Chapter Two

Race, class, and student choice: Negotiating competing rationalities

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Abstract

The previous chapter established the white-BAME attainment gap as a longstanding trend in UK universities, one that intersects with, but is not reducible to, class and educational background. This chapter focuses on BAME student choice in higher education. Though one of the more well-trodden paths in attainment gap research, previous studies have been sometimes guilty of taking a deficit approach which undervalues the personal narratives and motivations which may guide and constrain BAME student action. This chapter uses survey and interview data to explore students' core decision-making: why study at university, which university, and which degree programme. This reveals the cultural and social capital at students' disposal, foregrounding higher education as a key instrument for social mobility. Qualitative accounts importantly highlight differences between first- and second-generation immigrant narratives, which in turn shape students' motivations for, and adaptation to, university study.

Keywords: Higher education; race and ethnicity; student decision-making; subjective rationality; social capital; diversity; migration

Introduction

The discourse of 'student choice' has become increasingly ubiquitous in higher education, reflecting its significance within HE policy where it is positioned as an engine of progress in standards and outcomes. This began with the sector's expansion and introduction of tuition fees in the 1990s and accelerated more recently through marketisation reforms in the 2010s. Both phases arguably helped reposition higher education as primarily an economic, rather than social, good (Brooks 2018; see also Shelton, 2023). In 'putting students at the heart of the system' (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2015: 15), the relationship between student and HEI has arguably been reconceptualised as akin to a service provider and customer (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). According to Brooks (2018), the value of higher education is thereby framed as an investment, with students required to make decisions that will give them the best chance of maximising their return – usually measured in terms of a student's graduate employability and future income.[1]

With widening participation initiatives driving the expansion of student numbers, higher education scholars have sought to interrogate how equitable and empowering student choice might be in

practice. Initial research focused predominantly on social class, necessitating the construction of a 'new class paradigm' (Savage, 2003) as the broader societal impact of individualisation, post-Fordism, and globalisation had begun to dismantle traditional class identities and solidarities (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000). Studies by Ball (2003), Power et al (2003), and Reay et al (2005) were instrumental in advancing this paradigm, with the authors broadly concluding that the marketisation of education rewarded middle-class families as they were able to furnish their children with the social, cultural, and economic resources that would maximise educational returns. Moreover, these middle-class privileges were obfuscated through this new market logic, as they were assumed to reflect the rational actions of 'reflexive strategic actors' (Savage, 2003: 538). Meanwhile, the pernicious endurance of class stigma would leave poorer students reluctant to apply to elite universities or take up higher education altogether (Reay et al, 2009).

As noted in the previous chapter, this new class paradigm draws heavily on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 1986). Bourdieu advanced a model of class that was not reliant on collective identity or durable employment schemas, instead foregrounding the significance of cultural and social capital for maintaining the reproduction of structural inequalities. While this has usefully reconceptualised class around life chances and resources, its application to *racial* inequalities in higher education required further work. Though Bourdieu (1986) himself claimed that cultural and social capital were concepts partly inspired by the need to explain differential educational outcomes, his overarching rationale privileged explaining how the dominant class reproduces its own structural privilege. As Modood (2004) points out, this leaves little room for explaining educational success from disadvantaged groups. Given that BAME students across *all* minority classifications have long been overrepresented in higher education (Modood, 2004), one can infer that young people of colour do not necessarily lack the capital resources that facilitate entry into higher education.

However, this book is not about BAME access to higher education. As noted in the previous chapter, growing awareness of the attainment gap from the 2000s onwards necessitated more attention to studying BAME access and choice *within* higher education. Resultant research has focused on two broad patterns. First, Connor et al (2004) found that students of colour tended to favour degree courses that were perceived as providing a direct and specified career pathway (e.g. medicine, computer science, law). Second, Shiner and Noden's (2014) study indicated that BAME students were less likely to target 'elite' universities (defined as Oxbridge and the ancient/redbrick institutions which mostly comprise the Russell Group) even when the grade variable was removed.

Such patterns remind us that for all the university guides, league tables, and graduate outcome metrics students have at their disposal, student decision-making remains *subjectively* rational (Glaesser and Cooper, 2014). Significance should therefore be afforded to the context of an individual's choice, including the availability, range, and weighting of different informational sources, as well as the social and cultural factors which shape individual motivation. Modood (2004) argued that BAME overrepresentation in HE was broadly attributable to social and capital consolidated in strong familial ties which enabled the transmission of certain norms and aspirations – notably the valuing of education as a path to social mobility – from parents to children. However, these capitals did not necessarily extend to brokering access to the most prestigious universities, as this may draw on specific forms of knowledge, networks, and embodiment that remain the preserve of socioeconomic elites.

Emphasis on resource access has led some authors to effectively position race as a cultural subset of class, but this overlooks how choice may reflect racial differences and cultural needs. While these may not be as easily measurable as socioeconomic factors, they reflect the very real yet often invisibilised experiences of racism within the context of institutionalised whiteness (Rollock, 2012; Sue et al, 2008). Employing qualitative methods, Ball et al (2002), for example, argued that BAME students' desire to not 'stick out' in predominantly white spaces saw them favour institutions that offered a greater 'ethnic mix' of students (see also Rollock et al, 2015). Yet such choices – whether favoured implicitly or reasoned explicitly – are arguably incompatible with a consumerist discourse which presupposes a model of rationality that does not account for racial belonging. According to this logic, any BAME student opting to study at 'non-elite' institutions (or read 'vocational' degree subjects) risks being perceived as lacking sufficient ambition to maximise their educational returns.

