



Minoritised ethnic students' perceived quality of their UK higher education experience

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**Minoritised ethnic students' perceived quality of
their UK higher education experience**

Micaela Raffuzzi

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of Sheffield Hallam University for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2025

Candidate Declaration

I hereby declare that:

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ER43256154	Minoritised ethnic students' perceived quality of their UK higher education experience	13/12/2022	18/04/23 & 22/04/25

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Abstract

Amidst ongoing globalisation and marketisation of UK higher education (HE), student satisfaction and service quality (SQ) have become central concerns for higher education institutions (HEIs) seeking to attract new and retain existing students. However, the generally lower overall satisfaction of minoritised ethnic (ME) students with their university experience is of concern to HEIs as it is thought to be a contributing factor for the awarding gap and lower rates of continuation and progression of ME students in comparison to their White peers (Neves & Hillman, 2019; NUS, 2011).

Previous research has explored ME students' university experience in the context of student engagement, success and retention. However, this study focuses on ME students' university experience in relation to perceived service quality (SQ) and student satisfaction in HE, thus, addressing the lack of empirical research in this area. Adopting a pragmatic philosophy and abductive approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 ME students across English HEIs to facilitate an in-depth examination of their experiences at university and explore critical factors shaping their perceptions of SQ, to develop a multi-dimensional, hierarchical SQ in HE model. The study revealed that a sense of belonging is essential for a good university experience and influences ME students' SQ perceptions.

This SQ in HE model is the first to incorporate 'belonging' as a critical SQ dimension, addressing a significant gap in existing SQ models and scales. The framework, which is specifically designed to evaluate ME students' perceptions of SQ in HE (MESQHE), is grounded in ME students' own perspectives, encompasses belonging, interaction quality, physical environment quality and transformative quality. The study also developed a culturally sensitive SQ scale, offering a replicable methodology and a practical tool for HEIs to assess and enhance service provision for diverse student populations. By examining ME students' university experience through the lens of SQ and student satisfaction, the study advances understanding of how ethnicity influences perceptions of quality and satisfaction, contributing both theoretically and practically to inclusive HE practice.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

BAME	Black, Asian and minority ethnic
BME	Black and minority ethnic
CLT	Curriculum, learning and teaching
CEQ	Course Experience Questionnaire
CoP	Community of Practice
DBIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
DfE	Department for Education
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
EduQUAL model	Education Quality model
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEdPERF model	Higher Education Performance-only model
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HESQUAL model	Higher Educational Service Quality model
HiEdQUAL model	Higher Education Service Quality model
HiEduQUAL model	Higher Education Service Quality model
IAA	Impact Asymmetry Analysis
IPA	Importance Performance Analysis
IRPA	Impact Range Performance Analysis
ME	Minoritised Ethnic
MESQHE	Minoritised Ethnic Student Service Quality in Higher Education
n.d.	no date
NUS	National Union of Students UK
NSS	National Student Survey
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement

OfS	Office for Students
PHEd model	Performance-based Higher Education Service Quality model
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
SAC	Student-as-consumer
SDL	Service-dominant Logic
SERVPERF model	Service Performance-only model
SERVQUAL model	Service Quality model
SQ	Service Quality
SU	Student Union
TA	Thematic Analysis
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
TSR	Teacher-student-relationships
UK	United Kingdom
UKES	UK Engagement Survey
UREC	University Research Ethics Committee
US	United States
UUK	Universities UK
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

1 Introduction

1.1 Research context

Marketisation and globalisation, as well as major changes in the UK's higher education (HE) sector in the past two decades, have made HE more competitive and market driven (Bunce et al., 2017; Dashper et al., 2020; Tight, 2013). In 2010, restrictions on 'for-profit' private universities to enter the UK HE sector were relaxed, enabling new providers to compete with existing universities and arguably leading to greater choice and increased competition (Gunn, 2018). In 2012, public funding for undergraduate provision was removed and tuition fees increased, with most universities charging the maximum of £9,000 (Gunn, 2018). In 2015, to further increase competition, the government removed the cap on student numbers (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills [DBIS], 2016) allowing HE institutions (HEIs) to recruit as many full-time undergraduate students as they could attract (Hubble et al., 2016). Finally, in 2016, to link HE funding to quality of teaching rather than simply quantity of students (Department for Education [DfE], 2016) the UK government introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). This led to an increased focus on HEIs being more accountable to students for the fees they charge (Sutherland et al., 2018), making their ability to increase student fees dependent on meeting certain student satisfaction levels, retention levels and employment outcomes (DfE, 2016). The TEF aims "to raise the quality and status of teaching in higher education institutions" (Hubble et al., 2016, p. 10). It assesses excellence in teaching, and how HEIs ensure excellent outcomes for their students in terms of graduate-level employment or further study (Office for Students [OfS], 2020). Consequently, the literature suggests that HE is increasingly conceived as a service (Mazzarol, 1998; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Winter & Chapleo, 2017), with students as consumers (Bunce et al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2017), putting HEIs under increased pressure to provide high-quality undergraduate provision and achieve high student performance and satisfaction (Sutherland et al., 2019) in order to attract and retain students.

It is within this context, minoritised ethnic (ME) undergraduate students' lower overall satisfaction with their HE experience is an issue that HEIs need to address as research

suggests that it is a major contributory factor to the ethnicity awarding gap, to higher drop-out rates and to lower rates of progression to graduate employment or postgraduate study among ME students (Neves & Hillman, 2019; National Union of Students [NUS], 2011).

For a number of years, the terms BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) or BME (Black and minority ethnic) have been widely used in the UK, however these terms inappropriately homogenise diverse identities and backgrounds and involve a confusing combination of race, ethnicity and nationality whilst ignoring individual identity and experience (Queen Mary University London, n.d.). Therefore, more recently it has been recommended that the term 'minoritised ethnic' (or the similar term 'racially minoritised') is preferable on the grounds that it recognises that individuals have been minoritised through social processes of power and domination rather than naturally existing as minorities (The Law Society, 2025). It also better reflects the fact that ethnic groups that are minorities in the UK are majorities in the global population. However, care should be taken when using umbrella terms such as these. Users should be aware of the negative consequences of grouping all minoritised individuals together in this way, especially when there is significant diversity both between groups as well as within each group (The Law Society, 2025).

Although the proportion of ME students in HE has been steadily increasing over the last few years (Advance HE, 2022), there are still significant disparities between ME students and their White peers regarding continuation, degree classification and progression (OfS, 2018). For instance, Black students are almost one and a half times more likely to drop out than White or Asian students (Keohane & Petrie, 2017). As Figure 1.1 shows, continuation rates of ME students are consistently lower than those of White students. Indeed, continuation rates of Black students are consistently the lowest of all ethnicities and in 2021-22 the continuation rate for Black students was 5.2 percentage points lower than that for White students.

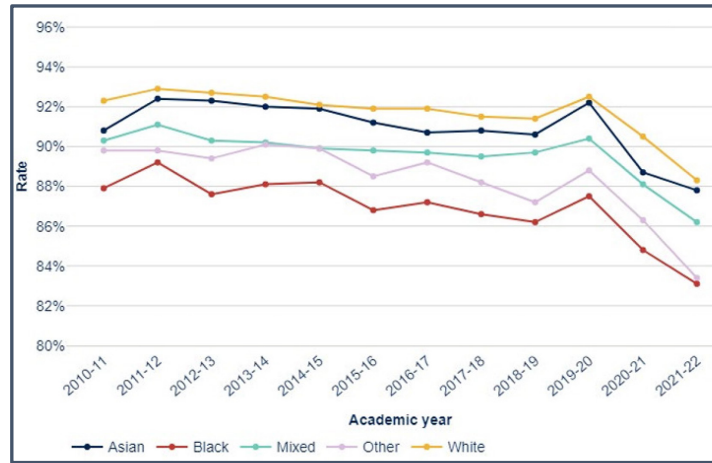


Figure 1.1: Continuation rates split by ethnicity from 2010-11 to 2021-22 (OfS, 2024)

There is also a significant difference in the proportions of ME students awarded a good (i.e., UK first or upper second class) undergraduate degree when compared to White students. This is referred to as the degree awarding gap. Figure 1.2 shows that for the year 2022-23, 81.1% of White graduates were awarded a good (1:1 or 2:1) degree – the highest percentage out of all ethnic groups, compared to only 58.7% of Black graduates who were the least likely out of all ethnic groups to get a good degree (OfS, 2024).

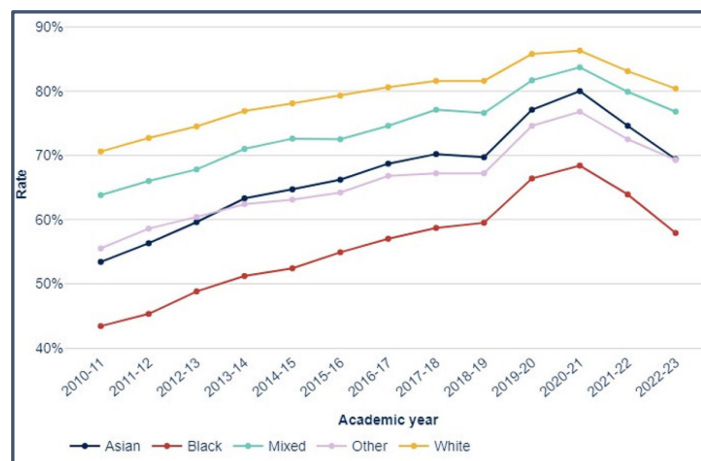


Figure 1.2: Attainment rates split by ethnicity from 2010-11 to 2022-23 (OfS, 2024)

Figure 1.3 demonstrates that although the awarding gap between Black and White students has narrowed from 27.0 pp in 2010-11, there was still a significant discrepancy of 17.4pp in 2020-21 (OfS, 2022).

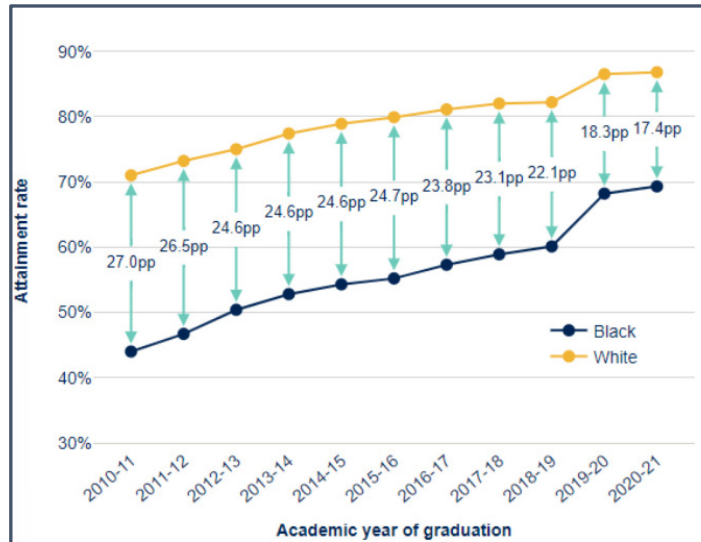


Figure 1.3: Percentage point gap between the proportions of White and Black students receiving a 1:1 or a 2:1 (OfS, 2022)

In relative proportion, the gap for first class degrees is even more striking. As illustrated in Figure 1.4 in 2020-21, White students were almost twice as likely to receive a first class degree (40.8%) compared to Black students (21%) (OfS, 2022). So, even though the gap in 1:1s and 2:1s combined has reduced, the gap for 1:1s alone has almost doubled from 11.5pp to 19.8pp between 2010-11 and 2020-21. This is because more students achieve 2:1s than 1:1s and a larger proportion of Black students achieved 2:1s than White students by 2.4 percentage points (Figure 1.4) (OfS, 2022).

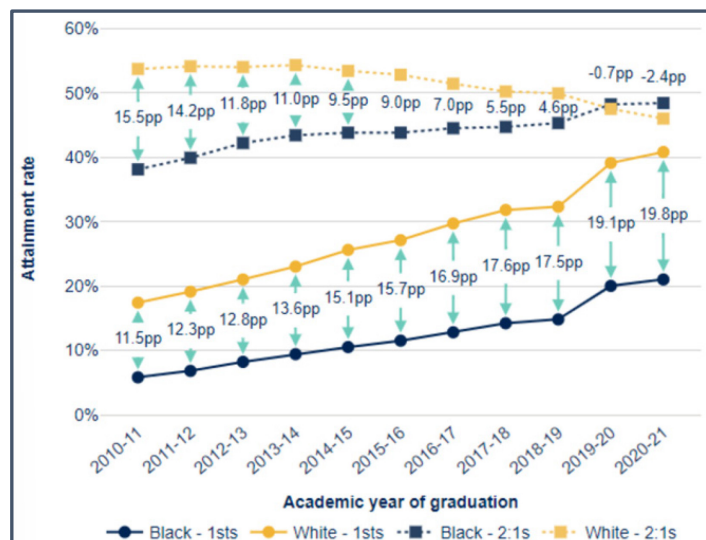


Figure 1.4: Percentage point gap between the proportions of White and Black students receiving a 1:1 or 2:1 degree (Source: OfS, 2022)

Regarding progression rates into higher-skilled employment or higher-level study (Figure 1.5), the degree awarding gap discrepancy appears to continue to affect ME students' lives beyond bachelor's level. This is because minimum entry requirements for graduate-level jobs and postgraduate courses are frequently 2:1 or above in an undergraduate degree, thus 73.4% of White students progressed to managerial or professional employment or higher-level study in 2021-22 compared with only 70.1% of Black students (OfS, 2024).

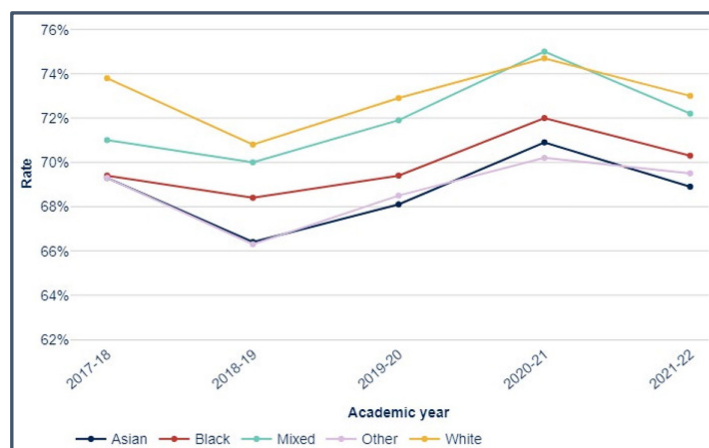


Figure 1.5: Progression rates into higher managerial or professional employment or higher-level study (Source: OfS, 2024)

These disparities are thought to be caused by the lower overall satisfaction of ME undergraduates with their academic experience (Neves & Hillman, 2019; NUS, 2011), which appears to relate specifically to two key aspects of their academic experience:

- (i.) *Lower satisfaction with teaching quality* (Neves & Hillman, 2019). ME students feel they are not being treated equally by lecturers, that there is a lack of fair and balanced teaching, assessment, and support; as such, they feel left out of discussions and debates or feel 'invisible' to lecturers and are not given the same level of attention and encouragement as White students (NUS, 2011).
- (ii.) *Lower satisfaction with curriculum content, design, and delivery* (Universities UK [UUK], 2019). ME students feel the curriculum does not reflect issues of diversity, equality, and discrimination, and as most courses are designed and taught by White lecturers, diverse backgrounds and views are not considered.

Consequently, ME perspectives and experiences are not represented in the curriculum delivery (NUS, 2011).

Therefore, the above suggests that ME students' lower overall satisfaction with their academic experience is an issue HEIs need to address urgently. However, the satisfaction and awarding gap of ME students is a complex issue with a variety of causal factors and so far, HEIs have made little progress in addressing ME students' lower overall satisfaction with their academic experience, and in reducing the satisfaction and awarding gaps. Reducing the awarding gap requires HEIs to critically reflect on current practices, perceptions and thinking in order to improve ME students' undergraduate experience (NUS, 2011). It is important for HEIs to understand ME students' needs and what specific factors influence ME students' perceptions of the quality and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their university experience and to what extent. Only by identifying what ME students' service quality (SQ) perceptions really are can HEIs provide a high quality service for ME students. Thus, this research aims to identify the key factors affecting ME students' perceptions of the quality of their HE experience in order to facilitate improvements in the experience of ME students in future and also develop a SQ framework and a SQ measurement scale to quantitatively measure their perceptions and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their HE experience in order to more clearly identify the key issues in existing provision.

1.2 Rationale for the research

Achieving high levels of SQ and student satisfaction are key issues for HEIs as high satisfaction rates have been linked to student loyalty, retention and achievement (Bell & Brooks, 2018). Thus, identifying factors affecting SQ is vital to keep students satisfied and retain them. However, although extant literature explores the importance of SQ and student satisfaction in a HE context to some extent, there is no agreement on how SQ should be defined or measured in HE, and a generally accepted model of SQ does not exist.

A limited number of HE specific SQ instruments have been developed, namely HEdPERF (Firdaus, 2006a), HiEduQUAL (Latif et al., 2019), EduQUAL (Mahapatra & Khan, 2007),

HESQUAL (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). However, despite an extensive search of the literature, no studies have been identified that have applied these SQ instruments for measuring SQ in the context of English HEIs, although one study applied a modified version of HEDPERF in the context of Scottish HE (Guo, 2018). This indicates a lack of application of these instruments in the UK in general and England, in particular. Moreover, there is no empirical research, to date, which has specifically examined ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction with their HE experience. Thus, there is a gap in the literature in this area, which this study aims to address.

1.3 Research questions, aim and objectives

This study will focus on the factors affecting ME students' perceptions of quality, whilst also considering how quality is conceptualised in HE. A SQ model of ME undergraduate students' higher education experience will be developed together with a scale to specifically measure ME students' satisfaction with relevant elements of their higher education experience to facilitate future empirical insight into SQ and satisfaction in HE from the ME students' perspective. Thus, this research will be addressing the gap in the SQ and student satisfaction research relating to ME students, whilst also providing HEIs with valuable information regarding how ME students evaluate the services provided, which can then be used by HEIs to identify key priorities for improvement of their provision.

Research questions

1. What are ME students' perceptions of their university experience?
2. What factors affect ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with, their university experience?
3. What are the primary dimensions of ME students' perceived SQ?

Research aim

To explore the quality of ME students' university experience through the lens of both education and SQ theories.

Research objectives

- 1) To explore ME students' perceptions of their university experience.
- 2) To identify factors affecting ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with, their university experience.
- 3) To determine the primary dimensions of SQ as perceived by ME students.
- 4) To develop a conceptual framework for evaluating ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their university experience.

