



Wellbeing and Mental Health services for students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds: Additional recommendations by the BAME Network

This document has been formed through a combination of experiences discussed during events held by the BAME Network, as well a more formal consultation and survey of students of a racial and ethnic minority background on mental health and wellbeing services available to them conducted by the BAME Network.

For the purposes of the document, staff who support student wellbeing will refer to:

- Counsellors
- Wellbeing advisors
- Personal tutors
- Resilife staff

This document consists of:

- Recommendations for direct next steps to improve wellbeing and counselling and services
- Additions to the training for staff who support student wellbeing:

This section of the document does not describe issues that whilst important, are already in existing training (e.g. on racial hate crime). The new EDI training modules being produced by the university are welcome, and we would encourage the following issues to be incorporated (described later in more detail)

- a) Microaggressions
- b) Drinking culture
- c) Cultural competence
- d) Belonging

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With thanks to the accredited students and those who wished to be anonymised for their ideas and contributions.



Recommendations for direct next steps:

- 1) Forum between students from a racial or ethnic minority background and the counselling services**

“Continuously signposting services and ensuring that seeking counselling for students from a racial and ethnic minority background is an efficient and easy process.” – Nida Ahmad, Indian LLB Student, Wellbeing Rep for the Islamic Society

“Engage your students throughout the year instead of waiting on them to engage you. Also building rapport and getting students comfortable enough to open up about issues they are struggling with. – Alisha Tillery, Black/Mixed Student, Postgrad Rep for Sociology

It is hoped that regular forums would begin a longer relationship to establish trust and visibility between the counselling services and students of a racial and ethnic minority background.

- 2) Training delivered by students from a racial or ethnic minority background to the counselling services**

This would not seek to replace more formal training on these issues, but allow counsellors to hear directly from students themselves.

- 3) A more informal wellbeing service for students from a racial or ethnic minority background to be matched with staff from a racial or ethnic minority background**

The BAME Network has surveyed students of a racial and ethnic minority background at Bristol University on issues of wellbeing and mental health. These students frequently report feeling out of place at the university academically and socially for aspects relating to their identify as a student of colour. They feel that for these issues, they would appreciate being able to speak to a wellbeing advisor or staff member from a of a racial and ethnic minority background, who can relate through their lived experience and contextualise it with the university experience. Though a BAME counselling service is available through NILARRI, many students do not feel they require this level of intervention but would appreciate being able to chat through these issues in a more informal advisory setting.

Students should be able to request a one-off virtual meeting with a member of staff of a racial and ethnic minority background for issues including:

1. Microaggressions/issues around racism
2. Cultural barriers / pressures / homesickness



3. Feeling out of place academically or socially due to race/culture

This service could be particularly promoted at peak times where these wellbeing issues are particularly prominent for students of a racial and ethnic minority background, such as:

- During the Freshers period
- Mid December around the winter exam and deadline season
- The late January exam and deadline season
- The March/April exam and deadline season

It is just a one-off informal session for a student to talk about these issues with someone with lived experience. It can be made clear that this service is not a substitute for more longer-term counselling, wellbeing, or academic services. If it becomes clear that these services are what is required during the one-off session, the student can be signposted to them.

4) Transparency around the long-term recruitment initiatives being taken to diversify the staff who support student wellbeing themselves

“We need more diversity in staff. A lack of it sets you back when asking for help, you feel it’s “not worth it as they can’t relate”.” – Jai Kalyan, South Asian student, Co-president of the Asian Society

As has already been identified by the university, offering services, such as counselling, specifically with staff who identify from a racial and ethnic minority background has been helpful. This is both to foster a sense of belonging and inclusivity in moments of vulnerability in wellbeing, and increase ease of explaining wellbeing and mental health issues that intersect with race and culture. This diversification should be continued and extended to all staff who support student wellbeing across the university.



Additions to the training for staff who support student wellbeing

Microaggressions

“Not downplaying/dismissing student concerns and instead trying to understand/deescalate , seek to engage students not only when they are in a recognized crisis but consistently host meetings to discuss how they are feeling or quick chats to check.” - Alisha Tillery, Black/Mixed Student, Postgrad Rep for Sociology

Students from a racial or ethnic minority background are disproportionately affected by microaggressions. While the current training does address this, it is important for all of those offering student support to understand the severity of how this impact students. When a student shares a microaggression, though to a white person this be perceived as a one off “rude” remark, for students from a racial or ethnic minority background this is amplified by being a constant part of their lived experience. Furthermore, these comments are a poignant reminder of the systematic issues of discrimination faced every day.

“The staff response to microaggressions and slurs is often to act alarmed, but focus on them writing it down, rather than supporting the student.” – Hibah Awan, South Asian Politics Student, Events and Campaigns Officer for the BAME Network

As such, it is important to ensure that communications do not in any way negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of the student reporting these experiences. Furthermore, recounting these experiences will often be difficult and exhausting, and so students should feel that they are direct next steps to the stories they have told. Students may need support with understanding the different options for how to take action in the way that they wish that is not exhaustive or extensive in paperwork.

