even indeed hopes to become an academic in that field, should that be part of their ambition? Bearing in mind there are some young people right from a young age who do have that dream of becoming a lecturer, not a scientist, not a secondary or primary school teacher, but a lecturer based on their own passion in that field. Not seeing self in staff representation."

[Black Member of Staff]

"You need to increase visibility of people. So that means representative of our students. That needs to be in academic and student support, but also these kind of value driven events and activities or your guest speakers... So, when that kind of whole decolonising the curriculum piece came about four years ago, it was all built on a fact is that our curriculum, our universities, rightly or wrongly… are institutionally racist and we have to own that and accept that. That doesn't mean there should be a blame culture. That means we acknowledge it. There was a whole big push about five years ago to increase visibility of diversity, predominantly linked into ethnicity. But also, I'm very big on things that are non-protected characteristics or the more broader things like LGBT, people that are neuro diverse because we don't necessarily homogenize. When you talk about ethnicity or BAME, it's not one group of people. They don't look at each other and go, We're all the same."

[White, LGBT, Senior Leader]

"So, I know we've, in my whole time working in academia. So, I did my PhD in 2012. I have known two black [academic discipline], just two. So how can you then get the role models? When there's no pipeline? There's something lower down the pipeline, which is stopping people getting into academia in the first place."

[Black Member of Staff]

"I'm a Chinese student and then I go to a particular office that is supposed to help students overcome certain challenges. And I don't see anybody that I really directly identify with, it's sometimes very difficult to go in for the kind of support that I need. So, I'm saying that maybe there should be a lot more diversity in terms of the arrangements that they invest in to support students."

[Asian, International Student]

"I don't see myself represented in academic staff, professional staff, or for many students, mainly international students, how can I share my grief with someone who understands my visa issues, that limit to my work, work hours and my financial struggles."

[Member of Staff discussing student experience]

"I think poor mental health can be used to describe almost every student at some point in their 3-4 years in this University, but the difference is that white peers will have a white counsellor whereas brown and black people will be expected to explain their feelings to a white counsellor as well. The problems and causes of poor mental health are different."

[Disabled Asian British Student]

3.2.2 Disability

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Cultural and societal	Cultural awareness	Progression
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Institutional support	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
Working/learning environment — Remote working/commuter students/ hybrid and distance learning	Representation	Attainment/good degree outcomes
	Mental and physical well-being	Mental and physical well-being
		Inclusion
		Withdrawal from programme

There is variability in the visibility of disabled individuals, including staff and students [C]. There is a stigma associated with disclosing a disability, coupled with a lack of institutional and societal awareness of hidden disability [M]. There have been some successful campaigns, such as the sunflower lanyards, and disability support services are well perceived by staff [M]. However, staff are not making sufficient accommodations for disabled students [O], impacting on performance [O]. In addition, concerns were expressed regarding students having sufficient mental capacity [M] to engage with disability services, putting them on a backfoot with decision making and disclosures [O]. Dedicated disability representatives within the Students' Union [M] were viewed as undervalued, due to their status at students.

Interview Quotes:

"I would say there's much work going on and us having the disability service, I would say is something we need to be shouting about. It's a plus. They're doing an excellent service. I can't fault them in any area and X's leadership and [their] team are doing brilliantly. And no wonder the degree awarding gap for disability is less than that, that it is for ethnicity. So that effect, I would say there are some quick wins. So, lecturers with a disability, whether visible or not, they can wear the lanyards, the sunflower lanyards."

[Member of Staff]

"I would say faculty may differ, but looking at accessibility in the broader sense, even acknowledging that some people might be having a hearing impairment and not necessarily wanting to say something about it. So, there's that aspect of owning the need to give due regard to disability in the broader sense. So, I as a lecturer wouldn't speak covering my mouth. I as a lecturer would need to make sure that should the room have a very high ceiling; I need to be able to make sure that there isn't anyone with a hearing aid and if there is a need to make adaptations either that we change the room because that person will be having echoes. So, there's also something about training, there's something about awareness. It's broad. It's mega broad."

[Member of Staff]

"…So, I think I've my feeling was that throughout my three years, the involvement of students union with university wasn't that appreciated, and undervalued because the Students Union is run by students…"

[International Student]

"There were modules I had been interested in doing and realised I wasn't going to be able to do them, because I'd have to give presentations because…the idea of getting up in front of a group of people and talking terrified [me], I couldn't, I wouldn't be able to do it"

[Disabled Home Student]

Concerning academic malpractice [O], there was a sense that many students were failing to declare mental health issues [M] that may constitute a disability, often as a direct consequence of their disability.

"…in terms of protected characteristics, I think that we see more students divulging potential mental health issues, which may constitute disability. It's up to the students, whether they divulge whether they're registered [with disability services] or not, and for them to sort of like make the case- not for us to make it for them. And so, sometimes those mental health difficulties may have impacted on the assessments that they've done. And I think as well, there are issues with the capacity to disclose."

[Staff - Malpractice leader/legal advisor]

3.3 Example 3: International students

3.3.1 Cultural taboos

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Cultural and societal	Cultural awareness	Progression
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Institutional support	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	Communication Service/ initiatives / support	Attainment/good degree outcomes
	Representation	Mental and physical well-being
	Pressure Internal and external	Inclusion
	Mental and physical well-being	Withdrawal from programme

International students [C] reported feeling uncomfortable seeking help from university and external support services. This was due to the cultural taboos associated with help seeking behaviours [M], power and authority [M]. Students described the lack of institutional understanding and cultural awareness pertaining to their reluctance to seek support [M]; this was particularly true for mental health related issues. Seeking assistance for physical illness was considered less problematic. As a result, students reported a decline in their mental health [O] which, in some cases resulted in adverse outcomes such as a failure to progress, poor attainment, or withdrawal from the programme [O].

Interview Quotes:

"…in terms of mental health support, there are a lot of cultural taboos. There are cultural barriers to seeking help and to sharing information about. Their well-being or lack of well-being, because it's not culturally a thing which is done for people to speak out. And so definitely we're seeing that in numerous cases."

[Student support leader]

"The Chinese population, for example, we have one of the largest Chinese student populations… and for them, the cultural differences that you've alluded to, can be huge and for many of them talking about mental health, or psychological wellbeing, it's absolutely alien to them."

[PS Staff member]

"…because we like people, minorities, especially like a lot of black people, the black people in the uni, a very small, there's not a lot of us, a lot of us we have like issues with like either family or mental health and in our culture the mental health aspect isn't actually looked at properly, it's very brushed over. So, and then it kind of bottles up and then you finally come to uni, you're by yourself and then it

explodes. And then you want to talk to someone about it. But if you talk to the uni, you don't know what to do, because you might get fitness to practice."

[Black, international student]

"… [speaking of] culture, I mean, issues around power distance, and how students relate to authority. In some cases, you will notice that for some international students, I can really say this, for those, for instance, from say, Africa, and then maybe Asia, some are used to situations where you are only able to approach your lecturer, you know, you know, with confidence. And so, when some of them come to the University of Manchester, or maybe the UK, it takes them a bit a bit of time to get acclimatised to the situation here. And so, there are times for instance, when they are sending you emails, they would receive everything with a lot of apologies, before they finally make a request that they actually entitled to. And so, for some people, that's sometimes I would say, interferes with the ability to make use of the opportunities available in ways that can help them, you know, achieve whatever it is that they are in here for. So yes, crucially, that's an issue."

[Black, International, Staff, Former Student]

3.3.2 Pressure from sponsorship obligations

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Cultural and societal	Cultural awareness	Progression
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Institutional support	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	Student voice	Attainment / good degree outcomes
Economic and political	Financial aid and income Cost of living crisis / bursaries/ scholarships/ hardship funds / employment	Mental and physical well-being
Life outside the institution	Communication Service/ initiatives / support	Inclusion
	Culture Blame/ accountability/ support / value	Academic malpractice/ Fitness to Practice case
	Additional responsibility	Racist incident
	Pressure Internal and external	Withdrawal from programme
	Mental and physical wellbeing	Employability
	Bias and discrimination	Access
	Hidden curriculum	Basic hierarchy of needs
	Inclusion and exclusion	

Students from the gulf have strict obligations to perform as part of the sponsorship conditions [C]. Students are under pressure from their sponsors and families to achieve due to financial implications if they fail, which can result in, for example having to pay back fees and stipend [M]. There is often a lack of institutional awareness of such sponsorship pressures [M]. As a result of the pressure, worry,

and financial implications [M], students' learning is negatively impacted [O], and in some cases may result in a student cutting corners with coursework, for example by colluding or plagiarising [O]. If a student is found guilty of such malpractice, their marks will be lower, or their degree outcome will suffer[O].

Interview Quotes:

"So, with those students… you've got their sponsor obligations layered in…to the cultural stuff. So, there's quite a high level of anxiety for those students because they've got the threat of having to pay back all of their tuition and living costs if they fail. So that's you know, that's a huge kind of huge sword over your head... It's a cultural, you know, the kind of cultural awareness piece around our [students]."

[White British, Member of Staff]

"I think as well, there's probably more pressure, again, like we talked about pressure to perform the or attain, I think that's potentially more for international students as well. Given that they're paying high fees, there's a financial pressure to that, sometimes you have like sponsored students… if you don't get a certain grade [the sponsor] will come after you for all this money [and potentially] will take away your house."