These factors necessitate a theoretical framework which ensures racial experience does not get subsumed into the logic of class while allowing for student agency amid these structural constraints. Picking up from the previous chapter, we propose a framework bridging Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capitals with critical race theory (CRT) and self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000). While Bourdieu's work has long been heralded for examining the ways in which class and racial hierarchies are structurally reproduced, there is a need to centre racial experience and shift our conception of student choice away from simply 'playing the game'. This also entails avoiding presupposing a common 'BAME' experience of higher education. As already noted, intersections of race and class may help explain differential resource access when it comes to student decision-making, but we should also be careful to recognise differences between ethnic origin categories and identities. Moreover, as this chapter will show, students' migration status and generational identity are also significant for understanding their motivations within higher education.

This chapter admittedly makes a partial intervention into existing literature on race and student choice, drawing as it does on original data from a single institution. In other words, all of our research subjects – incorporating a survey of home-domiciled undergraduates[2] (N=4504) and 62 follow-up interviews from the 2014-5 academic year[3] – ultimately opted to study at the University of Kent. However, this limitation ultimately does not contradict our principal focus on student decision-making within higher education. Neither a Russell Group nor 'post-1992' institution, Kent ranked in the top 30 of most university league tables during the data collection period.[4] As a post-war 'plate-glass' institution with its main campus located on the outskirts of Canterbury (with a smaller campus located in the Medway region), Kent's reputational proximity to the 'elite' universities, combined with its physical proximity to London, served as key factors in BAME students' decision-making.

The chapter itself contains two substantive sections. The first unpacks 'home' BAME students as a category, drawing out in particular the significance of differing family migration narratives and how this affects choice and perceived belongingness within higher education. From this base, the second section examines student reasonings for their choice of institution and degree subject. This traces the influence and impact of two competing rationalities: one, the marketisation discourse of contemporary HE which positions choice as an economic investment; and two, the expectations from family to invest in education as a means of social mobility.

Ethnic minorities in the UK education system: Unpacking 'home' BAME students

It is important to begin by considering the diversity and composition of home BAME students that typically study in UK universities. Table 1 breaks down ethnic categories for all UK-domiciled students studying in the UK during the 2013-4 academic year. Results show that black African students comprise the biggest BAME subcategory, representing 4.6 per cent of students overall, followed by Indian (3.4 per cent) and mixed (3.2 per cent). Excluding 'other', Bangladeshi (0.9 per cent), Chinese (0.9 per cent), and Caribbean (1.5 per cent) are among the most underrepresented categories. The data makes clear that BAME students are largely concentrated in London, comprising 46.2 per cent of all students studying in the city. London represents the region with the largest share for each individual BAME category, though the proportion of black African students is highest by some distance at 11.7 per cent. Pakistani students are the least concentrated in London, with 2.6 per cent living in the rest of England, but overall BAME categories are significantly underrepresented at universities located in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

The concentration of BAME students in London is broadly commensurate with the UK population as a whole – data from the 2021 census (excluding Scotland and Northern Ireland) indicates that 46.2 per cent of the capital's residents identified as belonging to a BAME ethnic group.[5] In other words, ethnic minority undergraduates are generally more likely to study close to where they live. Defying this trend somewhat, Table 2 and Figure 1 suggest that Kent's student demographic more closely resembles that of London universities than the rest of England. In the 2016-7 academic year, BAME home undergraduates hit 40 per cent, and have continued to grow in the years since. Further in line with wider trends, black African students represent the most populous BAME subcategory, having exceeded 10 per cent in 2015-6. Unlike London universities, however, Kent features a higher representation of black students than it does Asian students.

Table 1: UK domiciled students by country of institution and ethnic group

	White	BAME total	Black				Asian					Chinese	Mixed
			All	Caribbean	African	Other	All	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Other		
England	76.8% 1148890	23.2% 347025	7.5% 111605	1.8%	5.3%	0.4%	9.8% 147,075	3.9%	2.9%	1.1%	2.0%	0.9% 13755	3.6% 53685
London	53.8% 139825	46.2% 119950	16.7% 43310	4.1%	11.7%	0.9%	18.5% 480,075	6.5%	3.9%	3.0%	5.1%	1.6% 4230	5.7% 14910
Eng. exc. London	81.6% 1009065	18.4% 227075	5.5% 68295	1.3%	4.0%	0.3%	8.0% 99,000	3.4%	2.6%	0.7%	1.3%	0.8% 9530	3.1% 38775
Northern Ireland	97.5% 46630	2.5% 1210	0.4% 210	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.9% 415	0.4%	0.2%	0.0%	0.3%	0.4% 190	0.7% 310
Scotland	92.6% 164360	7.4% 13150	1.5% 2680	0.1%	1.3%	0.1%	3.0% 5410	0.8%	1.4%	0.1%	0.7%	0.7% 1320	1.5% 2745
Wales	91.7% 99935	8.3% 9025	2.0% 2160	0.3%	1.6%	0.1%	3.2% 3510	1.3%	0.7%	0.5%	0.8%	0.5% 540	2.0% 2150
Total	79.8% 1459815	20.2% 370415	6.4% 116655	1.5%	4.6%	0.3%	8.5% 156410	3.4%	2.5%	0.9%	1.7%	0.9% 15805	3.2% 58895

Source: ECU (2015: 114-5).

