BME Student Experiences at Central School of Speech & Drama

Catherine McNamara and Nicholas Coomber
This research and report were commissioned and funded through the HEA’s Academic Associate scheme.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Higher Education Academy for awarding the funding for this research project. In particular, we would like to thank Dr. Paul Kleiman, the HEA’s Discipline Lead for Dance, Drama and Music, for his continued interest and support throughout the project. We would like to acknowledge the support of colleagues at Central School of Speech & Drama who have supported the idea of looking closely at Black and Ethnic Minority students’ experiences at the institution and particularly those colleagues who participated by being interviewed.

Most significantly, we would like to acknowledge and thank the Third Year BA students of 2011/12 who participated in the project by being interviewed and sharing their experiences of studying at Central School of Speech & Drama for three years. Speaking with such depth and clarity will genuinely enable the institution and sector to enhance students’ experiences.

The authors

Dr. Catherine McNamara led this project and is the Pro Dean (Students) at Central School of Speech & Drama (University of London). She has a key role in the quality of the students’ experiences at the institution and works closely with academic staff. She also oversees the school’s Learning Centre. Catherine teaches various undergraduate and postgraduate courses at Central as well as supervising Doctoral students. Catherine’s applied theatre practice and research often engages queer-identified young people.

Nicholas Coomber was a Research Assistant on the project and co-wrote the report. He holds a BA in Politics from the University of Nottingham. He has worked with young people in schools and youth groups and currently works for a non-profit community interest company in London.

October 2012
Executive Summary

In 2012 Central School of Speech & Drama (University of London) received funding from the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to carry out research into the experiences of their Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students. The research included a review of pre-existing reports of the experiences of BME students in Higher Education (HE), as well as qualitative interviews with fifteen third year students and five staff members. Of the students interviewed, all categorised themselves as BME, whereas the staff were mostly a variant of White British.

The interviews with students focused on their individual experiences of their time at the institution, specifically in relation to their race and the extent to which they felt their identities as BME students had been acknowledged and affirmed during their time at Central. Students discussed in detail their experiences before and during their time at the University.

Since the completion of the research in September 2012, the institution has begun to make changes based on the findings of this research and started to engage staff and students with the recommendations in order to plan considered actions in response to the research.

Issues raised

When the main topic for discussion is experiences of race and ethnicity, it is possible that negative experiences will outweigh the positives or will dominate people’s recollections of their experiences. Most students interviewed seemed to overall have a positive view of their time at the Central, but it was noted that there were a number of issues regarding their experiences as BME students. This should not be seen as reflecting negatively on the institution, as increasing knowledge of these experiences can only lead to a greater opportunity to improve the culture for BME students.

Improving the experiences of BME students requires a critical reflection on the practices and thinking at the school. It is evident from the experiences of these students at Central that a number have been touched both directly and indirectly by experiences of racism and discrimination during their time at the institution. Experiences of staff highlight that they or their colleagues may feel they have a lack of knowledge or understanding of the complexity of the issues involved but staff also demonstrate a willingness to develop and improve.

Some of the main themes to emerge are:

- A number of positive experiences were shared in the interviews. Students felt positive about events organised by Central through the Black and Asian Alumni Network, or events they had organised themselves as part of Black History Month. Some students praised the Learning Centre (and its predecessor, Student Support Services) for their assistance.

- The majority of the 15 BME students interviewed reported feeling isolated or felt they had an increased awareness of their race as something that marked
them out as different. This was attributed to the relatively small number of BME students and staff at Central, as well as a perceived ignorance of other students when it came to understanding the lives and experiences of BME students.

- Peer attitudes to BME issues were not viewed favourably by the students who were interviewed. Almost all of those interviewed had stories of ignorance and resulting indirect racism from other students. BME students often felt unable to speak up about things that made them uncomfortable for a variety of reasons.

- 7 of the 15 of students interviewed spoke of some of the difficulties in the process of considering the institution as an option for further study, with a lack of family or school support cited as barriers towards their arrival at Central. Some students believed that their non-BME peers thought they had only been successful in their applications because they ‘filled quotas’ for recruiting BME students.

- The curriculum was a focus of the interviews and to varying degrees, all of the students stated that their course content did not adequately cover issues of race as it pertained to them as individual people. While some students valued a focus on critical race theory, many of those interviewed felt that there was insufficient course content which included Black actors / playwrights / directors etc.

**Recommendations**

As a result of this research, ideas were proposed with regard to how Central could improve BME students’ experiences at the institution. These recommendations for improvements are summarised below and described fully on page 27:

- Continue to work with BME students through events and projects such as the Black and Asian Alumni Network and Black History Month celebrations. This activity was cited as creating a positive space for BME students to meet and interact with other BME students and alumni where they could explore and express their own culture and histories, both with and without the presence of non-BME students as both are important.

- Increase awareness of support so that students feel less isolated. Many students spoke of feeling unable to speak out anywhere when problems did arise and many were not aware of the support services available at Central until relatively late into their course. Peer mentoring schemes were suggested, as too was the provision of BME industry mentors for BME students in order to provide industry role models in an attempt to enhance retention rates. Information on actual retention rates over the three-year period 2009/10 to 2011/12 at the institution is on page 10.
- Students and staff suggested providing a form of education around race and ethnicity for all students at the beginning of a course of study to help reduce/prevent inappropriate behaviour or comments occurring within peer groups.

- Ensure that BME students are present and visible on open days. Fully inform prospective students of the high graduate work rate of BME alumni and target schools with talented BME drama students to ensure they are aware of the opportunities available at Central. Work with outside institutions (schools and Further Education colleges) to increase support for prospective students as they consider their routes into training.

- Ensure that student events are inclusive and do not cater just for the social culture of the majority. For example, ensure that some alcohol-free events exist for those students with religious or cultural beliefs against drinking alcohol and talk about the fact that not all students will enjoy/participate in events in bars.

- The perceived lack of BME content on the course curriculum should be addressed by increasing the focus on academic explorations of Black History and on BME students’ lived experiences. Students were keen for race to be studied separately to other issues such as gender, class or disability in order for it to receive the proper level of focus and discussion they felt it required. The importance of White students being involved in educational discussions around race was felt to be significant. The need for an increase in the study of Black playwrights, performers, directors, etc. was also made clear by students who were frustrated by the lack of Black artists in the curriculum. The majority of those interviewed felt this focus on developing the curricula would be a positive step towards changing the White-dominated culture that students perceived at Central.
Section 1: Introduction

Central School of Speech & Drama (University of London) offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in acting, music theatre, theatre practice, applied theatre, movement, voice, stage management, puppetry, scenography, sound design, theatre design, drama therapy, drama and media studies teacher training, as well as MPhil/PhD research degrees, short courses, diplomas, summer schools and youth theatre. Three of the university’s full-time courses are offered at undergraduate level, whereas the remainder are postgraduate.

There are approximately 900 full-time students at Central, 650 of whom are registered on one of the three undergraduate degrees; BA Acting, BA Theatre Practice, and BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education. More information about these courses will be given below. This report and the research it presents focuses on the undergraduate student body.

At Central, for the average undergraduate student body, 15% identify themselves as BME. Of the three undergraduate degree courses, for the academic year 2011/12, the percentage breaks down per course to 15% BME students on the BA Acting, 12% BME students on the BA Theatre Practice and 25% BME students on the BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education. At Central, in any given academic year there will be approximately 95 BME students studying across the three undergraduate degrees out of a total undergraduate cohort of 640. There is some fluctuation in these figures year on year, but no extreme variation.

The Equality and Diversity committee had identified two themed actions for the academic year 2011/12, one of which was ‘Information and our use of it’. The intention was to develop the statistical and qualitative data gathering and the use of this data in order to enhance the ways the profiles and experiences of staff and the student body were monitored and investigated with regard to race, sex, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion and beliefs, pregnancy and maternity and marriage and civil partnership. One specific objective that would support this aim was to:

"Continue to carry out consultation and dialogue with staff, students, governors and other stakeholders to look at people’s experiences of work and study (and other engagements) at Central. (Single Equality Scheme Action Plan 2011 – 2012, www.cssd.ac.uk)"

This research project has enabled direct engagement with BME students and facilitated hearing in depth their experiences of work and study at the institution.