The qualitative study explores ME students' perceptions of their university experience (Research objective 1) and the factors affecting their perceptions of quality of HE provision (Research objectives 2). Drawing on both the literature review and qualitative findings, the SQ dimensions most relevant to ME students are identified (Research objective 3). These insight then inform the development of a conceptual framework for evaluating ME students' SQ perceptions in HE (Research objective 4)

1.4 Structure of thesis

Chapter 1 Introduction

Chapter 1 provides the research context and the rationale for this study. It also presents the research aim and objectives.

Chapter 2 Literature review

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the pertinent literature to gain a better understanding of concepts and theories relevant to the study to identify

research gaps and how this research will contribute to knowledge. The conceptualisation of a service and its characteristics are discussed and HE as a service and the concepts of students-as-consumers or co-producers/co-creators are explored. Furthermore, conceptualisations of quality in a HE context and different stakeholder-relative views of quality in HE are discussed. In addition, pertinent HE and non-HE specific SQ models are evaluated and SQ dimensions that are relevant in a HE context are identified. The chapter concludes with a proposed conceptual framework for evaluating ME students' perceived SQ in HE, which is based on the literature review.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology for this study's primary research. First, the philosophical underpinning and the research philosophy for this study are discussed. Next, the research approach and research strategy are outlined. Following this, the data collection method, sampling strategy and data analysis method are explained. The chapter concludes with the consideration of potential ethical issues that could arise from the research.

Chapter 4 Findings

In this chapter the findings from the semi-structured interviews are presented. Participants' reasons for attending university, their feelings about their decision to attend and their views about their university experience are discussed. Additionally, the four main themes in relation to the factors that influence participants' university experience that emerged from the semi-structured interviews are also explored.

Chapter 5 Discussion of findings

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the findings of the primary research. The findings are compared with both the extant theory and findings from previous research to identify factors considered essential by ME students for a positive university experience with the purpose of developing a conceptual framework for evaluating ME students' perceived SQ in HE.

Chapter 6 Conclusions

Chapter 6 presents the conclusions of this study. First, an overview of the study is given and the key findings are summarised and related back to the research aim and objectives of the study. The chapter also considers the contributions to knowledge and practice of this research. Recommendations for improvement to HEIs' provisions to enhance ME students' university experience are also made. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, future research opportunities and some final thoughts.

2 Literature Review

This chapter presents a comprehensive review of the literature to provide the context to the thesis. The aim is to examine pertinent literature to gain a better understanding of concepts and theories relevant to the study to answer the research questions, meet the research objectives and identify research gaps and how this research will contribute to knowledge.

First, service is defined and the key characteristics of a service are explored. Then, the notion of HE as a service and the view of students-as-consumers will be examined. The concepts of SQ and customer satisfaction and how they differ from each other are also discussed. In addition, different conceptualisations of SQ (disconfirmation and performance-only) and pertinent SQ models that are based on these differing conceptualisations, such as SERVQUAL and SERVPERF, are explored to gain a better understanding of these concepts and examine their applicability for this research. Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical model, which is central to this study, is also examined. Furthermore, instruments for setting priorities for quality improvements, such as the Importance Performance Analysis (IPA) and Impact Range Performance Analysis (IPRA) and Impact Asymmetry Analysis (IAA) are also outlined. Then, different conceptualisations and stakeholder-related views of quality in HE as well as relevant learning theories are explored to better comprehend quality in a HE context and stakeholders' perceptions of quality. Thereafter, HE specific SQ models are discussed and common SQ attributes/dimensions in HE are examined to identify those dimensions that are likely to also affect ME students SQ perceptions of their university experience (Research Objective 3). The chapter concludes with a proposed conceptual framework linked to the methodology development in Chapter 3.

2.1 Service

Before discussing SQ, it is important to first define a service and explore its characteristics.

2.1.1 Definition of a service

Due to the diverse array of services, there are many definitions of 'service' in the existing literature spanning across a number of disciplines. However, often the focus is on activities, deeds, processes and interactions. For example, Berry (1980, p. 24) describes a service as "a deed, a performance, an effort". Likewise, Zeithaml et al. (2008, p. 4) view services as "... deeds, processes, and performances provided or co-produced by one entity or person for another entity or person." Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2011) believe that a service is a time-perishable intangible experience performed for a customer in the role of co-producer. Similarly, Lovelock and Wirtz (2016) consider a service as an economic activity offered by one party to another, typically without transfer of ownership, creating value from use of, or access to, labour, skills, and expertise, goods and facilities, and networks and systems.

According to Polyakova and Mirza (2015) services can be considered in three different ways: as a process, a solution to customer's problems, or as beneficial outcome for the customer. The view of service as process is supported by Lovelock (1991, p. 13), who defines services as "a process or performance rather than a thing." Equally, Grönroos (2001) argues that a service is a process with an outcome of partly simultaneous production and consumption processes.

The second perspective focuses on the customer and conceptualises a service as solution to customers' problems (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015). This view is supported by Grönroos (1990, p. 27) who defines a service as "an activity or series of activities of more or less intangible nature that normally, but not necessarily always, take place in interactions between the customer and service employee and/or physical resources or goods and/or systems of the service provider, which are provided as solutions to customer problems."

The final perspective is service as a beneficial outcome for the customer. This perspective is favoured by Vargo and Lusch (2004, p. 2) who define service as "... the application of specialized competencies (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself".

Similarly, Kotler and Armstrong (2017, p. 244) define it as “... an activity, benefit or satisfaction offered for sale that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything”.

Overall, the above literature suggests that a service involves activities, deeds or processes and represents a solution to a customer’s problems or a beneficial outcome for a customer. This indicates that it is essential that service providers meet customers’ needs during the service delivery. However, services have certain characteristics, which are cited by a number of authors (Berry, 1980; Zeithaml et al. 1985), which make them fundamentally different to products and which impact the management of their quality. These characteristics will be explored in more detail in the next section.

2.1.2 Characteristics of a service

The four unique characteristics of a service, which distinguish them from products, are intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability (Figure 2.1).

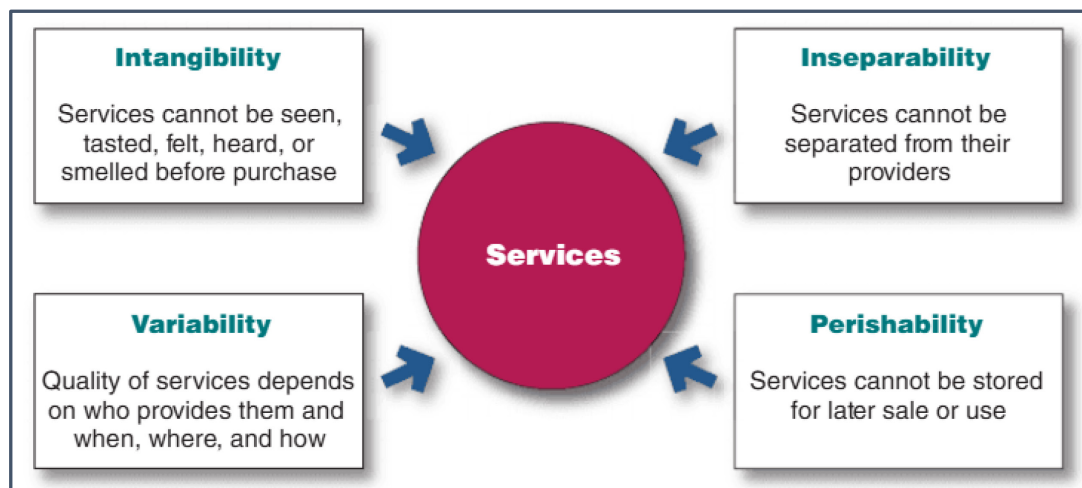


Figure 2.1: Characteristics of a service (Kotler & Armstrong, 2023, p. 261)

Intangibility

As previously stated, services are performances; thus they are intangible (Berry, 1980; Lovelock, 1981) and cannot be seen, touched or tasted. Therefore, customers cannot evaluate a service before purchase and a service cannot be tested in advance of sale to assure quality (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Furthermore, because services are

intangible, they cannot be simply communicated to customers, which makes it more difficult for customers to evaluate services effectively. Additionally, service providers may find it difficult to understand how consumers perceive their services and evaluate SQ (Zeithaml, 1981).

Inseparability

Another characteristic of services is inseparability of production and consumption, that is, services are produced and consumed simultaneously (Zeithaml et al., 1985).

Products are usually produced first, then sold and then consumed later. By contrast, most services are usually sold first, then produced and consumed simultaneously, meaning that in many cases the service provider and the customer have to be present during the production of the service (Berry, 1980). However, on many occasions it is not sufficient for the customer to simply be present, but rather they have to be actively involved in the service delivery process. Thus, Edvardsson et al. (2005) propose to focus on co-production and co-creation rather than on the product-focused and production-oriented view where the provider delivers a service and the customer simultaneously consumes it. Consequently, because of the involvement of the customer in the delivery process, the quality of most services is affected by both the service provider and the customer, i.e., the quality of a service not only depends on how well the service provider performs, but also on how well the customer performs. However, the involvement of the customer in the delivery of the service is an aspect over which the service provider may have little or no control, which can make managing SQ very difficult (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015). Moreover, because of inseparability of production and consumption, SQ cannot be checked before delivery, but instead has to be managed at the point of interaction between the consumer and the service provider during service delivery (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Thus, it is important that service providers endeavour to get the service right first time, and every time (Ghobadian et al., 1994).

Heterogeneity

Heterogeneity relates to the variability in delivery of services, that is, services can vary from service provider to service provider, from customer to customer, and even from one situation to another (Zeithaml et al., 1985). Thus, variability makes consistency of

services difficult. Because not only is it challenging to ensure consistent behaviour from different service employees, but it is also challenging to ensure consistent behaviour from the same service employee because a person's performance inherently varies from moment to moment (Knisely, 1979). Furthermore, just as no two services are the same, no two customers are exactly the same. Thus, a service being delivered at the same time to a group of customers can be perceived very differently by each of the customers and even the most homogeneous group of customers will have different perceptions of the same service (Kandampully & Solnet, 2019). Therefore, heterogeneity can result in variability of service delivery from one period to another and from consumer to consumer, which can make managing SQ very difficult (Ghobadian et al., 1994).

Perishability

The final characteristic of a service is perishability. Perishability means that a service cannot be stored for later use, resold, or returned (Kandampully & Solnet, 2019). As a service is only produced when needed by the customer, service production is determined by demand at any given time. However, service providers can find it difficult to synchronise supply and demand, in other words, sometimes there is too much demand and sometimes there is too little demand for a service (Zeithaml et al., 1985). Consequently, managing demand is particularly important in the production and delivery of services.

2.2 HE as a service

Marketisation and globalisation have made HE more competitive and market driven making HE increasingly conceived as a service. For example, Oldfield and Baron (2000, p. 86) state that due to the degree of person-to-person interaction, HE can be classified as a 'pure' service. Similarly, Winter and Chapleo (2017) argue that education is a service because it possesses the key characteristics of a service (intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity, perishability). That is to say, education is intangible, it cannot be touched or tasted, knowledge can only be understood and experienced (Gupta & Kaushik, 2018). Furthermore, teaching efforts are produced and consumed simultaneously, with both academic staff and student being part of the

teaching experience (Gruber et al., 2010). Besides, education is heterogeneous, each student has their own demands, needs and experiences (Gruber et al., 2010). Finally, services are perishable. For HE this means that any place on a course that is not filled represents income that is lost forever. Likewise, if a student cannot get a place on a course, they will go to another HEI for their studies and that income is also lost.

Mazzarol (1998) uses Lovelock's (1983) framework for classifying services to demonstrate that education is a service. Education consists of intangible actions that are directed at people's minds (Lovelock, 1983). It consists of a lengthy and formal 'membership' relationship, and a continuous service delivery (Lovelock, 1983). Although the level of customisations varies for education services, for example small tutorials and individual supervision are very customised, whilst lectures offer a relatively standardised experience, teaching staff do use their judgement and discretion to meet the students' needs (Mazzarol, 1998). The demand for education fluctuates relatively narrowly over time, however, the ability to meet this demand can be limited by availability of teaching staff and course numbers (Mazzarol, 1998). HEIs can have single or multiple outlets and traditionally students had to be physically present, although, modern technology has made it possible for educational services to be delivered remotely (Mazzarol, 1998).

However, even though HE can be classified as a service, Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) suggest that educational services do differ from other professional services in that they play a central role in students' lives and students need to actively contribute to their learning experience by being highly motivated and have the intellectual skills to achieve their goals. Therefore, educational success depends on the efforts of both students and staff, and unlike many other services, students must be willing to take responsibility for their own education (Svensson & Wood, 2007).

2.3 Students-as-consumers or co-producers/co-creators

Understanding the students' role in HE is critical to evaluate SQ and student satisfaction. In recent years, marketisation and increased competition of HEIs as well as the inclusion of students and universities under the Consumer Rights Act 2015 has

led to HE increasingly been conceived of as a service and students repositioned from *learners* to *consumers* (Bunce et al., 2017). Tomlinson (2017) argues that this view of student-as-consumer (SAC) has changed the way students perceive their relationship with their HEIs, representing a shift in power from providers (HEIs) to consumers (students) who expect services to be delivered in ways matching their demand. A view that is shared by Bunce et al. (2017) who suggest that students who view themselves as consumers are less likely to be involved in their education and instead, are more likely to believe that they are entitled to receive positive academic outcomes in exchange for their fees. From this perspective, a consumer-oriented mindset among students leads to a shift away from intellectual engagement with content matter toward a more instrumental focus on meeting the requirements to pass or obtain the degree classification perceived as advantageous for future employment (Williams, 2013). Many students see getting a 'good degree' primarily as a means for becoming more employable and finding a 'professional', well paid job, thus they perceive little value in the notion that through immersing themselves in their subject they might change as a person (Molesworth et al., 2009). Consequently, the SAC approach encourages surface learning with students as passive recipients of what HEIs have to offer instead of active, engaged, and self-directed individuals (Tight, 2013), which has negative consequences for their academic achievement (Bunce et al., 2017).

Conversely, a study by Saunders (2015) found that students do not have a customer orientation towards their education, and Koris et al. (2015) found that students do not believe that payment of tuition fees guarantees getting a degree, but that it is their responsibility to put in the effort to ensure they get the degree they desire. Mark (2013) argues that the belief that the SAC approach is damaging to the learning process is based on an outdated understanding of producer-consumer relationships, whereby the producer creates value, and the consumer is a passive recipient of the service. However, the more recent notion of value co-creation, based on Vargo and Lusch's (2004) 'service-dominant' logic (SDL), sees customers as active participants and co-producers of the service (Dollinger et al., 2018; Hill, 1995; Polyakova & Mirza, 2015). Therefore, value is created in the interaction process between company and customer rather than just in the provision of the service (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015). Thus, the customer's active participation in the co-creation of a service impacts on the

experience of that service and unless they perform their role as co-producer effectively, they will not realise the desired outcome (Kotze & du Plessis, 2003). Within the HE context, the core service is the learning experience that is co-created by both students and staff, thus requires accountability by both parties (Ng & Forbes, 2009). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) argue that students are not passive recipients of education, but 'co-produce' their education through their participation in learning activities. Thus, students contribute to their own satisfaction, quality and value of their learning experience and unless they perform their role effectively, they cannot achieve the desired outcome (Bitner et al., 1997). In other words, if students do not put in the effort, they cannot get the desired results regardless of staff's performance (Diaz-Mendez & Gummesson, 2012).

Nevertheless, DeShields et al. (2005) argue that although some scholars are opposed to the notion of SAC, it is undeniable that without students, HEIs would have no 'customers' to serve. Therefore, Douglas et al. (2006) suggest that when evaluating quality in HE, priority should be given to students' experiences and how to improve them. Consequently, HEIs need to develop strategies to improve their services in order to meet students' needs and wants.

2.4 SQ and customer satisfaction

As previously mentioned, one of the major challenges is to define and measure SQ. Therefore, the following sections will examine different SQ conceptualisations and will explore a variety of SQ models.

Literature suggests SQ and customer satisfaction play a vital role in creating a company's competitive advantage (Kandampully & Solnet, 2015). Organisations must understand customers' experiences and perceptions of the quality of services provided in order to achieve customer satisfaction, and thus, retain existing customers and attract new ones (Ghotbabadi et al., 2015).

The concept of SQ has its origin in the product quality and customer satisfaction literature (Kandampully & Solnet, 2015). However, whilst the 'quality movement' in

goods manufacturing gained huge momentum after World War II, for the service sector 'quality' only started to be discussed in the literature in the 1980s (Kandampully & Solnet, 2015). However, initially there was little discussion of an overall philosophy, or of concepts or management models of SQ. As researchers attempted to develop an appropriate philosophy of SQ it became apparent that due to the characteristics of services (inseparability, heterogeneity, intangibility and perishability), that are not generally found in physical products (Kandampully & Solnet, 2015), there are significant differences between them. Thus, SQ is not the same as product quality and consequently, the management of SQ differs from the management of product quality. As such, many of the quality strategies applied to physical products are inappropriate for services (Kandampully & Solnet, 2015). Therefore, instead of using quality concepts from goods manufacturing, researchers developed new concepts of SQ, which emphasise consumer behaviour, expectations and satisfaction (Kandampully & Solnet, 2015).

Grönroos' (1984) customer-oriented construct of perceived SQ proposes looking at SQ from the customer's perspective (i.e., researching SQ as perceived by the users). It is based on the notion that a customer's evaluation of the quality of a service is based on their subjective perception of the experience and thus, is defined by the customer (Kandampully & Solnet, 2015). However, despite the customer-oriented view of perceived SQ being widely accepted, SQ remains an elusive construct. To date a commonly accepted definition of SQ does not exist (Rasheed & Rashid, 2024). Consequently, there is also no agreement on an objective measurement for SQ, which has led to the development of a variety of different measurement scales to evaluate customer perceptions of SQ (Bartolo & Tinmaz, 2024).