[Member of Staff]

3.3.3 English language

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Cultural and societal	Cultural awareness	Progression
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Institutional support	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	Communication Service/ initiatives / support	Attainment / good degree outcomes
Curriculum and assessment	Culture Blame/ accountability/ support / value	Mental and physical well-being
Life outside the institution	Impostor Syndrome	Inclusion
	Hidden curriculum	Academic malpractice/ Fitness to Practice case
	Inclusion and exclusion	Withdrawal from programme

Concerns have been expressed by staff that the English language skills of international students [C]. The English language assessment, IELTS, is not a perfect language assessment and wasn't designed for academic purposes [C]. The inadequate language proficiency of some students results in them struggling with English language [M], despite reaching IELTS admissions threshold, thus results in a negative impact on academic performance [O]. In addition, confidence is often lacking for students

speaking English as a second language, reducing the amount that students practice their language skills [M]. There is less socialization with students with English as a first language [O] and academic colleagues don't want to take international PGT/ PGR students due to perceptions of language deficits and thus increased workload [O].

Interview Quotes:

"In most of my essays and uni work, there's always a small proportion of grades based on English proficiency—no grammatical mistakes and stuff. For students like me, who don't have English as a first language, I feel like it's unfair to expect fluency at the same level."

[International Student]

"…So IELTS is kind of a bit of an imperfect assessment. There aren't any perfect assessments of English, and it wasn't 100% created for academic purposes…But there is an element to which your kind of you can get the right preparation classes and you can learn quite quickly, but it won't necessarily give you great communication skills in English. Yeah, you'll be able to produce an essay and you're able to pass the exams and that is what a lot of the Chinese system is about passing exams."

[White British, Member of Staff]

"Even though we passed the English language requirements, communication can still be a major barrier. Lecturers need to be more patient with foreign students expressing themselves."

[International Student]

"International students often stick together because they don't feel confident speaking to home students. If they only ever speak Chinese to each other, they miss out on developing their English skills."

[International Student]

"So, students coming from foundation programs, for example, was where… lower quality students who were going to perform worse didn't come out with that result. And I think that is largely because the barriers are less around English language and they are more around the kind of the fact that you're taking them from one system which is completely different, and then you just dropping them into another system and you're asking them to compete at the same level with kids who have gone through 20 years of a more kind of problem based learning curriculum. "

[White British, Member of Staff]

"One of the main challenges for me in sociology is the cultural gap. Understanding theories from a Western perspective is hard when you've studied them differently in China."

[International Student]

"...The Chinese system is a memory test largely. And that's why, you know, I think a lot of students who are coming in with, even for English language, you know, it's kind of a bit of a memory test and they're very good at retaining information for short periods of time. But the weakness is around this kind of the more problem based applied nature of some of the stuff that we ask them."

[White British, Member of Staff]

"I've had my all my former education in English, I still found that I found speaking, I wouldn't say intimidating, but maybe close to it. And so sometimes you are less confident to express yourself in class, not that you don't have anything to say. But you are not sure whether you might be making sense if, if you open your mouth in class."

[Black, International Student]

"I know someone who's just finished their master's in law. And they're from Venezuela, and they didn't get the right, they didn't get basically any support writing their dissertation. And so the feedback was really negative, because it was like, Oh, your grammar is wrong here and the spelling's wrong here and all of this, but not, like, not taking into account that if someone is writing in a language that isn't their native language, or that, you know, they've learned in a couple of years or whatever, that's really unfair, like the playing the playing field is not level at all. And it's just yeah. How can you sort of assess people on the same level if they're writing in a language that isn't their first language, or you know that I just think that's really just that they don't make any accommodation for that? I think that's just really awful."

[Black, Home Student]

"...for international students, for especially those who do not have English as their mother tongue, it was quite difficult for them to adjust the course, especially our Chinese students had studied in China before, because I did my undergrad. So, they had a really, I had really good relationship with my Chinese peers. And most of them would literally just come to me after every session to say, you know, explain that to me again, explain that to me again. And that's because, you know, English was, was a point of difficulty for them in some aspects'

[Black, International Student, Former Student Representative]

3.3.4 Financial issues

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Working/ learning environment Remote working / commuter students/ hybrid and distance learning	Cultural awareness	Progression
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Institutional support	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	**Financial aid and income** Cost of living crisis / bursaries/ scholarships/ hardship funds / employment	Attainment / good degree outcomes
Economic and political	Additional responsibility	Mental and physical well-being
Life outside the institution	Mental and physical wellbeing	Withdrawal from programme
		Employability
		Basic hierarchy of needs

The cost of living in the U.K. has increased significantly in recent years and for students this means they have a very meagre amount of money to live off [C] and means that a considerable proportion of them are required to work to supplement their finances [M]. Working whilst in full time study places increased pressure on their time, allowing for less time to study and socialise [M], and in some circumstances results in missing classes or assignments. This causes increased levels of stress and a decrease in their mental well-being [O] because students lack the ability to obtain sufficient nutrition and in some cases are not able to heat their accommodation because of the cost associated with these basic human needs [O]. Overall, this results in poorer academic performance, mental and physical well-being. Students who do not have additional financial support from their families are particularly vulnerable to such outcomes, which results in differential attainment for individuals from poorer backgrounds.

Interview Quotes:

"I've seen people around me who have challenges, you know, financially, and that really impacted on the ability to, you know, pursue their studies. I mean, there have been instances where people would go to work when they are supposed to be in school. And the issue is that if they don't go to work, they can't pay their school fees, and then they might be kicked out."

[Black, International, Staff, Former Student]

"In my student house, this year, like, it's really cold, because like, obviously, it just costs so much to like, put the heating on or keep the heating on. So, it's just like, even like my work and environment. It's like, impacted by, by that by my low-income background. And so, like people who were in their really toasty student houses, they can probably work a bit better, because, you know, they're a bit warmer. But, um, yeah, so that's definitely one way, I think that I'm probably not on the same sort of, like level playing field as other people."

"I know for some of my friends who don't receive financial aid, and you know, the cost of not just the cost of living, but basically the inflation of everything around, they had to work even more and during the final year. And you know, having to work part time is kind of getting in the way of studies."

[Disabled International Student]

3.3.5 Caring responsibilities

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Working/ learning environment Remote working / commuter students/ hybrid and distance learning	**Cultural awareness**	**Progression**
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	**Institutional support**	**Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities**
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	**Financial aid and income** Cost of living crisis / bursaries/ scholarships/ hardship funds / employment	**Attainment / good degree outcomes**
Economic and political	**Additional responsibility**	**Mental and physical well-being**
Life outside the institution	**Mental and physical wellbeing**	**Withdrawal from programme**
		Employability
		Basic hierarchy of needs

Students with caring responsibilities, whether that is for a family member or a child, have additional constraints on their time [C] because of the additional requirements placed on them due to the care they are required to give on a continuous basis [M]. These students are required to care for individuals who have very specific needs and require students to take time out of their everyday lives to provide assistance to individuals who rely on them [M]. Often these students are the only one who can provide this care and thus there is no option to seek additional help from others because of financial or cultural pressures that places this need on them. This results in less time and availability for these students to engage in study and social activities [O], which can lead to feelings of loneliness, additional stress and difficulties in their overall attainment at university.

Interview Quotes:

"…that's very important, very important, that parental or carer responsibility in certain cultures… for example…students raised with us that they are in charge of looking after the elders, that is, yeah, kind of cultural value, and for that, they have less time to socially engage or study…"

[Black, International, Staff, Former Student]

"we have a lot of single parents, students, for instance, and you know, they've got childcare to think about and, you know, if they're spending all of their time looking after children or working part time,

when are they going to find the time to do this volunteering, which is good for society, and also good for their CVs, it's, I worry about that."

[Disabled Member of Staff]

"So whenever, for example, my son is sick, I'm behind on work, and we're home, I get this anxiety, you know, it's like, when will I finish, I have presentation in three days, and my son is sick, we're home, I can't work."

[Disabled International Student]

"I think that students who are parents are usually less involved in university activities."

[Disabled Member of Staff]

3.4 Example 4: Life outside the university and the basic hierarchy of needs

3.4.1 Accommodation

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
University Size and shape of UoM / Russell Group/ UoM as an entity	**Cultural awareness**	**Progression**
Working/ learning environment Remote working / commuter students/ hybrid and distance learning	**Institutional support**	**Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities**
Space and physical environment	**Financial aid and income** Cost of living crisis / bursaries/ scholarships/ hardship funds / employment	**Attainment / good degree outcomes**
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	**Communication** Service/ initiatives / support	**Mental and physical well-being**
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	**Additional responsibility**	**Withdrawal from programme**
Economic and political	**Representation**	**Basic hierarchy of needs**
Life outside the institution	**Mental and physical wellbeing**	

Student accommodation present a significant issue for many. Halls of Residence (University owned) did not meet the student's needs (O), and private accommodation presented similar challenges. Many students reported struggling to afford reasonable accommodation (M), a lack of institutional support in resolving maintenance and other issues (M), the anxiety and financial implications associated with fines for breaches (M), and the impact that this had on their learning (O) and attainment (O).

Interview Quotes:

"In my first year, there were many problems with my accommodation (I lived in University Halls). A lot of appliances were broken or badly maintained, we had mice, silverfish (everywhere), the kettle and stove were broken. I was making maintenance requests almost every week. We didn't have hot water for a couple of days once, there was flooding and Reslife [University support service] was scaring us with fines for socialising - when we were already extremely isolated. I feel like there was no support from the university at the time, which impacted me and a lot of my friends, especially international ones and their wellbeing and attainment as we were learning to navigate student life..."