The first section of the report outlines the project’s aims, rationale and methodology, as well as well discussing how ethnicity and race are defined in the context of this research. The second section provides an account of the findings from the interviews together with an analysis of the findings which draws upon the data from the transcripts.
Project Aims

1) To provide statistical information relating to ethnicity and achievement at Central School of Speech & Drama (University of London);
2) To provide qualitative information relating BME students’ experiences of studying at Central;
3) To engage with students, academics and staff in support departments in relation to BME students’ experiences of a Drama University-Conservatoire environment.

The overarching intention in carrying out this research was to listen and then to develop practice on the basis of the information gained.

Rationale

Previous studies by the HEA show that ‘being from a minority ethnic group (except the Other Black, Mixed and Other groups) was ... found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment’ (HEA 2008: 6). Statistics indicate that there was an attainment gap of 18.6% between White students and BME students for the academic year 2009/10 (Stevenson 2011: 3). While attainment overall is generally increasing, the gap between BME students and their White peers has not narrowed significantly.

Pre-existing research does not only pertain to attainment; a report by the National Union of Students (NUS) described a ‘systematic marginalisation of Black perspectives in education’, which not only led to lower attainment but also to lower overall satisfaction with their HE experience (NUS: 3). The gap in satisfaction is generally seen to be reducing, but this depends upon the type of institution attended and the quality of teaching and learning offered.

While there is a large body of research already in existence around the experiences of BME students in general, little exists regarding the experience of students attending drama schools. The final report of the Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment Project (HEA, 2008) recommended that more research should be carried out into the different disciplines within HE, suggesting that a key area of focus ‘in relation to the learning and teaching environment should include how departmental and subject differences might affect attainment variation’ (pp. 34-5).

The only previous report into BME student experiences which directly engages with drama, theatre and performance courses was published by the Conference of Drama Schools (merged with the National Council for Drama Training in 2012 and now known as Drama UK) in 2010. The report raised a number of issues including the isolation experienced by BME students, a perceived lack of role models and BME staff and students feeling an inability to express their cultural identity within the world of theatre. During the process of engaging with the suggestions for improvement within this report, the institution will also take account of the Conference of Drama Schools 2010 recommendations.
In order to explore how BME students experience their education at Central, qualitative research in the form of interviews was carried out between June and July of 2012. Every third year student from Black, Asian, Arabic, Chinese and other non-White backgrounds in the undergraduate cohort of 2011/12 (twenty home students and three overseas students), was invited to participate in a 60-90 minute interview as part of a project researching their experiences at Central. (See Appendix A for full list of questions). A range of staff from academic and support departments were also invited to participate.

The purpose of this report is to look in detail at these experiences within Central and to look at ways in which Central can improve and enhance the experience of BME students.

**Definitions and context**

In exploring the experiences of BME students at Central, this research draws on a range of definitions of the term ‘BME’. Singh (2011) defines BME as:

‘... an umbrella term that is used to incorporate a range of minority communities living in the UK. Over the past 20 years the term has gained wide currency within public and private sector organisations to distinguish individuals and groups whose ethnic origins are either: non-White, in the case of African Caribbean and Asians, or non-British, as in the case of Eastern Europeans and Irish people.’ (Singh 2011: 2)

Whilst the NUS’ Black Students campaign uses the term Black rather than BME and defines Black to mean ‘students of African, Asian, Arab, or Caribbean descent’.

For the purposes of this research, the term BME student refers to students who identify themselves as Black (in line with the NUS definition) and belonging to another minority ethnic category, including that of Mixed Race. Students who participated in the project had a variety of ethnic identities. Several identified themselves as Black British or African British, others as Mixed Race, African Asian, Black Bermudan and Afro-Caribbean.

The report *Ethnicity and Degree Attainment* (Broecke & Nicholls 2007) showed that, even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors, being from a minority ethnic group (except the Other Black, Mixed and Other groups) was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment. Berry & Loke (2010) reported that BME students are 18% less likely to get a 1st or a 2.i degree classification:

‘Looking at data for 2007–08, the national attainment gap between BME students and White students was 18.3%. The attainment gap is defined as the difference between the proportion of White qualifiers who obtained a first class honours or upper second class honours and the proportion of BME qualifiers who achieved at the same level. This gap has since decreased slightly to 18% in 2008–09’ (Berry & Loke, 2010)
The data on these gaps can vary. As stated in the NUS Race for Equality report, the attainment gap between Black students and White students can vary across the different non-White ethnic groups. According to the NUS report, the differences between Asian students and Afro-Caribbean students were significant, with Asian students being significantly more likely to attain a good degree (NUS 2011: 7). It is important, therefore, to not only think of BME as one specific set of experiences, but rather a range of diverse experiences with some commonalities.

When looking at data pertaining to attainment and the potential gap between Black students and White students at Central, the figures vary. Over the three years 2008/9 to 2010/11, the gap in the attainment of a 'good' degree has been 3% lower for BME students (2008/09), 22% lower for BME students (2009/10) and 6% higher for BME students (2010/11) compared to White students. In terms of retention, the percentage of BME students permanently withdrawing from a programme of study at the school prior to completion averages 5% of the BME student population, or 4 to 5 students per year during the period 2009/10 to 2011/12. This compares to an average of 2% for the White student population (11 students per year) during the same period.

The percentages for degree attainment alter considerably as they are based on one or two more students obtaining a 1st or a 2.i and the statistical significance of these findings is limited due to the small sample size. Whilst not discounting statistics, it would be inappropriate to ask specific questions of the students and staff based on these statistics in order to explore the picture of attainment qualitatively. In the context of a small institution, individual experiences of being in a learning and teaching environment are more valuable than attempting to identify patterns within statistical data.

Other studies have indicated that lower attainment and a higher drop-out rate can be affected by other factors. University culture can be isolating for BME students and this theme emerged in the interviews carried out as part of this research. Studies have shown that integration into university culture is key to students completing their degrees, particularly during the first week and months of students’ educational experience. (Yorke et al. 1997; Ozga and Sukhnandan 1998). Similarly, dropping out of a degree can indicate a ‘lack of preparedness for university life – inadequate sources of information and unrealistic expectations and compatibility of choice’ (Ozga and Sukhnandan: 321).

The idea that this lack of preparedness more often affects BME students than their White counterparts can be explained by the concept that BME students may often be disadvantaged by the education system prior to HE. There are a number of theories that explore the roots of racism in the various institutions within society. Critical race theory introduces the idea that racism is an ordinary part of existence for BME people and in fact all people. Racism is the default, engrained within society, and is therefore a complex problem to address. It is suggested that formal conceptions of equality will only eradicate the most blatant forms of racism, and will do little to address the everyday experiences of BME people within society (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 7). Racism can manifest itself in small scale, day-to-day experiences where non-White people are systematically disadvantaged. Those experiences are arguably as harmful as the more obvious forms of discrimination.
If this theory is accepted, then it is no surprise that the NUS Black Students Campaign sees BME students as systematically disadvantaged by the education system, because the institution of HE is as susceptible to this engrained racism as every other institution in our society. The NUS report states; ‘institutional racism has embedded itself in our education system’ (NUS 2011: 1). Singh (2011) outlines a number of potential causes for lower attainment among BME students such as: racism, segregation, low teacher expectations, lack of role models, the undervaluing or under-challenging of BME students, discriminatory practice, and student and staff’s attitudes and expectations of BME students (Stevenson 2011: 11). Arguably all of these factors could be the result of institutional racism within universities.