Furthermore, there is also disagreement in the literature about the difference between *SQ* and *customer satisfaction*. Whilst SQ and customer satisfaction are related concepts, they are distinctly different. Parasuraman et al. (1988, p. 15) argue that SQ is "a form of attitude related but not equivalent to satisfaction". Similarly, Zeithaml et al. (2008) also view SQ and customer satisfaction as two fundamentally different concepts. Clemes et al. (2008) argue that the problem with distinguishing between these two concepts is that SQ and customer satisfaction have not been clearly defined

and differentiated. Nonetheless, there appears to be consensus that SQ is an attitude or overall judgement of a service's superiority (Munteanu et al., 2015). For example, Zeithaml (1987) views SQ as a consumer's judgement about an entity's overall excellence or superiority. Equally, Parasuraman et al. (1988) view perceived SQ as a global judgement, or attitude, relating to the superiority of a service. However, the exact nature of this attitude remains unclear (Munteanu et al., 2015). Parasuraman et al. (1988) suggest that it derives from a customer's comparison of service performance with their expectations. Conversely, Cronin and Taylor (1992) argue that it stems from customers' comparisons with ideal standards or from their perceptions of performance alone. Regardless of the nature of the attitude, i.e., expectations-performance comparison or performance-only evaluation, SQ is viewed as a global assessment, whereas customer satisfaction is a transaction-specific assessment (Parasuraman et al., 1994). SQ is the cumulative evaluation of multiple transactions over time (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Similarly, Lazibat et al. (2014) suggest that SQ is related to attitudes and is more enduring, whilst customer satisfaction is related to the consumption process and is transitional. Equally, Cronin and Taylor (1994, p. 126) argue that "SQ is a long-term attitude, whereas customer satisfaction is a transitory judgement made on the basis of a specific service encounter". Similarly, Oliver (1980) believes that satisfaction is the pleasurable consumption-related fulfilment of a need or desire by a product, service or experience and is always related to a transaction. Another difference between SQ and customer satisfaction is that other aspects such as convenience, price or availability may enhance satisfaction, but do not influence customers' perception of SQ (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). This view is further supported by Holdford and Reinders (2001) who propose that SQ focuses only on aspects of quality, whilst satisfaction can also be influenced by non-quality aspects such as price.

There is also disagreement whether SQ is an antecedent of customer satisfaction (Bitner, 1990; Hill, 1995) or vice versa (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Duque, 2014; Nadiri et al., 2009; Sultan & Wong, 2010). Parasuraman et al. (1988) suggest that customer satisfaction leads to perceived SQ, i.e., SQ results from the combination of satisfaction with separate incidents (Parasuraman et al., 1985). This means that, if a customer is satisfied with the service they received, they will perceive it to be of high quality. Therefore, customer satisfaction is an antecedent of SQ. However, more recently the

contrasting view, that SQ is an antecedent to customer satisfaction, seems to have been favoured (Dabholkar et al., 2000). Consequently, Zeithaml et al. (2008) propose that SQ is a component of customer satisfaction. Likewise, Brady et al. (2002) and Cronin et al. (2000) found that SQ is a strong determinant of customer satisfaction. Similarly, Cronin and Taylor (1992) contend that SQ is an antecedent of satisfaction, and that the direction of causality is from SQ to satisfaction. In other words, if a customer perceives the service to be of high quality, then they will be satisfied with the service. The belief that perceived SQ is an antecedent to satisfaction can also be found in the HE literature (Browne et al., 1998; Guolla, 1999).

2.5 SQ models

As a result of these different views, different, and somewhat disparate, conceptualisations of SQ have emerged. For example, Grönroos (1984) views SQ as the result of the comparison of *expected* to *perceived* service, leading to customer satisfaction when perceived service meets, or exceeds, expected service. Whereas Cronin and Taylor (1992) suggest that SQ is based on evaluating service performance only. Consequently, based on these different conceptualisations of SQ, two conceptually different streams of SQ models have emerged – the disconfirmation models (expectation-performance comparison) and the performance-only evaluation (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015).

2.5.1 Disconfirmation models

The first conceptualisations of SQ are based on Oliver's (1980) disconfirmation paradigm and conceptualise a customer's evaluation of overall SQ as the gap between perceived service and expected service (Ghotbabadi et al., 2015). Consumers compare their prior expectations of a service with the actual or perceived performance of that service, whereby confirmation results when the perceived performance meets expectations, and disconfirmation results when the perceived performance either does not meet expectations (negative disconfirmation) or exceeds expectations (positive disconfirmation) (Kandampully & Solnet, 2015). If the service performance does not

meet the customer's expectations, SQ is perceived as poor, which can lead to customer dissatisfaction (Bartolo & Tinmaz, 2024).

One of the first attempts to measure SQ based on the disconfirmation paradigm was Grönroos' (1984) perceived SQ model, also known as the Nordic model (Figure 2.2). Grönroos believed that for a service organisation to be successful it needs to understand the customers' perceptions of the service(s) provided. The model distinguishes two SQ dimensions: technical (outcome) quality and functional (process) quality. Technical quality is the result of what the customers will receive from their interaction with the service provider, whereas functional quality relates to how the service is delivered (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015). Additionally, Grönroos (1984) argues that the image of the company, i.e., the customers' view of the company or brand, influences customers' expectations, and thus affects perceived SQ. Customers' view of the company is the result of their perceptions of the service; therefore, a company's image is made up of the technical and functional quality (Grönroos, 1984). However, the reason why Grönroos' (1984) model was not utilised by empirical studies on SQ is because it lacks operationalisation, i.e., it does not offer a practical measurement tool (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015).

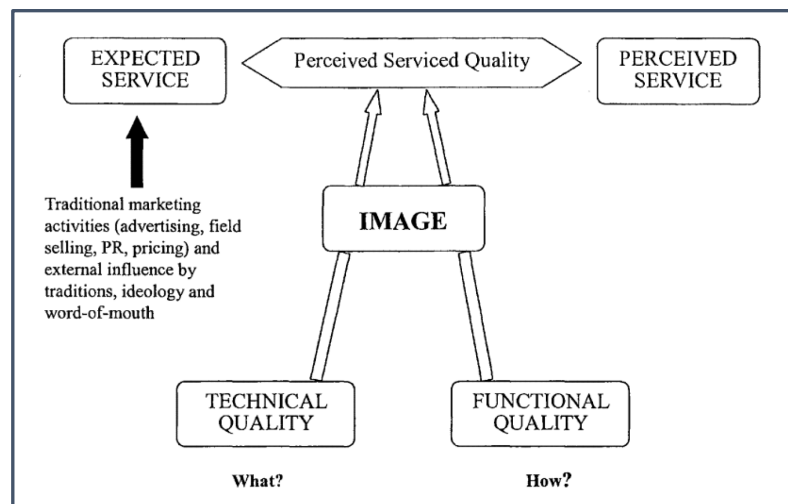


Figure 2.2: Perceived SQ model (Grönroos, 1984, p. 40)

Rust and Oliver (1994) developed the three-component model (Figure 2.3), which further refined Grönroos (1984) perceived SQ model (Figure 2.2). Rust and Oliver's (1994) model consists of the service product, the service delivery, and a third

dimension of SQ, the service environment. The service product encompasses the outcome of the service, i.e., *what* the customer receives as a result of the service (technical quality) and also the customer's perception of the service (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015). Service delivery relates to *how* consumers receive the service (functional quality) and thus, encompasses any events that occur during the service act itself (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015). The service environment is the environment in which the service takes place. However, a significant limitation for the application of Rust and Oliver's (1994) model is that they did not test their conceptualisation. Nonetheless, Brady and Cronin (2001) suggest that support for similar models has been found by McDougall and Lavesque (1994) in retail banking and by McAlexander et al. (1994) in health care. Even though there is no evidence for application of the model in its original form, the three-component conceptualisation of SQ led to enhancements of further models and a deeper theoretical understanding of the SQ concept (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015).

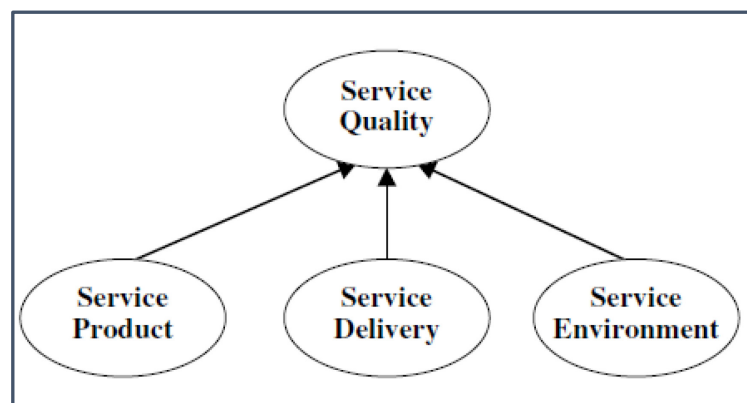


Figure 2.3: Three-component model (Rust and Oliver, 1994)

Another instrument for measuring SQ based on the disconfirmation paradigm is SERVQUAL (Figure 2.4), also often referred to as the American model, developed by Parasuraman et al. (1985). SERVQUAL is a multifactorial instrument comprising five generic dimensions for measuring SQ: reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance, and tangibles (Bartolo & Tinmaz, 2024). The SERVQUAL scale consists of two sections each containing the same 22 questions (items), the first section relates to customer expectations, the second section to customer perceptions (Nadiri et al., 2009).

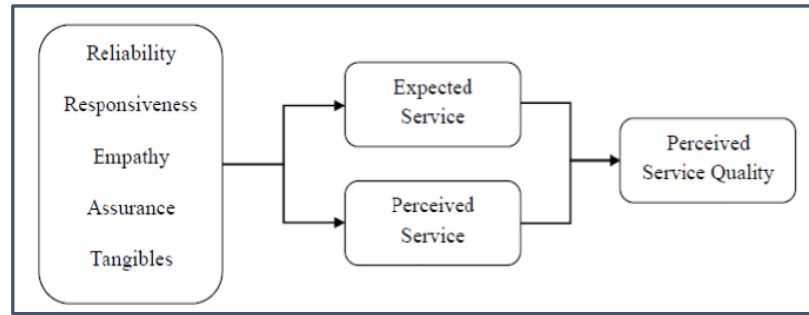


Figure 2.4: Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) SERVQUAL model (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015, p. 66)

However, although SERVQUAL is one of the most widely used instruments to measure SQ and has been used for a variety of services, including HE (Cuthbert, 1996; O'Neill, 2003; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Sahney et al., 2004), it has received considerable criticism. For instance, its reliability and applicability have been questioned as several studies, including those in a HE context, have been unable to replicate the five-factor structure of the SERVQUAL scale (Cuthbert, 1996). Indeed, Cuthbert (1996) goes on to conclude that the application of SERVQUAL to the HE context is not very successful. Additionally, validity problems arise from using customer expectations to evaluate SQ, that is, the lack of experience with a service may lead to tentative and uncertain expectations making them unsuitable as a standard to judge performance against (Fallon & Schofield, 2004). Expectations may also change over time and according to customers' experiences and consumption situations (Nadiri et al., 2009). Moreover, as it is impractical to measure expectations before the service is experienced, expectations are often recorded retrospectively, which is problematic as they may have been influenced by the actual service delivery (Palmer, 2011). Despite these debates, SERVQUAL remains one of the most widely accepted and used scale to measure SQ (Bartolo & Tinmaz, 2024). However, given the problems related to attempting to capture students' expectations, Oldfield and Baron (2000) suggest that a performance-only approach is more suitable for HE.

2.5.2 Performance-only models

In contrast to the disconfirmation models, the second stream of SQ models, i.e., performance-only models, is based on the notion that a customer's evaluation of continuously provided services is based solely on performance. For example, Cronin and Taylor (1992) question the validity of the disconfirmation paradigm, i.e., whether

customers evaluate SQ by comparing expectations with perceptions and propose that SQ is influenced only by perceptions of the service performance (Nadiri et al., 2009). Thus, they developed SERVPERF (Figure 2.5), which uses the same quality dimensions as SERVQUAL, i.e., reliability, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and tangibles, but uses a 'performance-only' measure of SQ (Cronin & Taylor, 1992). Consequently, as customers' expectations have a tendency to be consistently high, SERVPERF measures SQ by removing expectation items and focusing on measuring performance items only, thereby halving the number of items that need to be measured from 44 items to 22 items compared to SERVQUAL, making it easier to use (Bartolo & Tinmaz, 2024). Furthermore, Cronin and Taylor (1992) found that a performance-only measure outperforms SERVQUAL and explains more of the variance in an overall measure of SQ than the 'expectations minus performance' model (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Oliver, 1980).

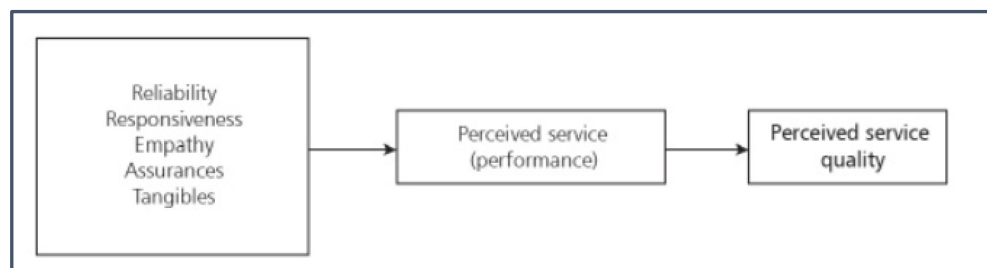


Figure 2.5: Cronin & Taylor's (1992) SERVPERF model (Polyakova & Mirza, 2015, p. 67)

2.5.3 Hierarchical models

Other SQ models have expanded the SQ concept vertically based on the hierarchical conceptualisation of SQ by Dabholkar et al. (1996) who argue that customers' overall perception of SQ is not only multi-dimensional, but also multi-level. Carman (1990) argues that customers tend to break SQ dimensions that are particularly important to them into various sub-dimensions. That is, customers' SQ perceptions are based on an evaluation of performance at multiple levels, and these evaluations are then combined to form their overall SQ perception of an organisation's performance (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Therefore, a hierarchical structure is better able to account for the complexity of human perceptions (Dabholkar et al., 1996). Consequently, Brady and Cronin (2001) put forward a hierarchical model of perceived SQ (Figure 2.6), which adopted Rust and Oliver's (1994) view that a customer's overall perception of SQ is

based on their evaluation of three dimensions of the service encounter: (1) the interaction between the customer and the service provider (functional quality), (2) the service environment, and (3) the outcome of the service (technical quality). Brady and Cronin (2001) termed these primary dimensions interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality. Each primary dimension has three sub-dimensions: attitude, behaviour and expertise of staff (interaction quality); ambient conditions, facility design and social factors (physical environment quality); waiting time, tangibles and valence (outcome quality) (Brady & Cronin, 2001). For each of these sub-dimensions the quality received by the customer must be perceived to be reliable, responsive and empathetic. Customers base their evaluation of SQ on their perceptions of an organisation's performance in each of the three primary dimensions, which in turn are evaluated based on the three corresponding sub-dimensions, the results are then combined to form the customers' overall perception of SQ (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Other studies have also found empirical support for a hierarchical structure of perceived SQ (Clemes et al., 2008; Liu, 2005). The relationship between these dimensions is represented in Figure 2.6 below.

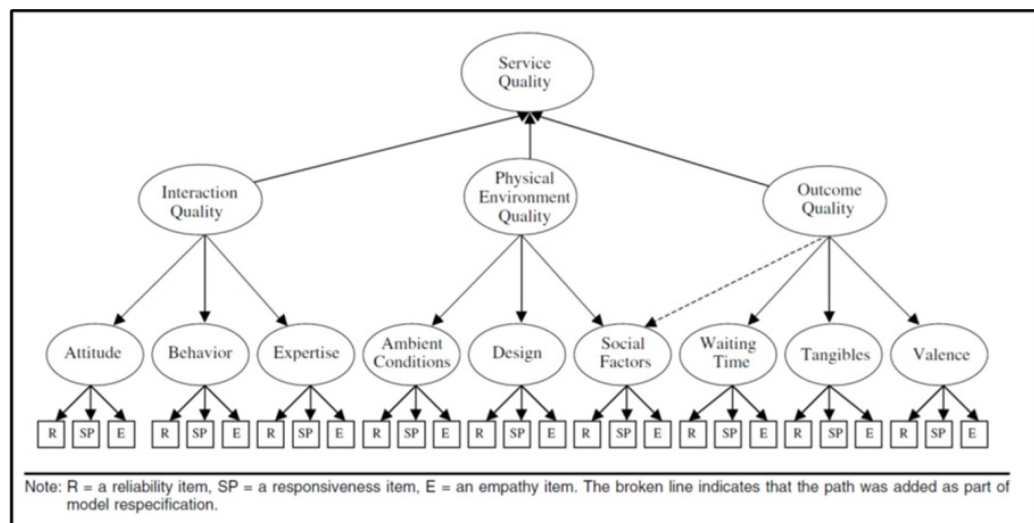


Figure 2.6: Hierarchical and multi-dimensional model (Brady & Cronin, 2001, p. 37)

2.6 Setting priorities for improvements

The literature suggests that the provision of high-quality services is critical for organisations to meet or exceed their customers' needs. Thus, it is essential to accurately measure customer experiences and perceptions and use the insights gained

as the basis for appropriate quality improvements (Jonsson Kvist & Klefsjö, 2006). Therefore, service improvements can only be effective and efficient if appropriate service attributes for improvement are selected, because only if appropriate priorities are set can overall SQ improve (Mikulić & Prebežac, 2008).

2.6.1 Factor theory of satisfaction

Historically overall customer satisfaction has been conceptualised as a function of satisfaction and dissatisfaction at an attribute level (that is, different components of a service) (Thuy & Thao, 2019). Thus, a *linear* and *symmetric* relationship between attribute-level performance and overall satisfaction is assumed, i.e., increased/decreased attribute performance leads to proportionally increased/decreased satisfaction (Busacca & Padula, 2005). Satisfaction and dissatisfaction are therefore seen as two sides of the same coin, in other words, the opposite of satisfaction is dissatisfaction. However, an increasing number of studies have challenged this view and have suggested that some service attributes can lead to satisfaction, but do not lead to dissatisfaction and vice versa (Kano et al., 1984; Matzler et al., 1996; Mittal et al., 1998). Thus, it is possible to suggest that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not simply dichotomous extremes on one continuum, but rather more complex where the opposite of satisfaction is, in fact, no satisfaction, and the opposite of dissatisfaction is no dissatisfaction (Thuy & Thao, 2019). Therefore, the relationship between attribute-level performance and overall customer satisfaction is believed to be non-linear (each additional one-unit increase in an input has a smaller impact than the preceding one-unit increase), and asymmetric (not all service attributes impact equally on overall customer satisfaction) (Anderson & Mittal, 2000).

Kano et al.'s (1984) 'three factor theory of customer satisfaction' (Figure 2.7) identifies three categories of SQ attributes with different impacts on overall customer satisfaction. '*Dissatisfiers*' (basic/must-be factors) represent minimum requirements that lead to dissatisfaction if not fulfilled, but do not lead to satisfaction if fulfilled (Matzler & Sauerwein, 2002). '*Satisfiers*' (excitement factors) increase customer satisfaction if fulfilled, however, do not lead to dissatisfaction if not fulfilled (Matzler et al., 2003), these attributes are not expected, but add value (Back & Lee, 2015).

'Hybrids' (performance factors) are attributes that lead to satisfaction if delivered and dissatisfaction if not delivered, or delivered poorly (Füller et al., 2006).