[International Student]

"The one thing I'm confused about is like why, you know, my course starts at 19th of September. And that's why the Maintenance Loan starts paying you 19th of September, and then in January and then in April or something, I don't know why so late because all every single accommodation they ask …September or before that, so I don't know how and I've heard like complaints about that from people, how are they expected to fill in that gap and just pay for something when some people like really depend on the money from like the student loan company to come in, and they don't have anyone and it's actually really hard to even get a guarantor. To prove that you need someone to like, vouch for you, and some people don't even have that. So that could be like a really big factor that is making people really struggle to get accommodation and to perform well in university, I think."

[Disabled International Student]

"I got put in Whitworth Park, which was really horrible. But, you know, I could afford it… And then this year, my student house, I'm living with friends. And its bills included. But there's the like fair usage policy. So, if we go over, like, the set amount, and then we'll have to pay them that at the end of the year tenancy. So that's quite stressful."
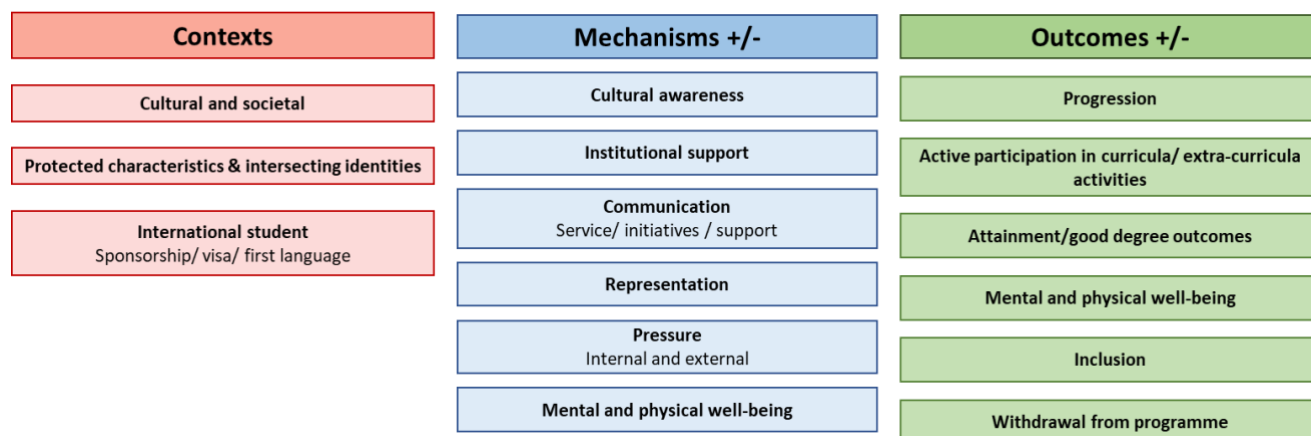
[Disabled Home Student]

"This year, finding our house for next year was really stressful…because like the, just the Unis in Manchester are super oversubscribed…there's just not enough student housing in Manchester. "

[Disabled Home Student]

"I went home a lot of the [time, because the] downside of halls like it's things like noise, like the walls are very thin, I got lucky and I was in one of the more modern buildings, I say lucky I explicitly put down that as like my choices because I knew that if I was in…any of the older buildings, I would not be able to sleep even in the one that I was in being able to hear parties and be able to hear you know, people going wild and other floors and stuff having all your senses I had was really damaging to my mental health."

[Disabled Home Student]

3.4.2 Cultural needs – ethnic differences

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Cultural and societal	Cultural awareness	Progression
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Institutional support	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	Communication Service/ initiatives / support	Attainment/good degree outcomes
	Representation	Mental and physical well-being
	Pressure Internal and external	Inclusion
	Mental and physical well-being	Withdrawal from programme

Students from different ethnic groups sometimes have varying cultural needs [C]. Examples could include that Black students may require access to an experienced hair stylist, or to hair oil. Due to a lack of institutional and societal cultural awareness [M], these physical needs are often not met [O]. When student physical needs are not met [O], it can further cement any feelings of otherness that the students may be experiencing, negatively impacting on their learning [O], and contributing to everyday racism [O].

Interview Quotes:

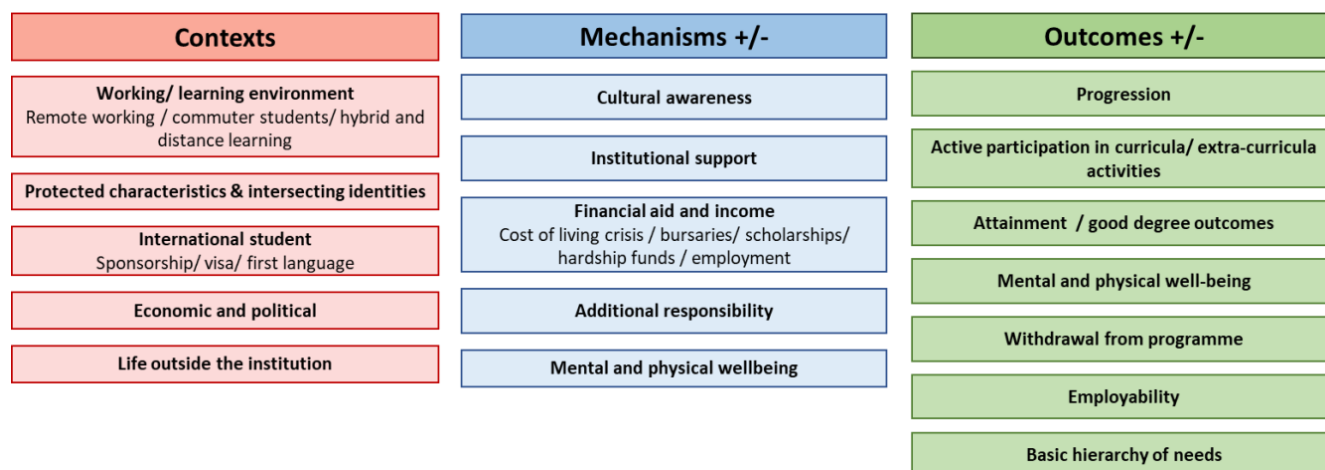*"…me needing to have access to hair products or basic ingredients for the type of food that I like, not that I'm going to be having it every day and being in an environment where that is absent, whether we're mindful of it or not. It can have an impact on the student who, yes, is doing really well studying, but there would come a time where not being able to have their hair done…. access to products is important for culture. And I don't know how you want to bash that, but in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs for each student community, that may differ somewhat."*

[Black, Member of Staff]

"All of your [student union] services are for white students. None of your services cater for students who are non-white… you know, you've got like a hairdresser. I said and your hairdresser don't get me wrong. She's a lovely lady. But she can only cut white men's hair."

[Member of Staff]

3.4.3 Cost of living

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Working/ learning environment Remote working / commuter students/ hybrid and distance learning	**Cultural awareness**	**Progression**
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	**Institutional support**	**Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities**
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	**Financial aid and income** Cost of living crisis / bursaries/ scholarships/ hardship funds / employment	**Attainment / good degree outcomes**
Economic and political	**Additional responsibility**	**Mental and physical well-being**
Life outside the institution	**Mental and physical wellbeing**	**Withdrawal from programme**
		Employability
		Basic hierarchy of needs

Students shared deeply personal narratives of their financial struggles [M] within the current economic climate [C]. Students are often choosing between eating and paying their bills or are having to forego their vital prescriptions or basic supplies associated with menstruation. Students reported choosing to take gap years to fund their studies. Their lack of financial security resulted in a range of negative outcomes, from declining mental and physical health to loss of accommodation or no access to food [O].

Interview Quotes:

"I didn't have money for like my laptop that I'm currently using or anything like that. So, I thought, the best for me to be in the best situation possible. I take a gap year, I build experience. So, I worked in a hospital, I saved up money, so I could buy the stuff that I needed. And then whilst I was working in the hospital, I was I encountered medical students. So, when I saw the medical students, I was able to talk to them. And they gave me tips and tricks. And that's how I was able to enter the uni."

[Disabled, Widening Participation Student, Home Student]

"I don't have money, I come from very poor background, so I had to work most of the time, even now…I am always like malnourished. I barely could find food especially at the beginning of this year. Because I was in a lot of debt. I didn't have money, or I didn't have painkillers. So, I would come into uni in excruciating, excruciating pain. But I still had to, like carry on but the actual information that's entered my brain is not into my brain because I'm in so much pain."

[Disabled, Widening Participation Student, Home Student]

"If you're a woman and it's that time of the period, you can normally like offset it by [taking] Ibuprofen, but I didn't even have money for that. So, I was just in a lot of pain."

[Disabled, Widening Participation Student, Home Student]

3.4.4 Employability

The institutional experience of students with respect to the mentoring, careers service, volunteering, etc. at the University of Manchester[C] will influence their employability after their student experience has ended. There are systemic barriers that may hinder student attainment and employability [O] including discrimination, lack of access to unpaid work experience, and insufficient career support [M]. The influence of restrictions on volunteering and biases in hiring practices result in stunted workplace experience and a reduction in employability skills [O].

Interview Quotes:

"We talk about attainment in universities, but we're actually talking about student outcomes and employability in the sector. If we feel there's a social responsibility to increase the diversity of our [students], then that needs to be addressed from day one or before day one. What are we doing in primary and secondary schools? The office talks about GCSE attainment. That is a core indicator on someone's success through further study, higher education and onto employment. So, it's slightly dismantling this attainment conversation in higher education, but it does take that bigger step is do we as an organisation have a level of social responsibility to increase opportunities for all?"