Evidently this systemic disadvantage not only affects students the moment they come through the doors of a university: there will be a long-term effect on BME students’ lived experiences preceding their time in HE and in their lives outside of HE. Students’ identities are multiple and not solely bound up in ethnicity and race; therefore it is important to look at intersectionality, where individuals may belong to more than one social group that may put them at a disadvantage. For example, the poverty rate in ethnic minority communities is 20% higher than the rate for White people (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2011). As stated in Degrees by Choice, patterns of entry and achievement in HE are affected not only by race but also by social class and educational inheritance from parents (Reay, David & Ball 2005: 110). If BME students are more likely to be from poorer backgrounds, they will also be likely to have the issue of economic disadvantage to contend with throughout their education. This research focuses on the experiences of students from the perspective of race and ethnicity, though the students also raised issues of class and socio-economic status as being a significant factor in their experiences.

Critical race theory strongly emphasises that ‘racism is ordinary, not aberrational – ‘normal science,’ the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of colour’ (Delago and Stefancic 2001: 7). There is acknowledgement that there are different types of racism, including those that are not always deliberate or direct, but all are still important and all are damaging. If the findings from the interviews are viewed from this perspective, it is clear that the range of experiences students reported often display evidence of racism as a fairly common, ordinary occurrence. If institutional racism is a part of society and is embedded within our education systems, then it would be unlikely that it has not touched Central School of Speech & Drama and the students who study here.

**Methodology**

Every third year home and overseas student from Black, Asian, Arabic, Chinese and other non-White backgrounds in the undergraduate cohort of 2011/12 was invited to participate in a 60-90 minute interview. The students were identified through the Student Records System as those who had declared their ethnicity as other than White and they were contacted by email (see Appendix B for the initial invitation).
Twenty were home students and three were overseas students. Although Black British students’ experiences will be quite different to those of Black students from other countries coming to study in the UK, the numbers of overseas students were so small that the opportunity was taken to include them, whilst being aware that the issues they raised may be qualitatively different.

Ten staff from across the three undergraduate degree programmes as well as from the Learning Centre (and its predecessor, Student Support Services) were also invited to participate and be interviewed about their perspectives on BME students’ experiences at Central.

The 23 students came from across the following courses:

1. BA Acting (pathways in Collaborative and Devised Theatre, Musical Theatre and Acting);
2. BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education;

When quoting students, the course that a student was undertaking is indicated, though not the specific pathway.

The response to the invitation to participate in this project was good and fifteen students and five members of staff were interviewed. This sample includes students from all three undergraduate programmes (although not each of the twelve strands of the BA Theatre Practice) and at least one member of staff from each programme. Several students commented that they welcomed the opportunity to be part of a research project which was seeking to enhance BME students’ experiences at Central. Some said that participating helped them to reflect on their time at Central, and several said that this was the first opportunity they had had to talk in depth about their ethnicity as it related to their experience as a student.

Several students did not respond to the first invitation but responded after follow-up emails and verbal encouragement/requests via their course tutors. Two students responded to say they would like to be interviewed but then did not reply to a further email seeking a specific date and time for the interview meeting.

Two students responded to say that they did not want to participate, one saying that she was too busy and had already participated in a project exploring student experiences for students with disabilities. She asked if her responses to that project could be drawn on within this project. A second student said he did not want to give the institution any more of his time. Four students did not respond at all.

Of those that were interviewed, some participants felt they did not need or choose to use a label for their ethnicity. Participants were invited to interview based upon how they identified their ethnicity at the point of registration at the University. In the interviews, many found the question of labelling their ethnicity
not simple to answer; some felt they had a range of identities, with their nationality being one aspect of themselves and their ethnicity being a different aspect. Some had a preference for the order of the words, for example one participant preferred to be ‘British Black’ as opposed to ‘Black British’. Participants usually chose a more simplistic way to identify their ethnicity for the purpose of completing monitoring forms, but it was notable that there was a complex range of identities present.

The interviews were carried out by two Research Assistants who described themselves in terms of ethnicity as Black British Women. The interviewers attended two briefing meetings during which the content of the structured interview was discussed, planned and agreed, as well as protocols for interviewing as part of this project. The Research Assistants were asked to read sections from Kathleen Gallager’s book *The methodological dilemma: creative, critical and collaborative approaches to qualitative research* (2008) and Andreas Witzel’s article ‘The Problem-Centered Interview’ (2000).

Students were offered the option of meeting with their interviewer onsite at Central, or if they preferred to be off-site in a quiet coffee shop in the area, or else somewhere that was a more convenient location for them. The aim was to give students a convenient and pleasant experience with refreshments provided.

The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. The interviewees consented to the content of their interview being used as part of this project and also understood and acknowledged that confidentiality could not be guaranteed due to the nature of the small class sizes at Central. Interviewees consented therefore, to the content of their interviews being shared both with staff at the institution and with a wider audience when this report was published.

The Principal Applicant and a third Research Assistant read the transcripts and identified themes, patterns and significant points. They also collaborated to write this report.
Section 2: Findings and discussion

This section groups the responses from the interviews into categories. From looking at the interview structure (Appendix A), it is clear that the intention was that the conversations focused on positive experiences as well as those that were less positive because it was assumed that a mixed set of experiences would be shared, and that some students would have fewer negative experiences whilst others may have faced a more challenging time as a student.

When the main topic for discussion is experiences of race and ethnicity, it is possible that negative experiences will outweigh the positives or will dominate people’s recollections of their experiences. Most students interviewed seemed to overall have a positive view of their time at the Central, but it was noted that there were a number of issues regarding their experiences as BME students. This should not be seen as reflecting negatively on the institution, as increasing knowledge of these experiences can only lead to a greater opportunity to improve the culture for BME students.

It is felt to be an important part of the process by which improvements will be made that material from the interviews be significantly incorporated into this report. The students and staff are quoted verbatim throughout, as well as their reflections being summarised where patterns and themes emerge. Some of the points that are made are sensitive and make for potentially uncomfortable reading for those responsible for creating learning environments but we are keen to report on this research with honesty and integrity.

During the interview conversations the positive and negative experiences are not restrained to specific questions. Respondents tended to veer from the question and discuss their experiences in rather fluid ways. However, for the purpose of identifying common themes and patterns, the sub-headings below present the common positive experiences first and then the more problematic experiences under specific headings:

- Positive experiences: support services, extra-curricular activity and the curriculum;
- Applying to Central;
- Being part of a minority: isolation and belonging;
- Attitudes of peers;
- Curriculum content;
- Staff experiences;

Suggestions for improvements from both the students and members of staff are presented in Section 3.
Positive experiences: the curriculum, extra-curricular activity and support services

Two of the students reported that they had not had any negative experiences relating to their race or ethnicity while being a student at the school. One person said:

I’ve never felt anybody being racist towards me or really anyone else, unless I’m just oblivious to it, but I’ve never experienced it…I’ve had a great experience at Central…thinking as a BME student, I’ve had a really great time. (BA Theatre Practice student)

Approximately half of the students spoke of having positive experiences when given opportunities to study or explore themes around culture and race, and giving performances which explored these themes was found to be a positive and empowering experience for students.

In first year we did a device which was clowning… I found it really interesting. And through researching Musical Theatre history, I came across Blackface and I was interested in that performance style and it being quite clown-like….I felt that a lot of people in our year group didn’t understand Black people or didn’t really know how to relate, didn’t know where a lot of things came from.

And Blackface was like this thing I never really…I’d heard of it but I’d never really explored. ...I enjoyed the clowning and I was thinking of a way to morph them together. ...And we did a performance that was very successful. That has to be one of the proudest memories I’ve had on this course because the reason for me doing that show was because of my peers. I wanted to show where these stereotypes came from, how you think a Black person should behave.