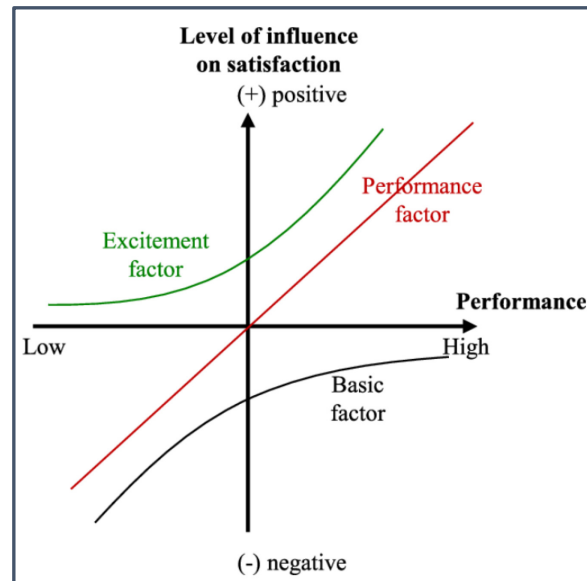


Figure 2.7: Kano et al.'s (1984) Three factor theory of customer satisfaction (Tuan et al., 2022, p 212)

2.6.2 Importance performance analysis (IPA)

The 'importance-performance analysis' (IPA), which was developed by Martilla and James in 1977, is a widely used instrument to set priorities for service improvements. It divides service attributes into four groups depending on their performance (high/low) and importance to the customer (high/low) (Matzler et al., 2003). Thus, it identifies those attributes that are most *important* to the customer and have the highest *impact* on customer satisfaction and those that have *low performance* and need to be *improved*. As can be seen in Figure 2.8, depending on an attribute's importance and performance levels, IPA provides four strategies for improvements. For attributes with high importance/high performance levels (Quadrant 1) organisations need to keep up the good work, i.e., efforts need to be maintained. Whereas for high importance/low performance attributes (Quadrant 2) immediate attention and improvement are required. Thus, organisations need to concentrate their efforts on these attributes. On the other hand, low importance/low performance attributes (Quadrant 3) are low priority, i.e., these attributes are not critical and no additional effort is required. Finally, for attributes with low importance/high

performance (Quadrant 4) performance might exceed what is necessary, indicating a ‘possible overkill’ of effort. Thus, efforts committed to these attributes would be better employed elsewhere (Matzler et al., 2003).

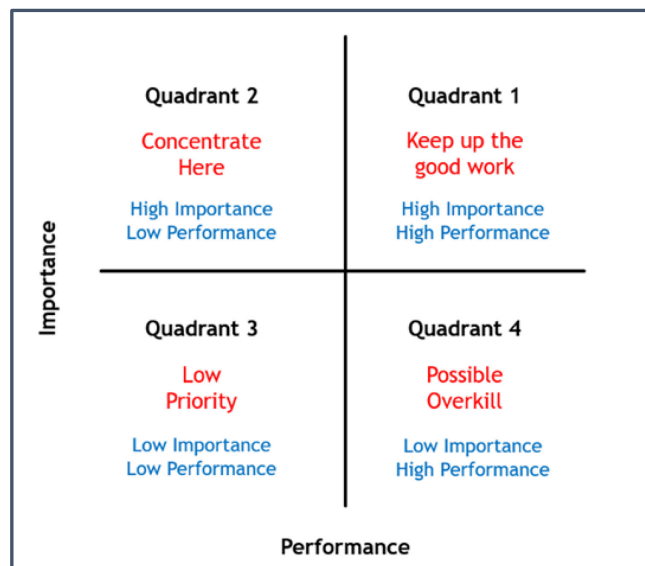


Figure 2.8: Importance-Performance Grid (adapted from Martilla & James, 1977)

However, there is much debate whether to include importance measures as this makes the statistical analysis and the interpretation of the results more complicated (Oh & Parks, 1997). Additionally, the asymmetric and non-linear relationship between attribute-level performance and overall customer satisfaction that IPA assumes has also called its applicability into question (Matzler et al., 2003).

2.6.3 Impact Range Performance Analysis (IRPA) and Impact Asymmetry Analysis (IAA)

However, due to above outlined shortcomings of IPA, Mikulić and Prebežac (2008) proposed a revised approach that assesses the relative impact of an individual service attribute and its potential to cause satisfaction/dissatisfaction rather than its importance. The approach comprises two methods - an Impact Range Performance Analysis (IRPA), which measures the range of an attribute’s impact on overall customer satisfaction, rather than its importance and an Impact Asymmetry Analysis (IAA) to analyse the asymmetric impact of service attributes in creating customer satisfaction (Mikulić & Prebežac, 2008).

However, although the asymmetric and non-linear relationships between service attributes and customer satisfaction have been explored by a number of studies for a variety of services, such as airport services (Mikulić & Prebežac, 2008), casinos (Back & Lee, 2015), hiking destinations (Oh et al., 2019), ecotourism destinations (Thuy & Thao, 2019) there is only one study to date by Mikulic et al. (2015) relating to the HE context. Mikulic et al. (2015) applied IRPA and IAA to assess which lecturer and course characteristics significantly influence overall student satisfaction in a Croatia HE setting. The purpose of Mikulic et al.'s (2015) study was to identify which characteristics have the strongest influence on student satisfaction and which characteristics have the largest potential to cause satisfaction ('satisfiers') and which ones have the largest potential to cause dissatisfaction ('dissatisfiers').

2.7 Quality in HE

Before attempting to examine SQ in HE and student satisfaction it is necessary to consider how quality is conceptualised in HE to account for the fact that educational services differ from other professional services.

2.7.1 Conceptualisations of quality in HE

Quality in HE is a value-laden, multifaceted, and complex concept that is difficult to define and conceptualise in any meaningful way (Harvey & Green, 1993; Law, 2010). One argument for the lack of consensus is that quality is a dynamic concept that changes in the context of a larger educational, economic, political and social landscape (Schindler et al., 2015). Other literature suggest that the definition of quality in HE is stakeholder-relative (Harvey & Green, 1993; Law, 2010, Tam, 2001; Voss et al., 2010), given the many diverse stakeholders in HE, such as students, teaching and non-teaching staff, management of HEIs, government, employers, professional bodies. Each of these stakeholders have different perspectives of what constitutes quality, influenced by their own interests and on differing views of the purpose of HE (Schindler et al., 2015; Tam, 2001). Thus, if the purpose of HE is believed to be the production of highly qualified employees, then graduates are seen as 'products' and their career prospects and earnings are seen as indicators of quality (Barnett, 1994).

On the other hand, if the perspective is that the purpose of HE is to increase the intellectual maturity and personal growth of students then the concept of quality in HE is that of 'quality as transformation' (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996).

Indeed, Harvey and Green (1993) suggest that there are five conceptualisations of quality in HE:

(i.) Quality as '*exceptional*' has three variations:

- Firstly, quality as something distinctive or special, which implies exclusivity (Harvey and Knight, 1996; Jungblut et al., 2015). Quality is therefore self-evident and there is no need for assessment because distinctiveness and exclusivity of education are a sign of quality in itself (Harvey and Knight, 1996).
- Secondly, quality as excellence and exceeding high standards. Excelling in input and output (Jungblut et al., 2015).
- Thirdly, quality as meeting required minimum standards (such as league tables and degree classifications), whereby the higher the standards that are met, the higher the quality (Harvey and Knight, 1996).

(ii.) Quality as '*perfection*' (or consistency) focuses on processes and their specifications and is related to the two concepts of 'zero defects' and 'getting things right first time' (Law, 2010). 'Zero defects' is concerned with conforming to a particular specification and emphasises consistency and reliability, whereby the absence of defects signifies 'perfection' (Jungblut et al., 2015). The concept of 'zero defects' also focuses on prevention rather than inspection, i.e., ensuring at each stage that defects do not occur rather than to rely on a final inspection to identify defects (Harvey and Knight, 1996). The concept of 'getting things right first time' is related to a 'quality culture' where everybody in the organisation is responsible for quality (Jungblut et al., 2015).

(iii.) Quality as '*fitness for purpose*' judges the quality of a product or service in terms of it doing the job for which it is designed, namely the extent to which its stated purpose is met (Law, 2010). However, it raises the questions of whose purpose and how fitness is assessed? If 'fitness for purpose' relates to fitting the customer specifications then customer requirements need to be identified and the outcome needs to meet these requirements (Harvey and Knight, 1996).

However, in the context of HE this poses two issues: (1) is the customer the service user (i.e., the students) or whoever is paying for the service (i.e., government, funding bodies, parents) and (2) the fact that the customer, namely the student, is not necessarily in a position to specify what is required (Harvey and Knight, 1996). However, to avoid these two issues an alternative view of fitness for purpose can be utilised, that of the HEI meeting its own objectives or 'mission'.

- (iv.) Quality as '*value for money*' views quality in relation to cost and puts an emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness (Jungblut et al., 2015). Quality is assessed in relation to return on investment or expenditure and is linked to accountability (Nicholson, 2011), i.e., accountability to the funders of HE. Notion of quality as value for money focuses on performance indicators for measuring quality.
- (v.) Quality as '*transformation*' focuses on the learner, whereby "students are not products, customers, consumers, service users or clients - they are participants" and "education is not a service *for* a customer, but an ongoing process of transformation *of* the participant" (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 7). Harvey and Knight (1996) argue that HE has to prepare students to be able to respond to a future which cannot now be imagined. Therefore, HE is about "producing people who can lead, who can produce new knowledge, who can see new problems and imagine new ways of approaching old problems" (Harvey & Knight, 1996, p 10). Hence, transformative quality in education comprises two elements: enhancing and empowering students. Enhancing the participant means to effect changes in the participant, which represents the notion of quality as value added, i.e., the extent to which the educational experience enhances the knowledge, abilities and skills of students (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996). Whereas empowering the participant involves giving power to students to influence their own transformation, i.e., taking ownership of the learning process (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996).

Although these five conceptualisations are interrelated, the key point to stress is that they differ with regards to the aspect of HE that is focused on and how the role of students is perceived (Jungblut et al., 2015). However, Harvey (1994) argues that

transformation is a meta-quality concept and that the other conceptualisations of quality are operationalisations of the transformative process.

2.7.2 Stakeholder-relative views of quality in HE

As mentioned previously, definitions of quality in HE are relative to HE's stakeholders' perspectives, based on their differing interests and priorities. For instance, quality as 'excellence' or meeting certain standards, is the predominant view of current and prospective students (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Students perceive quality as being about the standard of the education, which would ensure an advantage in career prospects.

However, the concepts of 'fitness for purpose' and 'value for money', on the other hand, are the prevalent view of quality of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) now the Office for Students (OfS) and the Quality Assurance Agency for HE (QAA) (Ottewill & Macfarlane, 2004). Lomas (2002) argues that fitness for purpose underpins the QAA's quality assurance procedures with reviewers comparing their perceptions with the HEIs stated aims of provision. In HE teaching quality is linked to teaching effectiveness, meeting course aims and objectives, and teaching efficiency, the use of resources to meet the stated aims and objectives (Lomas, 2002). Furthermore, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) argue that fitness for purpose is also the perception employers hold of quality. Thus, employers view quality of HE as the assurance that graduates have acquired the necessary capabilities and skills needed to perform a specific job in order to ensure the organisation's competitive advantage (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003).

Quality as 'value for money' is the notion that UK HE policy frames quality around as it requires HEIs to respond to expectations on the value and return of investment of studying such as future employability of graduates and expectations of tangible returns in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2018). Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2003) argue that quality as 'value for money' is also the preferred view of quality of funding bodies, which are looking for a good return of their investments. Thus, quality is seen as the effective utilisation of resources to provide an acceptable level of quality in the

delivery. Lomas (2002) suggests that accountability is central to the notion of quality as value for money. Public services are accountable to their funders (the government/tax payer) thus, accountability, i.e., assuring value for money, is centred around the need for restraint in public spending. However, where there is self-funding, accountability is directly to the student (Lomas, 2002).

The notion of quality as transformation is the preferred view of educational leaders, employers, academics and students (Lomas, 2007; Mastoi et al., 2019; Watty, 2005; Zachariah, 2007). It is closely related to the concept of ‘transformative learning’ (Cheng, 2014). Harvey and Knight (1996) argue that transformative learning is more than student-centred pedagogy and perspective transformation because it also encompasses students developing confidence and self-awareness as well as a continuous dialectical process of deconstructing a concept and building an alternative conceptualisation (Cheng, 2011). Therefore, in addition to engaging with knowledge, students need to develop their capacity to understand and question existing ideas, assumptions and discourses that inform their experiences and understanding of society (Cheng, 2014). Consequently, as students are participants in the process of their transformation, any measurement of quality and performance evaluation in HE needs to also include the student experience and how much they are learning and progressing, both intellectually and emotionally throughout their years at university (Tam, 2001). Therefore, in the next sections relevant learning theories are explored.

2.8 Learning Theories

As stated previously, HE differs from other services because students need to actively contribute to their learning experience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001) and must be willing to take responsibility for their own education (Svensson & Wood, 2007). Therefore, for quality in HE conceptualised as ‘transformation’ it is important to explore learning theories which not only lead to the enhancement of students’ knowledge, abilities and skills (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996), but also empower students to influence their own transformation, i.e., enable them to take ownership of the learning process (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996).

2.8.1 Constructivist learning theories

Constructivist learning theories posit that learners construct their own knowledge by actively participating in the learning process, i.e., by bringing what they already know into interaction with new information, ideas and experiences they encounter (Little, 2007). Therefore, for learning to be effective the learner's full participation in the learning process is vital. In addition, learning is seen as a collaborative process, and knowledge develops from individuals' interactions with their culture and society (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, social interaction in the development of cognition is vital because community plays a central role in the process of 'making meaning' (Vygotsky, 1978).

A key concept of social constructivism is 'scaffolding', which comprises the activities provided by the educator to support students as they are let through the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD). ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In other words, it is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what they can do with the guidance and encouragement from an educator. Therefore, learning is the result of doing, whereby expertise plays a vital role in guiding the learner and in the process learner autonomy is developed (Little, 2007). Learner autonomy is the learner's ability to take charge or control of their own learning (Holec, 1981). To become autonomous, learners need to develop the psychological and emotional capacity to control their own learning collaboratively as well as independently (O'Leary, 2018). By applying constructivist learning theory to this research, it is possible to suggest that ME students do not feel part of a community that helps them to 'make meaning' and are unable to relate what is being taught to their own culture, thus are less able to actively participate in the learning process because they feel the curriculum does not consider diverse backgrounds and views (UUK, 2019), and feel unable to bring their own perspectives to lectures and are left out of discussions and debates (NUS, 2011), which has a negative effect on their university experience.

Furthermore, in the context of curriculum, learning and teaching (CLT), many ME students feel there is a lack of fair and balanced teaching, assessment and support, and that they do not receive the same level of attention, support and encouragement as their White peers (NUS, 2011). Consequently, there is no scaffolding leading them through the ZPD and they are unable to construct their own knowledge to the same extent as if they had that support, which may explain lower satisfaction levels resulting in higher drop-out rates and lower achievement.

2.8.2 Learner identity

Interestingly, literature refers to learner identity as the ways in which students think of themselves as 'learners'. For example, Bunce et al. (2017, p. 1965) view learner identity as "a broad set of attitudes and behaviours associated with intellectual engagement, approach to learning and identification with the social category, 'learner'". Students with high learner identity identify themselves as 'learners', they enjoy learning and understand the importance of being at university to learn, they attend lectures, read relevant literature and make an effort to study (Bunce et al., 2017). A positive learner identity is essential for student success in HE and is positively linked with a sense of belonging in HE and student engagement, which has an impact on retention (MacFarlane, 2018). Within HE a sense of belonging is referred to as students' feelings of fitting in, acceptance and support from the university community, a sense that they matter and are a valued member of that university community (Strayhorn, 2012).

Literature goes on to suggest that the curriculum also plays an important part in developing a 'sense of belonging' (Smith et al., 2021), which is positively linked with engagement (Thomas, 2012). This sense of belonging and engagement impact on retention, because students who do not feel that they belong are not fully engaged and thus, will not progress in their studies (Trowler, 2010).

Furthermore, Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning emphasises learning as social participation involving active participation with people and practices in social communities (communities of practice (CoP)), construction of identities within these

communities and making meaning of what is done in the communities (Masika & Jones, 2016). Wenger's conceptual framework encompasses four interconnected learning components (Russell & Jarvis, 2019, p. 499):

- community (learning as belonging),
- practice (learning by doing),
- meaning (learning by experiencing) and
- identity (learning by becoming).

Certainly, it can be argued that CoP plays a central role in creating a sense of belonging and engaging students in learning, because what students do at university and how they experience it affects if, and how they participate in the university CoP and thus, if they develop a learner identity (Russell & Jarvis, 2019).

2.9 SQ in HE and student satisfaction

As HEIs have become more market focused, they are increasingly realising that SQ and student satisfaction are vital to attract and retain students. Kankhuni et al. (2023) found that SQ positively influences students' satisfaction with their university experience, students' engagement with their studies and students' attachment to their HEI. Equally, Clemons and Jance (2024) suggest that students' SQ perceptions affect student satisfaction, which in turn impacts on the retention of existing students and the ability to attract new students. Therefore, as DeShields et al. (2005) suggest satisfying the needs of their students, who are considered to be HEI's main customers, is critical. O'Neill and Palmer (2004, p. 42) posit that, based on the confirmation-disconfirmation paradigm, SQ in HE is conceptualised as "the difference between what a student expects to receive and his/her perceptions of actual delivery". Elliott and Shin (2002, p. 198) describe student satisfaction as "the favourability of a student's subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with education". Similarly, Onditi & Wechuli (2017, p. 330) suggest that student satisfaction is "the short term attitude that results from the evaluation of their experience with the education service received." Thus, it has become increasingly important for HEIs to gather feedback from students' about their experiences of HE. This has led to the development of many institutional and national surveys of student experience and

student satisfaction (discussed in section 2.9.1) and also a variety of SQ scales to evaluate students' perceptions of SQ in HE (discussed in section 2.9.2).

2.9.1 Student satisfaction surveys

Most developed countries use some form of national survey to elicit students' views on their HE experience (Senior et al., 2017). There are two different conceptualisations of university student experience, i.e., satisfaction-based and engagement-based conceptualisations (Kandiko Howson & Matos, 2021), which has led to different approaches for evaluating student experience (Zeng et al., 2023). Kandiko Howson and Matos (2021) argue that selecting what to measure is a political undertaking that is based on perceptions about the purpose of HE. The first approach, conceptualising student experience as student satisfaction, has been taken by Australia's Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and the UK's National Student Survey (NSS). By comparison, the second approach, based on the notion of student involvement or engagement as the focus for assessing the student experience (Kandiko Howson & Matos, 2021), has been taken by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the US (Zeng et al., 2023).

