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Thwarted ambitions: Barriers to completing university education

**Accounts from students and
Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
Leads**

A ROTA Research Study

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RACE ON THE AGENDA

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Executive Summary

Not enough is known about why some students from UK-domiciled Global Majority (GM)¹ and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities decide to withdraw from university. (ROTA, 2019., Office for Students, 2017., 2019.) ROTA's Pilot Study approached the issue from two perspectives: interviews with university Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Leads and a survey of students. Together with an exploration of official data from the Department Education (DfE), the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the Office for Students (OfS), research reports on withdrawals and additional conference material on race discrimination and inequalities in higher education, we present tentative evidence on why some students choose to discontinue their studies.

Reasons given by participants in our research included a sense of 'not belonging'. For students experiencing mental health and welfare issues, it was reported that support services were often not geared to taking cultural differences into account. This lack of adequate support contributed to some students from GM and GRT communities deciding to withdraw. At universities where there was lack of diversity among academic staff, it was thought this could contribute to a sense of not being in an environment that valued people from different ethnic backgrounds, which could adversely affect academic progress.

Although some universities had race equality measures in place, these were not sufficient to counteract instances of race discrimination and prejudice which appeared to persist in some higher education institutions. It was thought that prejudicial attitudes could be addressed by developing better academic awareness of how to deal with discrimination and better support for students who had encountered race discrimination. Race discrimination did not only occur on campus. It was reported that some students had come up against discrimination in their student accommodation that adversely affected their university experience, socially and academically.

Financial insecurity and debt aversion were mentioned as factors influencing some students from GM and GRT communities to consider withdrawing. ROTA considers that further research should look at the effect of proposed changes by Government to the student loan system on these groups of students as indicated in the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (DfE. 2022a, 2022b.)

It is clear that an improvement in data collection on student withdrawals, broken down by ethnicity and reason is needed. Without knowing the reasons why disproportionate numbers of GM and GRT young people withdraw from university, measures cannot be developed to improve the experiences of these students or to improve retention rates.

Looking further ahead, ROTA would like to examine whether the Government's proposed Minimum Eligibility Requirements (MERs) may discourage some UK-domiciled GM and GRT students from accessing and continuing in higher education. (DfE. 2022b.) The Widening Participation initiative appeared to have had a positive effect on students who did not necessarily achieve the entry requirements to university but who, through WP, succeeded well in their studies. If MERs are implemented, ROTA would like to explore whether there are strategies to ensure that students from less advantaged backgrounds will not have choices and opportunities in higher education reduced.

¹ The term Global Majority (GM) is used to replace previous terminologies i.e BAME, BME.

Key Findings

- **Few data were available to explain why some students from GM and GRT communities chose to withdraw from university.** Where respondents from individual universities knew that there were data on ethnicity, these were not recorded in sufficient detail. That which was available did not record reasons for withdrawal.
- **A sense of not belonging, mental health and wellbeing problems, a lack of diversity among academic staff, racial discrimination and financial difficulties** emerged as main factors thought to influence withdrawals
- **Race Equality Charters can help universities to develop better academic support for GM and GRT students but must be backed up by specific commitment and follow-through on equality and diversity.** Some interviewees and students in the survey were critical of Equality, Diversity and Inclusions measures. A secondary analysis of survey data may reveal whether the universities at which the survey participants attended had Race Equality Charters in place.
- **A lack of financial support might be a wider problem** for students than discussed in the interviews. Debt aversion by students from some GM and GRT communities should not be overlooked as a factor influencing decisions to discontinue their studies in higher education. Obtaining post-graduate funding was thought to be more of a problem for some Black students who had not received adequate support in finding funding.
- **Accommodation costs are becoming prohibitive for many students but are not the only factors adversely affecting the university experience of some GM and GRT students.** Feeling unwelcome in their university accommodation, being left out of activities, encountering racist or prejudicial attitudes from other students and staff on site have been reported. The cultural and religious needs of some students, e.g. providing a prayer space in their accommodation, have been overlooked.
- **Support services were not consistent.** It was reported that academics were unsure as to what they could offer students who asked for help. There was a need for greater involvement of GM and GRT students in developing mental health services. Models of support which drew on the experiences and knowledge of GM students were thought by interviewees to be useful in encouraging openness and challenging stigmatising preconceptions about mental health and GM students.
- **There is difficulty in obtaining information about students who had dropped out, the reasons why they had left, how they had fared once they had left and what kind of support they were given.** It was speculated, although not confirmed, that where universities might not want to keep official data on why students left, this was not solely for reasons of confidentiality. For example, a disproportionate loss of students from some ethnic communities would not reflect well on the university's retention or equality measures.
- **Preconceptions by some university course leaders about students** from diverse ethnic backgrounds being socially, educationally or economically disadvantaged are open to question. It was observed that many Black and other minority ethnic students are just as high achievers, with the same qualifications and aspirations as their White counterparts, but there can be barriers to their progression which White students do not experience.
- **Improvements are needed in the way universities relate to GM and GRT students at an institutional level.** Participants in the study reported that students at some Higher Education institutions had become disaffected with the way university authorities relate to GM and GRT students' concerns. Their concerns were the lack of academic support, the lack of opportunity to engage with academic staff and a disproportionate exclusion rate of GM and GRT students.

Abbreviations

APPS	Access and Participation Plans
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead
GM	Global Majority
GRT	Gypsy, Roma and Traveller
HEAT	Higher Education Access Tracker
LLE	Lifelong Loan Entitlement
MERs	Minimum Eligibility Requirements
REC	Race Equality Charter

1. Background to the Study

Research carried out by Race on the Agenda in 2018 found that a disproportionate number of UK-domiciled students from Global Majority (GM) and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities were withdrawing from university. (ROTA, 2019.) Although statistical data from HESA and the Office for Students (2017., 2019.,) demonstrate that students from these ethnic communities more frequently transfer courses or discontinue their studies, the reasons for withdrawals are under reported.

ROTA's Pilot Study, conducted between 2020 and 2022 looked at why some students choose to withdraw from university and questions whether race discrimination influences their decisions.

The Pilot Study presents findings from desk research, survey data and interviews.

2. Aim of the Study

The aim of the research was to gain insight into reasons why students from GM and GRT communities withdrew or were considering withdrawing. Information was gathered from desk research, a survey of students and from interviews with EDI Leads, or staff with an equivalent role, at London Universities. The Report recognises that universities outside London may have very different student populations. The experiences of students and EDI Leads in London may not be representative of those who are based elsewhere. ROTA intends to include all universities in the UK in a follow-up study, for which funding is sought.

3. Methodology

3.1 Desk Research

Desk research was carried out to contextualise the issue of student withdrawals and to inform and refine the questions for the student survey and the interviews. Sources examined included Higher Education statistical data on student withdrawals, research reports addressing the experiences of UK-domiciled GM and GRT students and policy documents including race equality policies. We also referred to material from a Westminster Forum conference on Race and Equality in Higher Education (2021.) The

conference explored challenges facing universities in raising awareness of discrimination among academics and support staff and developing better equality and diversity measures for GM and GRT students.

3.2 Student Survey

Students were surveyed because findings from a previous ROTA report indicated a gap in direct research with students from GM and GRT communities. (ROTA. 2019.) The purpose of the student survey was to identify the type of support needed to prevent withdrawals and to explore whether direct or indirect racial discrimination was a factor in decisions to withdraw.

In order to explore the reasons why UK-domiciled students from Global Majority and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities withdrew or were considering withdrawing from London Universities, a semi structured student survey was created via *Survey Monkey* and distributed to all London-based universities and Higher Education Institutions. This totals at 39 institutions across the capital some of which are Colleges with HE provisions. This methodological approach was selected as internet surveys are considered to be advantageous in attempt to gain responses within a short timespan, and “has the ability to obtain reasonably complete answers to open-ended questions” (Blair et al., 2014, p.58).

In an attempt to obtain a good response rate, it was decided that it would be most effective to directly contact Student Union representatives whose role is specifically focused on managing student matters pertaining to equality and diversity. An initial notification email was sent to the relevant representatives or a general contact for the Student Union if an EDI student representative was not appointed. This alerted them that we would be sending out a survey in request that they distribute this to their students. The email also informed them of the motivations behind conducting the research, and its purpose following completion. Following this notification email, a follow-up email was then sent out a few weeks later that included a link to the survey and information regarding the survey to be sent to students alongside the survey. For those institutions where no responses were received, prompt emails were sent out to institutions again requesting redistribution of the survey for students to complete. Responses were monitored, and the data was then compiled for analysis.