[White Member of Staff]

"[The] pretty interesting thing is volunteering is considered as work which is not work it's not paid, but it also hinders international students from not only make a living were living when they're struggling but also hinders them from gaining employability skills and UK life skills because that they're not even allowed to engage in unpaid works, which is not very promising."

[International Student]

"If I were to get a job in the UK, I don't think I would do it easily. It would be challenging for me to apply for a job in the UK…First of all, I'm [wearing a] headscarf. Have you seen any headscarf wearing lecturer at the University of Manchester? …For example, I know a friend. She was wearing a headscarf. And she never got a permanent job. She was working at the University of Manchester. She never got a permanent job, and she couldn't get any permanent job at any university. And she was really good. And then she removed her scar and got a job. So, this is always a problem. You are always outsider"

[International Student]

"Whilst they do have great career fairs a lot of our time, they were online. I find myself now having to pick up a lot of other roles to make up for the lack of experience on my CV now which is worrying. Definitely wish the Uni helped more in provided us with placement roles because even when I was on the programme and applying it was so hard to secure a place which I know many people struggled with."

"I think something which would benefit students as well, more broadly is, having more open conversation or peer mentoring schemes or anything like that, not necessarily just focused on academics, but focused on [employability]."

[White British Student]

3.5 Example 5: Curricula and assessment

3.5.1 Assessment

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Diverse Student Body Students come from different cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., international students, students with disabilities, home students).	**Tailored support (or lack thereof)** When staff are aware of specific student needs (e.g., creating accessible timetables), students are better supported. Without such awareness, students face additional stress and risk of academic underperformance.	**Increased stress and reduced attainment** Students who don't receive appropriate support or clear guidance may experience heightened anxiety, lower engagement, and poorer academic performance.
Inconsistent teaching, assessment, and feedback Variations in marking criteria, feedback clarity, and lecturer assumptions about prior knowledge and academic skills.	**Misaligned expectations** Differences in grading, feedback, and unclear guidelines create confusion, leading to frustration and unpredictable academic outcomes for students.	**Disengagement and dissatisfaction** Inconsistent marking and vague feedback contribute to students feeling demotivated and undervalued, particularly among international and minority students.
Workload and resource challenges for staff High marking loads, limited time, and lack of standardization in assessment practices.	**Feedback inconsistency** Students struggle to apply feedback effectively due to its varying relevance across assignments, leading to dissatisfaction and reduced confidence in their learning.	**Unfair assessment outcomes** Lack of standardized rubrics and overburdened staff lead to perceived or actual unfairness in grading
Post-COVID educational pressures Increased student intake and the transition to new forms of teaching and assessment.	**Assessment overload** Excessive workload for staff reduces marking quality and consistency, undermining fairness in assessments.	**Missed learning opportunities** Students may struggle to develop key academic skills due to unclear or conflicting expectations, resulting in lower confidence and preparedness for higher-level work.
Rigid institutional policies Fixed deadlines and penalties for late or missed assessments, regardless of personal circumstances.	**Inflexibility of institutional processes** Policies around illness and extensions create additional pressures for students during critical assessments, negatively impacting their well-being and academic outcomes.	**Staff burnout** High workload and lack of resources affect staff morale and their ability to provide consistent and high-quality support.

Students undertaking assessments are from a diverse student body [C] with different cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds (e.g., international students, students with disabilities, home students). Inconsistent teaching, assessment, and feedback including variations in marking criteria, feedback clarity, and faculty assumptions about prior knowledge and academic skills [M] mean that students have misaligned expectations of assessments. Students reported a lack of tailored support and inconsistent feedback [M] as factors leading to risk of underperformance. Students also grapple with assessment overload [M] rigid institutional policies such as fixed deadlines and penalties for late or missed assessments, regardless of personal circumstances [M]. Staff are impacted by workload and resource challenges such as high marking loads, limited time, and lack of standardisation in assessment practices [M], as well as post-COVID educational environment and pressures [C] resulting in transitions to new forms of teaching and assessment. Outcomes reported included increased stress,

disengagement, missed learning opportunities, dissatisfaction, reduced attainment and unfair assessment outcomes [O]. Staff reported stress and burnout [O].

Interview Quotes:

"So, to give you a really specific example, about teaching, learning and assessment, our timetable, we prepare a custom timetable for our students, which is a Microsoft Word document. My autistic student came to me and was like, I can't read this timetable, because it was full of bright colours, some of the things in it weren't in chronological order. And I looked at it and I was like, okay, I'm going to make you an accessible timetable. And then I tried to make an accessible timetable. Well, yeah, except that I was like, I can't read this timetable either. Because I have the same problem she was having. So, a colleague…redid the timetable for this student. But it's so if [they] hadn't have done that, then the student would not have been in the right place at the right time, she would have missed lectures, she would have been stressed, and her attainment would have suffered."

[Disabled Member of staff]

"I think lecturers assume that everyone has come in understanding how to write grammatically correct essays and they assume that they can teach people one thing in a plenary and it to be understood by the entire cohort. They don't bother holding smaller group seminars or listening to the actual struggle we have with writing essays."

[Disabled Asian British Student, Home]

"But I guess like in terms of feedback is because I don't know in firstly, it just feels weird because you're not really close to you've never even met your lecturers whatsoever and then they give feedback, and it doesn't really feel personalized."

[Disabled International Student]

"I mean, I struggled a bit to, to kind of find a balance between the system and the system used in my country, especially with grades and everything I remember in the first year, I didn't know what to expect, like, what's a good grade, what's a bad grade?"

[International Student]

"So, say you're a student [and] you produce coursework…in your first year. And actually, you've had some lenient markers, or people who haven't, like pulled you up on any concerns. You then get to your third year, and you've sort of like developed your writing style or what you think is [an] okay writing style because no one said anything different before you get to third year. And actually, you get faced with a quite a stringent marker. Who goes… What terrible writing this is like, this is definitely malpractice. But then you've gone, [but] no one's pulled me up on this [in] all these years that I've been here. The grading rubric could be another problem. We don't have that kind of universal criteria for all the markers."

[White British Member of Staff]

"We don't have like a standardised sort of like rubric. I think one of the challenges I've heard from academic colleagues in the past is around like learning outcomes or identifying learning outcomes. And I think sometimes... there's no, there's not necessarily always someone there to help you to write intended learning outcomes, like what that what's an intended learning outcome? How does this translate into the marking criteria?"

[White British Member of Staff]

"It's really different, I guess, to what I was used to. So, before University, I, I knew what to do to attain, I guess, so I knew what to do to get high marks or write the kinds of assignments that the teacher or the marker wanted me to write. And here if you like, it's not as straightforward. So, there are guidelines, but a lot of the guidelines are vague, and many different markers interpreted differently."

[International Student]

"A lot of my assignments are essays and stuff like that. So, I had to take a lot of risks and experiment with different ways I can communicate. And you know, sometimes I feel like I really put a lot of effort into something, and you know, I did my best, and then the Mark doesn't really reflect that. Because, you know, the, the way we are marked varies. And it's difficult to predict what the marker would want how they interpreted the assignment is quite tricky sometimes...it's just sometimes difficult when you put a lot of effort in and then the mark doesn't reflect that. And then you don't really understand why. Because for example, the feedback is not really clear."

[International Student]

"Assessment, especially after COVID, when they decided to get a lot of students, we were under pressure of marking a lot of papers. And I don't think we are doing justice to students. Because it is impossible to get consistency. If you're marking 100 papers, each of them three pages, you can't get it, you know, so I don't think we are doing justice and not every lecturer works in the same way."

[White British Member of Staff]

"It's sometimes difficult to figure out... how to apply those guidelines to different assignments to different topics, because... I've had feedback on some of my work that I'm not going enough into the details of the research I'm talking about in an essay, for example, or maybe my introduction to my lab report is not supported by research enough. So, I'm not including all the details I could... and then I would... apply this feedback to another work. So, I would go more in detail. And then I would get feedback that I'm going too much in detail... So, you know, the feedback I might get on one of my assignments, it might not be relevant to another one."
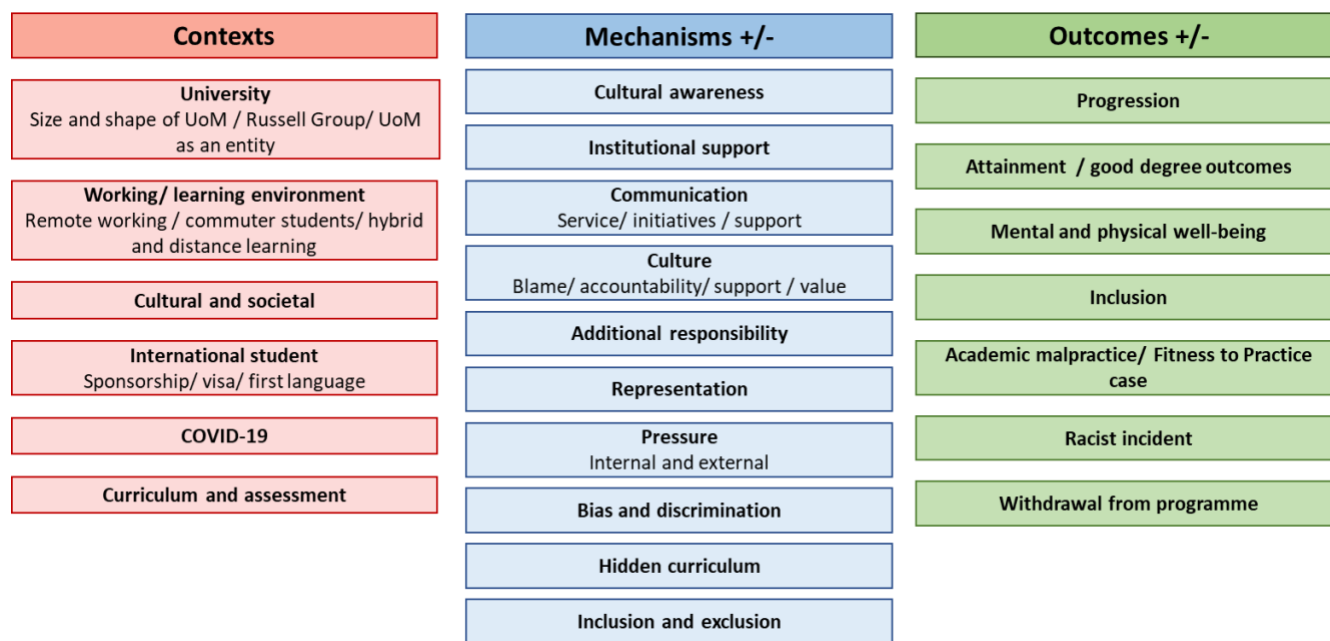
[International Student]

"Take my recent example of being ill now [I] call my manager, I'm, I'm unwell. Okay, I'll take a few days off. For students, it's sort of like, you can't be ill, when there's an exam, or an assessment that, you

know, like, particularly like a physical exam, or one that's within a set period. The implications of, of not submitting that assessment is quite high."