Australia's Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) was one of the first large-scale student surveys to emerge. It was developed by Ramsden (1991) and is used to gather information about graduates' quality perceptions of their degree programmes (Grace et al., 2012). The CEQ is widely used in many different countries and by many HEIs to examine the relationships between teaching quality and student satisfaction (Ramsden, 1991), with the purpose to guide quality improvements of HEIs' educational provision (Afonso et al., 2023). Although, the CEQ was developed specifically as a performance indicator of teaching effectiveness (Ramsden, 1991; Wilson et al., 1997), it is increasingly being used as a proxy for student satisfaction, despite it having been designed to measure perceived quality, not satisfaction (Grace et al., 2012). There are several versions of the CEQ, containing 36 items (CEQ36), 30 items (CEQ30) or 23 items (CEQ23). The CEQ36 is the most comprehensive, consisting of six scales with 36 items:

- good teaching (6 items),
- clear goals and standards (5 items),

-
- appropriate workload (5 items),
 - appropriate assessment (6 items),
 - emphasis on independence (6 items) and
 - generic skills (6 items)

(Wilson et al., 1997).

In addition, the CEQ also contains one single item addressing overall satisfaction with the quality of the course (Grace et al., 2012). Over the years, various studies have adapted and modified the CEQ, i.e., some studies have incorporated additional items or modified existing scales to capture additional dimensions or refine the instrument to suit specific purposes or contexts (Afonso et al., 2023).

Another instrument designed to measure student satisfaction is the UK's NSS. The NSS, first launched in 2005 and managed by the OfS on behalf of the UK funding and regulatory bodies, gathers final-year undergraduate students' views on the quality of various aspects of their courses and wider learning experience (OfS, 2025). The main purpose of the NSS is to inform prospective students' choice of what and where to study, to provide data that enables HEIs to assess and improve the student experience and to support public accountability of HEIs (Bell & Brooks, 2018). The results of the NSS are used to compile university league tables and feed into the TEF, determining whether a HEI is awarded a Gold, Silver or Bronze award (OfS, 2020). Thus, every university in the UK takes part in the NSS. The NSS contains a total of 27 Likert-style questions relating to a variety of aspects of students' learning experience, grouped into eight broad areas:

- teaching,
- learning opportunities,
- assessment and feedback,
- academic support,
- organisation and management,
- learning resources,
- student voice and
- mental health and wellbeing services

(OfS, 2025).

For students in England only, the NSS also asks one question about freedom of expression and, for students in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, one question about their overall satisfaction with the quality of their course (OfS, 2025). In addition, the NSS asks a number of optional questions for which the responses are not published, but are useful for individual HEIs (OfS, 2020). However, the NSS has received extensive critique. For instance, Kandiko Howson and Buckley (2017) argue that the NSS' consumer theory basis of satisfaction positions students as consumers of education and therefore, ignores the responsibilities and contributions of students as learners. Consequently, an alternative approach for evaluating the student experience, focusing on student engagement rather than student satisfaction, has been taken by some national surveys.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the US focuses specifically on educational activities related to learning and personal development (Kuh, 2003), i.e., what students do in their time in HE and how HEIs can create an environment to support student success (Kandiko Howson, 2021). It is designed to provide HEIs with actionable data to improve the student experience (Kuh, 2009a). The questions of the NSSE are based on Chickering and Gamson's (1987) educational best practices associated with high levels of student engagement: student-staff contact, cooperation among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task and high expectations. The survey questions are grouped into five 'benchmarks' of effective educational practices:

- level of academic challenge,
- student-faculty interaction,
- active and collaborative learning,
- enriching educational experiences and
- supportive campus environment

(Kuh, 2003).

Since its inception the NSSE has been adopted in many different countries, including South Africa, Ireland and China (Buckley, 2013). In 2007, with the development of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), it was adapted for Australia and New Zealand (Coates, 2010). In the UK, there has also been an increased interest in the NSSE, resulting in the development of the UK Engagement Survey (UKES).

In the UK, dissatisfaction with the NSS as a tool for enhancement of learning and teaching led to exploration of the NSSE and AUSSE. Kandiko Howson and Buckley (2017) argue that the NSSE has three key benefits compared to the NSS. Firstly, it contains a large number of items concerned with core aspects of the learning and teaching process. Secondly, it focuses on more complex aspects of learning and teaching. Thirdly, it focuses on learning rather than teaching by exploring students' participation in learning activities and how HEIs encourage and support students to invest time and effort (Kandiko Howson & Buckley, 2017). Furthermore, the NSS is not providing the detail and nuance required for the purpose of evaluating courses and departments, developing interventions and evaluating their impact (Kandiko Howson & Buckley, 2017). Thus, the NSS' focus on students' views of what they have received rather than the effort they have made led institutions to look at an alternative, resulting in various institutions adapting the NSSE for use in the UK, e.g., the University of Reading (Creighton et al., 2008), the University of Warwick (Taylor et al., 2011), the University of Worcester (Scott, 2011), Sheffield Hallam University and York St John University (Payne, 2012). In 2013, a steering group was established, coordinated by the UK HEA, to develop the UK Engagement Survey (UKES). The UKES is administered to non-final-year students and consists of 14 items in four areas: critical thinking, collaborative learning, course challenge and staff-student interaction (Buckley, 2013). Because the UKES focuses on enhancement rather than accountability, its results are not made public (Kandiko Howson & Buckley, 2017).

Another student experience survey is the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES), which is run jointly by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Advance HE. It was introduced in 2006 to examine the impact of tuition fee increases on students' perceptions and priorities and is thought to complement the NSS as it asks fundamentally different questions (Bell & Brooks, 2018). The SAES is an annual survey of how full-time undergraduate students rate their time in HE, helping HEIs to better understand students' expectations, perceptions and their experience of learning and teaching (Advance HE, 2025). It provides information on various aspects of the student experience, including contact hours with academic staff, number of assignments and quality and speed of feedback, student wellbeing, access to support

services and students' perceptions of value for money (Advance HE, 2025). The findings of the SAES are used to inform HE policy and also help HEIs to identify areas where action can be taken to improve students' teaching and learning experience (Advance HE, 2025).

2.9.2 SQ models in HE

In addition to national and institutional student satisfaction surveys a variety of SQ instruments have also been applied in a HE context. Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a) argue that to satisfy students' needs HEIs need to provide high quality education. Thus, it has become increasingly important for HEIs to understand how students perceive the services offered in order to provide services that positively impact on perceived SQ (De Shields et al., 2005). Consequently, assessing SQ from the students' perspective is vital in order to manage and improve the quality of the services they which HEIs provide (Clemons & Jance, 2024; Kankhuni et al., 2023).

However, as the literature demonstrates, there is a considerable debate as to how to define SQ in a HE context and consequently, its measurement has also become a controversial issue (Becket & Brookes, 2006; Brochado, 2009). Therefore, a considerable number of studies have tried to evaluate SQ in a HE context, using both generic and HE-specific SQ scales (Bartolo & Tinmaz, 2024).

For instance, several studies have attempted to apply SERVQUAL to HE (Cuthbert, 1996; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; O'Neill, 2003; Sahney et al., 2004). In fact, Goel (2025) notes that SERVQUAL is one of the most popular and widely accepted SQ models and has gained significant recognition in a HE setting. Similarly, Wider et al. (2024) suggest that SERVQUAL has been employed in numerous studies in various countries, demonstrating its global acceptance as a valuable assessment tool for enhancing SQ in HE. However, many of these studies were not able to replicate the five-factor structure of the SERVQUAL scale. As a result, Cuthbert (1996) concludes that the application of SERVQUAL to the HE context is not very successful. Besides, SERVQUAL only takes into account functional aspects of SQ relating to the delivery process and

neglects technical aspects relating to the outcomes of a service (Ladhari, 2009). Moreover, it does not consider specifics of HE (Teeroovengadum et al., 2019).

As a result of the issues with SERVQUAL, mentioned in section 2.5.1, some studies have modified the scale and its dimensions in order to develop industry-specific service measures. For example, Mahapatra and Khan (2007) propose EduQUAL which is an instrument based on SERVQUAL that attempts to measure education quality in technical institutions in India from different stakeholder perspectives. EduQUAL uses five dimensions to measure SQ, namely, learning outcomes, responsiveness, physical facilities, personality development and academics (Mahapatra & Khan, 2007). The learning outcomes dimension relates to the HEI's ability to provide the promised service dependably and accurately. Responsiveness conveys the willingness of staff to help students and to provide prompt service. The physical facilities dimension relates to teaching, recreational and residential facilities, equipment and other resources, as well as personnel and communication materials (Mahapatra & Khan, 2007). Personality development is concerned with the overall development of students' personality and the development of their knowledge and skills. The academics dimension covers aspects such as academic staff's expertise, support and individualised attention to students as well as their teaching and communication skills.

However, the fact remains that capturing students' expectations is challenging. Indeed, Oldfield and Baron (2000) suggest that a performance-only approach is more suitable for HE. Consequently, Firdaus (2006a) developed a performance-only model, HEdPERF (Higher Education Performance-only). HEdPERF is the most widely used scale amongst HE-specific scales and is specifically designed and applied to HE from a student's perspective (Bartolo & Tinmaz, 2024). It determines students' perceptions of SQ by evaluating 41 items loading on six dimensions (Firdaus, 2006a):

- academic aspects (aspects related to the performance and responsibilities of academic staff),
- non-academic aspects (aspects related to responsibilities of administrative staff),
- reputation (aspects related to the importance of the HEI in projecting a professional image),
- access (approachability, availability and ease of contact of staff),

-
- programme issues (comprehensiveness and reputation of study programmes), and
 - understanding (understanding students' specific needs in terms of counselling and well-being).

Firdaus' (2006a) HEdPERF model was further developed by Annamdevula and Bellamkonda (2012) into another instrument for measuring SQ in a HE context called HiEdQUAL. HiEdQUAL consists of 27 items loading on five dimensions, namely, teaching and course content, administrative services, academic facilities, campus infrastructure and support services.

Another performance-only based SQ model developed with a particular focus on HE is PHed (Performance-based Higher Education) (Sultan & Wong, 2010), which consists of eight dimensions: dependability, effectiveness, capability, efficiency, competencies, assurance, unusual situation management, and semester and syllabus. Dependability refers to the quality of the services being the same if the services are performed repeatedly over time. Effectiveness relates to the university's services being accurate and purposeful. Capability means that the university has the intellectual capabilities, physical resources and infrastructure to provide the services. Efficiency is related to the university's ability to provide services without wasting time, effort or expenses. Competencies refer to service providers' abilities and qualities to perform services satisfactorily. Assurance is about students having confidence in the university.

A hierarchical model of educational quality (Figure 2.9) was developed by Clemes et al. (2008), who adopt Curran and Rosen's (2006) view that since the perceptions of university experiences are multi-dimensional when viewed as a service, a hierarchical factor structure may be more appropriate in a HE context. Furthermore, they argue that the literature on student satisfaction focuses on similar factors to those identified in Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical model, namely teacher-student relationships (interaction quality), physical facilities (physical environment quality), and learning outcomes (outcome quality) (Clemes et al., 2008). Therefore, their hierarchical model of educational quality is based on Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical model of perceived SQ (see section 2.5.3). Clemes et al.'s (2008) model consists of three

primary dimensions and ten sub-dimensions. Interestingly, the first primary dimension, which was perceived as most important by students, is interaction quality (Clemes et al., 2008). This relates to teacher-student and staff-student relationships and comprises four sub-dimensions of which three are significant, namely, academic staff, the most important sub-dimension, followed by administrative staff and course content. Although one sub-dimension, academic staff availability, is insignificant, it still has a small impact on the perceptions of interaction quality (Clemes et al., 2008). Outcome quality is perceived by students as the second most important primary dimension and relates to the educational outcomes, that is, the knowledge, skills and abilities students have attained. Outcome quality has three significant sub-dimensions: academic development being the most important sub-dimension, followed by career opportunities and personal development (Clemes et al., 2008). The least important primary dimension, as perceived by students, is physical environment quality. Physical environment quality relates to aspects of the physical environment and has three significant sub-dimensions: the most important sub-dimension is physical attractiveness, followed by library and social factors (Clemes et al., 2008).

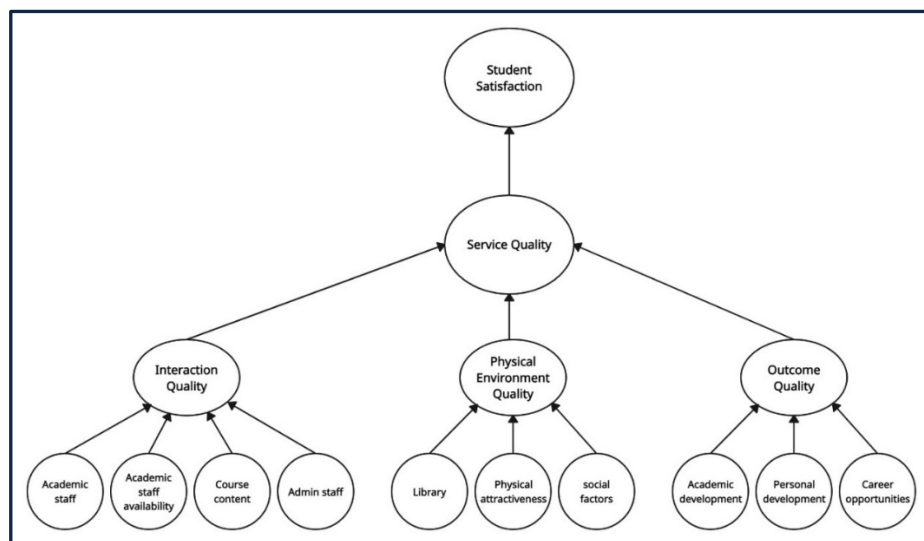


Figure 2.9: Hierarchical model of educational quality (Clemes et al., 2008, p. 310)

Another hierarchical model for measuring SQ in a HE context is Higher Educational Service Quality (HESQUAL) model, which was developed by Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a). The HESQUAL model (Figure 2.10) consists of five primary dimensions:

- administrative quality (with two sub-dimensions: attitude and behaviour of administrative staff and administrative processes),

- physical environment quality (with three sub-dimensions: support infrastructure, learning settings and general infrastructure),
- core educational quality (with four sub-dimensions: attitude and behaviour of academics, curriculum, pedagogy and competence of academics),
- support facilities quality (which is unidimensional) and
- transformative quality (which is also unidimensional).

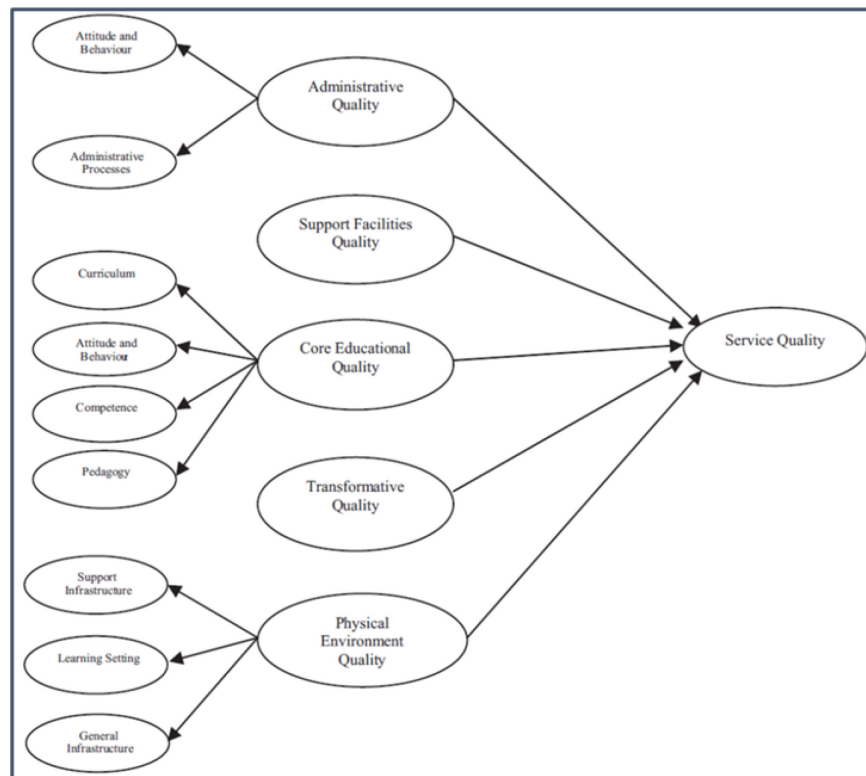


Figure 2.10: HESQUAL model (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a, p. 254)

HESQUAL combines both a holistic and a transformative perspective (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). A holistic approach is adopted by considering both functional and technical aspects of SQ in a HE context, whereby functional aspects relate to the delivery process and technical aspects relate to the outcomes of a service (Grönroos, 1984). Moreover, Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a) operationalise technical quality as transformative quality in HE based on Harvey and Green's (1993) and Harvey and Knight's (1996) conceptualisation of SQ in HE. Harvey and Green (1993) argue that education is not about presenting a service to a customer, but rather, it is a continuous process of transformation of the students through teaching and learning. Thus, an education of quality enables transformation in students and therefore, improves them (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Transformative quality consists of two components,

enhancement and empowerment of the student. Enhancement is the improvement of students in terms of knowledge and skills, whilst empowerment is about giving the participant some decision-making authority over their transformation process to achieve self-transformation and personal growth (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016). Teeroovengadum et al. (2019) suggest that in a HE context transformative quality (technical quality) has a stronger effect on students' satisfaction than functional quality. This demonstrates that in a HE context the outcome of the service is more important than the service delivery process in relation to satisfaction (Teeroovengadum et al., 2019). Consequently, they go on to propose that it is essential to include the technical dimension when evaluating quality of HE services. However, they point out that the notion of transformative SQ has been somewhat neglected in the majority of studies relating to SQ in HE and student satisfaction. Kang (2006) suggests that many SQ models only consider functional quality (i.e., service delivery) and overlook aspects related to technical quality (i.e., outcome of the service), which is something of an oversight.

2.9.3 SQ dimensions for HE

In order to make appropriate quality improvements it is critical to understand which quality attributes impact on student satisfaction and what their potential to cause satisfaction or dissatisfaction is. One of the key issues for measuring SQ in HE is the identification of determinants of SQ. However, research relating to SQ in HE is still relatively new (Sultan & Wong, 2010), and there is a lack of consistency in methodology and the dimensions used to evaluate SQ in HE. Whilst many studies have endeavoured to identify SQ dimensions in a HE context (Table 2.1), there is no agreement regarding the number or nature of dimensions. Nguyen et al. (2024) suggest that this is due to the nature of the services provided and the unique characteristics of educational environments in different countries. Nevertheless, there are some commonalities as summarised in the key literature below.