So, we played with modern day like Blackface, you know, hip hop and things like that. And all that sort of like, you know, Black people are meant to walk like this, talk...we played with all those sort of things in the research. ...So, it was definitely, yeah, the happiest moment, happy the course gave me that opportunity...I’m happy the course gives you, everyone opportunity to say, this is what I’m going to do. Put it there in people’s faces and encourage you to do that which I think is good. So, it was a way of educating without having to like be very vocal about it. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre & Education student)

A number of BA Acting students from all three pathways spoke about organising a Black History Month performance (October 2011), which was additional to the work they were doing within their courses. Those who talked about this found it to be an empowering experience for themselves and the other students involved, saying that it allowed them to educate other students about Black history and culture in a positive, celebratory way. It was noted that the performance was well received by other students, even if there was initially some scepticism about the
need for it. This performance was also referenced positively by other interviewees who had seen it.

The Black History Month performance that we did, which is the first time it’s ever happened. And I think it was well needed. ...It rubbed people the wrong way because it was like, ‘Why is there a month? What is the big deal?’... So, we did it and we made a specific energy... I mean, by the end, everyone was on the side, you know. Everyone loved it. And it was one of my best moments here, you know, to see, because we were all from all three strands and all three years, all the Black kids on stage performing, and to see that a whole White audience was there, clapping us and applauding us. And we got a standing ovation, and it was just the most touching thing that could have ever happened to us. (BA Acting student)

Other events aimed at BME students such as the Black and Asian Alumni Network events proved to be positive experiences for many interviewees who attended them:

The Black African Asian Alumni Network... through them, we have lots and lots of meetings with people. A particular actor came in to talk to us and this was [with] all the Black students there. And I think a lot of people were venting a lot of stuff because they felt a lot frustration, and... that was good, I think, to just get that out and done with but then once that’s out then it’s okay, that’s done so, you know, I think [that was] one of the best experiences. (BA Acting student)

Other students found that increasing participation in extracurricular activities, such as one student who became a Student Representative for their course, proved to be a step forward towards feeling more included and less isolated. Another participant spoke of their regret at not getting more involved in representing himself and his peers within the wider School community.

Many students found that they had positive experiences of accessing the support necessary in order to ensure they continued to be successful in their degree. One student spoke very highly of Central’s Learning Centre (and its predecessor, Student Support Services), which she had accessed:

I joined Student Support, and received so much support...the most amazing people that I’ve met in Central have been through this Student Support Service here. And I cannot advocate enough. And I wish there was something I could do to highlight that and let students know when they start that the service is there. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre & Education student)

However, while it was apparent that those who accessed the service felt it was helpful, many students commented that they did not realise the full extent of support available until later in their University experiences. Some interviewees felt that the support available had not been highlighted to them soon enough. Many of those interviewed became more aware of the sources of support available to them after an incident within the Students Union elections involving BME students which occurred part way through their second academic year (2011/12).
This incident appears to have had a significant impact on some of the BME students and led them to engage more openly with issues of representation among the Students Union and the School culture more broadly.

**Applying to Central**
When asked to comment on why students chose Central, people’s reasons varied. Some picked the institution due to its location, some were impressed by the specialist drama, theatre and performance courses which were not offered elsewhere and others knew of and valued the School’s reputation. Some had teachers at school or college suggest Central to them as a place to apply to, while others felt their teachers were actively disinterested in their application or assumed they would not be successful in being offered a place. Evidently, there were a range of experiences in this decision-making process.

It was outlined by a number of students that there were some barriers to attending the School and/or studying drama in general. A pattern emerged of students commenting on what they perceived as a lack of BME role models in theatre or drama schools:

> When I came to Central, I didn’t like it because I didn’t see any Black faces and that really put me off to want to apply... So, that put me off initially... I went to see a show and there were no Black people in it. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)

> I have come to open days and even in the industry, like in theatre, in films, you do not see that many Asian people in it. (BA Theatre Practice student)

As suggested by Singh (2011), a lack of role models is a potential cause of lower attainment in BME communities, and this was mentioned by a number of participants, not only regarding Central but also when speaking about their perception of theatre in general. This feeling of being a minority was even seen as a reason for being accepted into the School by one student when she found she was successful in her application.

> When I first got accepted, I was convinced that it was because I was Black, because I thought, you know, they have a quota. (BA Acting student)

Concerns such as these were echoed by other participants who had either thought similarly or who had had the idea that they were ‘filling a quota’ suggested to them by friends or other students, either at the time of them being offered a place or later on in their studies. This indicated for some, a feeling of not belonging or not being legitimately deserving of a place, sometimes before even arriving at the School.

When applying for a place it was clear that the support of parents, friends and family varied for participants. Most indicated that their family were supportive of their pursuit of drama and theatre, but for some it took some time for their parents to become supportive. One student had parents who already worked in the theatre industry, whilst the parents of others were less understanding of the
desire to study or train within a creative subject. One student commented on what he perceived as a devaluing of creativity within his culture:

Where my culture is, that if you’re not kind of a lawyer or a doctor or... nothing really counts. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)

None of the students spoke of outright disapproval of their choices or an attempt to stop them studying what they wished, and most of those questioned did not refer to a negative, culturally rooted attitude towards the subject they were engaged with. The student quoted above, later spoke of his parents coming around to appreciate his work and his interest when they attended his performances as part of the course. Several students spoke of their parents having a journey of acceptance and respect regarding their choice to study drama, theatre or performance, where parents may not have initially been supportive but were swayed by other factors.

My mum was kind of sceptical about it until she saw me perform. And then, she really kind of got behind me more than anyone, especially when I was looking through the prospectus and stuff, she was there with pen and paper. (BA Acting student)

And my parents, when I started at Central, they were more supportive because I was older and I had something else behind me... but I am very much sort of a person that regardless of what you think, I am going to do it anyway. (BA Acting student)

There were varying degrees of support from teachers and institutes of education that participants attended before their time at Central. One participant did not receive any support or encouragement in creative subjects whilst at school, and his school did not offer drama as a subject; he later entered Central as a mature student. Others came straight from college or sixth form. Some were referred to Central by teachers who suggested that they apply, while others perceived their teachers to be less supportive of their desire to apply than they would have liked.

It was suggested to me by a secondary school teacher... I didn’t know about the school’s reputation; I was just told to go apply. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)

Generally, interviewees spoke little of the encouragement of their teachers in their secondary school and college educations before Central. Of the participants interviewed, at least three were mature students at the time they entered the school. It appeared that for some BME students it was a longer journey for them to find Central because of a lack of support and/or information available to them. Those who did enter Central straight from school often reported feeling a degree of isolation or a lack of belonging. While participants did not make specific references to the widening participation agenda, it is evident that despite efforts to do so, more could be done nationally to try and attract BME students to study drama, theatre and performance. It would seem to be especially valuable if efforts to widen participation in HE in these subject areas included information about the
high employment rate of BME graduates from Central and other comparable institutions, which would add further legitimacy to creative studies and would be useful information to potential applicants and their families, for those who face familial pressure not to enter this sector.

**Being part of a minority: isolation and belonging**

A number of issues were highlighted when students were asked to speak about their positive and negative experiences at Central as a BME individual. One of the most noticeable themes to emerge was a feeling of isolation or alienation amongst their peers, often due to being the only or one of very few BME people within their classes. Many spoke about the sense that while they may initially have been one of a small number, it appeared to them that there was an issue with retention of BME pupils, and other BME students on their course dropped out for numerous different reasons. One student commented that as far as he could recall, while five Black students had started alongside him, only two had completed the course, including himself. Almost all participants mentioned at least one BME friend or classmate who they knew to have dropped out due to low attainment, isolation or other reasons. As discussed earlier, retention data does not completely back up this perception, but nevertheless, this was the perception of some of the interviewees.

Some participants commented that they were only aware of one Black teacher at Central, which furthered the feelings of isolation in some participants. It is the case that BME staff are under represented among the academic staff body at Central.

When talking about their race with regard to their initial experiences at Central, many students indicated that they became more aware of their race when entering what they perceived as a predominantly White, often middle class, space.