[White British Member of Staff]

3.5.2 Academic Malpractice

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
University Size and shape of UoM / Russell Group/ UoM as an entity	Cultural awareness	Progression
Working/ learning environment Remote working / commuter students/ hybrid and distance learning	Institutional support	Attainment / good degree outcomes
Cultural and societal	**Communication** Service/ initiatives / support	Mental and physical well-being
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	**Culture** Blame/ accountability/ support / value	Inclusion
COVID-19	Additional responsibility	Academic malpractice/ Fitness to Practice case
Curriculum and assessment	Representation	Racist incident
	Pressure Internal and external	Withdrawal from programme
	Bias and discrimination	
	Hidden curriculum	
	Inclusion and exclusion	

The pressure to perform academically, particularly in highly competitive academic environments [C], leads students to seek quick fixes such as contract cheating or engage in dishonest behaviour to meet expectations [M]. Academic pressure can be exacerbated by systemic issues like the cultural differences in understanding academic integrity, and the varying standards in different educational systems for international students [M]. The increased use of remote learning complicates the detection of malpractice, showcasing how structural factors, such as technological tools and resource constraints can shape the opportunities for malpractice [M]. Thus, the outcomes of malpractice are not solely due to individual failings but are a product of larger institutional pressures and contextual factors [M]. Malpractice can lead to reduced attainment, lowered progression ability, fitness to practice cases and ultimately withdrawal from programmes [O].

"The tendency of malpractice across… home and international bodies of students… I just remember some data from a few years ago where like exam malpractice cases, and out of 30, 29 were Chinese students. Which… is quite stark, in a way. All students are subject to the same exam conditions that have invigilators…[who] tend to pick up on, not in every exam, but they'll pick up on like… suspicious behaviour, people who might be like looking at notes and or looking at the phone and things like that. When you tend to talk to students about that, I think a lot of the time it comes down to sort of like pressure, I feel the pressure to perform and to get a certain mark, rather than maybe that knowledge any difficulties they might have had."

[White British Member of Staff]

"Something that I and many of my classmates, especially international students don't really know is how like the grading is done. If you're coming from a different educational background in a different country, it's not going to be that obvious what the instructors or the lecturers are looking for when they're marking assignments. So, when you mentioned earlier that there's a disparity between, say, minority and white students, that sort of came to mind because I was thinking, well, if they're lots of minority students are from other parts of the world. And they do the odds that are aware of how grading takes place, or how it's done in Manchester. That could explain some of the disparity."

[International Black Student]

"I think I think there's a pressure to perform. And I think that sometimes that pressure translates into people looking for sort of quick fixes to gain certain awards. So, one of the things…that's in the press quite a bit is around contract cheating, and the rise in contract cheating services. And so, if students are getting, like, lots of different emails that are coming in through the university servers that say, click on this link will help you write an essay that's guaranteed to get 70%. Okay, you know, there might, some students might be tempted by that."

[White British Member of Staff]

"Some students might sit there genuinely not understanding what plagiarism is, or they may conflate it to other cultural standards they might have been subjected to in previous education"

[White British Member of Staff]

"So, a lot of my assignments are essays and stuff like that. So, I had to take a lot of risks and experiment with different ways I can communicate. And you know, sometimes I feel like I really put a lot of effort into something, and you know, I did my best, and then the mark doesn't really reflect that. Because, you know, the, the way we are marked varies and it's difficult to predict what the marker would want how they interpreted the assignment is quite tricky sometimes."

[International Student]

"Students were saying, well, you've obviously made a system where it's really easy for us to cheat. Why would we not cheat? And knowing that other students are going to cheat."

[White Member of Staff]

"It's not only pressure on students and expecting… too much, which may lead to malpractice, but also recognising the case of malpractice could be related to…time… pressure in relation to… marking staff that were paid for an hour for marking… [for one] paper [of] 4000 words, and in [the] real world for me, to be honest, I've never [been able to mark that in] an hour because… with my work ethics, writing… at least a full a4 report on each assignment. It takes at least two hours to read 4000 words and write a full report."

[White British Member of Staff]

"We do get quite a lot of likes, contract [cheating] emails that that do get through the [IT] service and end up in people's inboxes. And quite often, I don't know how they do it. I'm not an IT person, but they can be quite targeted to like, certain demographic of students. So, you might have, you know, emails written in like Mandarin that only go to sort of like, Chinese students.

[White British Member of Staff]

"One of the challenges we've had in recent years is around the change to remote study and because of the change to remote study, the types of exams that have been utilised have been slightly different. So, you might have like, you know, timed assessments like this, this exam will be open for 48 hours… Some of the cases that we've seen, I think over the past couple years things like students who might be messaging each other on WhatsApp, they might put it might be like…What did you put for Question six, and then someone on…that message thread [is] unhappy with them talking about the exam, screenshot[s], send[s] it in, so you can't pick up on [this] because of more conventional methods of detecting malpractice aren't always there."

[White British Member of Staff]

3.5.3 International students

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Cultural and societal	Cultural awareness	Progression
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Institutional support	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	Communication Service/ initiatives / support	Attainment / good degree outcomes
Curriculum and assessment	Culture Blame/ accountability/ support / value	Mental and physical well-being
Life outside the institution	Impostor Syndrome	Inclusion
	Hidden curriculum	Academic malpractice/ Fitness to Practice case
	Inclusion and exclusion	Withdrawal from programme

International students [C] find the context of the UK education system, its curricula, and assessment alien [C]. They feel disadvantaged and discriminated against [M] as they don't know the assessment system, assessment modes rely more significantly on writing and on critical discourse [M] and must juggle bunched assessment deadlines with their working and carer responsibilities [M]. This leads to anxiety, poor performance, and a decline in wellbeing [O]. Some considered leaving their studies [O]. Support from staff [M] was reported as a significant enabler [M].

Interview Quotes:
"In terms of assessments, for some who are not used to the UK system of education, they struggle a bit before they actually get on their feet to be able to cope with that system. So, I have encountered

45

students in the past who, in fact, some of them even thought of quitting the programme, because they were not really coping well. But after some talking to the were able to recover, and then they did very well, especially in the latter part of their studies."

[Black, Member of Staff]

"I do find myself often asking for help from my white peers in the same school degree because they seem to always get higher grades than me. I am average in the 60's% whereas a lot of them get 70 and above. I don't understand how they can write essays that much better than me when we do the exact same modules sometimes."

[Disabled Asian British Student]

"…[international students] they get a feedback on the assessment, the lectures would say that they are too descriptive, what it means to be, if you like, a lot more critical or analytical than descriptive, and for many, they also think that they are sometimes overloaded with assignments, and so many of the assignments will be due for submission around the same time. So, they are only able to juggle, you know, these responsibilities, and that really puts a lot of, you know, strain or stress on them."