Table 2.1: Studies of SQ in HE and the factors/dimensions that were employed

Studies	SQ dimensions	Country
Owlia & Aspinwall (1996)	• Tangibles, • competence, • attitude, • content, • delivery, • reliability	UK
LeBlanc & Nguyen (1997)	• Reputation, • administrative personnel, • faculty, • curriculum, • responsiveness, • physical evidence, • access to facilities	Canada
Hill et al. (2003)	• Quality of the lecturer, • student engagement with learning, • social/emotional support systems, • resources of library and IT	UK
Firdaus (2006a) (HEdPERF)	• Reputation, • access, • program issues, • academic aspects, • non-academic aspects, • understanding	Malaysia
Pereda et al. (2007)	• Recognition, • quality of instruction and interaction with faculty, • sufficiency of resources, • quality of facilities	UK
Mahapatra & Khan (2007) (EduQUAL)	• Learning outcomes, • responsiveness, • physical facilities, • personality development, • academics	India
Clemes et al. (2008)	• Interaction quality (academic staff, administration staff, academic staff availability, and course content), • physical environment quality (attractiveness, library, and social factors), • outcome quality (academic development, personal development, and career opportunities)	New Zealand
Douglas et al. (2008)	• Critical dimensions (responsiveness, communication, and access) • satisfiers (functionality, socialising, motivation, and friendliness) • dissatisfiers (management, team work, attitude, communication, and tangibles) • neutral dimensions (reliability, flexibility, aesthetics, comfort, competence, courtesy, credibility, integrity,	UK

	understanding the customer, security, commitment, functionality, and virtual resources)	
Sultan & Wong (2010) (PHEd)	• Dependability, • effectiveness, • capability, • efficiency, • competencies, • assurance, • unusual situation management, • semester and syllabus	Japan
Annamdevula & Bellamkonda (2012) (HiEdQual)	• Teaching and course content, • administrative services, • academic facilities, • campus infrastructure, • support services	India
Ibrahim et al. (2012)	• Campus environment, • physical facilities, • training equipment, • instructor, • curriculum, • training delivery, • support service, • support staff, • library, • reliability of service	Malaysia
Sultan & Wong (2013)	• Academic SQ, • administrative SQ, • facilities SQ	Australia
Icli & Anil (2014) (HEDQUAL)	• Academic quality, • administrative SQ, • library services quality, • supportive services quality, • career opportunities	Turkey
Lazibat et al. (2014)	• Non-academic dimension, • academic dimension, • access, • reputation, • buildings	Croatia
Randheer (2015)	• Reputation, • access, • program issues, • academic aspects, • non-academic aspects, • understanding, • culture	Saudi Arabia
Yusoff et al. (2015)	• Professional comfortable environment, • student assessments and learning experiences, • classroom environment, • lecture and tutorial facilitating goods, • textbook and tuition fees, • student support facilities, • business procedures,	Malaysia

	- relationship with teaching staff, - knowledgeable and responsive faculty, - staff helpfulness, - feedback, - class sizes	
Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a) (<i>HESQUAL</i>)	- Administrative quality, - physical environment quality, - core educational quality, - support facilities quality, - transformative quality	Mauritius
Latif et al. (2019) (<i>HiEduQual</i>)	- Teacher quality, - administrative services, - knowledge services, - activities, - continuous improvement, - leadership quality	Pakistan
Kankhuni et al. (2023)	- Academic issues, - non-academic issues, - programme issues, - access, - reputation	Malawi
Nguyen et al. (2024)	- Academic aspects, - non-academic aspects, - programming issues, - facilities, - industry interaction	Vietnam

As Table 2.1 demonstrates the common SQ dimensions in a HE context relate to:

- teaching and learning,
- the curriculum,
- administrative and support systems and
- facilities and resources.

These common SQ dimensions will be explored further in the sections below.

2.9.3.1 Teaching and learning

In relation to teaching and learning, characteristics of teaching staff are important quality factors. These include academic staff's competence and expertise as well as their attitudes and behaviours. Competence and expertise of academic staff comprise aspects such as their qualifications, their theoretical and practical knowledge, their knowledge of new developments and research in their subject area (Ibrahim et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2024; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a) as

well as their communication skills, i.e., the ability to describe and explain concepts in a way that students can understand (Alhamad et al., 2024; Hill et al., 2003; Ibrahim et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2024). Whereas academic staff's attitudes and behaviours encompass staff's friendliness and approachability, and their accessibility and availability (Firdaus, 2006a; Firdaus 2006c; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a; Yusoff et al., 2015). In addition, interaction with teaching staff, which includes staff being supportive and encouraging (Clemes et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2003; Kankhuni et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024; Rasheed & Rashid, 2024) is also a factor related to teaching. Finally, another quality factor associated with teaching is the quality of instruction and delivery, which covers aspects such as effective presentation of information and the structuring of classes (Hill et al., 2003; Ibrahim et al., 2012; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996). Research has shown that even though teaching impacts students' SQ perceptions, and thus, their satisfaction, ME students are significantly less likely to be satisfied with the quality of teaching compared to their White counterparts (Neves & Hillman, 2019).

2.9.3.2 Curriculum

Another SQ dimension commonly identified in the literature in a HE context is the curriculum. Aspects relating to the curriculum include whether the course content is appropriate, relevant and innovative (Alhamad et al., 2024; Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Hill et al., 2003; Lee et al., 2019; Rasheed & Rashid, 2024), whether courses are up-to-date (Clemons & Jance, 2024; Latif et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2024) and whether courses are well organised (Langan et al, 2013). Additionally, whether the curriculum develops students' metacognitive abilities such as self-efficacy, emotional intelligence and self-confidence is also important (Teeroovengadum et al., 2019). Some studies also identified personal development (Alhamad et al., 2024; Langan et al, 2013) and career preparation (Duque and Weeks, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2024) as drivers of student satisfaction.

2.9.3.3 Administrative and support systems

A third commonly identified quality dimension relates to non-academic staff and administrative processes and support systems. The literature suggests that administrative and support systems and processes are important for delivering HE

services to students and as such, influence their perceptions of the quality of their university experience (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Lazibat et al., 2014; Sultan & Wong, 2013; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). Processes and systems need to be available, appropriate, easy to access, clear and easy to understand (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Firdaus, 2006a; Clemons & Jance, 2024). Furthermore, non-academic staff's competences, attitudes and behaviours are important factors influencing students' SQ perceptions (Clemes et al., 2008; Firdaus, 2006a, Nguyen et al., 2024). In particular, their skills, abilities and relationships with students (Sultan & Wong, 2013), which are influenced by staff's friendliness, politeness and willingness to help students and their ability to solve their problems and answer queries effectively and efficiently are aspects that influence students' perceptions of the quality of their education (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Kankhuni et al., 2023; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a; Yusoff et al., 2015).

2.9.3.4 Facilities and resources

Another commonly identified SQ dimension is facilities and resources provided by HEIs (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2024; Yusoff et al., 2015). Research has shown that the availability and quality of these facilities, services and resources are important for a quality HE experience (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). This dimension encompasses teaching facilities, such as lecture theatres and seminar rooms, support services and facilities, such as library, IT facilities and food services, as well as support services, such as learning skills support, career services and counselling. For a quality education the physical environment has to be comfortable and conducive to learning (Amoako et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2012). Additionally, it is important that teaching facilities are adequate, visually appealing and that the equipment is up-to-date (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Clemes et al., 2008; Holdford & Reinders, 2001). With regard to support services and facilities, for a quality education the provision of library and IT facilities that are adequately equipped and well-resourced are essential (Amoako et al., 2023; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2024; Pereda et al., 2007). Furthermore, availability of reasonably priced food services that offer good quality food is another important aspect of students' quality perceptions (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). Finally, availability and accessibility of support mechanisms, such as learning skills, career and counselling services also

influence students' perceptions of the quality of their HE experience (Ibrahim et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2024; Onditi & Wechuli, 2017). Thus, it is possible to argue that it is not just the academic aspects that impact on students' perceptions of SQ in HE, but also available facilities, their condition and also wider support services such as learning skills, counselling and career services.

2.9.3.5 Transformative quality

As the literature has demonstrated, many SQ models only consider functional quality (i.e., service delivery) and overlook aspects related to technical quality (i.e., outcome of the service) (Kang, 2006). However, education is not about presenting a service to a customer but rather represents a continuous process of transformation of the student (Harvey & Green, 1993). Therefore, an education of quality enables transformation in the students and thus, improves them (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Teeroovengadum et al. (2019) argue that in a HE context, transformative quality (outcome quality) has a stronger effect on students' satisfaction than functional quality, thus the outcome of the service is more important than the service delivery process in relation to satisfaction. Consequentially, it is vital to include the technical dimension when evaluating quality of HE services (Teeroovengadum et al., 2019). Transformative quality comprises two components: enhancement of students' knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996), and empowerment, giving students some decision-making authority over their transformation process to achieve self-transformation and personal growth (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a), thus, it involves students taking ownership of their learning process (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996).

Harvey and Knight (1996) identify four main ways of empowering students. The first form of empowerment of students is giving them the opportunity to comment on the education they are receiving through student evaluations. Second, empowering students by guaranteeing minimum standards of provision, for example, with a student charter (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Third, to give students control over their learning, for instance through a learning contract, giving students control over how they learn and when and how learning is assessed. The fourth form of empowerment

is to develop students' critical ability, specifically by encouraging students to think about knowledge as a process in which they are engaged. This approach treats students as intellectual performers rather than a compliant audience, transforming teaching and learning into an active process of coming to understand (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

Harvey and Knight (1996) argue that this fourth approach of empowerment is about the process of critical transformation, specifically the extent to which education transforms the conceptual ability and self-awareness of students with the aim of empowering students not just in relation to their education process, but for their entire life. However, to achieve this teaching and learning need to go further than students merely acquiring a body of knowledge or a set of skills and abilities. Rather, it is about the way students approach acquisition of knowledge and skills and relate them to a wider context. Consequently, critical transformative learning needs to encompass both the development of subject expertise and the development of critical abilities (Harvey & Knight, 1996). According to Harvey and Knight (1996) critical abilities consist of the following elements:

- independence as a learner,
- commitment to continued learning, especially through reflection, construction and deconstruction,
- use of a range of frames of reference or of explanatory apparatus,
- recognition that frames of reference empower and limit,
- interplay between own values and values in professional settings - continuous refinement of own values and sense of self (reflective practitioner),
- development of critical, dialectical thinking.

(Harvey & Knight, 1996, p. 11)

Teeroovengadam et al. (2016a) used Harvey and Knight's (1996) conceptualisation of quality as transformation to develop the following SQ attributes of transformative quality:

- enabling students to be emotionally stable,
- increase in self-confidence of students,
- development in students' critical thinking,

-
- increase in self-awareness of students,
 - development of problem-solving skills with respect to their field of study,
 - enabling students to transcend their prejudices,
 - acquiring adequate knowledge and skills to perform future job,
 - increase in knowledge, abilities and skills of students.

(Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a, p. 252)

Similarly, Gill et al. (2022) propose a five-factors, 27-item scale of transformative quality (TRFQ), which identified dimensions from university lecturers' perspectives. Although they used the seven dimensions of transformative quality proposed by Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a) as their starting point, they argue that because each of these dimensions signifies a complex psychological construct, it was necessary to develop a more sophisticated and nuanced measure of the attributes that constitute transformative quality in HE. Thus, based on a comprehensive literature review to elaborate on the specific dimensions of TRFQ, Gill et al. (2022) identify the following five dimensions of transformative quality:

- critical confidence,
- problem-solving skills,
- overall awareness,
- overcoming prejudice and
- skilfulness.

2.9.4 Factors affecting ME students' satisfaction

It is now appropriate to consider the SQ dimensions that have impacted ME students' lower satisfaction levels with their university experience. The literature suggests that a number of factors are responsible. Teaching quality is one of the main factors impacting student satisfaction, and research has shown that ME students are significantly less likely to be satisfied with the teaching quality than their White counterparts (Neves & Hillman, 2019). Factors impacting ME students' perceptions of teaching quality include equal treatment by lecturers and fair, inclusive teaching, assessment and support (NUS, 2011). With regards to assessment, ME students' perceptions are affected by whether assessments are fair, the marking procedures are

transparent and the feedback they receive is fair (NUS, 2011). Factors impacting ME students' perceptions of academic support comprise whether they receive the same level of attention and encouragement as White students (Bale et al., 2020; NUS, 2011), whether staff is approachable and contactable (NUS, 2011), and whether additional support such as extra seminar classes and drop-in sessions are offered (Kauser et al., 2021). Another important factor affecting ME students' satisfaction is curriculum content, design and delivery; in particular, whether the curriculum reflects issues of diversity, equality and discrimination and considers diverse backgrounds and views (Bale et al., 2020; NUS, 2011; Smith, 2017). The curriculum also plays an important part in developing a 'sense of belonging' (Smith et al., 2021). A lack of diversity in course content and delivery has been recognized as a source of feelings of isolation for many ME students (Connor et al., 2004). Consequently, many feel they do not belong in HE and experience a sense of 'otherness' (Bunce et al., 2021; Davies & Garrett, 2012). Research has shown that a sense of belonging affects students' satisfaction (Fan et al., 2021) and is also essential to student retention and success (Ahn and Davis, 2023; Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al., 2017). Sense of belonging refers to the extent to which students feel connected to their HEI and the people within that HEI (Strayhorn, 2018). Sense of belonging encompasses a student's feelings of 'fitting in' to the university environment and whether they feel that university is 'for them' (Keohane & Petrie, 2017). Another component of sense of belonging is the feeling of mattering to others (Hallam, 2023). 'Mattering' refers to an individual's feelings of being important to others (Schlossberg, 1989) and encompasses others paying attention to the individual, caring about them, appreciating them and depending on them (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). In an education context mattering refers to the extent to which students feel they matter to their HEI and people within that HEI (Schieferecke & Card, 2013), which makes them feel they belong. By contrast, feeling that they do not matter makes them feel marginalised (Schlossberg, 1989). Therefore, ME students' sense of mattering and belonging is affected by their ability to make friends with students from other ethnicities (Singh, 2011; Thomas, 2020) and to form relationships with academic staff from different backgrounds (Keohane & Petrie, 2017; Thomas, 2020).

In summary, as the above discussion shows, there is no agreement on a single model for measuring quality in HE and there is also no agreement what dimensions to include. Besides, to date only a few studies have applied these models in the UK HE context and no studies have used the models to specifically measure ME students' perceptions. Furthermore, none of the models are entirely appropriate to measure ME students' perceptions of quality of their university experience, highlighting the gap in knowledge and the need for research in this area, which this study will address by developing a SQ model in the context of ME students' university experience. Thus, the next section will discuss a proposed conceptual framework for measuring ME students' perceptions of their HE experience.

The literature suggests that HE can be categorised as a service, primarily due to its high degree of person-to-person interaction (Oldfield & Baron, 2000) and because it possesses the key characteristics of a service (Winter & Chapleo, 2017). However, HE differs from other services because students must actively contribute to their learning experience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001) and hence, must be willing to take responsibility for their own education (Svensson & Wood, 2007). The literature also demonstrates that although students are increasingly seen as consumers (Bunce et al., 2017) who expect services to be delivered in ways matching their demand (Tomlinson, 2017), more recently this view of student-as-consumer (SAC) has been challenged by the belief that students are co-producers/co-creators of the learning experience, which is the core service of HE (Ng & Forbes, 2009). However, irrespective of the view of students as either consumers or as co-producers/co-creators, when evaluating quality in HE, it is crucial that HEIs emphasise students' experiences and develop strategies to improve their services to meet their students' needs and wants. Thus, it is essential to define SQ and to determine how to measure it. Interestingly, as the literature review demonstrates, a universally accepted definition of SQ and its objective measurement do not appear to exist.

Consequently, different conceptualisations of SQ have emerged resulting in two conceptually different streams of SQ models. Expectation-(dis)confirmation models, such as Parasuraman et al.'s (1985) SERVQUAL, conceptualise SQ as the difference between a customer's *prior expectations* of a service and their perception of the *actual*

performance of that service (Ghotbabadi et al., 2015). By contrast, the second stream of SQ models, the ‘performance-only’ models, such as Taylor and Cronin’s (1992) SERVPERF, are based on the belief that a customer’s evaluation of a service is based *solely on performance* (Nadiri et al., 2009). However, both SERVQUAL and SERVPERF are generic models that are not totally adequate for measuring SQ in a sector as unique as HE (Firdaus, 2006a). Therefore, the literature suggests that a HE-specific instrument should be developed (Cuthbert 1996; Firdaus, 2006a). However, the development of such an instrument is difficult because, as can be seen from the discussion of the literature, quality in HE is a value-laden, multi-faceted and complex concept that is difficult to define and conceptualise. In addition, there are many diverse stakeholders in HE, who all have their own perspectives of what constitutes quality in HE, which are based on their own interests and views of the purpose of HE (Schindler et al., 2015; Tam, 2001). The conceptualisation of quality as ‘transformation’, for example, sees education as a continuous process of transformation of the student who is a participant, rather than a customer, in the process. (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

The debate about ways in which to define quality in HE has led to its measurement becoming a controversial issue as well (Becket & Brookes, 2006; Brochado, 2009). Although, some attempts have been made to measure SQ in HE, an adequate SQ model for HE still does not exist (Chong & Ahmed, 2012). Some studies have tried to apply SERVQUAL to the HE context (e.g., Cuthbert, 1996; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; O’Neill, 2003; Sahney et al., 2004), with little success. Because SQ measures need to be tailored to their specific context (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016), other studies have tried to modify the SERVQUAL scale to develop HE-specific scales (e.g., Mahapatra & Khan, 2007). However, these SQ instruments still have the issue of capturing students’ expectations, making performance-only models more suitable for HE (Oldfield & Baron, 2000). Additionally, performance-only models have been found to outperform expectation-(dis)confirmation models (Fallon & Schofield, 2003). This led to the development of performance-only models such as HEdPERF (Firdaus, 2006a).

However, the literature demonstrates that SQ in HE is not just multi-dimensional, but also multi-level, i.e., hierarchical (Clemes et al., 2008). Consequently, hierarchical SQ

models, such as HESQUAL (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a), were developed. However, none of these instruments are entirely appropriate to evaluate ME students' SQ perceptions within HE in the UK context. Firstly, none of these studies are UK based, aside from a single study conducted in the Scottish HE context (Guo, 2018), which applied a modified HEdPERF SQ measurement scale to assess postgraduate business and management students' SQ perceptions in Scottish HE. Thus, there is a notable lack of UK based research in this area. Secondly, SQ perceptions vary across cultures depending on demographic and personal characteristics (Clemes et al., 2008; Rasheed & Rashid, 2024), making it crucial to understand specific needs and perceptions of different student groups to develop and implement more targeted and specific interventions (Bartolo & Tinmaz, 2024). However, despite an extensive search of the literature, no research has been found, to date, that evaluates SQ in HE specifically from a ME students' perspective, a key gap in the literature, which this study aims to address. Thus, this study proposes a new conceptual framework for evaluating ME students' perceived SQ in HE, which will be discussed in the next section.