Invitations to students to take part in ROTA’s survey were emailed to 39 Higher Education institutions in London. See Appendix A: Student Survey.

3.3 Interviews with EDI Leads

EDI Leads were chosen because they are broadly responsible for designing and implementing equality policies across their university and supporting staff and students from different minority ethnic communities. Their roles generally include working with academic staff, student support services and human resources. Some EDI Leads work more closely with students, e.g. in ambassadorial roles with groups of students from minority ethnic communities or are involved in widening participation and student mobility.

The type of university was considered. Universities were divided into Russell-Group and non-Russell Group institutions. Russell Group universities are an association of research-intensive institutions and tend to dominate the top of the league tables. Entry requirements are usually set higher and the range of courses more academically exacting at Russell Group universities than at non-Russell group universities. Using data from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) between 2007/2008 and 2017/2018, Debut Careers reported that the retention rate for students at Russell Group universities

tends to be higher across the UK, although student drop-out rates are rising across all types of universities (Debut Careers. 2020.)

Potentially sensitive or controversial areas were addressed in the methodology. For example, ROTA was aware that some Higher Education institutions had been criticised for not responding to Black students' concerns about the way race discrimination had been handled by the authorities. Measures were developed so that if this, or similar issues were referred to explicitly by an interviewee, anonymity would be kept about specific people, places, or institutions.

The likelihood of interviewee bias was taken into consideration. EDI Leads, by virtue of their role, may be inclined to speak positively about their own institutions. This factor would be accounted for, e.g. when comparing interview data with that of student feedback.

Limitations of the small sample size were acknowledged. It was accepted that the views expressed by those interviewed would not necessarily be representative of the Higher Education sector and could only be considered as indicative of some experiences in some universities. Although thought unlikely to help identify trends, the interviews would act as a starting point, or catalyst for discussion about factors influencing some UK-domiciled GM and GRT students to withdraw from university.

Five Russell Group and five non-Russell Group institutions, from different parts of London were emailed invitations outlining the project's aim and objectives and the purpose of interviewing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Leads/staff holding an equivalent role.

Five universities (three from Russell-Group and two from non-Russell Group institutions) and a contact who had worked as an EDI Lead across several universities agreed to telephone interviews. Ten individuals took part in total. A semi-structured interview schedule was sent to participants, outlining the areas for discussion. *See Appendix B: Interview Schedule.*

Consent forms were signed by participants prior to the interviews. Interviews were conducted over the phone and audio recorded. Research ethics and protocols in the Social Sciences were adhered to. The identities of participants and universities were kept confidential. The research complied with data collection and security requirements.

4. Findings

4.1 Desk Research

We report on findings from the following sources: data on all student withdrawals for the whole of England; data on student withdrawals by ethnicity; data relating to disadvantage and withdrawals; data collected by universities on students from GM and GRT communities.

We also report on policy and policy changes likely to affect student withdrawals and retention. ROTA's focus was exploring whether there were measures in place to address inequality and discrimination that might affect GM and GRT students' experiences of university and their decisions to continue or withdraw.

The desk research also examined the literature for any studies that questioned whether race discrimination was a contributory factor in student withdrawals from university.

Race Equality Charters from selected universities were examined as these are put in place by universities as part of their measures to address inequalities and discrimination.

4.1.1 Data on undergraduate and postgraduate student withdrawals across England

Data on undergraduate and postgraduate student withdrawals across England for the years 2016 to 2019 were examined. Data for 2019-2020 and 2021/2022 were not included, as the COVID-19 lockdowns interrupted Higher Education courses for all students. It was thought that data for this period might not be representative. Some sources such as The Student Loans Company (2021) have suggested that the lockdowns did not significantly affect withdrawal rates.

At the time of this Report, information up to the end of 2022 was not complete. It should also be noted that we found slight variations in the way that data was reported by different sources i.e Solutionpath, the Student Loans Company, the Higher Education Statistical Agency and the Office for Students.

Solutionpath, using data from Student Finance England (2021) and the Student Loans Company (2021) reported that 'one in ten undergraduates drop out before their second year' in England, a figure which is slightly higher than those derived from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) and the Office for Students. (Solutionpath. September 2022.)

Using data from the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA), the Office for Students gave percentages for all UK-domiciled students over a three-year period who did not continue their studies in Higher Education after their first year of entry.

In 2016-17, 6.5% of all young undergraduates and 13% of all mature students did not continue. These figures rose slightly for 2017-18, 6.8% and 13.6% respectively, and fell slightly in 2018-2019, 6.7% and 13.5%. (Office for Students.2021)

The Student Loans Company (SLC) published statistics on 'withdrawal notifications' for the academic years up to 2021/2022, suggesting that there had been an overall increase (+14%) in withdrawal notifications, based on figures returned by all Higher Education providers. The SLC referred to the statistics as experimental and qualified the data as including 'only those students approved for SLC funding and confirmed as enrolled between the AY year 2018/19 and 2021/22'. (Student Loans Company. 2021.)

Figures released from HESA for 2021-2022 were not available at the time of reporting.

Reflecting on the data, and accounting for some slight variations in student withdrawals as reported, there appears to have been a rise in withdrawals overall between 2016 and 2021.

4.1.2 Data on undergraduate students by ethnicity

The Office for Students (OfS) reported on transfer and non-continuation rates for undergraduate students in England, broken down by ethnicity. Transfer rates refer to students changing/transferring course or university, non-continuation rates refer to students withdrawing or leaving university before the end of their studies.

In 2016-2017, transfer rates for students broken down by ethnicity was at the highest for Black and Other Ethnicity, 4.8% and 5.2% respectively, with 4.5% for Asian, 3.9% for Mixed Ethnicity and 2.5% for White.

For the same period, non-continuation rates for students broken down by ethnicity was at the highest for Black and Other Ethnicity (15% and 11.5% respectively) compared with 11.2% for Mixed Ethnicity, 9.7% for Asian and 8.7% for White. (OfS.2021.)

Reflecting on the data available on withdrawal rates broken down by ethnicity, transfer rates and discontinuation rates for students from ethnic minority communities appear to be higher (almost twice as high for Black students discontinuing) than for White students.

A note on data for mature students.

The OfS analysed continuation data for mature students in Higher Education in England. Mature students are defined as ‘those who enter higher education at the age of 21 and over.’ For the year 2018-2019 mature students were more likely to discontinue their studies:

‘In 2018-2019 84.4 percent of mature full-time students continued to their second year, a rate of 8 percentage points below that for young students. Of part time mature students, around two thirds continued to the second year. This was 6.6 percentage points below their younger counterparts.’ (OfS. Insight Brief. 2021.)

4.1.3 Data on disadvantage in relation to withdrawals

An examination was made of OfS data on disadvantage in relation to higher drop-out rates for students thought to come from less advantaged backgrounds. The OfS refers to area-based measures (POLAR and TUNDRA) to examine educational disadvantage in relation to geographical areas (post-codes) which have been identified as being more economically and socially deprived in comparison with other areas. (OfS.2020.).

The OfS in January 2022 revealed that 35 Higher Education institutions in the UK had more than 20 percent of students leaving their courses after the first year. The OfS analysis of student data concluded that a disproportionate number of students ‘often from disadvantaged backgrounds’ were recruited on to poorly performing courses that resulted in low outcomes for full-time undergraduates. A set of measures were proposed, to cut drop-out rates, including penalties for universities not meeting the thresholds set by the OfS for continuation and completion rates.²

‘Students studying on courses below the thresholds are often from groups underrepresented in higher education and the OfS’s proposals are designed to ensure that providers must support the students they recruit to achieve positive outcomes, regardless of their background’ (Office for Students. 2022.)

4.1.4 Data collected by universities on students from GM and GRT communities

Although statistical evidence shows that students from GM and GRT communities have higher withdrawal rates from university, the data collected by universities on ethnicity tends to be broad in category. This can be a particular issue with students from GRT communities.

For example, a recent report by the Sir John Cass Foundation found that in the Access and Participation Plans (APPs) of Higher Education Institutions almost any reference to GRT communities fell within the remit of ‘Other’, failing to attribute the ethnic group a name. (Atherton, G. 2020.)

² Thresholds set by the OfS are for 80% of full-time undergraduates to continue to the second year of study, for 75% to finish their degree and for 60% of those who complete to be in graduate employment or postgraduate education 15 months later.

