

# Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

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Volume 1  
Issue 40 *Fostering Inclusive Learning  
Communities Together*

Article 24

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July 2023

## Successfully Fitting In

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### Recommended Citation

Wang, Jin "Successfully Fitting In," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 40 (2023), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss40/24>

## **SUCCESSFULLY FITTING IN**

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In this piece, I share my personal experiences as an Asian student at a university. I start by explaining why it is important for Asian students to gain a sense of belonging, linking to the culture of their societies, then moves on to telling stories about what the student experienced and how she felt during incidents. I include references that link these incidents to current research, to build up arguments and depict perspectives upon which future improvements or academic research can draw. It may be valuable to consider it as a piece of evidence that depicts the difficulty of gaining a sense of belonging for Asian students at UK universities.

### **Defining Success**

What is success? It is a question that we should all ask ourselves throughout our lives. However, as a student from a BAME (black, Asian, minority ethnic) group—an Asian—my answer is closely linked to my campus life in the UK—day in, day out. To be more specific, I would define my success (as would many other Asian students) as gaining a sense of belongingness in a foreign country. In other words, to be considered as part of something, a member, to fit in.

If you were born in China, Korea, Japan, India, Thailand, or Malaysia, you may be familiar with being given tasks to validate yourself as a member. Am I right? No matter which part of Asia you are from, the society is more likely to expect you to be ‘part of something:’ a family, a community, or a social circle. That was no exception for me. As an award-winning advertiser, I worked hard for 12 years to be recognized by my colleagues, boss, industry, and society, until one day I flew thousands of miles away from home, spending almost my entire savings in the process, and began my studies in the UK.

### **Representation**

Studies show that Asian students find it hard to gain their sense of belongingness (Todman, 2020). Indeed, as a person from a minority ethnic group, I know that it is a task to fit in. What should I expect when I am not white, but study in a white-dominated community? In my department, every scholar I see, from the dean to my supervisor, from the head of department to any lecturer I meet, is white. This employment structure has significantly contributed to the reality that the BAME group questions their own academic and professional capabilities (Arday, 2019). This of course includes me. With the policy of university equality in mind, I still often ask myself if I am supposed to be here. Am I going to be evaluated the same way as the locals?

Underrepresentation is an issue. It was discovered as early as 2012 that there is an overwhelming disconnect between the words and actions within higher education institutions regarding race

equalities (Ahmed, 2012). However, the structure of academic employment has not improved since.

The present context for addressing issues of race inequality and systematic racism within higher education institutions is still lying in the hands of senior university stakeholders and administrators, best positioned to prioritise this agenda (Arday, 2020, p. 2).

Looking around, I am not confident enough about my belongingness at my university, let alone my career prospects.

Gradually, a picture has formed in my mind of how prejudices and injustices can manifest themselves, often in subtle ways. I do not remember exactly when it started, but I do remember the moment when I received an apologetic email from a university department stating that, “considering your qualifications and experiences, this would be disappointing news, but we are sorry for not being able to offer you this position.” The student who was hired seemed to me to be less qualified. Without further feedback in the email I received, I was left to wonder if I was not successful because of other reasons, including my ethnic background. From time to time, other memories stored in the corner of my brain would start to emerge: the moment when I was one of three Asians who had to wait at customs before our visas could be checked, while a 20-meter-long queue of Europeans were processed. I can also recall the feeling of being ignored by a member of staff responsible for providing service to all students on campus — irrespective of their backgrounds.

## **Attitude**

Attitude may be another issue. In academia, BAME students are facing higher fees (due to the higher fees charged to international students) and fewer scholarships than the majority ethnic group (Lynam et al., 2019). In general, the research bursary for BAME students is significantly less than for other students (Lynam et al., 2019). I have lost count of how many times I have heard stories about how a PhD student from BAME background got accepted by a conference yet did not have the money to go. Perhaps people think that Asian students, who have already gained the reputation of being submissive or obedient, would not even notice that they are treated in a different way. Every now and then, I receive marketing emails asking me to attend focus groups to tell the university’s marketing team what to say in advertising to attract more Chinese students. Every time I think: “Why not treat us the same as everybody else? Then we could attract students by positive word of mouth.” As such, inclusivity and equality should start by seeing BAME groups in the same way as other students.

Although current research shows that BAME people are more likely to be mistreated in professional places (see, for example, Hasan, 2021), can they find belongingness through other aspects of campus life? How about through making friends with the locals? Sounds like a good idea, right? Actually, one of my biggest reasons for choosing the UK instead of the USA is my love of British culture. I am a big fan of The Beatles and Britpop. My favorite band, Suede, was formed in London in the late eighties. Truly, I have been excited to see everything in the place I

dreamed of: the music, the pubs, the theaters, and, most importantly, the people. After spending days and nights in the library, I decided to step out and give it a try.

Immediately, I noticed that students from the majority ethnic groups were not too keen to initiate conversations with me, someone from a BAME group. They nodded and said hello and expected me to do the same. I learned that “how are you doing?” is an expression that implies a response of “I am doing great, thank you.” Everyone is in their own inner world and may not be too keen on exploring others’. However, I did see that more effort was made when it came to two white students. This is reflected in current research, which found cultural stereotyping and perceptions of different cultures are preventing BAME students from connecting to the majority ethnic groups (Todman, 2020). I am tired of being the one who always initiates conversations, trying to demonstrate my approachability. In fact, sometimes the efforts could be seen as ‘too flattering’ and be looked down upon.

I remember once when a conversation went wrong. That day, in a postgraduate research community space, where PhD students from different disciplines are supposed to have coffee and chat with each other, a local girl was standing by me taking coffee from the machine. While waiting, I asked: “Fuel yourself?” She replied, “Yeah.” I continued: “I like your mug. I am Jin, by the way.” Instead of a standard response like “nice to meet you,” she looked at me with a wary face, glanced me up and down, and then turned away with one hand covering her mug. Left a little humiliated and confused, I was thinking, “did she worry that I might want her mug?” For a while, I was trying to figure out what went wrong during that conversation. It could be just her personality—it does not represent everyone, and it does not stop me loving British culture. However, I hope this gives you at least a rough idea of how hard it is to demonstrate approachability and to build up connections as an Asian student. It involves risks and fear.

## **What To Do?**

Time goes by, but memories are still fresh. My experience is only one piece of evidence. Looking forward, I anticipate that all gaps can be narrowed, in spite of the current inequities within the academic hierarchy, policymaking and its applications, and cultural stereotyping. Perhaps, to overcome these obstacles, a university can give more instructions on policy applications, introduce more employees from BAME groups, and organize more activities so that different cultures can be understood. The greatness of human beings lies in their adaptability. Perceptions can be shifted; academic structures can be improved. With new generations of students rightly demanding equality in operations from their institutions, I hope awareness can be raised as soon as possible.

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