> I definitely realised that I was a Black student at Central. Not just a student at Central. And for me, they’re quite… they’re two different things. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)

The suggestion that their race preceded any other characteristics gives the impression that at various points in their experience at the school, students reported feeling undervalued, with a specific part of them being more apparent than any of their other attributes or abilities. However, others felt less strongly about the ways their race may be read by other students or staff, or felt it was only one of a number of characteristics that affected their experience:

> Well I never ever ever look at myself as a Black person going into something. I look at myself as a person going into something, and if someone chooses to see the colour of my skin first, then that’s their problem. (BA Acting student)

Others, particularly one participant, felt that social class had an equal if not more significant effect on her experience. It appeared that while race was perceived to be a significant factor for a lot of the participants, there was a general feeling of being different in a number of ways, from age and class, to attitude to study. The
student commented that:

_If you come from a certain kind of background and certain conventions are familiar to you then you can walk through Central with more ease._

*(BA Drama, Applied Theatre & Education student)*

It was evident that students were feeling ‘different’ and while this was race-related, it also intersected for some with class and prior experiences.

### Attitudes and behaviour of peers

When talking specifically about negative experiences of studying at the school, the majority of the experiences related to interactions with other students. There was a clear and strong perception among participants that a lack of understanding of cultural differences exists among the majority White population, and that this lack of understanding has a negative impact on BME student experience.

Some participants spoke of feeling defensive, and of preferring to keep their distance from other students instead of interacting with their peers more openly, largely due to what they perceived as a lack of understanding or stereotyping around race and ethnicity:

_A lot of people did stereotype people, put them in boxes and assumed that’s what they were meant to be like... *(BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)*_

Approximately half of the students spoke of a feeling of not wanting to get involved in social activities, extra-curricular activities or not being at the institution to make friends. It is difficult to assess though whether this may have been because the students already had a sense of being perceived as different by their peers from the application stage, or whether this sense was prompted once the students started their courses.

All of the students that spoke of having this feeling did seem to make some progress in terms of building relationships later on in their courses as they engaged in activities and increased the amount of interaction with those in their classes, which consequently improved their relationships with peers. It was evident though that many felt reluctant or unwilling to get involved in socialising with other students initially.

One student spoke very highly of the friendships she had developed whilst at the school, although she said she had not expected friendship to begin with:

_I didn’t come here expecting to make lots and lots of close friends, which I have done. So, I’m glad about that. Because I did not think I’d like connect with anybody on that level, you know, really personally because I’d be so different, but I have._

*(BA Theatre Practice student)*
Social events were described by two students as not suitable for everyone, even those who did want to get involved. Significant aspects of the social culture at Central were seen to revolve around alcohol, which is very limiting for students who ascribe to religious or cultural beliefs forbidding its consumption. The social culture at the institution therefore was isolating for some students, not only because of the majority population being a certain race or class, but because the activities were directly isolating students who may have wanted to get involved but could not.

Interviewees were asked about their experiences of racism while at Central. Some students commented that while they had experienced negative incidents or comments which they felt were based on their race, they viewed them more as ‘ignorance’ than outright racism. This issue was still difficult to navigate for many interviewees.

Several students shared specific comments that had been made by other students, which they felt were inappropriate. One student said:

Every wrong done to me, I must educate them. And I realised that I ain’t got time to be educating people. I’m doing three years training here and I’ve got to teach people where I come from, who I am and why it’s not okay to say, ‘Do you tan?’ I haven’t got time for that. (BA Acting student)

Another student shared this example:

This boy in my class, he’s Nigerian and a girl in our class came up to him and said ‘can I touch your hair, I’ve never touched hair like that before’… I just found that really weird…it just made me feel a bit strange…people can think things like that but she just said it…it just shocked me, on this kind of course as well. Because we go into placements and things in London and you can’t go around in London and say things like that. Maybe you can get away with it here but you can’t in real life. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)

The same student also shared this example:

X came and said to us [the respondent and her friend who is also a BME student and on the same course] ‘do you two ever think the only reason you’re here is because of the colour of your skin or because of your ethnicity?’ And I’ve never, ever thought that. I’ve never thought that. I’m just here to tick a box….But it just made me think it’s none of your business. Why are you thinking that? We’re not thinking that. And instead it just made me think ‘do other people think that? That we don’t deserve to be here, we’re just here to tick a box?’ And it takes everything away from your achievements when people say things like that. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre & Education student)
Another shared this example:

*Our* teacher was like, ‘So, I want you to get a hiphop song or like RNB song or something that is very young and hip right now and do it in a heightened RP accent.’ So, everyone went away and I picked one and everyone picked one and it was fun. And it was meant to be funny. And about three or four guys from the class picked a really quite hardcore hiphop song that had the N-word in it. And I...for one, I felt extremely uncomfortably. (BA Acting student)

Some described having felt disempowered and unable to speak out if they had an experience they perceived to be racist:

*I think the second saddest thing about it was because I was the only one in the class, I didn’t feel strong enough to say that I was uncomfortable about it. And it just made me feel like an island in the classroom. All of a sudden, I felt so Black and so isolated and not strong enough to do anything about it because there wasn’t anyone on my side.* (BA Acting student)

Over half of the fifteen students interviewed spoke of feeling a lone responsibility to challenge unacceptable comments or attitudes. More than one student commented that they felt responsible for educating other students on top of doing their degree, a responsibility they did not feel they should have to take on. Evidently it was felt by a significant proportion of the participants that not only were some students ignorant about BME identities, but when inappropriate comments came up in classes or when students made staff aware that these comments had been made, the teaching staff did not do enough to address this ignorance. This left many participants feeling that putting up with racism and ignorance was an inevitable part of their experience or something which they had to address themselves.

It was felt by some interviewees that while they would have some willingness to share their experiences in the hope of educating their peers as part of those students' learning experience, they were not given such an opportunity.

The interviewees who had spoken of carrying this burden of responsibility tended to go on to speak about their experiences of course content as not adequately addressing the issues of race or ethnicity or providing sufficient content that included Black writers, directors, academics, theorists, designers and other practitioners. The curriculum content will be explored below.

While it was significantly less common, there were a small number of reports of staff making comments that were deemed to be inappropriate or assumptions about BME students based upon their race and/or ethnicity. Again, when this arose, students described a feeling of it being a result of ignorance from staff as opposed to direct prejudice.
Overall, the majority of students admitted to having had some experience of racism whilst at Central. They explained that they had not experienced violence or directly and overtly racist attitudes, but that they had had experiences that made them feel uncomfortable, angry and offended. Few spoke of directly confronting or reporting a racist comment.

Curriculum content
Numerous issues relating to the content of the curriculum were reported by the sample of fifteen participants.

Well, there was no ‘me’ on the course. There was nothing to represent me on the course. Black history, you know, is done in a week or a couple of days. That’s not enough. And as I said, in the course itself, there was no place there that I saw myself there. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)

It was apparent to some of the interviewees that when the topic of race became a major focus other (White) students were actively resistant. One student spoke about her understanding of a module which focused on theories and concepts of difference which was delivered to the year below her:

Only this year did they introduce a whole option on race, it’s supposed to be about race and class. It just turned out to be about race and it turned out just to be about the Black race because again, the Black students who chose and picked that option kind of hadn’t had a chance to speak before that... A lot of the White students that picked that option were a bit uncomfortable with that and they were kind of annoyed... (BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)

This suggests that there was a clear need for Black students to be provided with a space to talk about race issues academically as well as personally, but that in this case the discussion around race led to tension amongst the student cohort.