Similarly, only 30% of APPs of 24 HE institutions in total made any reference to GRT communities at all, with no APPs incorporating targets for 2024/25 related to access and participation in Higher Education for GRT learners. The pitfalls of using *Other* as an ethnic category and the surrounding lack of data were discussed in the Sir John Cass Foundation Report and it was pointed out that a lack of reference point obfuscates the ability to set numerical targets.

Speculation about reasons for the higher rates of withdrawal from university among GRT students were made in the interviews (*see Other Issues arising from Interviews*).

ROTA takes the view that there is a need for universities to improve the collection of numerical data on student withdrawals from some GM and GRT communities, and to obtain better information about factors influencing these students to leave. This can help develop ways to provide better support for students considering withdrawing and potentially to reduce the drop-out rate.

4.1.5 Policy and policy changes likely to affect decisions to withdraw from university

Policy and policy changes were examined, including the proposed Lifelong Loan Entitlement and Minimum Eligibility Requirements.

One of the factors thought to affect the decisions of some students from GM and GRT communities to withdraw from university relates to financial difficulties.

A Consultation by the Department of Education (DfE) in 2022 considered the re-structuring of Further and Higher Education and the introduction of a new Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE), measures which were intended to help students, 'irrespective of their socioeconomic background' to 'space out their studies, transfer credits between providers and partake more in part-time study' (Department for Education. 2022a.)

An Equality Analysis published by the DfE alongside the Consultation looked at possible effects of implementing the new policy reforms outlined in the Lifelong Loan Entitlement on specific groups of students. In essence, it was acknowledged that the proposed extending of loan repayment to a 40-year term might have a negative effect on some groups who had been identified as debt-averse (Department for Education. 2022b.)

The Equality Analysis referred to groups of prospective students who may have a greater reluctance to take out loans to finance their academic study, even when it may serve their longer-term interests. It made the following point:

'Debt aversion can influence the decisions that prospective students make about the pursuit of Higher Education, to the extent that poorer choices are made, including choosing not to participate at all' (Department for Education. 2022b.).

The groups of students referred to tend to include those from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and women from some GM communities. *See Callender and Mason (2017) and Fagence and Hansom for Youthsight in a research report for the Department for Education (2018).*

ROTA believes that for students who are currently at university, there may be implications for progression to further study that are associated with financial barriers. Interviews carried out by ROTA indicated that some Black students experience more difficulties accessing funds for postgraduate study than other groups of students. ROTA speculates that if the loan repayment system were to be extended, as recommended in the DfE's Lifelong Loan Entitlement, and if current undergraduates are already

carrying a debt burden which they find onerous, it may further discourage them from continuing their studies.

Another factor that may affect student progression to further study is the proposed change to university entry requirements. Changing university eligibility or entry requirements may prevent students from applying to Higher Education courses that previously would have been open to them, restricting opportunities to progress to a higher level of academic achievement. The Government's reforms suggest that Minimum Eligibility Requirements (MERs) to Higher Education should be universally applied at two E-grades or equivalent at A-Level or Grade 4 English and Maths at GCSE. Students not attaining these entry requirements would be restricted to less academic and more 'technical, skills-oriented programmes of study'. (Department for Education. 2022a.).

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (2022) argued that the Government's proposals to introduce MERs for access to student loans would disproportionately affect GM students and those from lower income backgrounds. The stated purpose is to ensure that students have the 'baseline skills' required to complete a degree and the rationale is that in the current system, students are being encouraged to enrol in university courses 'for which they are not yet properly equipped'.

An IFS survey of the 2011-12 cohort of GCSE students who attended university as undergraduates, found that 7% of white students would have been affected by the proposed MERs compared with 10% of Chinese and Indian students, 18% of Bangladeshi and Pakistani students, and 23% of Black students. The authors indicated that this difference reflects the fact that students from ethnic minority communities have a higher rate of attendance at university than white peers with the same academic results (Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2022.)

It should be noted that the IFS Study did not indicate whether the study included international students as well as UK-domiciled students. The IFS described the population studied as 'individuals from the 2011 and 2012 GCSE cohorts who started a full-time undergraduate degree at at 18 or 19'.

There is an argument that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who formerly aspired to certain universities but did not possess the eligibility grades, were assisted by programmes such as Widening Participation. The proposed pre-university MERs applied universally could potentially restrict entry to 'up to 20,000 students annually' (FE News. 2022.). Widening Participation is regarded by some to have a positive effect on retention among GM and GRT students – an opinion voiced in the interviews with EDI leads.

ROTA is of the view that the proposals for MERs should be questioned more closely in relation to students from these communities accessing – and progressing within – Higher Education.

4.1.6 Race discrimination as factor in student withdrawals

We examined the literature for studies focusing on race discrimination as a contributory factor in student withdrawals from university.

In 2017, the Social Market Foundation (SMF) conducted research on student retention and drop-out rates. It looked at the characteristics of universities with higher drop-out rates and the profiles of students more likely to drop out. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds, whose parents had lower-level occupations, those who came from 'low-participation localities', and Black students were more likely to leave university before completing. (SMF. 2017.)

Factors thought to influence students' decisions to leave university, apart from financial constraints, were a sense of not belonging and an inability to engage fully with academic and social university activities. When focusing specifically on the ethnicity of students, the SMF identified a 'lack of cultural connection' 'difficulties making friends with other students from ethnic minority communities' 'difficulties forming relationships with academic staff associated with cultural differences' 'lack of satisfaction with the quality of course' and 'living at home' factors. (SMF. 2017.)

It is of interest to ROTA that the implicit 'failure' of withdrawing lies with the students themselves and not because of any perceived discrimination or lack of support at institutional level.

Although racial discrimination was not found to be a specific factor in withdrawals, the Report noted the 'design of the curricula which may unconsciously marginalise specific groups' and mentioned other 'ethnic and cultural factors' which might have bearing on students withdrawing. (SMF. 2017.)

Research addressing inequality based on race in the UK and the issue of student withdrawals appears to be thin on the ground. Although some groups of UK-domiciled students from different ethnic communities clearly face barriers that other groups of students do not, some universities appear slow to introduce changes that will help to improve their experiences.

'Statistics demonstrate that people of different ethnicities experience Higher Education dissimilarly and pose a significant challenge to us (as policy makers and educationalists) to not only attract more racially diverse populations into Higher Education but to ensure that they have the same chance/s of completion and success as White students' (Crimmins, G. 2022.)

ROTA's Pilot Study interviews suggest that there is a reluctance by some universities to deal with race discrimination, whether it is unconscious bias, a lack of cultural awareness, an inability to deal with racist incidents or a failure at institutional level to put in place measures to counteract discrimination and support students who have experienced it.

4.1.7 Measures to address inequality and discrimination: University Race Equality Charters

Race Equality Charter (RECs) are mechanisms by which inequalities might be addressed. They are broadly designed to combat discrimination and to ensure that the needs of students from Black and other minority ethnic groups are met.

A selection of RECs was examined: two from Russell Group universities and three from non-Russell Group universities. Several questions arose from this exercise, which indicated that wider research and closer scrutiny is needed to address the following: how and with whom universities consult on the content of their policies; whether the student body is involved in drafting the policies and whether those involved represent the views and needs of GM and GRT students; how the effectiveness of the policies is to be measured.

Recent research assessing the impact of RECs (awarded as a 'kitemark' of good practice) suggests the following:

'REC is not perceived as a significant vehicle for progressing race equality work in award-holding institutions. Rather, it is mostly applied as an enhancement tool to help shape and sustain existing race equality initiatives that produce incremental change. This, we argue, suggests the REC's intention to inspire race equality approaches that favour institutional strategic planning at the highest level, is yet to be realised' (Karis Campion & Ken Clark. 2022.)

It was of interest that the implementation and effectiveness of RECs was questioned by some of those whom we interviewed in our Pilot Study.

ROTA suggests that although RECs are a positive step towards embedding better strategies to counter discrimination at an institutional level, further research is needed to explore how they are implemented in practice and how their effectiveness is evaluated.