2.10 Proposed conceptual framework

Firdaus (2006a) recommends the development of industry-specific SQ measures rather than utilising generic models such as SERVQUAL or SERVPERF. However, the development of an adequate model for assessing SQ in HE remains a challenge (Chong & Ahmed, 2012). The pertinent literature suggests that quality in HE is not a unidimensional concept, but is multi-dimensional (Curran & Rosen, 2006).

Additionally, a hierarchical conceptualisation of SQ is considered both appropriate and necessary in a HE context because it captures the complexity of student perceptions of HE services (Chong & Ahmed, 2012). Moreover, the literature on SQ in HE and student satisfaction focuses on similar factors to those identified in Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical model of perceived SQ, specifically staff-student relationships (interaction quality), physical facilities (physical environment quality), and learning outcomes (outcome quality) (Clemes et al., 2008). Furthermore, support for Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical model has been found in many service industries including HE (Chong & Ahmed, 2012; Clemes et al., 2008).

Many studies have focused only on aspects of functional quality when evaluating the quality of HE services (Firdaus, 2006a). This is based on the assumption that students lack either the ability, information, or confidence to assess the technical quality of the service and thus, rely on functional quality to evaluate the quality of a service (Holdford & Reinders, 2001). However, the nature of HE demands a high level of involvement and participation from students, that is, unless students are mentally involved and participate in their education, they cannot learn (Holdford & Reinders, 2001). Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a) suggest that when evaluating SQ in a HE context it is vital to not only focus on functional quality, i.e., service delivery, but to also include aspects related to technical quality, i.e., the outcome of the service. Besides, according to Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a), technical quality, conceptualised as transformative quality, has a greater effect on students' satisfaction than functional quality.

Figure 2.11 incorporates many key elements of the literature discussed throughout this chapter, which have been utilised to develop a new SQ model with its respective SQ dimensions. Consequently, a new conceptual framework for ME students' perceived SQ of their HE experience (MESQHE) is proposed that is based on Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical model and Teeroovengadum et al.'s (2016a) Higher Educational SQ (HESQUAL) model. Thus, like Brady and Cronin (2001) and Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a), this research will adopt a hierarchical conceptualisation of SQ. In addition, a 'performance-only' operationalisation of SQ, based on ME students' experiences, will also be adopted as due to the problems with capturing students' expectations it is considered more suitable in a HE context (Oldfield & Baron, 2000), and because this approach has outperformed both 'expectation-(dis)confirmation' and 'importance-performance' models in previous research (Fallon & Schofield, 2003). However, to provide specific contextual relevance for this research, the following primary dimensions will be included in the conceptual framework for this study (Figure 2.11): interaction quality, physical environment quality (taken from Brady and Cronin's (2001) model) and transformative quality (taken from Teeroovengadum et al.'s (2016a) HESQUAL model). Each primary dimension will have sub-dimensions, although their exact nature and number will be informed by the study's qualitative primary research and a new framework will be produced from the findings of the study.

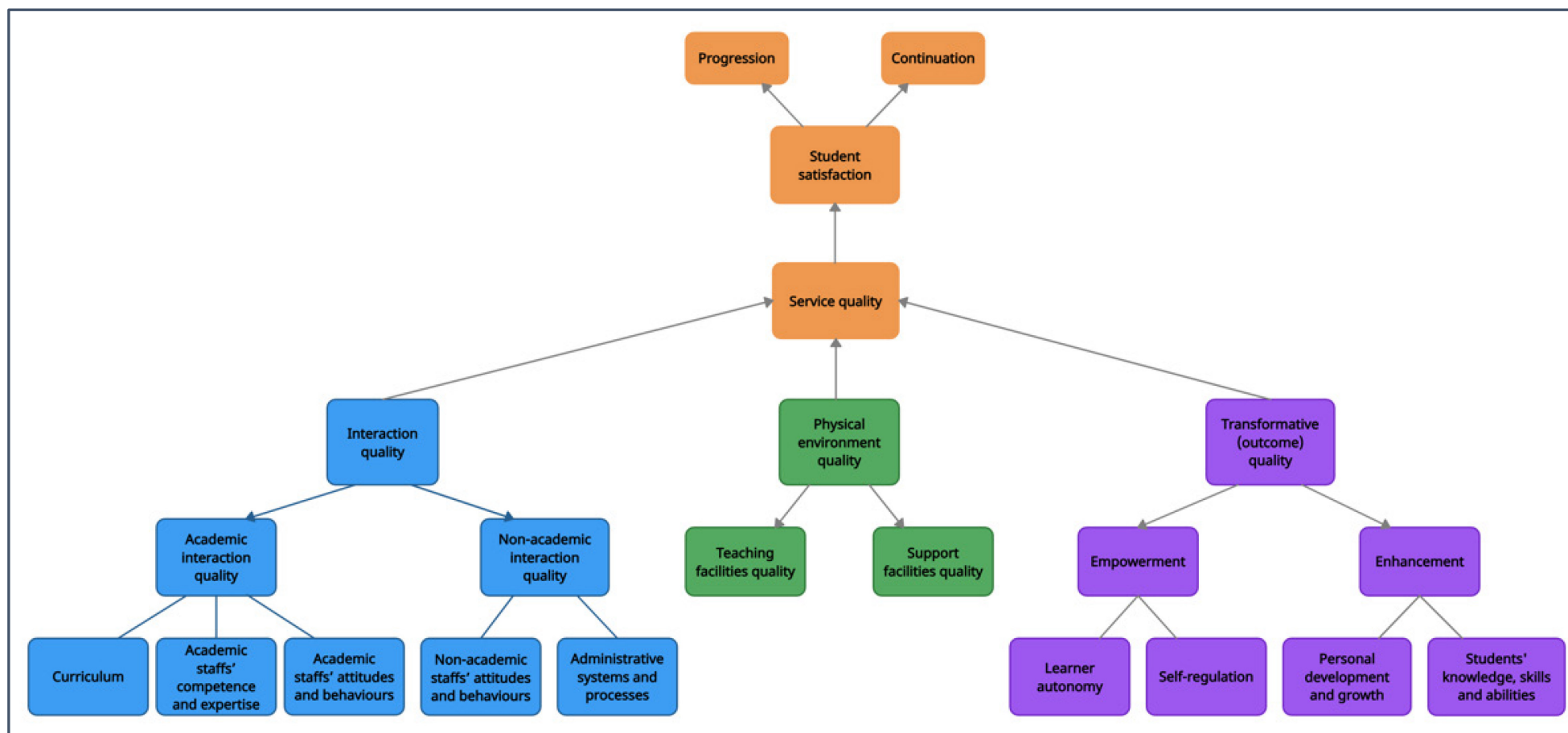


Figure 2.11: Proposed conceptual framework

Services are characterised by inseparability, that is, in many cases the service provider (i.e., service staff) and the customer have to be present during the production of the service and on some occasions the customer even has to be actively involved in the service delivery process. Therefore, interactions during the delivery process have a great effect on SQ perceptions and thus, should be included as a primary dimension in the conceptualisation of perceived SQ (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Brady and Cronin (2001) suggest that three distinct factors constitute customer perceptions of interaction quality: attitude, behaviour and/or expertise of the service provider. In a HE context interaction quality is also regarded as an important construct when measuring perceptions of SQ (Clemes et al., 2008). It relates to the interactions between staff (academic and administrative) and students as well as the systems for providing the service. Based on the review of the literature the following sub-dimensions of interaction quality are proposed: academic interaction quality and non-academic interaction quality. Academic interaction quality will comprise the expertise, competence, attitudes and behaviours of academic staff (including fair and equal treatment of students), and aspects relating to the curriculum such as content (including whether the curriculum considers diverse backgrounds and views), relevance, and innovativeness. Non-academic interaction quality will comprise competence, attitude and behaviour of administrative and support staff as well as administrative and support systems and processes. The interaction quality elements are shown in *blue* in Figure 2.11.

The physical environment quality elements are shown in *green* in Figure 2.11. This relates to the physical or 'built' environment, i.e., the 'servicescape' (Bitner, 1992) in which the service takes place. Due to the intangibility of services the physical environment can have a significant influence on perceptions of the overall quality of the service encounter (Bitner, 1992), thus it is important to include it in a SQ model. The sub-dimensions of physical environment quality will comprise teaching facilities, such as lecture theatres and seminar rooms, and support facilities, such as library and IT, and will include factors such as layout, design, availability, accessibility and sufficiency of resources.

The transformative quality elements in Figure 2.11 are shown in **purple**. They relate to the educational outcome of the service. Research suggests that in a HE context the outcome of the service is more important than the service delivery process in relation to satisfaction (Teeroovengadum et al., 2019). Therefore, it is essential that it is included when evaluating the quality of HE services. Transformative quality comprises two sub-dimensions - enhancement, the improvement of a student's knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes, and empowerment, a student's ownership of their learning process (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996).

Table 2.2 presents a more detailed overview of the proposed conceptual model's SQ dimensions and sub-dimensions, with examples of items relating to each sub-dimension with pertinent informing literature sources cited in the last column.

Table 2.2: Proposed SQ dimensions and sub-dimensions with examples

Primary SQ dimensions	Sub-dimensions	Examples	Literature sources
Interaction quality	Academic interaction quality	• Academic staff are knowledgeable and have expertise in their area. • Academic staff are approachable, empathetic and supportive. • Academic staff give all students equal attention and encouragement. • Lectures/seminars/workshops are well structured and organised. • Instructions are clear. • Teaching is inclusive and all students are given opportunities to participate in discussions. • Course materials are clear. • Course content is relevant. • Curriculum is inclusive and considers diverse backgrounds and views. • Assessment is fair and relevant.	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda (2012); Clemes et al. (2008); Firdaus (2006a); Holdford & Reinders (2001); Latif et al. (2019); Mahapatra & Khan (2007); Mastoi et al. (2019); Sultan & Wong (2010); Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a and 2019)

		• Marking procedures are transparent and feedback is constructive and fair. • Academic staff conduct research.	
	Non-academic interaction quality	• Staff are approachable, empathetic and supportive. • Processes and procedures are clear. • Communication is good. • Support services (Admin, Careers, Well-being) are appropriate and easily accessible.	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda (2012); Clemes et al. (2008); Firdaus (2006a); Holdford & Reinders (2001); Mastoi et al. (2019)
Physical environment quality	Teaching facilities	• Teaching facilities are modern and visually appealing. • Space and layout of teaching facilities is adequate. • Teaching facilities are well equipped. • Equipment is state-of-the-art.	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda (2012); Clemes et al. (2008); Mahapatra & Khan (2007); Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a and 2019)
	Support facilities	• Adequate library facilities and services are available. • Library has adequate and sufficient resources. • The layout and space of library facilities is adequate. • IT facilities are adequate and sufficient. • The layout and space of IT facilities is adequate. • IT facilities and equipment are up to date. • Support facilities are easily accessible.	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda (2012); Holdford & Reinders (2001); Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a and 2019)
Transformative quality	Enhancement	• Students' knowledge, abilities and skills are increased. • Students acquire adequate knowledge and skills to perform their future jobs. • Students' problem-solving skills with respect to their field of study is developed. • Students' self-confidence is increased. • Students' self-awareness is improved.	Gill et al. (2022); Harvey & Green (1993); Harvey & Knight (1996); Lomas (2007); Srikanthan & Dalrymple (2002); Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a and 2019)

		• Students' ability to transcend their prejudices is developed. • Students are enabled to become more emotionally stable.	
	Empowerment	• Students' critical thinking is developed. • Students are enabled to become independent learners. • Students are given control over their own learning. • Students can choose when and how they learn. • Students are allowed to pursue ideas and bring in their own views and experiences. • Students are encouraged to actively participate in their learning.	Gill et al. (2022); Harvey & Green (1993); Harvey & Knight (1996); Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a and 2019)

This chapter presented a comprehensive review of the pertinent literature to gain a better understanding of concepts and theories relevant to the study to identify both research gaps and how this research will contribute to knowledge.

First, what constitutes a service and its key characteristics were explained. A comprehensive overview of SQ and the various conceptualisations of SQ models were examined. The notion of HE as a service was also explored and the two contrasting views of students-as-consumers and students as co-producers/co-creators were considered. A variety of HE-specific SQ models were outlined and common SQ dimensions in a HE context were researched. This chapter concludes by using the literature to develop a proposed conceptual framework to address the ongoing challenge of developing an adequate model for assessing SQ in HE (Chong & Ahmed, 2012). The absence of such a model highlights the potential to add to the existing body of knowledge in this area and aligns directly with the research objectives of this study. Specifically, the literature review supports the identification of common primary dimensions of SQ in HE (Research Objective 3). These dimensions will be further refined through findings from the qualitative study, which explores ME students' perceptions of their university experience (Research Objective 1) and

identifies factors influencing their perceptions of the quality of, and satisfaction with, HE (Research Objective 2). Together, the literature and qualitative findings will inform the development of a new conceptual framework and measurement scale designed specifically to evaluate SQ in UK HE from the perspective of ME students (Research Objective 4)

In Chapter 3 the methodology for this study, which is designed to answer the research questions and build knowledge by generating insights into identifying the factors influencing ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and their levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their university experience, is discussed. Ultimately, this will lead to the development of a new SQ model and SQ measurement scale tailored to ME students.

3 Methodology

Methodology relates to how a particular piece of research should be undertaken, i.e., it is the critical study of research methods and their use (Saunders et al., 2007). It refers to the choice of research strategy and consists of the conceptual approach, the methods to be used, and the data sources (Grix, 2001).

This chapter presents the methodology for the study's primary research to explore ME students' perceptions of the SQ of, and satisfaction with, their university experience and builds upon the proposed conceptual framework provided in chapter 2. The methodology for this study is designed to provide a philosophical foundation and research strategy that enables the identification of factors influencing ME students' perceptions of SQ in HE. The findings will help determine the key dimensions of SQ ME students consider important within UK HE. These insights will inform the development of both a new conceptual framework and a SQ scale tailored to measuring ME students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience, helping to address the knowledge gap in this area.

The chapter begins by exploring the philosophical underpinning, i.e., the ontological and epistemological assumptions that are the foundation of any research and the research philosophies, which shape the methodological choices of a study. Following this, the overall research approach is introduced, which leads into a detailed discussion and justification of the selected research strategy, data collection methods and sampling strategy. Finally, the chapter concludes with a comprehensive exploration of the data analysis and a reflective discussion of ethical considerations relevant to the conduct of this research.

3.1 Philosophical underpinning

Each research project is based on a number of assumptions regarding the realities that are being investigated (ontology), beliefs about human knowledge (epistemology), and the extent and ways that the researcher's own values influence the research (axiology) (Saunders et al., 2019). These ontological and epistemological assumptions influence

the choice of methodology, specifically, they influence how the research question(s) are understood, what methods are used and how findings are interpreted (Crotty, 1998). Different ontological and epistemological views lead to different views of the same social phenomena, thus will lead to the utilisation of different methodologies (Grix, 2001).

3.1.1 Ontological assumptions

Ontology refers to assumptions about the nature of reality (Saunders et al., 2019). It is about what sort of things exist in the social world and assumptions about the form and nature of that social reality, i.e., it is the image of social reality upon which a theory is based (Grix, 2001). Ontology relates to the type of reality that exists, what it looks like, the entities within this reality and how the entities interact (Tronvoll et al., 2011).

Ontological assumptions are important as they affect how research objects are seen or studied (Saunders et al., 2019). Consequently, it can be suggested that a researcher's view of reality is the basis of all their other assumptions, thus, their ontological position will influence their epistemological views and the methodological approaches they will choose (Tronvoll et al., 2011). There are two ontological positions:

- **Objectivism** incorporates the assumptions of the natural sciences and argues that "social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 21). In other words, there is an objective reality 'out there', which exists independent of consciousness (Grey, 2014).
- **Subjectivism** (also called *constructivism* or *constructionism*) on the other hand, contends that "social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 22). Therefore, it implies that social phenomena are produced through social interaction and are in a constant state of revision (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.1.2 Epistemological assumptions

Having considered the juxtaposed ontologies objectivism and subjectivism in the previous section, in this section the epistemological assumptions are explored. Epistemology is concerned with assumptions about knowledge, i.e., what is acceptable, valid and legitimate knowledge (Saunders et al, 2019), and focuses on the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, or how what is assumed to exist can be known (Grix, 2001). Whilst ontology is about what we understand reality to be and deals with questions such as what exists and what are accepted facts, epistemology is about how we know what we know and deals with questions such as what can we know and how can we know it. Therefore, epistemology focuses on the knowledge-gathering process. There are two contrasting epistemological positions, positivism and interpretivism. *Positivism* proposes “the application of the methods of natural science to the study of social reality” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 15). Thus, proponents of positivism believe that social phenomena should be assessed and measured in an objective way. By contrast, proponents of *interpretivism* believe that “a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural science and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 17).

3.2 Research philosophy

In this section the five major research philosophies will be discussed. A research philosophy describes the beliefs and assumptions the research is built on and thus, forms the foundation of any study. It refers to the development of knowledge in a particular field of study. According to Saunders et al. (2019) there are five major research philosophies, which can be distinguished from an ontological or epistemological point of view, which are positivism, interpretivism, critical realism, postmodernism and pragmatism (Saunders et al., 2007). These five philosophies will be examined in turn below.

Positivism

Positivism proposes “the application of the methods of natural science to the study of social reality” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 15). Proponents of positivism believe that social phenomena should be assessed and measured in an objective way. This approach allows for cause-and-effect relationships to create facts and laws which produces unambiguous and accurate knowledge. According to Gill and Johnson (2010) even if applied to organisational and social settings, positivism would result in universal laws to predict behaviour. To summarise, the positivist philosophy is intended for studies where variables can be controlled and measured precisely to create those universal laws.

Interpretivism

By contrast, proponents of interpretivism believe that “a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural science and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 17). Social actors create ‘meanings’ from their interaction with the world and thus, different cultural backgrounds and experiences impact human constructs, resulting in different social realities. Thus, interpretivist research encompasses viewing the world from different ‘player’ perspectives with a focus on narratives and interpretations with researchers also being subjective as they too, are part of this world (Saunders et al., 2019). That is, reality is basically subjective and varies across contexts.

However, Pawson (1999) argues that the notion that positivism and interpretivism have nothing in common and therefore are irreconcilable is a methodological myth. They outline three key reasons why this is a false dichotomy. First, both approaches face identical problems and thus, need to adopt common solutions. Second, a lot of research has successfully employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Third, methodological disputes are more like ‘family feuds’, i.e., they are more likely to occur within, rather than between paradigms (Pawson, 1999). They therefore propose that it is better if positivism and interpretivism are perceived as being on a scale rather than as falling into two completely separate compartments.

Critical realism

Developed as a critique of positivism, it originates from the work of Bhaskar (1978). Critical realism is underpinned by empirical experience and observations that shape events (Reed, 2005). It sees reality as external and independent, but not directly accessible through observations. What people experience are 'sensations', which are representations of what is real, and which can be quite deceptive (Saunders et al., 2019). To understand the world, sensations and events are experienced, and then mental processing after the event, called 'retroduction' (Reed, 2005), takes place, which gives meaning to these events in retrospect. It focuses on facts being of a social construction and acknowledges that researchers are by nature subjective and their findings subject to interpretations.