The unique challenges that BAME people face (microaggressions, implicit bias, exclusion, discrimination) can affect their studies [demotivation, isolation, mental health...] – Anonymous Black Student

It is also important to note that in some way, there should be a regular avenue for students from a racial or ethnic minority background to be able to discuss their experiences outside of a moment of crisis. It must be understood that this may impact their studies long term, so these issues may present to personal tutors for example as issues in academic performance.

Drinking Culture

Students from a racial or ethnic minority background are more likely to either be complete non-drinkers or to participate less in drinking. This is often related to faith, with non-drinking being a key part of the religious identity of Muslim students, as well as those from other religions originating outside of the West. However, this may also



be for cultural reasons, with drinking often being discouraged in other cultures or not being emphasised to the same extent in social life internationally. These students are more likely to experience discomfort and isolation with the perception of socialising and nightlife revolving around the consumption of alcohol.

As such, wellbeing services or counsellors may be approached by students experiencing extreme distress due to feelings of isolation surrounding drinking culture. This may present as an issue in student living with parties being hosted in their accommodation. It may also present more generally in social exclusion or lack of participation in student social life.

Staff in student facing roles should understand the gravity of the issue when approached due to concerns about drinking, in that it is not merely a matter of preference but a crucial conflict with their feelings of safety and wellbeing. They should not focus on encouraging students to “integrate” or minimise how they perceive the issue.

Instead, the focus should be on helping them to reach out to the appropriate services to see if there are practical solutions to lessening their interaction with the source of stress. For example, the option of moving accommodation to a non-drinking flat or supported goodwill agreements with flatmates. If areas they cannot avoid, students should be provided with coping strategies for navigating the distress in these environments.

Cultural competence

Getting to know students/their backstory and identities more so you can help mentor/counsel the whole student vs just their identity as a student.” – Alisha Tillery, Black/Mixed Student, Postgrad Rep for Sociology

Other systems of support often play an integral role in how these students assess their wellbeing, including extended family, faith, and community. The individualism in the idea of “focusing on yourself” in order to better yourself may not encompass the more collectivist attitude that these students hold. No matter the nature of individual relationships with these aspects of their lives, e.g. the relationships with their families, or religion, or culture, the place in has in their lives is inherently linked to how they feel.

As such, when students from a racial or ethnic minority background approaches you with concerns about familial, faith based, community based or cultural issues, it is important not to focus on trying to distance the student from these aspects of their lives. Instead, the different significance of these issues should be understood and given the appropriate level of support in helping students to manage them alongside their university life.



Furthermore, providing wellbeing advice that incorporate these more culturally relevant alternative systems of support helps students feel that you are understanding what empowers them. Staff that support student wellbeing should have an open mind in understanding that not all conventional wellbeing strategies (often whitewashed) resonate with students of racial or ethnic minority backgrounds and so be led by the student in what might be useful for them.

“Isn’t there a Jordanese society” Can put people off coming back to the services when culturally incompetent.” – Nadeen Ghazal, Arab Law student, Secretary for the BAME Network

Recommendations to seek out cultural societies should not be used instead of culturally competent wellbeing support. Often students can feel frustrated that the only advice they receive on these aspects of their identity is joining a student society.

Belonging

[They should be trained on] how to deal better with international students on the change in environment and culture.” - Ashmitha Gunaratne, South Asian Economics and Mathematics student, President of the Sri Lankan society

Culture shock is especially an issue for international students when they arrive in the UK, with the environment around them being a great contrast with that of their home. Being of a racial or ethnic minority background exacerbates this, as there is the struggle of suddenly feeling like a minority when this was not the case in their country of origin. Similar feelings manifest in different ways also present for British students from those backgrounds, who are often from more diverse areas of the country. Seeing the entire university environment as white, including your course, living environment, teachers and society life, can be a notable barrier to engagement.

“Loving your skin colour [should be a prioritised aim on the theme of race in the student counselling service].” – Anonymous Black LLM student

As above, recommendations to seek out cultural societies or activities at the university should not be the immediate form of culturally competence advice, However, being aware of these spaces in order to signpost students to them alleviate the concern around belonging specifically is helpful, especially when students are seeking spaces where their racial or cultural identities are celebrated.

Conversations around decolonising or increasing racial representation in the curriculum are often much more emotionally charged for BAME students who face feeling uninvited in the culture of academia, and so feeling there may not be a place for them within it. The feeling that the knowledge they learn does not celebrate their own races or cultures or in fact is often a consequence of their colonial erasure or oppression can impact a student’s wellbeing much more heavily than a simple theoretical discussion. They must also be aware that these wellbeing issues are



often a symptom of long-term disparities, with systematic change being important to students.

“BAME students can be used as tokens in student representation. They need to change their attitude not just through the use of statistical adjustments. It needs to be a long term and structural approach.” Jaanvai Coneti, South Asian Law Student, Residential Living Liason for the Wellbeing Network

As such, staff advising on student wellbeing should have an awareness of networks to signpost students to which raise awareness of such issues and provide an outlet for their desire to make change, such as the BAME Network or the BME Success Programme. Staff should also seek to be a part of longer-term change in university policy to alleviate these issues.