4.1.8 Conference Material on challenges facing Higher Education institutions

The Westminster Forum Higher Education Conference in November 2021 was attended by ROTA and delegates with an interest in addressing racism and equality. The Conference highlighted some issues of concern raised by attendees which ROTA believes merit further consideration. These are summarised here:

- Before coming to an understanding of how universities tackle racism, the gap in data must be addressed. An investigation into the post-university progress of GM and GRT students is needed. Following up on factors influencing why some students choose to withdraw before finishing their studies could reveal whether racial discrimination had played a part in their decision. It was noted by delegates there are few statistics available on reasons for withdrawals.
- A lack of representation and GM role models among university staff causes difficulty for GM and GRT students to bring concerns or complaints to staff. Data from Leeds Arts University for example estimated that in 2020-2021, out of 3,600 University Governors, only 75 people were from GM or GRT communities. Research Professional News, drawing on HESA³ statistics subsequently reported that in 2022, just three percent of university Governors across the UK were Black. (Research Professional News. 2022)
- Where racism is perceived to be tolerated or not acknowledged on campus, this can ignite student dissatisfaction and lead to demonstrations against the authorities. Where universities are not seen as a safe space for students from some GM and GRT communities, the question of institutional racism needs to be tackled head-on. It was observed by delegates that there should be mechanisms for reporting and acting against racial bullying and to make sure that the curriculum has more than minimal teaching about diversity and racism. It was also thought that the content of the curriculum could be frequently too 'colonial' or western-centric. ROTA has found that the issue of de-colonising the curriculum in Higher Education can be a contested area. An attitudinal survey of the general public on de-colonisation was carried out by the University Partnership Programme and the Higher Education Policy Institute in 2021. In summary, it found negative perceptions held by some of the sample surveyed on the principle of de-colonisation. It was thought that such views could be changed through new ways of presenting the benefits and positive aspects of the initiative. 21% of those surveyed were more inclined to support de-colonisation when it was presented as a broadening of perspectives rather than the removal of western-centric viewpoints. (UPP and HEPI. 2021.)
- When assessing students, their potential and performance can be negatively affected by racism, leading to lower grades which can adversely affect decisions to continue at university. Conference attendees thought there should be a plan with strategic objectives to alert tutors and assessors to reasons why students, including high- achieving GM and GRT students, may start to under-perform.

³ HESA merged with JISC in October 2022. Updated statistics on University Governor Representation were not available at the time of this report.

- Where universities fail to address racism or are not complying with race equality policies, sanctions could be introduced, such as losing their status as Race Equality Charter champions. It was suggested that Universities which have been awarded the REC 'kitemark' of excellence should be monitored to ensure they can demonstrate positive measures to implement the terms of the Charter and to evaluate effectiveness.

4.2 Findings: Student Survey

A total of 39 Higher Education institutions in London were contacted via a Student Union representative/ equivalent Student Officer, with a link to a Survey Monkey questionnaire for students to complete.

See Appendix A: Student Survey

Eleven students responded in total. Seven of the eleven said they had considered withdrawing.

The sample was too small to make a quantifiable analysis of student characteristics based on gender, ethnic background or social class, indicating that a larger sample should be recruited in order to see, for example, whether more men than women consider withdrawing and whether any patterns can be detected on ethnicity or socio-economic status.

4.2.1 Reasons for considering withdrawing

Only three of the eleven respondents gave reasons for considering withdrawing from their course. Financial reasons, unsuitability of chosen course and the course being not well taught/badly taught were cited. One student had experienced racial prejudice/discrimination.

4.2.2 Support for students considering withdrawing

Eight of the eleven respondents answered the question on support services that could have been put in place to help them make decisions about whether to withdraw or continue. As it emerged that seven of the eight respondents to this question were on the same course at the same university, it cannot be said that the data, which suggested that better academic support should have been available, is representative.

Health/mental health/well-being support featured equally with better Equality, Diversity and Inclusion measures. Financial support/advice was also mentioned, as were access to mentoring and student support for Black and other minority ethnic students.

4.2.3 Strategies for engaging with students and ex-students

Because of the low response rate and associated difficulties of analysing such a limited sample, the data cannot be considered statistically useful. However, when taken together with the desk research and interview data, it gives an indication of where the research on the reasons for student withdrawals should go next.

It was clear that surveying the student population was always going to present some methodological challenges. At the time of the survey, many students were still studying from home due to Covid-19 restrictions, as were some Student Union representatives and others whom we approached to assist with circulating the questionnaire.

ROTA considers that the route to student engagement needs to be re-thought. There may be factors explaining students' low participation in research on withdrawals that would benefit from a different approach. A future study might for example include setting up an online student discussion space to

explore the experiences of GM and GRT students; developing relationships/possible research partnerships with student support organisations with a view to running focus groups.

4.3 Findings: Interviews with Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Leads

Data was transcribed from interviews with the following individuals: two EDI Leads, one Senior Lecturer with a role as Equalities Advisor, one Director of Student Support & Social Mobility, two post-graduate research students with student support roles, one Student Data Assistant, one Student Ambassador Officer, one Support and Equality Manager and one ex-University EDI Lead and Advisor.

One Head of EDI withdrew from the Pilot Study interviews due to other pressures of work but provided some information in an email.

A thematic analysis of data was made, under five broad headings: *Data broken down by ethnicity and reason for withdrawals; Rates of withdrawal for individual courses or programmes of study; Main factors influencing students to withdraw; Support services for students considering withdrawing; Follow-up and support for students who have left.*

The headings had been used to guide the interviews and were intended to allow additional, interviewee-led topics or issues to emerge.

4.3.1 Awareness of data held by universities, broken down by ethnicity and reason for withdrawals

Although it is acknowledged that statistically disproportionate numbers of UK-domiciled GM and GRT students choose to withdraw from university, often the reasons are unknown or that the data is not easily accessible.

This gap in knowledge prompted ROTA to approach EDI leads or equivalent university personnel to see if they could shed some light on the issue. Interviewees were asked if they knew of any data kept by their university on ethnicity and reasons for withdrawal.

There was uncertainty about who would collect or record this type of data at university level. One interviewee suggested that some figures on ethnicity were available from the Student Registry or the Office for Student Access and Participation. (D1)

Another thought that the Student Union might have some information about students and reasons for leaving. (A)

One interviewee was gathering feedback from students considering withdrawing from university as part of a research project, but the data had not yet been analysed (C2)

Interviewees reported that some Universities collected data by ethnicity but not reason for withdrawal. Three interviewees thought that their universities collected data by ethnicity, but not by reason for withdrawal. (C2, D2, B).

One referred to data held by their university on student withdrawals which showed that for 2019-20, withdrawals for Black students were higher than for White (65% and 17% respectively) but that the reasons were not recorded. (E).

Two interviewees (C1 and D1) knew of some data that was broken down by 'white and GM' but that the categories were broad and not coded by reasons for leaving.

Interviewee C1 knew of surveys conducted elsewhere, such as a study by Georgia State University which addressed reasons for non-continuation and revealed indicators or 'academic red flags' that helped to develop interventions to retain students at risk of dropping out. (Dimeo, J. 2017.)

One interviewee (F) who had worked in several universities as an EDI Lead knew of some institutions which had previously conducted surveys or student consultations in relation to progression and attainment/retention and mentioned sources such as the National Union of Students, whose 2019 report recommended actions to be taken by Higher Education institutions to close the attainment gap. (NUS. 2019.)

Data from the Office for Students (2017) suggests that withdrawal rates for mature students across all courses in different kinds of universities tended to be higher. Reasons were unclear, but it was speculated by an interviewee who had worked as an EDI Lead in Russell-group and non-Russell group universities that completing assignments around family or work responsibilities could account for some withdrawals (F)

All of those interviewed reported that few data were available to explain withdrawals from university. Statistical evidence from official sources examined in the desk research gave a similar impression that not enough data was being recorded on the reasons for student withdrawals broken down by ethnicity.

To address this lack of information, ROTA considers that further approaches could be made e.g. to university administrators responsible for data collection to see if provision can be made to record and codify reasons for withdrawals according to ethnicity, without identifying individual students.

4.3.2 Rates of withdrawal for individual courses or programmes of study

It was noted by interviewees that few data were available on the drop-out rates for individual courses or programmes of study. Four out of ten interviewees who were asked about drop-out rates for individual courses stated that they did not know of any specific figures or that the data was not in a form that could be interpreted easily. (B, C2, D1, F.)

Collecting data on drop-out rates was not thought possible where some courses had small numbers of students and where other courses spanned several different subject areas. One interviewee said that the data was incomplete and could not be disaggregated by ethnicity and reason for withdrawing. (B).

Another observed:

'It is difficult to unpick as departments perform differently, data is collected differently and programmes span several subject areas. Some courses have very small cohorts of students. (D1)

One interviewee who had worked in an advisory capacity on Equalities across several universities mentioned that some HE institutions might be reluctant to divulge information about courses and drop-out rates, not least because of concerns about funding and future funding. (A)

Withdrawal rates for GM and GRT students on specific courses were provided by interviewees at two universities. At one university, retention figures for the Nursing course were lower (C1).