[Black, Member of Staff]

"It was very different because it did feel a little bit like, with my course, maybe there weren't as many diverse people, or at least not many that would come to lectures or classes. I always was in contact with a lot of British students. And I always thought that it might be just a little bit easier for them to understand the material or just a little bit easier for them to navigate Manchester, because maybe they lived in the UK before, [they are] familiar with it. So, I was always like, okay, I've got an extra obstacle here. So, and it was harder for me to maybe relate to them. Because I would talk. And it was like, okay, I don't know what to talk about. It always seems like bizarre for them."
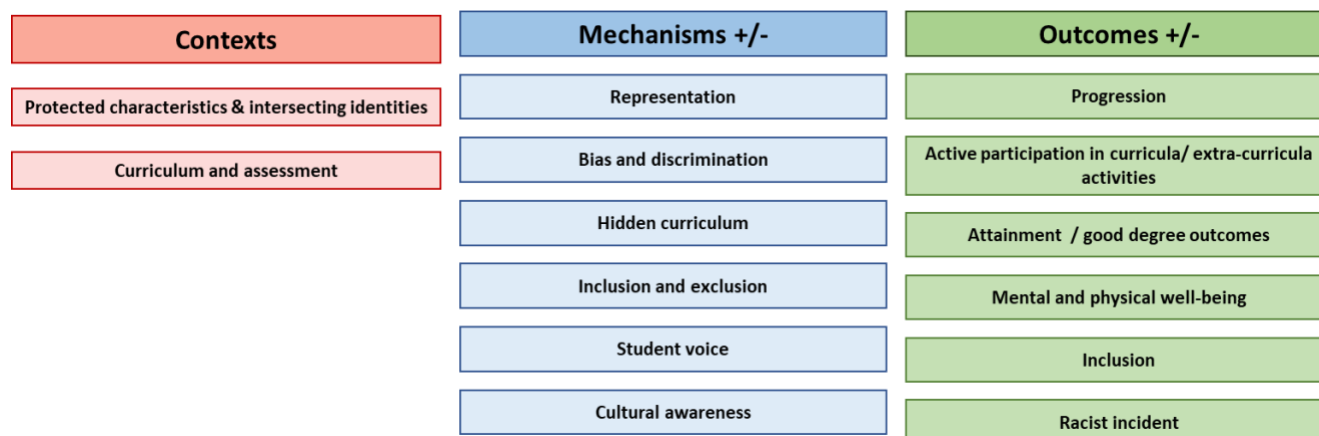
[International Student]

"I think I think at the start [of my course], I was changing a lot of things about myself, like cutting my hair, having bangs, changing my glasses, you know… there was a whole different identity change, I really didn't need to do. But I think I was doing that maybe subconsciously, to try to integrate… and then whenever I'd go back home, I was like, who are you? What are you doing? Your whole different person. But it's not that I was trying to be someone else. I was just trying to maybe explore a few different things."

[International Student]

"…okay, so for many of them [international students], I mean, the, the mode of assessment involves a lot more writing, you know, you probably have to familiarise yourself with the literature in your field, and then also engage in a lot more criticality."

[Black, Member of Staff]

3.5.4 Representation within curricula

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Representation	Progression
Curriculum and assessment	Bias and discrimination	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
	Hidden curriculum	Attainment / good degree outcomes
	Inclusion and exclusion	Mental and physical well-being
	Student voice	Inclusion
	Cultural awareness	Racist incident

Students described issues within the curricula [C] which impact upon the attainment [O]. Students reported curricula that were not representative [M], were 'overwhelmingly white' and thus exclusionary [M], and that their voices were not heard [M]. Such bias and discrimination [M] made for an uncomfortable learning environment [O] for students, impacting upon their ability to engage [O].

Interview Quotes:

"In terms of curriculum levels, also maybe try and exemplify or try to include minority students more in terms of talking about their experiences and exposing what they think about something to the rest of a majority of something, a majority, a class of, let's say, home students, or white students are female and male students, because I feel like the space for voice and representation can help a lot. And it can spark a lot of conversations and thoughts, most people and that would help everyone, including the minorities themselves, to kind of make them feel validated, and give them space to make things easier for them to attain."

[Asian Student, Home]

"It's like, quite difficult, and where my course is very white, very, you know, overwhelmingly white, it's sort of it does feel it's very uncomfortable, to like, sit in a seminar and discuss racism or colonialism and then have like, all eyes on you to like, speak for a whole country or speak for a whole nation or whole period of time. And it's just that sort of, like, feeling of, like discomfort, when I'm supposed to be learning, which, like, when people won't have in the same way, if that makes sense that obviously, the history like history can make most like, should make everyone uncomfortable, because it's, like, difficult history."

[Black Student, Home]

"…being the only black person in a room being the only person of colour in a room. It's really difficult to like, be. Yeah, and just that, yeah, I think just generally, even if we're not dealing with particularly difficult material, it's just it's sort of like weighs in, in a sort of, like impostor syndrome way."

[Black Student, Home]

"it's really uncomfortable to be a person of colour. So, I think, just yeah, just diversifying the sort of like student body as well as the staff. Because I think in terms of drama, there is one black member of staff in the whole sort of… staff unit"

[Black Student, Home]

"Being from [an] ethnic minority background, or whatever, or being from a low socio-economic background, would impact your relationship with teaching and staff. Because you feel like you can't relate to them, can't really open up, they're not from the same background as you"

[Black Student, Home]

"Also, the [lecture] content. That is the main thing I remember in first year; I had a history lecturer. We were talking about American, African American history. And we were talking about I think it was just like, like, a bombing or something of like an African American church. And he was like, Yeah, I think I find it very interesting. I said, interesting. What a weird phrase to use, like I was looking around, like, like you wouldn't call a genocide of some people like, interesting."

[Black Student, Home]

3.5.5 Impostor syndrome

Contexts	Mechanisms +/-	Outcomes +/-
Cultural and societal	Cultural awareness	Progression
Protected characteristics & intersecting identities	Institutional support	Active participation in curricula/ extra-curricula activities
International student Sponsorship/ visa/ first language	Communication Service/ initiatives / support	Attainment / good degree outcomes
	Culture Blame/ accountability/ support / value	Mental and physical well-being
	Impostor Syndrome	Inclusion
	Hidden curriculum	Withdrawal from programme
	Inclusion and exclusion	

Students and academics struggle in the academic environment that they are in because of the constant pressure to do more and to be better [C]. This environment exists because there is a constant comparison to others, which makes us believe that we haven't don't enough. The culture of academia and false belief that we should be doing more, creates a sense of unease that we are never quite good enough because there are always others who have done more and are better [M]. This

creates internal pressure to be more productive, placing unnecessary stress on the individual, which results in poor mental health and reduces attainment [O].

Interview Quotes:

"There are many obstacles [to my attainment] … firstly is my intelligence and that I cannot change."

[International Student]

"But obstacles, I guess it would be myself to be honest, like, my own internal dialogue that goes on, like, you're not good enough or like you're not doing enough or like, that really, like, stops me from like, even pursuing it further, sometimes I just kind of give up there are days where like, I don't do anything."

[International Student]

"I guess, the whole obstacle is just before I try to step out of my comfort zone and try to attain something that I want. I'm always held back by ideas that Oh, what if bla bla bla because I'm an Asian or what if blah, blah, blah, because I'm the minority. Like, that's always that little voice in the back at the back of my head that kind of acts as a barrier for me to actually attain the things that I want, like self-doubt that I have."

[Disabled International Student]

"If I want something I have to prove myself. And that, that makes me not believing in myself that I'm capable. Like, I have to, I have to do something, to show that I'm capable. Actually, I'm really capable. I didn't believe myself. Like that imposter syndrome it was so real. That imposter syndrome was so real and, and something that I'm still working on."

[Disabled International Student]

4. Secondary analysis of data – poetic inquiry

A secondary analysis of the dataset was conducted which only considered the experiences of students with a disability. The researcher team employed critical poetic inquiry, a constructionist approach, to analyse the transcripts, aiming to illuminate the lived experiences of disabled students by focusing on underlying power structures, social contexts, and emotional depth.

To construct the poems, the researcher team followed Glesne's (1997) method of poetic inquiry, which involves creating participant-voiced poetry using only the participants' own words. This process included manually coding the transcripts for significant phrases, emotional expressions, and key themes, while also attending to the nuances of participants' language, grammar, and syntax to maintain authenticity. The researchers engaged in multiple iterations of thematic analysis, refining themes through team discussions and analytical coding to ensure a faithful representation of the students' experiences. Once themes were developed, the team reassembled the coded phrases into poems, preserving the structure, rhythm, and emotive power of the participants' original words, but rearranging them to highlight layers of meaning. The poems were then reviewed and refined collaboratively, focusing on clarity, coherence, and emotional impact, ensuring they effectively captured the essence of each participant's lived experience.

This method enabled the researchers to translate complex narratives into evocative poetic expressions, providing a visceral and deeply personal portrayal of the challenges disabled students face. A thematic analysis was also conducted, revealing four interconnected themes that highlight systemic barriers, ableist stereotypes, and disparities in access to support.

1. **The Perseverance Stereotype –** Disabled students often encounter the assumption that success is solely a matter of effort. This stereotype ignores systemic barriers and ableist structures, reinforcing a deficit-based view of disability. Participants described feeling pressure to conform to neurotypical expectations, often internalizing blame when they struggled despite their efforts.
2. **Managing the Hidden Curriculum –** Beyond formal academic requirements, students must navigate an unspoken set of expectations that disproportionately disadvantage disabled learners. This includes figuring out how to access accommodations, interpret vague academic standards, and manage inflexible learning environments. Many participants described feeling lost or unsupported in deciphering these implicit expectations.
3. **Privilege and Access –** The ability to access support services and accommodations often depends on prior knowledge, privilege, and social networks. Some students described stumbling upon essential resources through word of mouth, while others remained unaware of available support. Intersectional factors, including race, socioeconomic status, and migration background, further influenced students' ability to navigate these systems.

4. **Surviving, Not Thriving –** While institutional support helped some students avoid complete failure, it did not enable them to flourish. Participants described constantly "pushing" or "struggling" to keep up, highlighting that current support structures often focus on crisis prevention rather than proactive inclusion. The study emphasized the need for a shift from basic accessibility compliance to fostering environments where disabled students can thrive.

These themes illustrate the emotional, cultural, and systemic barriers faced by disabled students, calling for urgent institutional reforms to challenge ableist norms, enhance access to support, and reframe education through a universal design lens.

The poems were written by Professor Gabrielle Finn and Dr Megan Brown, before being recorded by Dr Emmanuel Oladipo, a member of academic staff, former student., and spoken word poet. The recordings can be found here and are available to read below. The individual links to each recording can be found by clicking the link on each title below. In sum, the secondary analysis provided a critical, emotionally resonant exploration of DA using poetic inquiry.

Over a wall
I am over a wall they built. I am behind and below and cannot see what they see but what they see is "unsatisfactory".