Figure 1: Ethnic breakdown of entrants at University of Kent in 2017/8 academic year
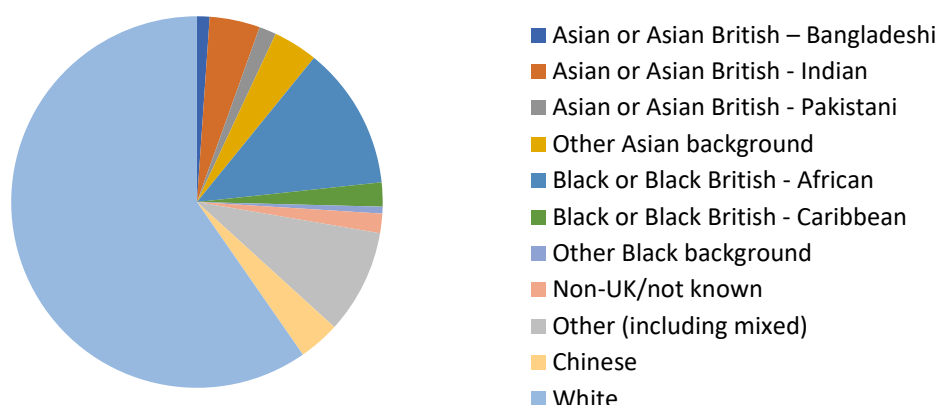

Legend:
- Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi
- Asian or Asian British - Indian
- Asian or Asian British - Pakistani
- Other Asian background
- Black or Black British - African
- Black or Black British - Caribbean
- Other Black background
- Non-UK/not known
- Other (including mixed)
- Chinese
- White

Table 2: Ethnic breakdown of entrants at University of Kent 2013-8

Ethnic group		Entry year				
		2013-4	2014-5	2015-6	2016-7	2017-8
Asian	Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi	0.8%	0.7%	0.9%	1.0%	1.1%
	Asian or Asian British - Indian	4.2%	4.2%	4.9%	3.9%	4.4%
	Asian or Asian British - Pakistani	1.5%	1.4%	1.2%	1.1%	1.5%
	Other Asian background	3.5%	3.9%	4.4%	4.7%	3.9%
	Total	10.0%	10.2%	11.1%	11.0%	10.8%
Black	Black or Black British - African	9.7%	9.9%	10.2%	10.5%	12.5%
	Black or Black British - Caribbean	2.3%	2.4%	2.5%	2.6%	2.1%
	Other Black background	0.8%	0.7%	0.6%	0.8%	0.6%
	Total	12.8%	13.0%	13.3%	13.9%	15.3%
Other BAME	Non-UK/not known	1.4%	1.5%	1.9%	2.1%	1.7%
	Other (including mixed)	6.7%	7.8%	7.8%	8.2%	9.1%
	Chinese	3.9%	4.6%	4.7%	4.8%	3.6%
	Total	12.0%	13.8%	14.4%	15.1%	14.4%

Source: Qlikview, University of Kent. Note: Percentages by column.

Of course, these data do not fully capture the ethnic diversity on Kent's UK campuses – or indeed universities more generally – as they feature home undergraduate populations only. This excludes how international students and postgraduates may impact on the overall representation of ethnic minorities. Though these groups sit outside the white-BAME attainment gap as defined by the Office for Students, the experience of being a home-domiciled and international BAME undergraduate may not differ as much as one might expect. Interviews revealed that many students categorised as

'black African' were not born in the UK, with their formative years characterised by chain migration, sometimes via another European country. This speaks to broader migration trends: in 2001, the population of Nigerian-born UK residents was 87,000; by 2011, it had grown to 191,000 (Office for National Statistics, 2013). In contrast, all of our black Caribbean interviewees were born and raised in the UK.

In practical terms, this can create anxieties for prospective students who emigrated in their mid-teens. For non-British citizens to qualify as a home student for Student Finance England, applicants need to either have long residence (either seven years or half your life) or have proof of settled/pre-settled status (Department of Education, 2022: 6-7). This involves regularly renewing visas, applying for indefinite leave to remain. For some students, this meant that their status as home or international students would not be confirmed until a few weeks before their arrival at university:

> I was born in Ghana and then I came to the UK in 2006, so in 2012 I was meant to start uni, but I got my indefinite *[leave to remain]* very late, around August. I applied to the University of Kent around July and then they send me messages that they need a copy of my citizenship. And during that time, it was at the Home Office. So, I was so scared that they were going to reject me because I'm not able to send them my citizenship. (Rebecca[6], BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

> I was born here but I went back to Nigeria when I was three years old, and I came back as an adult. So, they asked for a copy of my British passport and there were lots of delays. They were asking for an English result to show my English proficiency. (Andi, LLB Law – Black African)

Given these fine margins, it is perhaps unsurprising that many first generation/recently naturalised students frame their identities more strongly according to their country of origin (Jessop and Williams, 2009). Moreover, receiving 'home' status shortly before arrival at university likely reflects a schooling that has spanned more than one country. Rebecca experienced a sense of cultural dislocation from entering school in the UK in her mid-teens:

> It was difficult because in Ghana, the way you have to behave is really different from here. In Ghana if a teacher comes to the class everyone has to stand up and greet her. And then if the teacher asks you a question you have to stand up and answer. So, of course, I had the same mentality when I came here, and when the teacher asked my name I stood up and everyone was laughing at me. So it was really difficult to adjust because back home if the teacher talks you can't really be rude. But here it's different. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

This indicates that for first generation BAME students may feel 'othered' not only in racial terms but also with regard to the British educational system and its 'invisible pedagogies' (Bernstein, 1996). Puwar (2004) draws on the work of Bourdieu and Michel Foucault to explain how cultures of exclusion operate within such institutional spaces:

> Social spaces are not blank and open for anybody to occupy. Over time, through processes of historical sedimentation, certain types of bodies are designated as being the 'natural' occupants of specific spaces… some bodies have the right to belong in certain locations,

while others are marked out as trespassers, who are in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined, politically, historically and conceptually circumscribed as being 'out of place'. (Puwar, 2004: 51)

For students born and schooled in the UK, few spoke of comparable disorientation in their formative years, mostly on account of having grown up in cosmopolitan areas of London. This generated a different set of social and cultural capital resources. Though many spoke with pride of the experiences and sacrifices of their parents, students ultimately were more likely to describe their home culture in equivocal terms – identifying with multi-ethnic, diasporic communities in London:

I have been raised in multicultural groups from when I was really, really young. My groups of friends, my mum's group of friends, have always been a mixed group – Portuguese, Italian, this and that. I can't comprehend somebody who is like, "I have never met a person like that" or "I have never had this food." I am like, "My friend's mum – that is all she cooks!" (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

Of course, we should be mindful of presupposing hard boundaries on the grounds of country of birth. Frances's experience, for example, sits somewhere between those of Rebecca and James. Having been born in Germany to Nigerian parents, she felt more personally detached from her family's migration narrative but retained an acute awareness of the decisions and actions of their parents. This highlights the existence of different cultural identities within a family unit:

My parents were both from working-class to middle-class families, so it wasn't the typical, you know, Water Aid advert with the starving kids. But it still came from a struggle. […] I appreciate my parents so much for coming from Nigeria and moving to Germany and then here. There weren't many opportunities in Nigeria. They moved here because there's an element of racism in Germany, especially in the selection for students for uni. […] They say to me all the time, like, "You're a European baby because [laughs] you're just so acclimated to this environment". My mum would always be like, "You're so lazy. When I was ten, I had to carry water on my head". It's just like, "Okay Mum, you're dramatising." *[laughs]* (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

Frances's casual reference to 'Water Aid adverts with the starving kids' shows a reflexiveness about how migrant families can be framed and stereotyped in British society. But such stereotypes do not capture the complex transference of middle-class values and capitals involved in Frances's family's migration narrative. It has long been established that though most migrants come to the UK in search of upward social mobility, many experience downward social mobility upon arrival as the jobs available to them are often below their qualification levels (Modood et al, 1997; Basit, 2012: Reay, 2017). This might be attributable to discrimination in the labour market, as well as language and financial problems caused by living in dislocated, transnational families. Consequently, migrant families often put great emphasis on education – particularly higher education – as an accessible means of converting familial social and cultural capital into a UK context. This is particularly evident in the educational choices of children of black African migrant parents (Mitton and Aspinall, 2011), as illustrated in the interview accounts of Ava, Frances, and Rebecca:

> A lot of Nigerian families or African families, there's a lot of pressure. It's academically driven. Academics is key to getting out of poverty and making a living when you're older. (Ava, BSc Wildlife Conservation – Mixed Race)

> My parents felt that coming to England, not only would I learn English – which is more translatable in terms of where I can go – but also [it] gave me a chance to succeed, you know, being black. So that's the main motivation behind being here. (Frances, BSc Biomedical Science – Black African)

> Obviously not everyone wants to come to uni but African parents do push you to go. It was my choice, but I don't know what my dad would have done if I said I wouldn't come. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

In many cases, improving educational opportunities for their children was identified as a key factor for their parents' decision to migrate to the UK. For students such as Meera, whose parents emigrated from Kenya, and Yeni, whose father had previously studied in Egypt, this involved following in their families' footsteps. Like Frances, the incentive of an inclusive university education system was coveted both as a means of capital conversion and as a continuation of their family identity:

> It's been like the main thing since I can remember. After we moved here, we were doing our GCSEs and A-Levels and [my parents] were doing their university degrees. (Meera, BA Comparative Literature – Other Asian Background)

> They've always wanted me to go to uni 'cause we're quite an academic family, although I am the first in our family to go to university in England. (Yeni, BA Politics & International Relations – Other Mixed Background)

The conveyancing of these 'durable ambitions', consolidated within family networks, to BAME students represents a form of social capital that Modood (2004: 95) identifies as significant for explaining ethnic minority overrepresentation within British universities. However, for migrant families this transference of capital can incur emotional costs. Remi's parents left Rwanda during the Civil War in the 1990s and spent time in Tanzania before the family moved to the UK. However, their first town of settlement was coloured by experiences of racism:

> When we first came to this country it wasn't too welcoming to ethnic minorities – one time someone spray-painted a Nazi sign on our door. Eventually we moved and my parents just had to really build their lives from scratch. A couple of years later, both my parents got their PhDs. So they're very pro-education. (Remi, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black African)

For BAME students born and raised in the UK, migration narratives take on a more symbolic quality, drawing on the secondary accounts of parents and grandparents. This reflects their families' settled status often within multi-ethnic and diasporic communities (Vertovec, 2009). This was true for James, whose family is of Caribbean heritage and has lived for many decades in London. In his case, education is valued less as an identity and more in recognition of transformations in the UK labour market, with university degrees increasingly a precondition of entry into professional careers:

My parents have never been to university. But obviously at the time when they were my age there was no need to. This was the 1980s, so it was like you could get into a job and go up. Because both my parents they worked in telecommunications, by the time they met they were both at management level. They hammered that into us, like, "You have to go to university. It is just something that you have to do." (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

Yet within the advice James received from his parents was a recognition that staying competitive would not necessarily override racial discrimination when it came to professional recruitment[7], recalling the well-known aphorism that people of colour 'must work twice as hard to get half as far':