At another university, undergraduate programmes in English, Music, Music Technology History and Games Programming had more students withdrawing. (E)

At the university where the Nursing course was mentioned as having a higher withdrawal rate overall, the reasons for GM students withdrawing more frequently had not been fully explored.

'The Nursing course has a higher drop-out rate, but the reasons are not clear. It could be attributed to several different factors – the freestanding nature of course, which is modular, over five years, or the structure of the programme. Or support for GM students may be lacking.' (C1)

There is some evidence that laboratory-based courses or those which have high associated costs – fieldwork, equipment for example, – may contribute to some students leaving because of additional, or unexpected financial demands. (ROTA. 2019.)

4.3.3 Main factors influencing students to withdraw from or consider withdrawing from university

Interviewees were asked what they knew about decisions made by UK-domiciled students from Global Majority or Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities to withdraw, defer or change course. The following factors emerged as having some bearing on withdrawal decisions; a sense of not belonging; direct and indirect racism; a lack of diversity among academic and support staff; mental health and welfare issues; financial difficulties; problems with accommodation.

A sense of not belonging was mentioned by five of those interviewed. Although it could not be established with certainty that discrimination was a contributory factor to students feeling unwelcome, it is important to note that five interviewees also mentioned direct or indirect race discrimination as a contributory factor to students withdrawing.

Five interviewees referred to students not fitting in, not belonging, lacking a feeling of connectedness and 'impostor syndrome'.

One interviewee remarked that there was anxiety among some students about self-worth:

'They feel they are not as entitled to be at the university as other students.' (C1)

Others described it in terms of students not feeling fully accepted or not 'being fully part of university life' (C2) or 'out of their comfort zone' (D1)

One interviewee commented:

'Not feeling as well integrated into the student body as a whole and being socially isolated could be a contributory factor in some mature students considering withdrawing' (F)

An interviewee who had a role as a Student Ambassador Officer (D2) described a sense of being an outsider in a predominantly White population of students. She said:

'I have personal experience of observing other students forming friendship groups or cliques around their ethnic or racial identity within a predominantly White university... I experienced difficulties fitting in to university life that I have not experienced in my present, racially more diverse university.' (D2)

A lack of GM and GRT student representation on some specific courses was mentioned as adding to students' experience of feeling ill at ease within their group:

'It was clear to me [when talking to a group of students] that they were concerned about the lack of GM representation on some courses, such as Psychology and Medical Sciences.' (C2)

It was thought that where there was an under-representation of students from GM and GRT communities, the few who were represented felt 'less confident' about their chosen course of study.

The sense of 'belonging' has been discussed elsewhere in articles and news features in terms of 'imposter syndrome' - that is, a student feeling that they are an 'impostor' or not as deserving of a place at university as other students. It was described in this way in an I-News article:

'It's more than just a battle with self-confidence in a new space, or a bout of consuming self-doubt when under pressure. For black girls at elite universities, imposter syndrome is an internal battle between your desperate attempts to fit into a new space, and the in-built institutional legacies at these universities that remind you that you're not actually welcome there' (inews.co.uk 2019.)

Research carried out by the University of Birmingham (2022) reported that

'Non-Russell Group universities have a cohort of approximately 8% of black students versus less than 45% at Russell Group institutions'

The University of Birmingham further commented:

'To compound this within the black community, many students are put off going to Russell Group or Oxbridge universities by fear of being isolated from other black students due to the lack of GM students. Therefore, black students experienced an educational paradox when they either choose an institution that may provide them with better opportunities but isolate them, or go to a university that may provide a better sense of community but may not provide the quality of education given at Russell Group or Oxbridge universities. This paradox is something that white students are automatically excluded from as they are the majority.' (University of Birmingham. 2022.)

ROTA suggests that the experiences of students at elite or Russell-group universities compared with those at non-Russell group universities in terms of how keenly they felt themselves to be 'impostors' needs further exploration. The Student Survey asked students (anonymously) to identify their university so that the responses about 'belongingness' could be analysed in terms of type of university attended. However, the sample was too small to draw conclusions.

Direct and indirect racial discrimination was thought to affect progression in some individuals.

Even if discrimination was not explicit, it was thought that the approach to teaching in some universities was 'lacking cultural sensitivity', 'lacking race awareness' or an 'unconscious race bias'. It was thought that some universities were reluctant to address racial discrimination openly and that academics were not able to tackle the problem when it arose.

One interviewee described tensions which emerged in a university with a diverse student population:

'[The university] has a diverse student population, including many international students. Some may come from cultures which are not as sensitive to race issues as home students. When incidents of racism arise lecturers do not know how to respond. There are progressive lecturers who are keen to open the subject up but when faced with remarks by students which are racially insensitive it becomes difficult to know how to tackle it. The teaching cohort is not equipped well to help students experiencing racism.'(A)

One interviewee mentioned 'a perception that the university culture as a whole is discriminatory' but that measures were being taken to counteract this with an ambassadorial programme geared to ensuring representation of students from different ethnic backgrounds (C1).

One interviewee who had a role as a Student Ambassador Officer gave an example of direct discrimination - being singled out as a Black woman in a way other students were not:

'On the rare occasion that I struggled to attend class, I was pulled up on this, although no attendance register had been taken and other students had not been singled out. As a Black student, my absence in class was more visible' (D2)

Another interviewee described how GM students had voiced criticism of the way the university related to them:

'There was a perception that GM students were not supported in their studies in the way that White students were, that there was a lack of engagement with academic staff and that the exclusion rate of GM students was disproportionate.' (E)

Interviewee E noted that the university had responded with a commitment to raise awareness of race justice, improve policy and look at the underlying causes contributing to GM students' dissatisfaction with the university experience. The effectiveness of the intervention was being evaluated at the time of interview.

Interviewee A observed that in many universities racism, which can in itself become a 'very layered, complex issue' cannot be met by Race Equality Charters and action plans if there is a lack of institutional commitment. The issue was explored further in the interviews on student Support Services.

ROTA shares concerns that although Race Equality Charters are designed to improve anti-discrimination policy at an institutional level, more needs to be done to embed them into practice across all university departments and services.

Accessing data was reported to be a problem for one interviewee who had a responsibility for monitoring student progression. Where student data collected by the university was not sufficiently detailed in terms of ethnicity and reason for withdrawing, it could not be determined whether racism was a factor affecting some students' decisions. (B)

ROTA takes the view that having no data on ethnicity does not mean there is no problem with racial discrimination. Attempts to discern whether there are issues with racism are merely obscured by the lack of information.

A lack of diversity among academic and support staff was thought by some interviewees to contribute to some GM and GRT students feeling that they were not in an environment which values inclusion or understands cultural differences. This can have a negative effect on how students feel about studying. There was also the challenge of de-colonising the curriculum which was thought more problematic when there were few senior academics from ethnic backgrounds other than white British.

Examples were given by three interviewees of the lack of diversity affecting students' experiences of learning.

In one university which had a diverse student intake, the interviewee said that students had expressed concern at the lack of representation, both in gender and ethnicity, among senior academics – for example, there were far fewer Black Afro-Caribbean women than would have been expected. (C1)

Another interviewee reported a very diverse student body that was not yet reflected in the academic or support staff, from all ethnic backgrounds. She said:

'The university has a large cohort of UK-domiciled Asian students, but Asian academic staff are under-represented. Representation at classroom level and across disciplines is not there yet. Across departments, there are [a number of] Black academics, but half of them are working in one Department (D1)

One interviewee acknowledged that a lack of diversity among the academic staff may put barriers in the way of student progression:

'Although the university has a diverse academic team, it still does not reflect the composition of the student body. 20% of the academic staff are from GM backgrounds compared with 48% of students.' (E)

It was reported by interviewee E that the university was introducing new initiatives to address under-representation, including positive recruitment practices, raising awareness of the importance of diversity, and staff training and progression.

One interviewee summed the situation up:

'Students have expressed concerns about the lack of representation among senior academics. Having counselling and wellbeing support staff who can relate to students from BAME communities is as important as having personal tutors who understand ethnicity and culture. Staff members should be alert to or sensitive to race, race relations, the use of language and terminologies in their teaching.' (C1)

The effect of under-representation in Higher Education was explored by Gabriel and Tate (2017) in auto-ethnographic literature mentioning a range of barriers that confront GM women working as academics. They cite:

'Subtle microaggressions to overt racialized and gendered abuse... invisibility and hypervisibility, exclusion and belonging.' (Gabriel, D. & Tate, S.A. 2017.)