Accessing support is…
Hearing a passed-down whisper, or hearing nothing at all.

"If you try hard, you will do well"

I became strange
when all my symptoms
lined up.

I became forgotten
in huge competition,
lingering
in my head.

Not knowing how
to do well.
Tackling!
Forcing!
Struggling!

The impossible cost
of trying.

Not this, but that.

Not dropped out, but thrown out.
Not silence, but noise.
Not passion, but overwhelm.
Not brief, but detailed.
Not guided, but indefinite.
Not enough, never enough.

Not accessible,
Not supported,
Not more than one thing.
Not me, but here.

Starting, failing

I started,

                Not keeping up,

I failed.

                Not speaking up.

I started,

                Living backwards,

I failed.

                An old half.

I started,

                Looking for help,

I failed.

                Not able to talk.

"Just say the word!"
Just say the word.
But with everything,
I couldn't.

My Thing

Ya know
that's my thing;
Struggling.

I'm trying
to make me
better – social,
but what if I can't?

What if no matter
how much help I get
There is always
Struggle
Holding me back?

I am not your deficit

Don't reduce me to a gap on your dashboard.
A percentage point on your action plan.
I am not your deficit.
I am not the problem you whisper about in strategy meetings,
the 'hard-to-reach' student you never reached for.
I am here. Complex.
Brilliant in ways your rubrics never learned to read.
You say "evidence-based."
Here's your evidence:
I worked two jobs,
navigated racism in silence,
and still showed up.
Not for your stats.
Not for your league tables.
But for me.
So don't call me a data point when you never asked
for the story behind the number.

5. Outputs and Recommendations

This section will highlight the main findings from the report along with recommendations for each scenario. The aim is to provide actionable solutions to the problems which influence differential attainment and awarding gaps. The proposed recommendations are in line with the Access and Participation Plan 2025-26 to 2028-29, are supported by the findings of the National Student Survey, align with the University of Manchester's Equality Diversity and Inclusion Strategy as well as the Race Equality Charter Silver Award commitments.

Key findings highlighted disparities in student experiences related to physical spaces, representation, support for international students, financial barriers, and inconsistencies in curricula and assessment. Many university facilities were unsuitable for students with additional needs, often feeling unwelcoming, overstimulating, or inaccessible. This discouraged students from using these spaces, negatively affecting well-being and academic performance. A lack of staff diversity further reinforced inequalities, as underrepresented students lacked role models and mentors who shared their lived experiences, which reduced aspirations for academic progression.

International students faced additional pressures, including cultural taboos around seeking support, sponsorship obligations, language barriers, and caregiving responsibilities, limiting their engagement with university services. Financial insecurity was another key barrier, with students struggling to afford accommodation, food, and heating. Institutional policies, such as fines for accommodation breaches and a lack of maintenance support, compounded these difficulties, forcing many students to work while studying, which negatively impacted academic performance.

Inconsistencies in teaching, assessment, and feedback further contributed to the student experience discussed here. Variations in marking criteria, unclear feedback, and assumptions about prior knowledge led to misaligned expectations. International students felt disadvantaged by unfamiliarity with the UK education system, while underrepresented groups found curricula overwhelmingly Eurocentric and lacking diverse perspectives.

To address these challenges, the below recommendations are made:

Theme	Recommendations	Action Plan
Academic Support and Learning Resources	Develop studying spaces that are suitable for all students.	• Conduct audit of study spaces to ensure that they are fit for purpose for all students (taking into consideration the needs of disabled and neurodivergent students and staff). Allow students to participate in this process for a holistic approach. • Develop more quiet zones and focus on acoustic improvements (e.g. noise-dampening materials) to reduce ambient noise. • Designate sensory-friendly spaces that consider lighting, ambient noise and reduced crowds. • Provide more spaces that are open later, as many students work and need the additional time to study. • Integrate environmental well-being (e.g. quiet areas, sensory spaces, etc.) into mental health strategy
	Make learning materials and recordings available to all students (not just DASS registered students)	• Ensure that all lectures are recorded and available so that anyone can view them.
	Develop more opportunities to introduce students to the higher education environment	• Integrate important onboarding information throughout the academic year to avoid bombarding students during welcome and induction activities. This also supports students who join late.
	Develop targeted support systems	• Establish support groups where students can share experiences and strategies for overcoming self-doubt.
	Develop Introductory sessions for new students	• Students are not clear on the expectations of university study when they begin, thus creating clear communication systems around what the expectations are related to study, resources, and tools available needs to be prioritised. • Create more opportunities later in the year to introduce students to what Manchester has to offer, this reduces the fear of "missing out" if you don't engage at the start of the year.
Representation, Mentoring and Pastoral Support	Hire lecturers and staff from underrepresented groups e.g., Black, Asian and Disabled to	• Review diversity initiatives to ensure that underrepresented groups are hired in all areas of the University.

Theme	Recommendations	Action Plan
	increase diversity within the workforce.	• Encourage staff to share their backgrounds with students as students want to interact with people who 'look, think, and sound' like them Review diversity initiatives to ensure that underrepresented groups are hired in all areas of the University, especially those where underrepresentation is a prominent issue. • Hiring panels should also be diverse to enhance fair hiring practices.
	Increase inclusive student social events.	• Create events that are not centred around alcohol use • More lunchtime events to ensure commuter and students with caring responsibility can attend.
	Mentorship programs should be reflective of the diversity of the University.	• Create a diverse environment where students see themselves reflected in the staff members that they engage with; this can also include developing visible role models for underrepresented groups. • Create mentorship programs that pair international and minority students with senior peers or faculty members who have overcome similar challenges. • Reverse mentoring to upskill senior colleagues.
	Provide support opportunities that are less formal and provide expedient support.	• Set up a help booth in the heart of the campus, such as an outdoor prominent position on Oxford Road, to signpost students to support services and rapidly deal with queries. • Reform student support services to focus on helping students flourish, not just avoid failure.
	Improve communications to students and staff.	• Establish a programme of work with the Communications team and student content creators which portrays the experiences of minoritised student groups. For example, many colleagues are unaware of the additional pressure's sponsorship leads to for student recipients.
	Culturally inclusive design approach	• Review and redesign the displayed artwork and displays to reflect the diversity of the university population.
	Enhance cultural competency in student support services	• Student support officers should be as diverse as the student population to ensure that students can discuss problems with individuals who understand their unique circumstances. • Ensure that mental health support is appropriate for all cultures.

Theme	Recommendations	Action Plan
	Promote disability disclosure and support	• Create a safe space for students to disclose disabilities with clear communication to showcase how they will be supported (academics can also inform others on the sunflower lanyard system)
	Enhance support systems for students with caring responsibilities	• Create a formalised system of support, offering the option for flexible study e.g. offering extensions, remote work options or subsidised childcare services.
	Culturally sensitive services	• Offer access to services that cater to all cultures e.g., related to hair care, culturally specific dietary options, etc. in university owned facilities and student unions.
International Student Experience	Provide assistance and guidance to those who are new to the UK education system	• Introduce more targeted academic mentoring and support schemes designed to address the barriers that students face including access to resources, fostering a sense of belonging, English language support, financial guidance, etc. • Provide academic transition assistance to international students who are unfamiliar with the UK system. • Focus on national and ethnic differences when developing support programs. • Develop language confidence building workshops where students can practice their speaking skills in a supportive environment.
	Provide support in languages other than English	• Consider providing pivotal information for international students setting up in the UK in languages other than English. This might include banking, registering with healthcare providers, or visa requirements.
	Create introductory sessions focused on life in the UK	• International students require assistance with basic living requirements in the UK, surrounding for example, payment systems (banking), putting household bins out on the curb, GP registration, etc. which are often overlooked.
	Create an International Student Help Desk	• Create a place where students can easily come to discuss academic and non-academic problems.
	Reduce burden in first few weeks at university	• International students struggle with the administrative and regulatory requirements in the first weeks at university, setting up a 'one stop shop' for all these requirements would ease the burden.
	Provide targeted employability support	• International student should have a unique and targeted approach to improving their employability due to visa restrictions. This should support their transition into the workforce.

Theme	Recommendations	Action Plan
Bursaries, Scholarships and Financial Support	Provide university subsidised options for the basic needs of students	• Cheaper food options on campus. • Providing free or affordable societies, collectives, and events.
	Review the bursary payments provided to students	• Review the bursary payments provided to students. • Expand access to emergency fund support. • Develop financial literacy workshops where students can develop their understanding of budgeting and their options for work during study. • Provide stipends to Widening Participation students at the start or during semesters to alleviate financial stress.
	Provide more paid opportunities	• Provide students with more research and industry-based projects which are paid, as this would aid in future employability and reduce financial pressures.
Student Accommodation	Provide adequate housing for students. Improve accommodation quality and support	• Increase capacity of student housing offered by the University. • Ensure maintenance of accommodation is improved so that the burden is not left on the student.
	Current accommodation offered to students meets their basic hierarchy of needs.	• Audit the current facilities to ensure that students can study within their rooms.
	Adjust bursary payment schedule	• Adjust initial payment schedule to align with payments that are required for housing.
Curriculum and Assessment	Ensure assessment feedback is standardised within a course and increase the level of constructive feedback to ensure that students can progressively improve during their course.	• Audit current assessment policies to highlight inconsistencies in marking and feedback. • Academics should be given adequate resources to provide this feedback. • Provide formative feedback throughout the semester. • Assessment induction provided at the beginning of a course. • Hire more teaching assistants to reduce the marking burden on academics. • Advocate for fairer evaluation methods that do not disproportionately disadvantage minority students.
	Standardise the feedback given between Schools/Faculties	• Organise meetings where program directors create a standardised approach to feedback and assessments. • Publish detailed assessment information publicly.