It is harder for a minority to get a job. You have seen studies where it is like if a person has got an ethnic minority name compared to a white name, they are more likely to hire the person even though they have the same degree. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

In sum, the student narratives underline the particular significance often afforded to studying at university in BAME students' upbringing. For students not born in the UK, these are often tightly bound up in family migration narratives, sometimes reflecting parents' motivations for their own higher education as well as their children's. Higher education may also represent an accessible means of restoring the family's professional status following their migration to the UK. The transference of these familial norms and values serves as a form of social capital in that it sets clear expectations of participation in higher education – education in this respect may give students a sense of *who they are* (Modood, 2004). Higher education is also venerated for UK-born BAME students, though this may reflect greater awareness of the increased importance of HE qualifications in a changing job market, albeit one that still discriminates against people of colour. Though different in their motivations, these narratives ultimately reach the same conclusion. Data presented table 3 indicates that family encouragement plays a more significant role for BAME students than it does for white students.

Table 3: Importance of family encouragement as a factor in choosing to study at university level

		In general, how important were the following factors in your decision to study at university level?		
		Important	Not important	Not applicable
The encouragement of my family	White (N=2935)	63.1%*	33.4%*	3.5%*
	BAME (N=994)	77.3%*	16.3%*	3.5%*
	Black (N=460)	81.5%	15.2%	3.3%
	Asian (N=263)	75.3%	20.9%	3.8%

N=4504. *P=0.00.

Metrics, employability, and 'ethnic mix': Choosing a university and degree subject

With university representing an increasingly common path for UK school leavers, marketisation policy and rhetoric has put greater emphasis on selecting the right university and degree subject (Macfarlane, 2020). Reforms in the past decade have sought to provide prospective students with the informational tools to enable them to make an informed choice. Although students do not necessarily see themselves as consumers (Tomlinson, 2017), they are increasingly aware of the risks and consequences of their decision-making which can cause feelings of anxiety and uncertainty (D'Silva and Pugh, 2021). Despite this, aforementioned studies by Ball (2003), Power et al (2003), and Reay et al (2005) have all addressed how differential access to cultural and social capital equips middle-class students with greater knowledge and self-confidence to make the sorts of decisions that will help them maximise their returns. Conversely, the relative lack of such capitals may lead working-class students to self-exclude from opportunities available to them (Bourdieu, 1977; Watson, 2013; Bathmaker et al, 2016).

Race also plays a part in enabling and constraining student choice, though its significance as an independent variable can be harder to ascertain, at least quantitatively. This is evidenced in Shiner and Noden's (2014) multivariate analysis of 50,000 HE applicants, which identifies class (measured according to parents' occupation) as the principal underlying factor in explaining why BAME students are less likely to apply to 'prestigious' universities. The authors conclude that converting class privilege into selective schooling is the most crucial factor as it raises students' expectations of their academic potential and furnishes them with the confidence to 'play the educational system' to their advantage.

Shiner and Noden's work helps establish clear behavioural trends, but there is a need to unpack categories of 'class' and 'race' more sociologically. Drawing on their analysis of 120 interviews, Ball et al (2002) construct contrasting ideal types of prospective student: the 'contingent' and 'embedded' chooser. Embedded choosers capture the privileges and freedoms typically enjoyed by white, middle-class students as their decision-making draws on a range of knowledge sources and social capital networks to select the right institution from a broad range of options. For contingent choosers, HE decision-making is characterised by constraint as much as possibility. Reflecting the narratives of ethnic minority and working-class interviewees, choice is comparatively distant and 'unreal', drawing little on social capital or parental engagement, and shaped by what is feasible financially. Contingent choosers also draw less on the 'hot knowledges' valued in marketisation discourses, instead favouring trust, familiarity, and local proximity.

Race is only explicitly highlighted in Ball et al's (2002) ideal types with regard to contingent choosers' preference for universities offering an 'ethnic mix' of students. Ball helps develops this further as a contributor to Rollock et al's (2015) study of the educational strategies of the Black middle-class parents, finding that parents favour schools for their children that combine ethnic mix with the right educational credentials. In practice, however, pursuing the latter may come at the expense of the former, necessitating leaving their community to access more high-performing schools (see also Adewumi, 2015).

Of course, students themselves have greater agency when it comes to higher education decision-making, but according to Shiner and Noden's analysis a preference for ethnic mix is likely to be one of the factors that will likely lead BAME students to apply to 'less prestigious' universities[8]. As a top 30 institution but outside of the Russell Group, the University of Kent is one such destination, albeit

not located in a region known for high ethnic diversity. However, it would be a gross oversimplification to assume that a BAME student's choice of Kent reflects a lack of knowledge or resource access. This is evident in the accounts of Eric and Shappi. Though both were from lower-income households[9], echoing Rollock et al's (2015) study their relatively privileged state schooling furnished them with the resources and encouragement to apply to Oxford and Cambridge universities. Nevertheless, this experience generated further pressures that conflicted with a preference for universities offering a greater ethnic mix:

> I went to a comprehensive, but it was basically posing as a private school. We had obligatory UCAS sessions once a week, talks on student finance, graduate careers, on how your life will be infinitely better if you go to university. We all went on an Oxford and Cambridge trip, and it was just like, this is your future, basically *[laughs]*, this is your goal. And I just thought, maybe not *[laughs]*. I remember having an argument with my head of sixth form because he was upset that I didn't apply to Oxford for English literature. (Eric, BA Comparative Literature – Mixed Race)