ROTA speculates that the perception that GM female academics are being overlooked or discriminated against might well reinforce GM and GRT students' impression that the university is an unwelcoming place to study or work.

Experiencing mental health and wellbeing difficulties were thought by interviewees to affect the decisions of some students deciding to withdraw, especially where support services were deficient or not culturally sensitive to the needs of students from different ethnic backgrounds.

Concerns that universities were failing to support Black students experiencing mental health difficulties were expressed in the media. The Independent Newspaper reported that 'Black students with mental health conditions were much more likely to drop out of their courses and attain lower class degrees.' (Independent. 2019.)

This observation was substantiated by figures from Office for Students demonstrating that there were far more Black students with mental health problems who had withdrawn from university, compared with Black students who had not reported such problem:

'There is a wide variation in outcomes when looking at ethnicity. Black full-time students who report a mental health condition have some of the lowest continuation and attainment rates. Only 77.1 per cent continued to their second year, compared with 85.0 per cent for black full-time students overall.' (Office for Students. 2019.)

One interviewee who was a Student Ambassador Officer described that financial insecurity and lack of funding contributed to mental strain and ill health, the pressure of which could eventually build up and lead to withdrawal. She had personally experienced this happening. (D2)

When GM and GRT students experiencing mental health difficulties sought help, it was thought that the support services were deficient in several ways. Students faced lengthy waiting lists (C1) and there was a lack of space for Black students to talk about issues affecting their mental health and wellbeing (C2).

One interviewee said

'GM students felt they had not benefited from support services as they were not culturally sensitive to their needs' (A).

Another observed

'Some counselling and wellbeing support staff did not relate well to students from GM communities (C1).

How the universities responded to GM and GRT students experiencing mental health and wellbeing problems was explored further when asking about student support services.

Financial difficulties were thought to disproportionately affect GM and GRT students, particularly at postgraduate level.

Three interviewees mentioned that financial problems and a lack of financial support were factors in students withdrawing.

One interviewee was concerned that for Black post-graduate students, funding could be an obstacle to progression. (C2)

One interviewee acknowledged that there was an issue with Black students accessing funding. In response, a (named) initiative had been set up by the university to offer scholarships to Black students. (D1)

To summarise from observations made by these interviewees, undergraduate fees were more accessible, but at postgraduate level, students had to apply for funds from a variety of sources, including Maintenance and Career Development loans or to rely on relatives' support. In the search for funding, processes were not altogether transparent, and advice did not appear to be forthcoming. There was a suggestion that Black postgraduates were faced with more obstacles in applying for grants and funding than their white counterparts in some HE institutions.

ROTA has concerns that students' difficulties in accessing funds to continue their studies is on the rise, particularly for post-graduate students from GM and GRT communities. It cannot be ignored that European research funding dwindled since the UK exited the European Union (The Royal Society. 2019). In 2022 it appeared not to have been fully replaced by UK Government funding e.g., through conduits such as UK Research Institute (UKRI) which is a non-departmental Government body and diverse other funding agencies.

The issue of financial problems needs to be explored further, in terms of support available from universities.

Problems with accommodation were mentioned in the interviews.

Although ROTA's Pilot Study did not ask interviewees specifically about student accommodation, 'living circumstances' 'difficulties with housing' or 'adverse housing conditions' were touched on by participants as factors which might have some bearing on students' decisions to withdraw.⁴

Interviewees did not perceive accommodation problems affecting GM or GRT students more than other groups of students, although there is evidence that this is so.

For example, a survey and focus groups conducted by Unite Students (2022) found that Black students reported more negative experiences in student accommodation than their White counterparts. A range of issues affected Black students, from not feeling as welcome in their accommodation as other students, to feeling less safe and less well integrated with activities taking place in student accommodation.

The study found:

- 43% of Black students felt a 'sense of belonging' in their university accommodation compared with 61% of White students
- 68% of Black students felt 'safe and secure' in their accommodation compared with 81% of white students.
- 63% of Black students felt 'comfortable expressing who I am' compared with 81% of white Students
- 58% of Black students felt 'comfortable participating in formal and informal activities within my student accommodation' compared with 69% of White students. (Unite Students. 2022.)

A concerning aspect of the Unite Students survey was that reasons for Black students' less positive experiences were attributed to explicit discrimination on the part of both on-site staff and students in the accommodation. 'Over-policing' 'racial slurs' 'microaggressions' such as being left out of things and a lack of cultural-specific resources and facilities such as a Muslim prayer space were cited.

Even more damaging were the reports of having witnessed racist incidents (67% of Black students and 61% of White) with 54% of Black students reporting having been a victim of racism and 47% of Black students having witnessed staff act in a racist way. Hearing other students say racist things was reported by 62% of Black and 70% of White students. (Unite Students. 2022.)

In the light of these findings from Unite Students on students' experiences of accommodation, ROTA believes that the topic warrants closer scrutiny. It is intended to investigate accommodation difficulties in any follow-up work which ROTA does on the reasons students withdraw from university.

4.3.4 Support services: academic support for students considering withdrawing from their studies

Interviewees were asked about the support services which were available and whether these were tailored to the needs of students from GM and GRT communities.

In terms of academic support, opinions diverged on the level of academic support available for GM students facing a range of issues affecting their studies and barriers to progression.

⁴ A question about accommodation was included in the student survey, but respondents did not list it as a factor influencing withdrawal.

Three interviewees were positive in their view of the academic support available, describing various measures such as mentoring, student advice and learner support, the development of a more inclusive curriculum and cultural awareness training for academic staff. Also mentioned were initiatives which were intended to guide students through different levels, steps or pathways of support, depending on individual needs.

Other interviewees were more circumspect in their views, qualifying what they said about academic support by acknowledging that there were limitations to what could be offered by individual lecturers, or that evaluating the effectiveness of support was lacking.

Criticism was made of academic support for some Black post-graduate students who needed better advice on accessing loans and research grants to help them complete their studies.

It was thought that personal lecturers were positive and encouraging towards GM students who were encountering difficulties affecting their studies and that positive feedback had been received on the mentoring programme.

'The mentoring system was helpful, as were the opportunities to network and be part of the university community. This continued throughout the whole Covid outbreak and shut-downs.'(C2)

One interviewee (D1) stated that there was good academic support at Departmental level, through an Academic Advisor to student advice & counselling, learner support, but that collecting feedback was disjointed:

'There was no central way of knowing which services students picked up or how effective they were in helping them make decisions about withdrawing or deferring. A new online engagement tool had been developed during lockdown, which was thought very successful in supporting students to continue their courses during an uncertain time. It was intended to carry on with this.' (D1)

This interviewee gave examples of the university developing access and participation targets and mentoring schemes for Black students, and a mentoring and awareness-raising programme, student-led, which aimed to help academic departments improve practice on equality, diversity and inclusion. For mature students a support initiative had been developed, with an introduction of bridging courses (D1)

It was thought that where Race Equality Charters were in place, they could help universities to develop better academic support for GM and GRT students but that they needed to be backed up by specific commitment and follow-through. One interviewee who had worked as an EDI Lead in several different universities observed:

'Race Equality Charters are a way to increasing GM staff representation...highlighting a more inclusive curriculum and pedagogy, [raising] cultural awareness training for staff and developing community links to tackle racial injustice.' (F).

However, it was thought that there were tensions for EDI Leads to implement the requirements. One interviewee summarised Race Equality Charters as a 'kite mark' that may be achievable, but demonstrating how the detail plays out, and how committed the university is to its implementation can be problematic unless followed up by action plans (A)

One interviewee described a system of Stepped Support:

'The First Call is for students to approach their personal tutor who could guide them towards academic support and access to the student centre for wellbeing, counselling and advice. For students whose studies had already been interrupted, the Fitness to Study assessment was tailored to individual needs. This was targeted support for GM students. It was not specific to withdrawals but it was thought it did help some to stay on.'(E)

A similar process was described by another interviewee who mentioned pathways of support for students considering withdrawing. These began with advice and support from the academic team and a referral to Student Services, with subsequent targeted services such as Dyslexia support, Mental Health and Wellbeing or Employability (B)

One interviewee who had a role as a Student Ambassador Officer, stated that

'The university [she had attended previously] had few support mechanisms for Black students – the university did not reach out or engage academically' (D2)

Interviewee D2 had personal experience of barriers to academic progression as a post-graduate student, compounded by a lack of support in navigating routes to funding. As a result of this, in her current role she stated she was personally developing an Ambassadorial Programme for GM students facing difficulties or barriers to study.