Another example shared involved non-BME students complaining about having to play ‘Black roles’ on the occasions that speeches or scenes with Black characters were built into the curriculum:

They were all complaining to the high hills, ‘I’m not Black. I’m not Black. I’m not a woman. Why do I have to do it? Why do I have to do it?’ And it’s just like, ‘Okay, for one, it’s an exercise. But for two, I have to spend three years doing Chekov, Shakespeare, all these things where a Black person doesn’t belong. (BA Acting student)

One interviewee felt that his race heavily affected the casting for roles in productions on his course, having only ever been cast in more prominent roles when the character was explicitly Black:
I got really badly cast for the majority of the time I was at Central... I felt like the training was unequal. There was a few people in the class that got lead roles pretty much every single play...The White, middle class handsome boys...got the lead roles. And I got a lead role when it was a Black specific part. (BA Acting student)

Staff experiences

Members of staff were also interviewed as part of the research into BME experiences. Of the staff interviewed, all identified themselves as White, with variations of national identities including White British, White Welsh, White European and White African. The staff members’ roles ranged from lecturers and senior lecturers, course leaders and staff who worked to support students with dyslexia. Of the Academic Staff, one worked on the BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education, one on the BA Acting and two on the BA Theatre Practice.

Members of staff were questioned about their experiences of working with BME students and they talked about how race had an impact on the work they did, and any experiences of racism they had witnessed. The responses were varied, with some staff seeing race as having a greater significance than others. Some commented that they rarely thought about race and ethnicity or did not often notice the ethnic origin of students.

I’ve had a bunch of students, some maybe from a [different] ethnic origin. And I kind of don’t notice that. Maybe that’s me but I mean, it’s not....I’ve never seen it as a particular issue. (Senior Lecturer)

Race seemed to be of less importance to these staff members than to the majority of BME students who were interviewed. However, a number of staff members commented on their awareness of the intersectionality of issues of race and class. Several staff commented that a lot of the issues faced by BME students were socio-economic as well as race-related. It was felt by some that the issues faced by BME students with regards to attainment may be due to it being generally more likely that BME students come from more economically deprived backgrounds, and therefore the quality of education or encouragement in arts can be lacking.

It’s not just about their ethnicity, that’s just part of - maybe more of a visible part - but their age, their backgrounds, their particular learning needs, and there is a relationship between…in this country between BME-ness and class. They’re more likely to be come from a poor background and more likely to come from urban environments, you’re more likely…so all of that stuff comes with it and it’s like another layer of complexity. (Senior Lecturer)

Some staff commented that they were aware of the difficulties some students faced in their home lives as a result of their family backgrounds, citing an awareness of some students' home and family commitments which made study more difficult than for other students.
...so, if somebody is having to look after their younger brother, get them up in the morning, get them to school before they come in to work, you know, it's probably going to have a more of a time keeping issue than somebody who's got a flat nearby and can walk here and get here early.  
(Senior Lecturer)

There was an awareness of the difficulties faced by BME students when it comes to the social environment of the institution, which is recognised as a largely White middle class environment. The awareness also extended to the issues faced by BME students at home, where their decision to study in HE and then study drama may not be supported, possibly leaving BME students in a difficult position in both their home and educational environment.

Some students from BME backgrounds that we've had, it's been a lot about parental expectations and support of them coming into this environment. They're the first person in their family that's come to HE. They, all of their friends and peers are not in education anymore. So they feel, they've expressed very clearly that they feel at sea here because it's a big leap. But when they go back home, they no longer connect to their home environment because their parents aren't supporting them. 
(Senior Lecturer)

This contradicts what seemed to emerge from the student interviews about their family backgrounds, although none of the students specifically talked about this notion of returning 'home' after having embarked on their course of study. Evidently many staff had an understanding of some of the issues that affected students on their course, and many of the staff members’ thoughts did reflect similarly to the experiences outlined by student in their interviews. Staff generally recognised that there were problems within Central, but it was suggested that these problems were difficult to eradicate because they were evident in the wider theatre industry.

There are other issues because there are issues in our industry. 
(Senior Lecturer)

This was reflected by, for example, a member of staff discussing the difficulties some BME actors go through during casting, when the default position in television roles is that the characters will be White. If there is a problem in wider theatre and film making with institutional racism and an erasure of BME actors, this will affect the study of drama and theatre if opportunities are not always present for BME actors or BME actors are less visible. One member of staff discussed a former student who had started her own theatre company as it was almost impossible for her, as a Vietnamese woman, to find acting work.

The apparent difficulty of finding BME staff members to employ was mentioned in the interviews. The staff, like students, recognised that there were almost no BME staff members on the academic staff at Central. However, staff talked about feeling that this was a case of a lack of BME applicants when vacancies arose. One staff member commented that this situation was not exclusive to this institution, and resulted in any appropriately qualified BME individuals being 'snapped up' almost
instantly. It was notable from this discussion that there was a strong perception that there is a general underrepresentation of BME people in academia, particularly in these subject areas.

Many of the staff spoke about the concept of studying and discussing race with students in a classroom or support context. One member of staff who works to support students with dyslexia mentioned how talking about race may put her in a vulnerable position:

*I suppose there is a fear of possibility the students could call me racist, could they you know, if they make a charge of racism then I have to answer to that. My colleagues [other dyslexia tutors] don’t address it and won’t have to answer to that. So it is kind of making yourself more vulnerable, putting yourself on the line.* (Member of Student Support Service, predecessor of the Learning Centre)

Discussing race within teaching can expose the teacher’s own flaws in their thinking which can then leave them vulnerable to criticism (Jones, 2009: 203). While in general staff may want to discuss race and culture with their students, they may feel they are not adequately educated, trained or supported to do so. The quote above suggests that for at least one person, the risk of talking about what can be a sensitive and complex subject may outweigh the gains that they feel it could bring to students.

Staff had numerous suggestions for what could potentially enhance BME students’ experiences, which follow alongside students’ suggestions in the next section.
Section 3: Suggestions for Improvement

Participants, both staff and students, were asked what they felt Central could do to improve the experiences of BME students. A number of themes emerged from the responses to this question, and a number of other suggestions were made at different points throughout the interviews, which will also be collated here. In addition, it is possible to draw further conclusions as to potential improvements to BME experiences at Central from the interview content more broadly.

Supporting aspirations of young BME people

While many students spoke of issues regarding their journey from secondary education to Central and described a lack of support, knowledge or in some cases a lack of family understanding, few mentioned specific potential improvements for Central to consider. However, it would seem to be beneficial to continue to monitor the ways that Central attracts BME students to the school and seek ways that this can be improved. Suggestions in this area included an increase in the presence of BME students and/or alumni on open days and in prospectus/web material to reflect the demographics of the school as closely as possible. People suggested that the institution targets specific schools with cohorts including talented BME drama students to ensure that they are aware of Central. Interviewees felt it was important to highlight the graduate career opportunities that Central’s training and education can provide for BME students, in order to assure students and their families of the practical gains of studying at Central.

A number of staff commented that they sometimes felt BME students had not been adequately prepared by their previous schools for HE study and had observed that some students found it difficult to catch up with their peers. An idea that was repeated by more than one member of staff was the need for a foundation course or short summer school for prospective students who displayed talent, but who were not quite ready for the level of study in the first year of an undergraduate degree. It was felt that an initiative such as this would make a significant difference to the attainment and retention of BME students and students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds.

Curriculum content

Many students felt that the course content needed to be more focused on cultural diversity, race and ethnicity. Some participants suggested an academic exploration of Black history, of the lived experiences of BME people (whether the students’ own experiences or those of characters in texts etc.), of Black theatre, or an academic focus on race in some other way which would enhance their own and all students’ experiences. This was thought to be a useful opportunity for both BME and White students to discuss issues of race and ethnicity openly and would improve the knowledge and attitudes of non-BME students. It was noted by a number of students that while it was important for there to be a space where these issues are discussed, it had to be with non-BME students in order to have any effect.
I think some of those events [Black and Asian Alumni Network] should be opened up to students on all levels because there is absolutely no point in having Black and Asian or whatever... people who just like talking about issues themselves... how on earth are you supposed to make a difference if you don’t have other people in listening? If you have others listening to the concerns that you raise, then they’ll learn and they might think differently. (BA Acting student)

Staff described some of the ways they do create opportunities to discuss race within their various curricula, and it was noted that a new unit had been recently commenced on one of the courses which discusses these themes. Many staff said they did not often directly set work such as essay questions on ethnicity, as they liked to give students the freedom to explore themes that were relevant or inspiring to them. However, it may be suggested from what emerged more generally from the interviews with students, that more set work focusing on ethnicity could be beneficial to all students.