> It was a grammar school, one of the best in the area. Very sort of like "if you don't go to Oxford…" They had things like, "if you're thinking of going to Oxford / university / work…". They didn't even identify the two [Oxford and other universities] as being the same thing *[laughs]*. (Shappi, BA Classical & Archaeological Studies – BAME Arab)

The resultant decision to apply to Kent arguably positions Eric and Shappi somewhere between embedded and contingent choosers as per Ball et al's (2002) conceptualisation. Though one can argue that freedom of choice was constrained by their valuing of ethnic mix, this was not attributable to 'narrowly defined socioscapes and spatial horizons'. With more than half of its BAME students hailing from Greater London (see table 4), Canterbury promised opportunities for personal growth and independence away from home:

> Choosing university in London will enable me to stay at home, so I'd save more money instead of paying for bills. But then again somehow I wanted to go outside, like outside London. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

> My dad didn't want me to stay at home here. He was like "Live life, don't stay here for uni". So I was like yeah, definitely I don't want to be at home. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies – Black African)

> My friend went to Queen Mary he never had Fresher's because you have to go home. He never really got to enjoy the nightlife of uni and I didn't want that. You always hear how going to uni, having that lifestyle is one of the best times of your life. I wanted to at least give myself a chance to experience all of that, so I wanted to go far enough where it would be reasonable to stay on campus. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

Table 4: White and BAME students' home postcode region by campus

	Students' home postcode region

		Kent	Greater London	Rest of UK
Canterbury	White (N=2944)	21.1%	15.5%	63.5%
	BAME (N=945)	9.3%	56.3%	34.4%
Medway	White (N=340)	51.2%	14.7%	34.1%
	BAME (N=220)	11.8%	62.3%	25.9%

N=4449. P=0.00.

For Rebecca, Jocelyn, and James, the decision to study in Canterbury rather than commute to a London university represented the deployment of social capital insofar as university learning privileges independence (a point we will discuss more in chapter three). James's comment in particular also highlights that for many students the appeal of 'independence' is inseparable from the desire for personal growth that comes from experiencing the 'student lifestyle'. However, this does not mean distance from home is not an issue. As a city 60 miles from London connected by Britain's only high-speed rail service, Canterbury promised freedom with a safety net. With family providing an importance source of bonding capital (Modood, 2004), our interviewees were reluctant to overly weaken their close ties to home:

> I didn't want to go to the University of London because I wanted to move out of home, but I don't want to move *that* far out, otherwise my parents will just be, "Oh, you're going so far away." And Kent's a good commutable distance for them and it's far enough for me to be more independent. (Eric, BA Comparative Literature – Mixed Race)

> I didn't want to be at home, I didn't want to be in London, I wanted to be somewhere else but I wanted to be far enough, so I think Kent was the best option. London's only two hours away. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology – Black Caribbean)

> The main reason was really distance. I'm very close to my family so I couldn't see myself going very far. Kent is a very good university as well, particularly for law. It just all seemed right. It was really between Kent and Surrey. (Remi, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black African)

Of course, facilitating the decision to study at Kent was a degree of economic wealth since the location of the Canterbury campus (which itself is approximately two miles from the city centre) is arguably too far from London to be considered commutable. With white people representing 93.7 per cent residents in the county[10], it is perhaps unsurprising that only 11.7 per cent of BAME students commute to the Canterbury campus (see table 5). At Medway, however, the campus's 30-mile distance from London makes commuting more viable and even cost-effective. Financial constraint is certainly evident in the accounts of Emily and Hannah, both students from lower-income households. For Emily, her decision-making reflected a desire to minimise future debt repayment, whereas for Hannah commuting allowed her to continue making a financial contribution to her single-parent household:

Finances became a factor for living at home because I felt like if I lived away I would have more debt in terms of paying back. I didn't want to have an extra loan on top to pay back with already what's been provided for me. (Emily, BSc Business Studies – Black African)

I would have liked to go to Coventry, but I thought it was quite far so I picked Kent. […] I live with my mum. She wanted me to stay closer to home rather than go far away, but I don't regret it to be honest. She needs me moneywise. I work at KFC down the road from where I live, so I commute to uni, come back, and go straight to work. I can get enough money to go to uni, pay for uni things, as well as pay for things at home. (Hannah, BSc Business Information – Black African)

Table 5: Undergraduate commuters[11] by ethnicity

All students		Commuter	Resident
Canterbury	White (N=1982)	16.3%	83.7%
	BAME (N=486)	11.7%	88.3%
	All students (N=2468)	15.4%	84.6%
Medway	White (N=246)	53.3%	46.7%
	BAME (N=131)	26.0%	74.0%
	All students (N=377)	43.8%	56.2%

N=2845. P=0.00.

Despite their differences, the accounts of commuters and residential students highlight the importance of ethnic relatedness in university choosing. This incorporates both the maintenance of strong ties to home and the desire for ethnic mix on campus. When arriving at university, BAME students would have to contend with dominant cultures which implicitly privileged aspects of whiteness (see chapter four), but at the point of choosing it was notable how the basic *visibility* of diversity across the student cohort was considered foundational for developing belongingness at university:

I'm actually satisfied with the diversity here because the other universities I applied for weren't diverse at all. It's nice to see, it makes you feel a bit more, I don't know, at home. Not at home, but a bit more comfortable when you do see diversity. (Ava, Wildlife conservation – Mixed Race)

When I was applying for university, I wanted it to be multicultural. I didn't want to apply to a university that had a very high percentage of just one ethnicity. I am not comfortable in that sort of environment. I want to be in an environment where there are people of multiple ethnicities. […] When I came here, I thought that it was going to be a majority of white people. I was very surprised and my parents were surprised. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