ROTA concurs with the view that personal tutors and academics have limited resources to support individual students who are considering withdrawing because of issues affecting their academic progress. The most successful interventions appear to combine elements of better staff training and awareness of the needs of GM and GRT students and mentoring support. As the evidence from the interviewees was largely anecdotal, it needs to be backed up by case study material or examples of good practice that demonstrate outcomes.

4.3.5 Support services: health and welfare provision were described by interviewees

The prevailing view was that although welfare support services were available, there were moves to improve provision so that it was better geared to the needs of GM and GRT students. Support services were not consistent, academics were unsure as to what they could offer students who needed help and there was a need for greater involvement of GM and GRT students in developing mental health services.

At the time of interviewing, participants did not mention any specific initiatives within the sector as whole to promote better mental health support. ROTA notes that in 2022, Universities UK introduced a revised framework for higher education institutions to develop and improve mental health services. Page 25 of the StepChange framework refers to measures to enable inclusivity for students from diverse backgrounds (Universities UK. 2022.) Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) corroborated further development in the GRT mental health domain, publishing a new report in September 2022 on tackling suicide inequalities in GRT communities, published in collaboration with the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID).

One interviewee, who thought that the level of health and welfare support overall was inadequate, described barriers facing students approaching personal tutors for help:

'The support they receive depends on personal tutors or academics, but if students feel they can't divulge reasons to their personal tutor, they won't...it's a matter of having the confidence to talk

about things, how comfortable they are about telling a tutor their reasons. There could be a lot at stake.’ (C1)

In practice, student welfare services were not working well as there were waiting lists. The interviewee said that the university was in the process of reviewing its support structures (C1)

The pathways to support could be problematic for lecturers whose primary role was to teach:

‘Lecturers are there to teach. They may not have the resources to deal with mental health issues. They are supposed to signpost students to support networks. Better advisory models are being developed around wellbeing support now.’ (A)

A post-graduate student who had a role developing a model of support for Black students at her university had identified a need, and founded a group, for Black students to come together and discuss mental health challenges:

‘Speaking openly about mental health and wellbeing issues is important in understanding needs and developing support services... The feedback from the student group would be used to develop and improve support services throughout the university.’ (C2)

An interviewee who had worked as an EDI Lead across several universities mentioned a similar model of support that involved student-led groups discussing cultural-specific issues around mental health and suggesting ways that needs could be met:

‘One university had introduced Black students’ Mental Health Focus Groups, to help challenge stigmatising preconceptions about GM students and to put forward ideas for improving support.’ (F)

ROTA believes that there may be a need for universities to provide additional, targeted mental health support for students from GM and GRT communities. These might be developed through consultation with students themselves, so that cultural-specific needs can be accounted for more effectively.

4.3.6 Support services: financial support

Interviewees were aware that some GM and GRT students faced financial difficulties which could contribute to their decision to withdraw from university. Mechanisms for accessing extra support were not explained in detail by any of those whom we interviewed, except for one interviewee who thought that at post-graduate level, the Office for Students offered some assistance to increase the numbers of students from GM and GRT communities(D1).

Research funding was becoming increasingly hard to access (C2). It seemed to be very much down to individual effort to identify sources of grant. This could discourage students from continuing their studies.

Barriers that Black postgraduates encountered were described by one interviewee:

‘They seemed to be excluded from applying and the process was not transparent... no support was forthcoming from any of the people approached.’ (D2)

ROTA’s view is that a lack of financial support could be a much wider problem than discussed in the interviews. Evidence is coming through that the costs of student housing are becoming prohibitive for UK-domiciled students from less advantaged communities. This was highlighted by a charitable scheme

to pay for free housing for students coming to university from the Care system. (Unite Foundation. 2022).

4.3.7 Follow-up and support for students who left university

Follow-up and support for students who had left were not thought available by the majority of those interviewed. Six out of the ten people interviewed said there was no follow-up support for students who had withdrawn. Two did not know. Two said there was 'some' follow up, e.g., for students deferring, there would be some access to Student Services but this was discontinued if they withdrew altogether. Where some follow-up support was offered to students, data was not being kept on the reasons why they had withdrawn or left.

ROTA makes the point that if reasons for withdrawal are not recorded, it cannot be known whether the students who left would have benefitted from help and support. It was speculated, although not confirmed, that where universities might not want to keep official data on why students left, this was not solely for reasons of confidentiality. For example, a disproportionate loss of students from some ethnic communities would not reflect well on the university's retention or equality measures.

Of the six interviewees who said there was no follow up or support offered to students who had chosen to withdraw the main reason given was that as ex-students they no longer had access to university services

'Students who have deferred have access to Student Services during the period of deferral but not if they withdraw altogether.' (B)

According to most of those interviewed, only students who took time off could access support services. If they decided not to come back, there was little, or no follow up.

'There is nothing in the way of follow-up or support, apart from the Careers Service, which is doing some work with GM students looking at training and skills-building.' (C1)

Another interviewee similarly stated that apart from the Careers Service, nothing was in place to support withdrawers:

'For students who leave prematurely, there is very little follow up. The Alumni Association may have some insight into what happens to students once they have graduated, but for those who withdraw not much is known. There is some value in maintaining contact with students who leave but at present this is minimal. It is something worth looking at.' (D1)

An attempt to set up a programme of support for students who had left or were about to leave was described by one interviewee as having been unsuccessful:

'A Peer Support programme has gathered some anecdotal evidence from students who have left or are considering leaving but the programme itself, which was under-funded, has been discontinued as it did not have any impact on retention and in some instances, a negative impact e.g on Arab & Bangladeshi students...students were possibly reluctant to take part because it added an extra layer of scrutiny to any problems they were already experiencing.' (C1)

Figures might be kept on the number of leavers, but reasons for leaving were not officially recorded/available. If personal tutors did know, it was thought that they would be unlikely to disclose.

'Personal tutors may have some insight into why a student has left, but they would keep this confidential'. (E)

It was thought that more support could be needed where illness was a factor in students not completing. One interviewee who was a Student Ambassador Officer described her own situation:

'Because of illness I failed a written exam. I was not allowed to do re-sits. A short time afterwards I had to go into hospital and it was then that I gave up...my appeal to re-sit was rejected.'(D2)

4.3.8 Other Issues from the interviews: attitudes, expectations and pre-existing barriers to progression

Negative preconceptions and attitudes towards GM and GRT students were thought by some interviewees to exist among some academic staff and that notions held by some university course leaders about students from diverse ethnic backgrounds being socially, educationally or economically disadvantaged should be open to challenge.

It was commented that many Black and other minority ethnic students are just as high achievers, with the same qualifications and aspirations as their white counterparts, but there can be barriers to their progression which white students do not experience. (D1)

This view has been found elsewhere in the literature. For example, a study of young people from GRT communities (Mulcahy, E. *et al.* 2017.) examined preconceptions formed by educators at an early stage of schooling that GRT pupils will not excel in an academic context and will jeopardise institutions' reputations, particularly on league tables and public rankings.

These attitudes were thought to persist throughout secondary education, even despite 'positive expectations of secondary school maintained by GRT communities', with the result that 'negative experiences were highly predictive of early drop-out'.

ROTA reported similar findings regarding young people from GRT communities being disproportionately excluded, or self-excluding from school (ROTA. 2022.).

Other factors affecting progression to university were cited in the Mulcahy study as:

*'Lack of knowledge of the education system and the lack of cultural capital to navigate it [that] persists and may intensify as pupils move beyond compulsory education towards further and higher education' (Mulcahy, E. *et al.* 2017.)*

These factors, and the resistance to take on debt 'cultural debt aversion' and 'the reluctance to engage with government financial support or loans' were identified as further disincentives to attend university for the GRT community.

Although ROTA's Pilot Study did not specifically address barriers to GRT students applying for university from school or sixth form college, we recognise that this is an area warranting further research. Achievement and progression at university may be associated with a range of pre-university experiences such as the support available to students prior to applying to university; teacher expectations; familiarity with entrance requirements and school-to-university pathways.