Many participants who perform as part of their course spoke about how they felt they were largely only playing White characters in performances, studying plays written by White people, and being taught by White lecturers. This increased and intensified the feeling of isolation during participants’ experiences at Central that stemmed from being one of very few BME students or sometimes the only BME student within a class group. It was suggested by several participants from all three courses that there needed to be an increase in the focus on work by BME performers, playwrights and others within the curriculum.

When you’re doing a play text, pick a play that is by a Black playwright. I think it’s literally as simple as that. Pick a Black playwright. Pick a theme about race, you know... (BA Acting student)

The further study of Black artists would help to normalise issues of race being discussed academically, inside and outside the classroom. Some students talked about wanting to study the work of Black people, not for its connection to their own ethnicity but because the work (plays, journal articles, design, directing style, etc.) was interesting and of value to the curriculum. Some participants had witnessed complaints by White students who felt uncomfortable playing explicitly Black characters or speaking the words of Black writers on occasions. It was felt that this should be as commonplace and uncontroversial as BME students playing White characters. It was suggested that an increase in the study of Black playwrights would enhance the curriculum and the general culture of the learning environment, alongside increasing participation of Black academics and industry professionals to teach and interact with the students. Evidently, BME students needed different ethnicities to be acknowledged, discussed and celebrated within the classroom, both directly and indirectly.

There was never anything positive to separate me from the rest of class. It was always something negative or by accident. And when I did something to separate me from the class in a positive way, it was so few, and it was me who had to do it without the help of everyone else. It became... I think to look at ethnicity in a positive light, through the medium of theatre, it would be lovely. (BA Acting student)
**BME teaching staff**

The issue of employing BME individuals was discussed by staff in their interviews, and the problem of under representation among academic staff was attributed primarily to a lack of BME applicants. Therefore, a more long term strategy may be necessary to combat this in addition to ordinary recruitment processes, for example, encouraging more BME students to stay in academia through further study and/or employment. If there are less BME staff members, other strategies for making BME students feel more represented should be used more often, such as increasing the number of BME visiting professionals employed, and studying more BME playwrights, actors, designers, etc. within the curriculum.

**Understanding race and ethnicity as a community**

One student suggested there be an e-forum or some information source for White students to educate themselves so that they do not make inappropriate comments. She acknowledged that some students come to Central, and therefore to London, from areas of the country that have a very low representation of BME communities, she said:

> I don’t think people are horrible and I don’t think they say ignorant things to be mean. They just don’t know. But perhaps they could read some sort of forum where people could educate themselves, then they don’t say stupid things because…in the real world, people aren’t going to take it easily if you say something to them like in your job ‘well you only got the job because you have brown skin’ (BA Drama, Applied Theatre & Education student)

Some staff had discussed the situation whereby some White students began a course of study at the institution, coming from areas of the UK which are relatively mono-cultural and White. Such students may not, for example, have worked alongside BME students during their primary or secondary schooling and may not have had social circles including people from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. It was suggested by one member of staff that a workshop with students could take place in the first weeks of the course in order to discuss issues of difference and ensure all students have an opportunity to consider and discuss these issues. However, as mentioned previously, some staff had concerns of being seen by some students raising the discussion of race, culture and racism unnecessarily and potentially as acting in ways that were underpinned by a form of racism.

This is a complex suggestion for improvement which has not yet emerged in a coherent form. It may be useful to provide opportunities for staff to discuss these issues as a group with the aim of developing confidence to then discuss them with groups of students. It is important to ensure that all staff are fully aware of the information and support available to them within the institution if any problems were to occur, in order to stop staff feeling that the risk of bringing up issues of race and culture was too high.
Sources of support for students

Another common theme in the recommendations was around support for students. A number of students’ recommendations relate to different types of support that could be made available for BME students. These suggestions demonstrate that not all of the students knew how to access the support that is already available. Some of the students did talk about having been unaware of what support was available to them for at least part of their time at the institution, so an aspect of this recommendation is concerned with the communication of information in this area:

They should make it clear that there is support there if you’re having any issues or you think someone’s making you feel uncomfortable due to your race in the course, that there are people to talk to about it, you don’t have to carry it around. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)

I would say... make sure that BME students know that... they know there are people in the school that are there for them as BME students. I think that’s really, really important and because of that they’ll understand that their experience as a BME student is relevant. (BA Drama, Applied Theatre and Education student)

A common theme in the interviews was students’ positive experiences when working alongside other BME students or doing work to address BME issues. Students urged Central to continue this positivity by actively encouraging students to become involved in events such as Black History Month, to continue the Black and Asian Alumni Network events, and to increase events which give space for celebration and education related to cultural and ethnic diversity. Providing BME students on different courses with a space to come together and work together was suggested as a positive step towards reducing experiences of isolation.

Staff spoke of a student mentoring scheme which existed within some courses at the institution (including postgraduate courses), whereby former students would act as mentors for current students. Staff explained that mentors and students were not matched based on their race, and that there was also often poor uptake of the scheme. One of the most positive experiences reported was the opportunity for BME students to meet alumni who were also BME. It may therefore be potentially beneficial to explore a BME mentoring scheme by way of providing access to role models in the industries that the students are aspiring to enter.

When formal support was available than a common perception was that there was a requirement for a student to have a disability, learning difficulty or mental health issue in order to access it. One participant spoke of being irritated at having to use her ‘labels’ to receive any assistance. Increasing support services for those without diagnosed disability-related support needs and focusing increased awareness of services to students who may become isolated (therefore including BME students) were proposed as beneficial. The Learning Centre is part way through a process of implementing this kind of provision.
A clearer position on racism

A clear recommendation was that the school should take more opportunities to make it abundantly clear that racism is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Students acknowledged that the school has policies and processes for dealing with any incident that breaches the Code of Conduct, but felt that more could be said verbally on this subject.

More than one student suggested that there should be specific staff available to discuss any experiences or issues students have had, saying that this would help empower students to speak out when they are uncomfortable and feel less like they have to deal with issues of discrimination alone. The academic year 2011/12 was the first year that a system like this was implemented, and six members of academic staff were ‘named contacts’ for students to speak to about issues that related to equality and/or diversity in some way. None of the students interviewed referred to this system and therefore it may be assumed that they were not aware of it and consequently, it should be promoted more clearly.

As isolation is generally thought to be one of the main reasons for low attainment and non-completion, this increase in communication may help to maintain and perhaps improve retention of BME students, and also enable issues to be identified early before a situation becomes irreparable.

Re-considering the inclusivity of social events

An issue raised by one student was that the social culture at Central often involves the consumption of alcohol. This student described the fact that she was unable to participate in much of the Fresher’s Week events organised by the Student Union or post-show/end-of-project celebrations with her peers in the same way as everyone else, due to the events being centred around alcohol:

with Universities, especially the freshers, they focus a lot in drinking and you know…I think that’s one thing I hate about this experience because I’m a Muslim and I don’t drink…it sounds so weird to everyone, like it’s new to them and they don’t understand it. And I think that’s why I never like…I never raise it. Like I never tell anyone that I don’t drink because it’s just so strange and like it makes you sound dull and I don’t want to be like I’d feel like the odd one out. So I never ever say it… Sometimes they don’t realise that it’s because I am Muslim and I don’t drink. Sometimes they’re just like, ‘Why? I don’t understand. Why don’t you want to drink?’ (BA Theatre Practice student)

While the student did not perceive this to be Central’s problem, it is evident that this student felt that the social events and the social side of student life in general, offers little space for those who do not drink alcohol for whatever reasons, and that on the whole, other students tend to be unaware of the reasons why people may not drink and therefore place undue pressure on them in social situations.
The culture of a university can have a significant impact on students’ initial feelings about their course. The Student Union at Central does see that some alcohol-free events are scheduled, in order to ensure that those students who do not consume alcohol still feel able to attend Fresher’s week and other social activities, though perhaps this is something to consider for the broader work of the Student Union. Course-related social time may mirror the general culture of the theatre industry which can be a ‘bar culture’ and tutors may need to consider that some students can feel alienated when that culture is replicated at Central.