Of course, ethnic mix is not necessarily replicable across all departments and programme cohorts. Table 6 indicates that Connor et al's (2004) aforementioned analysis of BAME course representation is broadly reproduced at the University of Kent, with arts and humanities courses undersubscribed compared with courses in the sciences and social sciences. Interview accounts also broadly support Connor et al's analyses, namely that ethnic minority students favour degree courses that are perceived to lead more directly to professional occupations. However, decisions over degree subject reflect a more complex negotiation of rationalities, one which affords greater significance to parental encouragement and expectation. For Gina, Rebecca, and James, this involved choosing degree subjects that their parents recognised as providing a more direct pathway to a respectable professional career:

> I really like to dance, I went to Brit School but it got too expensive. I just wanted to have a degree, like an actual degree. I could still do dance on the side rather than just pursue it and not have a degree to fall back on. I don't even do dance now, but I decided to get an academic degree so that if anything happens, I've still got that. (Gina, BSc Clinical Psychology – Black Caribbean)

> Before GCSE I really liked art, I was really into art. But with Africans our parents have this influence on what we do, so my dad was like, "Art is not really good, you wouldn't really get a good job out of there." They kind of see it as being a doctor, being a lawyer, you know, them high positions. (Rebecca, BA Health & Social Care – Black African)

> I love acting, I love drama because it really boosted my confidence, especially [after] bullying and stuff [but] I don't necessarily need a degree to be an actor, that is something my parents always told me. It was like, *love drama, do sciences*. I would still like to do acting, whether I am good enough is a completely different thing. (James, LLB Law & Business Administration – Black Caribbean)

For all three students, the selection of psychology, health and social care, and law as degree subjects incurred the rejection of a prior passion for arts subjects. This was the outcome of two mutually reinforcing rationalities. On the one hand, the perceived value of arts and humanities subjects has suffered from the repositioning of students as consumers of higher education, evidenced most clearly in the UK Government's divestment in non-STEM subjects since 2012 (e.g. McGettigan, 2013). This has compounded the pressure to choose degrees which will maximise career returns. On the other hand, for Gina, Rebecca, and James, advice on degree subject choice came principally from their parents. Again, one can locate important racial nuance between Ball et al's (2002) 'contingent' and 'embedded' chooser types, with parents representing 'strong framers' albeit in ways that can sometimes constrain decision-making. For James, his expectations of university were strongly shaped by his parents' emphasis on staying competitive within an often-discriminatory labour market, whereas for Rebecca her educational aspirations reflect her parents' migrant narrative. In each case, a passion for the arts is relegated to 'hobby' status with relatively little complaint.

Table 6: Distribution of home domiciled white and BAME students by subject area, 2014-5 entry year

	Entry year

		2014-5
Humanities	White	80.7%
	BAME	19.3%
Sciences	White	60.9%
	BAME	39.1%
Social sciences	White	62.0%
	BAME	38.0%

N=3849

Of course, parental pressures to pursue high-status careers as doctors and lawyers are well-worn cultural stereotypes within BAME and especially Asian communities and precede recent marketisation reforms (e.g. Mirza, 1992; Basit, 1996). Though this may strengthen the likelihood of ethnic mix at subject level, students who opted to study arts and humanities degrees were often acutely aware of how their choices confounded such stereotypes. Meera, for example, chose to read comparative literature and found herself to be one of a minority of students of colour on her course:

> A handful in my degree [are ethnic minorities], there are not a lot of males doing it either. […] A lot of people assume that Asian parents are very strict in terms of careers and education because of that stereotype of Asians go onto be lawyers or doctors. I'm not a part of either of those stereotypes. (Meera, BA Comparative Literature – Other Asian Background)

While Meera did not encounter any pushback from her choice of degree, Jocelyn's desire to study film required more careful negotiation process to ensure it would satisfy her parents' hopes for a sustainable career:

> My parents are Nigerian. African parents are all the same, the idea of their children going into the arts is unheard of. And because it's unheard of they don't really know what it's about. So, if they're not seeing other people like in the arts they're like, "okay, so where are they?" Like, you don't even really have someone to look up to. So, when I was at secondary school if I try to talk about the arts, it's like, "Well, you know that's not really safe is it?" But they saw that I was not going to be happy doing anything else. I really loved English, they've always known that I love reading and writing. I wanted to be an actress when I was younger, that was like really scary for them. Child stars like Lindsey Lohan and all of that – that's all they saw. So that was a bit nerve wracking. So, when I started screenwriting, they were like, "Yeah that's good, there's money in screenwriting, we'll support you". (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies – Black African)

Jocelyn was conscious of the broader structural factors that explained the underrepresentation of people of colour in the performing arts but still recognised the importance of gaining her parents' understanding and approval. Despite their initial scepticism, Jocelyn's pursuit of a degree in film studies was aided by a background of relative economic privilege, coming as she did from a higher income household. This arguably helped soften familial pressure on immediate career returns, as did the fact that her elder sister had recently graduated from a UK university. The combination of her parents' economic capital and greater knowledge of UK higher education also laid the platform for a more nuanced conversation about Jocelyn's decision whether to study at university:

I made up my mind in college I didn't want to go to uni. In an African household that is unheard of. I told my sister, and she was like, "Good luck telling mum and dad that". I sat them down, and I was like, "Parents I don't want to go to university." And they were like, "Okay." And I was like, "What do you mean okay?" Literally they were the calmest they've ever been. I came with my arguments for it, and they were like, "That's good, you've thought about it. But what are you going to do with yourself because you're not going to chill at home for three years whilst your sister's going to uni, your brother's in school. You have to be doing something." And I was like, "That's so true, I don't have anything to do right now." And my mum was like, "Well you'd better find something to do." So I said, "Okay, yeah I didn't find anything to do so I guess I'm at uni now." But when I read about the course and I actually got on the course I was like, okay I'm coming to uni for a reason, I actually enjoy what I'm doing … I'm just thinking about this whole reverse-psychology thing, I didn't realise it *[laughs]*. (Jocelyn, BA Film Studies – Black African)

This points to importance of understanding the subtle intersections of race and class when studying of undergraduate choice. For higher income BAME students, decision-making is more likely to draw from a wider range of variables which are not governed by economic needs or constraints. For lower-income students, their selection of degree programme or the decision to commute may reflect a narrower scope of choice. However, race cuts across class when we consider BAME students' desire to study at universities where they are less likely to be made to feel like 'space invaders' while retaining close ties with family. The latter, too, reflects the considerable influence of BAME students' parents when it comes to the value placed on education as a means of social mobility as an ethnic minority in the UK.

Conclusion

It is clear from the interview and survey data presented in this chapter that BAME students typically do not lack the motivation to succeed in higher education. Achieving a university degree represents a key resource for social mobility, be it for converting family capital to a new national context or maintaining a competitive advantage in the labour market. This highlights the complex interplay between race and class when it comes to BAME student decision-making. While there are overlaps between the two, the added pressures to combat racism and discrimination makes it clear that one should avoid assuming that the former is ultimately reducible to the latter. This underlines the value of analysing choice from a student perspective.

The interviews show that BAME student decision-making entails a complex negotiation of two competing yet often-overlapping rationalities: on the one hand, a higher education system which increasingly positions a degree principally as an economic investment, and the influence of family which places high expectations on students to make good on parental sacrifices. For many interviewees, choosing to study at Kent was the outcome of a careful negotiation of these rationalities, while also seeking to carve out a degree of personal autonomy at a key life stage. Significantly, Kent's relative diversity and proximity to London enabled students to retain ethnic relatedness on campus and at home. While this may represent a constraint on BAME student choice as per Shiner and Noden's (2014) assessment, the basic desire for ethnic mix is rooted in students' lives and family histories which have been coloured by racism. Not all students of colour may feel able or willing to act as trailblazers in applying to a predominantly white university, and for this

reason the pursuit of 'ethnic mix' should be recognised as valid in its own right, with the onus on HEIs, rather than students, to address institutional diversity shortfalls.

Choosing a degree subject was found to be more constrained, as HE and family rationalities were often mutually reinforcing. This drove the majority of BAME students towards programmes which were perceived as providing the fast-track to a respectable career, sometimes at the expense of subject areas students had found more personally rewarding. Jocelyn's story indicates that class – both in terms of economic and cultural capital – can help counter these rationalities, but what remains clear is that parents play a significant role – either directly or symbolically – in shaping BAME students' understanding of higher education and motivations for attainment. Once at university, however, parental influence is diluted as students are expected to meet institutional expectations of acting as 'independent learners'. This is the focus of the next chapter.

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[1] For example, graduate employment progression is a key 'numerical indicator' for the awarding panel of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Progression is defined as 'the proportion of qualifiers who identify managerial or professional employment, further study or other positive outcomes among the activities that they were undertaking when responding to the Graduate Outcomes survey 15 months after they left higher education'. (https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/tef-data-dashboard/about-the-data-dashboard/).

[2] Individual survey respondent data was linked with the University's student records to match responses with data relating to students' ethnicity, postcode region, degree programme, campus, and household income. The combining of these sources of data was subject to the University's data compliance procedure, with consent taken from all survey participants. The survey dataset was anonymised, and strictly limited for the purposes of Student Success research only.

[3] In the interests of consistency, we have chosen to situate these findings within the broad context of the HE statistics and student demographics from the 2014-5 academic year.

[4] Complete University Guide 2014: https://www.educationindex.co.uk/articles/university-rankings/obschie-reytingi-vuzov-velikobritanii/ranking-uk-2014-cug/

Guardian University Guide 2014: https://www.theguardian.com/education/table/2013/jun/03/university-league-table-2014

[5] https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/regional-ethnic-diversity/latest

[6] All student names in this chapter have been anonymised, with pseudonyms applied consistently across all chapters in this book.

[7] To illustrate, recent data indicates that black male graduates are over three times more likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts. See https://www.voice-online.co.uk/news/uk-news/2022/07/20/black-male-graduates-twice-as-likely-to-be-unemployed/

[8] While BAME access to Oxford and Cambridge universities has increased over the past decade, evidence points to a continued lag compared to the rest of the sector https://blog.thepienews.com/2019/07/universities-like-oxbridge-fail-to-represent-britains-ethnic-diversity/

[9] Data in this chapter draws on students' household income as originally reported to Student Finance England. The categories of 'high', 'medium', and 'low' income mirror those employed by Student Finance England to determine whether students should receive no grant, a partial grant, or a full grant. https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/35366065/a-guide-to-financial-support-for-higher-education-students-2013-14

[10] https://www.kent.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0009/8559/Cultural-diversity-in-Kent.pdf.pdf

[11] 'Commuter' is self-defined commuters, excluding the self-defined who are resident on campus. 'Resident' is defined as living in student accommodation (on/off campus) or shared house with other students and does not self-define as a commuter.