Strategies with a possible positive effect on retention. Measures such as Widening Participation were thought by two interviewees to have a positive effect on student retention rates. Some evidence was

offered that Widening Participation students tend to do better. This could be substantiated in data gathered from universities taking part in a Tracker scheme. It was observed by one interviewee that the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) was developed by the University of Kent and adopted by 90 institutions which are monitored for the impact of interventions such as WP and the attainment/outcomes of students. (D1).

However, the efficacy of Widening Participation in terms of achieving better outcomes for those taking part has been disputed by some organisations. (Social Market Foundation and UPP. 2017.)

4.3.9 Improving the way universities can respond to GM and GRT students at institutional level

It was thought that improvements are needed in the way universities relate to GM and GRT students at an institutional level. Disaffection was expressed with the way that some university authorities relate to GM and GRT students' concerns. These concerns focused on key issues, namely lack of academic support, lack of opportunity to engage with academic staff and a disproportionate exclusion rate of GM and GRT students.

Initiatives were described as having been put in place to raise awareness of racial justice, to improve policy and look at underlying reasons for GM and GRT students' dissatisfaction. The effectiveness of interventions to retain GM and GRT students was being evaluated at the time of interview.

It was thought by one interviewee that withdrawal from university might be seen in a positive light. The view was expressed that it was not necessarily a negative choice and could be 'the best thing for some students' (C1)

The comment that leaving can be the best thing for some students is difficult to verify if there is no follow-up or feedback from students who switch university or course, or who leave for positive reasons. There is therefore a need for HE institutions to consider how they might gather information that would help them to understand why some students choose to drop out.

ROTA questions whether claims can be substantiated about students having made 'positive choices' leading to better opportunities. The Pilot Study indicates that there may be evidence from organisations offering careers advice to graduates or that report on post-university experiences of graduates in the jobs market but this has yet to be investigated.

5. Recommendations

As it is intended to extend this Pilot Study to a wider number of participants at universities in the UK, for which funding is being sought, recommendations based on the findings are tentative and open to further discussion.

For Universities

- There is a need for universities to improve the collection of numerical data on students from some GM and GRT communities who are considering withdrawing, transferring course or leaving university. Better information should be gathered about factors influencing these students to leave. This can help develop ways to provide better support for students considering withdrawing.
- University administrators responsible for data collection might be encouraged to see whether provision can be made to record and codify reasons for withdrawals according to ethnicity, without identifying individual students. ROTA takes the view that having no data on ethnicity

does not mean there is no problem with racial discrimination. Attempts to discern whether there are issues with racism can be obscured by the lack of information.

- Universities should be encouraged to look at how they deal with race discrimination, whether it is unconscious bias, a lack of cultural awareness, an inability to deal with racist incidents or a failure at institutional level to put in place measures to counteract discrimination and support students who have experienced it.
- Race Equality Charters (RECs) should be acted on by universities to embed counter-discrimination strategies at an institutional level. Consideration should be given on how RECs are implemented in practice and how their effectiveness is evaluated across all university departments and services.
- To support students considering withdrawing because of issues affecting their academic progress, attention should be given by universities to institutions which have developed successful interventions, e.g., which appear to combine elements of better staff training and awareness of the needs of GM and GRT students and mentoring support.
- Universities might consider ways to provide additional, targeted mental health support for students from GM and GRT communities. These might be developed through consultation with students themselves, so that cultural-specific needs can be accounted for more effectively.
- More efforts should be made by universities to follow up with students who have left. If reasons for leaving are not recorded, it cannot be known whether the students would have benefited from better help and support. For universities which might have issues with student retention, being able to analyse data on students who have dropped out would give a better understanding of their reasons and what measures might be taken to improve retention rates.

For the Department for Education

- The DfE should consider whether extending the student loan repayment system as proposed in the Lifelong Loan Entitlement might further discourage GM and GRT students, some of whom already find their debt burden onerous, from continuing their studies. Difficulty in accessing funds is on the rise, particularly for post-graduate students from GM and GRT communities and some research funding that was lost when the UK exited the European Union has not been fully replaced by UK Government funding.
- The DfE's proposals for Minimum Eligibility Requirements (MERs) should be questioned more closely in relation to students from GM and GRT communities accessing – and progressing within – Higher Education as there is some evidence that MERs are detrimental to learners' aspirations and may discourage many students from entering Higher Education.

For Further Research

- Further research is needed on the experiences of students at elite or Russell-group universities compared with those at non-Russell group universities on how keenly they feel themselves to be 'impostors' or lacking a sense of 'belongingness'.
- ROTA's Pilot Study was limited to gathering data from students and EDI leads based in London universities. It is intended to look for funding to expand the research so that a fuller understanding can be reached of factors contributing to student withdrawals in all UK higher education institutions.
- Students' experiences of accommodation should be explored further. Evidence is emerging that apart from prohibitive costs and unsuitable housing, some students from GM and GRT

communities experience discrimination and racist attitudes which affect their studies and may contribute to withdrawing.

- For ROTA, the route to student engagement needs to be re-thought. There may be factors explaining students' low participation in research on withdrawals that would benefit from a different approach. A future study might for example include setting up an online student discussion space to explore the experiences of GM and GRT students; developing relationships/possible research partnerships with student support organisations with a view to running focus groups.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Student Survey

Higher Education Pilot Study

1. Please confirm that you are of UK domicile? (a person is domiciled in the country in which they have their permanent home – the country regarded as your 'homeland') - Please only continue this survey if you are of UK domicile

- Yes
- No

2. Which of these best describes your gender?

- Female/Woman
- Male/ Man
- Trans Female/ Trans Woman
- Trans Male/ Trans Man
- Gender Queer/ Non-Binary
- Other (Please specify)
- Prefer not to say

3. What is your ethnic background?

- White British
- White European
- Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups
- South Asian
- East Asian
- Asian British
- Black Caribbean
- Black African
- Other ethnic group (please specify)
- Prefer not to say
- Self-describe

4. Do you currently attend, or have you previously attended a Higher Education Institution within the UK?

- Yes
- No

5. What University are you currently attending, or have you previously attended?

6. If you have answered yes to either of the above, what course did you study?

7. If you are a current student are you considering or have you ever considered withdrawing?

- Yes
- No

8. If you are not a current student, did you withdraw from your course?

- Yes
- No

9. If you withdrew from your course, did you leave the University or did you change course?

- Changed course at the same university
- Changed course and moved to a different university
- Left university entirely
- Other (please specify)
- None of the above

10. If you did leave your course, using the list below, please indicate why you decided to withdraw

- Financial reasons
- Health related reasons
- Family reasons
- Childcare issues/lack of childcare provision
- The course was unsuitable (e.g., change to career path)
- The course was not well taught
- Academic support was inadequate
- I experienced social isolation e.g I did not make friends/felt out of place
- I experienced racial prejudice/discrimination
- The university did not do enough to promote equality, inclusion and diversity
- Accommodation was unsuitable
- The location was inconvenient/transport links were poor
- Was not my first choice of university, needed to pass to transfer to preferred institution
- Other (please specify)
- None of the above

11. Is there any support that could have been put in place within your university to prevent you from withdrawing from your course?

- Financial support/advice
- Help with childcare
- Health/mental health/wellbeing support
- Better academic support e.g increased contact time/supervision/access to additional resources or classes
- Pre-university induction course/Foundation option on course
- Access to mentoring/student support groups e.g for Black and other minority ethnic students
- Better Equality, Diversity and Inclusion measures
- Other (please specify)

12. Please state whether you would be willing to be contacted by ROTA to discuss your answers.

- Yes
- No
- If so, please provide your contact details

Appendix B: Interview Schedule
Higher Education Research Pilot Study

Interview date

Name of interviewer

Name of interviewee and contact details

Thank you for agreeing to meet to discuss the HE research which ROTA is carrying out. The research focuses on reasons why some UK-domiciled students from Black and other minority ethnic groups are more likely to withdraw from their course of study than other students.

1. In your current role, what do you consider are the main factors influencing students to leave, or consider leaving university? Please tell us about the decisions made by undergraduate and postgraduate students.
2. Do some courses have higher drop-out rates than others? Which ones?
3. For students who are considering withdrawing, what support services are available to help them make decisions?
4. Do you know what happens to students who leave before the end of their course? Is there any follow-up or support services provided by the university which they can access if requested?
5. Is any data available from your university on the numbers of UK-domiciled students who withdraw, broken down by ethnicity and the reasons for withdrawal?

Other/comments

Many thanks for your participation.

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**Thwarted ambitions: Barriers to completing university education
Accounts from students and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
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A ROTA Research Study