**Conclusion**

This report will be disseminated within the institution and a range of groups of staff and individuals will engage with its contents, and particularly with the suggestions for improvements. The Equality and Diversity Committee will monitor the progress made against objectives that are set in relation to this report and the issue of BME students’ experiences more broadly. Information will be routinely published on the institution’s website.
Bibliography


NUS (2011) Race for Equality, NUS.


Singh, Gurnam (2011), Black and minority ethnic (BME) students’ participation in higher education: improving retention and success, A synthesis of research evidence. York: HEA


Appendix A

Interview structure: BME Student Experiences at Central School of Speech & Drama Project

Introductory blurb

This interview will hopefully allow us to get a full sense of your experience as a student over the last three years at Central.

Reiteration of info you’ve had over email:

- 60-90mins
- We can break for the loo/ another drink if we need to
- The conversation is audio-recorded and will be transcribed
- Patterns and themes will be pulled out of all of the interviews, as well as experiences specific to individuals
- The research project is about Central understanding more about your experience as a ‘BME’ student, and potentially informing understandings of BME student experiences at Drama schools beyond Central.
- BME, as used within this project stands for ‘Black and Minority Ethnic’, and by that, we mean people who are from a range of ethnicities including Black Caribbean, Black African, Asian, South-East Asian, Chinese, Arabic, and a whole range of Mixed backgrounds.
- You will not be named at any point in the writing up of this interview.
- Ask for the Consent Form.

Section A: warm-up questions to focus the mind and get conversation flowing (approx. 20mins)

1. What course and pathway/ strand (if relevant) are you on and how did you know that’s the course you wanted to do?

2. How do you classify your ethnicity? [use this language/ phrasing in later questions]

3. Let’s start by thinking back to when you were offered a place on your course. What vision or ideas did you have of how your experience would be?

4. What do you remember about the first weeks (Freshers, induction, meeting your year group, and your first classes)

Section B: shifting into more specific questions (approx. 50mins)

5. Do you feel your experience as a student is particular to you as a [**** wo/man] – how connected is ethnicity to your experiences as a student?

6. What have been some of your best experiences over the three years and what
made them so positive? We’re really trying to think in terms of you as a [**** wo/man] and positive experiences connected to your identity.

7. To what extent do you feel your identity as a [**** wo/man] has been respected, acknowledged, been 'met' as part of a process of learning while you’ve been on your course?

8. Let’s talk about any negative experiences that you would link to your identity as a [**** wo/man].

9. How about relationships with staff – as a ‘BME’ student, have you had positive relationships with particular staff connected with your identity?

10. How do you feel the curriculum content suited you, or didn’t suit you, as a [**** wo/man]?

11. Have you participated in the wider community at Central and if so, has that had a positive impact on your experience as a [**** wo/man] at Central? (sitting on any committees, acting as Student Rep, the Student Union, other extra-curricular stuff)

12. Would you say your life outside Central (relationships with family, non-Central friends, maybe your job if you have one) is important in relation to your experience as a student?

13. Would you say you have experienced racist attitudes or behaviour while at Central?

Section C: closing (approx 20mins)

14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me as part of this interview?

15. Next steps: transcription; you can have a copy if you’d like one; we’re not asking people to comment/amend though; you will receive a copy of the final report in September.
Appendix B

Initial invitation to participate in the research

From: Catherine McNamara
Sent: Fri 18/05/2012 16:25
Subject: invitation to talk about your experience at Central

Hello,

I'd like to invite you to be interviewed as part of a project which is researching Black, Asian, Arabic, Chinese and other non-White students' experiences at Central.

I'm inviting every 3rd year Home and Overseas student from those backgrounds in the undergraduate cohort of 2011/12 to participate in a semi-structured interview that is likely to last between 60 and 90 minutes. A range of staff from academic and support departments will also be invited to participate in an interview.

I'm inviting students who identified as Black, Black British (Caribbean and African), Asian, Chinese, Other Ethnic Background, Other Back background, and a range of Mixed background upon registration, and I'm going from Central Student Records. I hope you feel I'm asking you for the right reason. Similarly, if you happen to know of someone who is from one of those backgrounds and I haven't emailed then, ask them to contact me!

The interview can take place at a time and date to suit you. I will be working with a small team of Research Assistants who are themselves, representative of a range of ethnicities, and who have experience of studying Drama, Theatre and Performance in Higher Education. This small team will carry out the interviews during June and possibly into July.

I very much hope you'll agree to talk with us and share your experiences. Email me at c.mcnamara@cssd.ac.uk and we can arrange a time & date.

As a final year student, you are the focus in order that we can attempt to interview every student within a specific year group, and because by this point in your degree, you have had the most experience and the broadest range of experiences from Admissions, induction and the first year, through to the challenges of the final year and everything in between.

Patterns, trends and features of the study experiences of students from Central's three undergraduate programmes will be extracted from the data and put into a context of other related research. A report and a publicly available electronic portfolio will be produced and will be the outcomes for the HEA (and Central), to be disseminated as appropriate.
Ethnicity and Degree Attainment (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007) showed that even after controlling for the majority of contributory factors, being from a minority ethnic group (except the Other Black, Mixed and Other groups) was still found to have a statistically significant and negative effect on degree attainment.

Improving the degree attainment of Black and minority ethnic students reports that Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students are 18% less likely to get a 1st or a 2.i degree classification:
Looking at data for 2007-08 (ECU, 2009), the national attainment gap between BME students and white students was 18.3%. The attainment gap is defined as the difference between the proportion of white qualifiers who obtained a first class honours or upper second class honours and the proportion of BME qualifiers who achieved at the same level. This gap has since decreased slightly to 18% in 2008-09 (ECU, 2010). (Berry & Loke, 2010)

The Ethnicity and Gender Attainment Gap project (HEA, 2008) recommended that more research be carried out into the different disciplines within Higher Education, suggesting that 'in relation to the learning and teaching environment should include how departmental and subject differences might affect attainment variation' (pp. 34-5).

There are some popular perceptions around the demographic of the student population in small, specialist 'conservatoire' Drama Schools such as the idea that this population is predominantly white, middle class and female. These are partly true in some course, in some years, but perhaps not 100% true across the board.

At Central, in any given academic year we will have approximately 90 BME students across our three undergraduate degrees (out of a total cohort size of approximately 600). The number of students at our institution is relatively small, and while we have a 15% BME population, when this equates to 90 individual people we need to use qualitative methods of research to explore people's experiences as well as analysing data. It would be very useful for us to be able to support the analysis of statistical data, with narratives from those the data 'captured'.

Let me know if we can arrange a date to talk,

Catherine

Deputy Dean of Studies
The Higher Education Academy (HEA) is a national body for learning and teaching in higher education. We work with universities and other higher education providers to help bring about change in learning and teaching. We do this to improve the experience that students have while they are studying, and to support and develop those who teach them.

Our activities focus on rewarding and recognising excellence in teaching, bringing together people and resources to research and share best practice, and by helping to influence, shape and implement policy – locally, nationally, and internationally.

www.heacademy.ac.uk | Twitter @HEAcademy

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Higher Education Academy.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Higher Education Academy. Such permission will normally be granted for educational purposes provided that due acknowledgement is given.

This report is available online in PDF format on the HEA website. For enquiries about this report please contact the communications office at the HEA: 01904 717500 or pressoffice@heacademy.ac.uk