Theme	Recommendations	Action Plan
		• Provide student clear explanations of the purpose of feedback and focus on actionable improvements. • Implement a feedback tracking system where students can compare past feedback across modules to identify patterns for improvement. • Develop feedback guidance support and training for students and staff.
	Improve clarity surrounding mitigating circumstances	• Improve communication about mitigating circumstances policies to ensure students understand their options.
	Improve Accessibility in Timetables and Learning Materials	• Standardise timetables to be accessible, avoiding bright colours and ensuring chronological clarity. • Provide multiple formats (text-based, visual, digital) for timetables and key documents to accommodate different needs. • Make unspoken academic expectations explicit, as disabled students often struggle with navigating unwritten rules.
	Create introductory material to assessment and study in the UK	• Research led teaching is not the norm in all countries, thus, it would help students (particularly PGT/PGR) to have information provided that explains the UK ethos around teaching and assessment.
	Enhance diversity and equity of curriculum	• Introduce diversity into course curriculum to align with Student Union's Decolonise the Curriculum Strategy
Communication Strategies and Staff Training	Develop effective communication channels with students to receive timely feedback.	• Develop streamlined student communication plan. • Organise Town-Hall style open meetings with students and staff where student concerns can be heard. • Develop a feedback approach for underrepresented groups to ensure that their voices are heard.
	Develop a university wide approach to communicating support services.	• Broadcast the support that is available and focus on engaging underrepresented communities. • Engage staff in improving transparency of support services and to normalise the use of these services.
	Create student voice feedback loop	• Create a space where students can provide feedback around the university services offered to ensure that the University receives timely feedback.

Theme	Recommendations	Action Plan
	Develop Awareness and Staff Training on Disability	- Implement regular training programs for staff that showcases the unique needs that students with disabilities have, especially students with hidden disabilities or mental health issues. - Offer training for staff on creating accessible materials and engaging disabled students in co-designing learning resources.
	Create reporting and monitoring of differential attainment	- Develop routine reporting for differential attainment and awarding gaps and showcase solutions to staff. - Develop metrics that showcase differential attainment so that decisions are data driven.

6. Discussion

The findings here focus on the student experience by explicitly stating how students perceived attainment at the University of Manchester. Extant research has highlighted specific student characteristics (e.g., gender and ethnicity) that influence attainment in higher education (Cotton et al., 2016). Our study went beyond this approach to determine how staff, students and academics perceive challenges to attainment, whilst still considering those who are most affected by discrepancies in attainment. Similar work has been undertaken to identify the various levels of factors that influence differential attainment (Mountford-Zimdars, 2015). These include societal and structural factors, e.g., economic inequality, racism and systemic biases at the macro-level and institutional factors including university policies, curricula, teaching practices, and student support services at the meso-level. At the micro-level, they identified individual student experiences including their sense of belonging, relationships with staff and individual motivations as variables that influence attainment. Our findings highlight the significant disparities in the student experience which lead to differential attainment, particularly because of physical spaces, lack of representation, financial barriers and inconsistencies in assessment practices. These hinder students' academic performance, well-being and overall sense of belonging.

The analysis above highlights the inadequacy of university facilities for students with additional needs, showcased by for example a lack of quiet and sensory-friendly study spaces that accommodate a diverse range of student needs. Educational environment can influence academic attainment; thus, it is an important aspect to improve upon when considering how to reduce the awarding gap especially for neurodivergent and disabled students (Kassab et al., 2024). The absence of an inclusive educational environment can contribute to lower academic performance, reiterating the need for comprehensive audits to redesign any inadequate spaces. Designing spaces and the availability of extended hours access improves academic success, especially for those students who must balance work and study, which can be conducted in partnership with students to allow them to co-design the spaces that they use.

A lack of diversity amongst academic and professional staff was identified, which presents a clear lack of role models and mentors for underrepresented groups. Providing students with mentors who represent their lived experience can foster academic success and increase aspirations for underrepresented students (Tise et al., 2023). Without these role models, students may experience feelings of isolation and a diminished sense of belonging, reducing academic motivation and persistence.

International students face unique challenges, including cultural barriers, language difficulties, and sponsorship pressures. These findings resonate with a growing body of research that highlights the difficulties faced by international students who find it difficult to adjust to the UK education system, which includes unfamiliar academic practices and difficulties accessing support services (Li and Shen, 2025). Language barriers and cultural taboos exacerbate these difficulties because they deter students from engaging with university support services (Cogan et al., 2024). International

students are also faced with distinctive challenges related to employability due to their visa statuses and a lack of support upon graduation. Providing the large international student population at the University of Manchester with targeted support is crucial in addressing the challenges faced.

The financial insecurity of students has increased in recent years and presents a significant barrier to student attainment, because many students struggle with affording basic living costs. The bursaries given to student no longer can cover basic living costs for many students (Todman, 2024). The financial pressures that students have results in increased stress because many must work part-time jobs to afford to study, which reduces the amount of time that students have for study outside of lectures, seminars and labs. Expanding the financial support that students obtain would alleviate some of the financial pressures faced by students, allowing them to focus on studying more.

Students experience significant inconsistencies in curricula and assessment practices throughout the university of Manchester. The feedback that students receive is often unclear and the marking criteria varied, resulting in these inconsistencies. Unclear assessment and feedback requirements result in confusion and disadvantage, especially for those with pre-existing language barriers. In the first year of study, this can be even more difficult to navigate due to the unfamiliarity of university expectations for new students. Students also perceived the curriculum to be heavily Eurocentric, which can alienate students from different cultural backgrounds and limit their engagement with the content. Standardising assessment practices, providing formative feedback, and ensuring curricula reflect diverse viewpoints are essential elements of an equitable and inclusive educational environment.

Many of the findings here (e.g., cost of living) can be attributed to all students, however, many students have compounded experiences which include many of the disparities found here. These students face difficulties not only with financial pressures but also a lack of belonging to the university community, isolation because they are international students, difficulties with language barriers, acclimating to life in the UK and in a UK based educational environment. Thus, there is a compounding effect of these variables which makes the higher education experience immensely difficult for these students. These can be further intensified by the University of Manchester's sheer size and location in the city of Manchester. This is a missed opportunity when Manchester's scale, diversity and regional integration provides ample scope for service learning, social and professional networking and skills development, and intercultural exchange.

7. Conclusion

The report showcases the lived experience of students and staff members at the University of Manchester to highlight the reasoning behind differential attainment and awarding gaps for Black, Asian and Disabled communities. The report utilised the findings from 123 interviews conducted with students, academic staff and support services. The interviews were qualitatively analysed using the realist method to highlight the context-mechanism-outcome of students and staff. A programme theory was developed to unpick the components of student experiences and understand how they

led to different outcomes. The programme theory was refined through a series of stakeholder events. Creative outputs, including talk-show panels, infographics, and poetry have been developed to engage a diverse audience in the important findings of this work.

This report provides evidence-based recommendations for improvements to ensure that the University of Manchester is providing an inclusive and equitable learning environment. By focusing on the lived experience of student and staff, as showcased in this report, the University of Manchester can create a more inclusive, supportive and accessible learning environment, benefiting all students and enhancing the campus experience by developing a greater sense of belonging and well-being. It is important to remember that many of the barriers to attainment are systematic, rather than individual failings and thus, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Improvements to university facilities, ensuring inclusivity for neurodivergent students and those with physical disabilities.
2. Address concerns around representation, specifically around racial diversity and disability inclusion whilst simultaneously providing mentorship programmes with enhanced representation
3. Enhance support mechanisms for international students that aid in their cultural and academic integration whilst simultaneously teaching staff about how to improve attainment for such a diverse student body.
4. Provide targeted financial support for underrepresented groups.
5. Develop the environment that international students enter, where they feel more supported academically, financially and socially.
6. Ensure student accommodation meets basic living standards.
7. Review the assessment and curriculum currently in place to enhance the feedback process to enhance student development over time.

The report showcases the structural issues surrounding the student experience from a diverse range of perspectives. There are specific factors found in the university that negatively impact student attainment and can exacerbate differential attainment. The University of Manchester must take a holistic approach to addressing these issues to ensure that we enhance the experience of all students.

Outputs to date:

- From Gap to Growth: A Realist Evaluation of Differential Attainment. Assessment in Higher Education (AHE) Conference, Manchester, UK, June 19 & 20, 2025.

- Birds of a feather DO NOT flock together: the nuances of black students' experience and attainment at University of Manchester." Assessment in Higher Education (AHE) Conference, Manchester, UK, Thurs 22 June, 2023.
- A realist evaluation exploring differential attainment in health professions education. Association for the Study of Medical Education conference 'Developing a diverse workforce' 12th July 2023, Birmingham, UK.
- A realist evaluation exploring differential attainment in health professions education. The Clinical Teacher: Volume 20, Issue S1. Special Issue:Annual Scholarship Meeting 2023 - Developing a Diverse Workforce. https://asmepublications.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/tct.13657
- Brown, M. E., & Finn, G. (2024). Shut up, or Set Free: Poetic Inquiry into Disabled Students' Experiences of Differential Attainment. Perspectives on medical education, 13(1), 561. https://pmejournal.org/articles/10.5334/pme.1392
- Soundcloud UoM Voiced Poetry: https://soundcloud.com/uom-voiced-poetry
- Multimedia content relating to this project can be accessed here.

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