Post-Modernism

Post-modernism emerged from an extreme critique of positivism and emphasises the role of language and power relations. It seeks to question accepted ways of thinking and tries to give voice to alternative marginalised views (Saunders et al., 2019). It argues that dominant ways of thinking and doing are not necessarily the 'best', but rather they are seen as that by a group of people at that time, thereby suppressing other perspectives that could create alternative worlds and truths (Saunders et al., 2019). Thus, post-modernism challenges the established ways of thinking and knowing to make the marginalised and suppressed ways of thinking and knowing more visible (Saunders et al., 2019).

Pragmatism

Saunders et al. (2007) suggest that debates on epistemology and ontology are often about the choice between either the positivist or the interpretivist research philosophy. However, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009) argue that it is better to think of the philosophy adopted as a continuum rather than opposing positions. Thus, in terms of ontology and epistemology, pragmatism is not committed to a single philosophy or reality (Creswell, 2009), rather it attempts to reconcile both objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders et al., 2019). Reality is actively created as individuals act in the world; thus, it is ever changing based on their experience (Frey, 2018). Pragmatism believes in the existence of one reality, but multiple perceptions of that reality

(Maarouf, 2019). Truth is what works at the time, instead of being based in a duality between reality independent of the mind or within the mind (Creswell, 2009).

Pragmatism posits that knowledge is both socially constructed and based upon the reality of the world we experience and live in (Johnson et al., 2007). Therefore, for this research it is believed SQ is a construct that exists independently from social actors, however different actors have different perceptions of SQ, and these perceptions change over time based on their experience.

Moreover, pragmatism supposes that research methods are determined by the best way to obtain useful and workable answers to the research questions being asked rather than by assumptions based on one paradigm or another (Gray, 2014). Because one approach may be more suitable than the other for answering the research question (Saunders et al., 2007), pragmatism is less interested in whether a proposition fits a particular ontology, but is more concerned with whether it suits a purpose and can generate meaningful action (Rorty, 1998). Pragmatism is interested in solving practical problems in the real world, thus it is concerned with 'what works' (Maarouf, 2019). SQ research is a pragmatic discipline with an emphasis on practical research, focusing predominantly on practical issues with managerial relevance, such as measuring and managing SQ (Tronvoll et al., 2011). Likewise, this study is concerned with exploring a practical problem and finding workable solutions to that problem, namely the aim of this study is to explore ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with, their university experience in order to develop a SQ conceptual framework and SQ scale to specifically measure ME students' perceptions of SQ in HE. Together, the SQ framework and SQ scale will provide HEIs with a practical student-centred, stakeholder-informed measurement tool, yielding insights into how ME students experience and evaluate institutional services. These insights can be used to inform strategic planning, enabling HEIs to identify areas for enhancement and implement initiatives aimed at improving ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction with their university experience. Thus, the framework and scale allow HEIs to design, refine, and manage services in ways that are responsive to the diverse needs of their student body. Although the development of the SQ model and scale are grounded in ME students' views, this research is not using critical theory because, unlike critical theory, the purpose of this research is not to give ME

students a direct voice, but rather it is to provide HEIs with a tool to measure ME students' perceptions that is based on ME students' perspectives. Therefore, pragmatism is considered a suitable philosophical position to adopt for this study.

Furthermore, as pragmatism focuses on the problem to be researched and the consequences of the research, it permits mixing paradigms, assumptions, approaches and data collection methods and analysis (Creswell, 2014). Thus, pragmatism facilitates the use of mixed methods required to investigate the problem within the longer-term context of this research. This exploratory study, which is qualitative in nature, represents the first phase of a larger mixed-method project. This study aims to identify critical factors of SQ from a ME students' perspective in order to develop a new SQ framework and scale in the context of ME students' university experience. The second phase, which is beyond the scope of this thesis, will consist of quantitative research using the SQ scale developed in the first phase, which will be included in a self-administered SQ questionnaire, to measure ME students' perceptions of quality and satisfaction/ dissatisfaction with their university experience.

3.3 Research approach

The research approach is concerned with the relationship between theory and research. The choice of research approach depends on the research problem and the phenomenon under investigation (Saunders et al., 2007). According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2002) selecting an appropriate research approach is crucial for three main reasons. First, it enables researchers to make informed decisions about their research design. Second, it assists in determining which research strategies are suitable, and more importantly, which ones are not. Third, familiarity with different research traditions allows researchers to tailor their design to practical constraints, such as limited access to data or lack of prior knowledge of the topic.

There are three different research approaches, deduction, induction and abduction. A deductive approach is about testing theory. Thus, it represents a 'top-down' approach, which begins with the theory and then moves to empirical observations (Panke, 2018). Based on what is known about a particular area, and its theoretical

considerations, one or more hypotheses are deduced, which must then be subjected to empirical scrutiny (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The theory and the hypotheses deduced from it then drive data collection. In other words, research starts with the theory acquired from literature or earlier empirical studies, then hypotheses are formulated and tested, and finally conclusions are drawn. By contrast, an inductive approach is about building theory (Saunders et al., 2007). Therefore, an inductive approach is a 'bottom-up' approach (Panke, 2018). In other words, it answers the research question by starting with empirical observations within an exploratory study, then, based on the insights of the observations, develops explanations and theory (Panke, 2018). Thus, unlike a deductive approach, an inductive approach does not try to corroborate or falsify a theory, but attempts to establish patterns, consistencies and meanings through a process of gathering data (Gray, 2014). An inductive approach is typically associated with qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

However, an increasingly common alternative approach to induction is abduction (van Hulst & Visser, 2025). Abduction originates from pragmatism (Peirce, 1974) and aims to find a middle ground between deduction and induction (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) by conducting parallel and equal engagement with empirical data and extant theoretical understanding (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). An abductive research approach is an iterative approach that starts with an unexpected, surprising or puzzling observation based on the researcher's existing knowledge of the phenomenon. Then, moving back and forth iteratively between empirical data and established theory to find the most plausible explanation leads to new insights or refinement of an existing theory or theoretical framework (van Hulst & Visser, 2025). Thus, Timmermans and Tavory (2012) argue that it is important that researchers familiarise themselves with theories relevant to their topic at the outset and throughout the research.

This research uses an abductive approach. First, pertinent literature was reviewed to understand the key concepts underpinning this research, such as SQ, customer satisfaction and different conceptualisations of quality in HE. Additionally, SQ models, both generic and HE-specific, were also explored to identify what models exist, if any of the existing models could be utilised for this study and to examine the commonly identified SQ dimensions. The review of the literature resulted in the development of

the proposed conceptual framework (see section 2.10). Then, an exploratory qualitative study was conducted to identify factors that specifically affect ME students' perceptions of, and satisfaction with, their university experience. Next, working back and forth iteratively between the findings of the study and the literature relating to SQ in HE, student satisfaction, student engagement, retention and success, and ME students' university experience, a SQ framework and a SQ scale were developed to specifically evaluate ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their university experience.

3.4 Research strategy

The research strategy is closely linked to the research approach. There are two types of research strategies: qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative research emphasises quantification in the collection and analysis of data, whilst qualitative research emphasises words rather than quantification (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For many researchers, the differences between the two approaches go deeper: qualitative and quantitative research differ in terms of the role of theory and their epistemological and ontological assumptions and thus, can be seen as two distinctive groups of research strategies (Bryman, 2016). Quantitative research emphasises the deductive approach, as it focuses on the testing of theories. It incorporates the practices and norms of the natural scientific model, in particular positivism, and views social reality as an external, objective reality (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Conversely, qualitative research emphasises the inductive approach as it focuses on the generation of theories. Qualitative research rejects the practices and norms of the natural scientific model and emphasises the ways in which individuals interpret their social world. Thus, social reality is viewed as a constantly changing creation of individual social actors (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, an alternative to the inductive approach is the abductive approach. The abductive approach is an iterative process, which develops new theoretical propositions to explain a set of observations, which cannot be explained by a previous proposition or theoretical framework (DePoy & Gitlin, 2016). In other words, it starts with surprising observations and then works back and forth iteratively between data and existing theory to find the most plausible explanation, often leading to new insights or refined theories (van Hulst & Visser, 2025).

This research is an exploratory study, which utilises a qualitative research strategy. An exploratory study is very useful when there is the need to explore a phenomenon in a new light, to seek new insights and to clarify understanding of a problem (Robson, 2002). The purpose of the exploratory study is to identify critical factors or determinants of SQ from ME students' perspectives in order to develop a new SQ framework and scale in the context of ME students' HE experience. There are several ways of conducting exploratory research, such as a search of the literature, interviewing 'experts', conducting focus groups or one-to-one in-depth interviews (Saunders et al., 2007, Sreejesh et al., 2014).

3.5 Data Collection Method

For this exploratory study both primary and secondary data are utilised to support a comprehensive approach to answering the research questions and meet the research objectives (Section 1.3). Secondary sources are utilised for an extensive search of the literature to identify SQ factors or determinants. These secondary sources consist of, but were not limited to, literature relating to SQ and student satisfaction in HE, ME students' university experience and educational theories. These sources provide theoretical context, inform the development of the conceptual framework (Chapter 2) and highlight gaps in current knowledge. In addition, primary data is collected through interviews with ME students, offering in-depth insights into their experiences, perceptions of SQ, and factors influencing satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This ensures the findings are directly relevant to the study's aim and objectives, specifically, to determine critical SQ factors from ME students' perspectives to develop a new SQ framework and SQ scale for evaluating ME students' perceived SQ in HE. By integrating both data types, the study combines the depth of primary research with the breadth of secondary sources, strengthening the analysis and supporting the development of a new SQ model and measurement scale customised to ME students in UK HE.

Choosing an appropriate data collection method is essential for achieving the research objectives. There are quantitative and qualitative methods for collecting. Quantitative

data collection methods include questionnaires and structured interviews. Qualitative data collection methods, on the other hand, include semi-structured or unstructured interviews, focus groups and observations.

As this is a qualitative study with the aim to identify ME students' perceptions of their HE experience and to elicit critical SQ factors from ME students' perspectives, a qualitative data collection method needed to be utilised in order to achieve the research objectives.

Originally, to gather the qualitative data, four focus groups comprising five to seven ME undergraduate students were planned. However, due to a number of unforeseen difficulties it was not possible to hold focus groups. For instance, it turned out to be extremely difficult to recruit sufficient numbers of participants to conduct focus groups as ME undergraduate students seemed very reluctant to commit to participating in the study. Besides, even from the number of initial expressions of interest it proved very difficult to organise times when sufficient numbers of students were available to attend focus groups. Consequently, it was decided that as it was not possible to hold a sufficient number of focus groups and it would be more feasible to conduct interviews with individual ME students instead. The use of interviews instead of focus groups was deemed appropriate because both methods allow to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, views and opinions. Moreover, it avoids the potential for focus group members' attitudes and feelings to be influenced by each other.

The aim of an interview is for the interviewer to elicit from the interviewee information about the interviewees' behaviours, attitudes, norms, beliefs and values (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Gray (2014) argues that if the objective of the research is to explore people's views and attitudes then using interviews may be the best approach. Understanding people's lived experiences and the meaning they make of these experiences is at the heart of an interview. Thus, a well-conducted interview is an excellent tool for eliciting rich data on participants' perspectives, views, attitudes and the meanings that underpin their lives and behaviours (Gray, 2014). There are several different types of interviews, which can range from highly formalised and structured interviews to more informal and unstructured conversations (Saunders et al., 2007).

Thus, depending on the level of formality and structure, interviews can be categorised as either structured, semi-structured or unstructured (in-depth) interviews (Saunders et al., 2007).

In a structured interview the interviewer reads out a predetermined and standardised, or identical, set of questions exactly, and in the same order, as they are printed on the interview schedule (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The type of questions usually used in a structured interview are closed questions or closed-ended questions, i.e., questions have pre-coded answers (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This is why structured interviews are mainly used to collect quantifiable data and thus, are often referred to as quantitative interviews (Saunders et al., 2007). By contrast, semi-structured and unstructured interviews are used to collect qualitative data and thus, are referred to as qualitative interviews (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer has a series of questions to be covered in the form of an interview schedule. However, the interviewer may not ask all questions in each interview, and the sequence of the questions may vary depending on what direction the interview takes or the flow of the conversation (Gray, 2014; Saunders et al., 2007). Generally, though all questions will be asked and a similar wording will be used from interview to interview (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, the interviewer also has some flexibility to ask further questions in response to interviewees answers (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This is because even though the interviewer has an interview schedule, which contains the topics to be covered, interviewees have a lot of leeway in how they respond (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Unstructured, or in-depth interviews are usually used to explore an issue or topic in-depth. Although generally there is no list of predetermined questions, the interviewer needs to have an idea what aspects or issues are going to be explored in the interview, however, interviewees are allowed to talk freely about their views, opinions or perceptions in relation to the topic (Gray, 2014).

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), the interview as a data collection instrument is probably the most widely used in qualitative research. Thus, for this study it was considered appropriate to utilise interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen specifically for this study because although a clear focus of the study already existed, the semi-structured interviews allowed for more specific aspects related to the

research question to be investigated (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Besides, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to ‘probe’ answers, i.e., ask interviewees to explain, or build on, their responses (Saunders et al., 2007). This can lead the interview into areas that had not previously been considered, but which might be significant for understanding their perspectives and which are important for addressing the research questions (Saunders et al., 2007).

The semi-structured interviews took place between Tuesday 2nd May and Friday 9th June 2023. Interviews were conducted online via MS Teams (see Table 3.1: interview timetable) and lasted between one and one and a half hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. As the interviews were semi-structured in nature, an interview schedule ([Appendix 1](#)) developed from the literature was followed. Participants were asked about their perceptions of their university experience, and to discuss aspects related to services and facilities offered by their HEIs. In particular, interview questions were concerned with exploring participants’ overall experiences with their HEIs, their course, teaching and learning strategies, their opinions regarding academic staff and peers, and available support mechanisms. Although, an interview schedule was used, the conversation was open-ended in order to elicit interviewees’ in-depth perspectives. However, the researcher played an active part in the interviews asking for clarification or further explanation if necessary by using questions such as “Can you give an example?”, “Can you elaborate?” and “Why do you think that is?” Nonetheless, care was taken not to be directive or to ask leading questions.

Table 3.1: Interview Timetable

SSI 01	Tue 2 May	10am – 11.30am
SSI 03	Wed 3 May	4pm – 5.30pm
SSI 04	Wed 10 May	10am – 12pm
SSI 05	Wed 10 May	1pm – 2.30pm
SSI 08	Tue 16 May	11am – 12.30pm
SSI 06	Wed 17 May	10am – 11.30pm
SSI 07	Mon 22 May	11am – 12.30pm
SSI 12	Tue 23 May	2pm – 3.30pm
SSI 09	Wed 24 May	2pm – 3.30pm
SSI 02	Thurs 25 May	11am – 12.30pm
SSI 11	Thurs 8 June	2pm – 3.30pm
SSI 10	Fri 9 June	12pm – 1.30pm

One important consideration regarding the semi-structured interviews was the ‘race of interviewer effect’ and ‘racial matching’ of researcher and participant in interviews. The race of interviewer effect is something to be aware of as it suggests that participants tend to avoid giving answers they believe might offend an interviewer from a different ethnical or racial background and that essentially participants tend to be franker in their responses with interviewers from their own ethnicity and race (Hachett & Schuman, 1975). Therefore, Schaeffer (1980) argues that due to the race of interviewer effect when racial topics are included in an interview racial matching of interviewer and interviewee is recommended. This is based on the assumption that a racially matched researcher will have better co-operation, better understanding and a genuine interest in the welfare of their ethnic community (Papadopoulos & Lees, 2002). Similarly, many studies in relation to ME students’ experiences consider it important that interviews are carried out by an individual from a ME background (Givens et al., 1999) because it is believed that this encourages ME students to identify with that researcher, which makes it more likely they share their experiences (Osler, 1999). However, racial matching of interviewer and interviewee was not possible for this research, but a reflexive approach to this research was employed and as such the researcher considered their position as a White researcher. Ultimately, in line with Givens and Bennett (2004), it was considered that in relation to this study the researcher’s attitudes, values, skills and approach were more important than their ethnicity. Furthermore, the notion that because of the researcher’s White ethnicity they did not have a genuine interest in ME students’ experiences was rejected. The purpose of this research is to create a better understanding of ME students’ HE experiences, thus more important than the researcher’s ethnicity was to take a reflexive approach and be open with participants and showing a genuine interest in their views and experiences. Besides, Bale et al. (2020) argue that the onus should not lie with researchers from ME backgrounds to undertake research relating to ME topics, but that it is the responsibility of all researchers regardless of their ethnic background to undertake this kind of research.

3.6 Sampling

As the participants were drawn from a population where numbers in subgroups could be very small, for this research the use of the ME category will continue, while being mindful that it is problematic. Therefore, the research population consisted of ME students in England. However, as it would not have been possible to speak to every person in the research population, it was necessary to choose a smaller, more manageable number of participants, a so-called sample (Dawson, 2009), which had characteristics that were similar or identical to those of the population (Gray, 2014).

Thus, for this exploratory qualitative study, purposive sampling was undertaken with a specific predetermined group in mind. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling, i.e., not all members of the population have an equal chance of being selected and some units are more likely to be selected than others (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This form of sampling is commonly used in qualitative research and does not focus on being proportional or representative of the group. The purpose of the sample is to collect data which enhances knowledge and understanding of human experience by examining specific cases and identifying common themes from these cases (Jessop & Williams, 2009). For this study participants with particular characteristics were required to gain valuable information that could not be obtained otherwise (Gray, 2014). Thus, ME students were deliberately targeted for this study.

Even though, originally it had been planned that participants were going to be drawn from a variety of HEIs accessed through personal contacts at the institutions, the NUS and through advertising on social media, e.g., LinkedIn, this proved to be very difficult. Unfortunately, the NUS was not able to help with individual research and although large numbers of EDI (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion) departments, SUs (Student Unions) and student societies of various HEIs were emailed, only very few responses were received. Besides, even when responses were received, participant recruitment remained a constant challenge. Students appeared reluctant to participate in this research. This may have been due to an unwillingness to be defined by ethnicity and a distrust of targeted discussion of ME issues (Davies & Garrett, 2012) or maybe, it may have been perceived as yet another way of being made to feel 'other' or 'different'.

Furthermore, initially the sample was focused on undergraduate ME students at levels 4, 5 and 6 of study in England, designated as home students. However, as it proved difficult to recruit sufficient numbers of participants, despite many months trying, it was decided to also include postgraduate students in this research. Although, undergraduate and postgraduate degrees differ from each other in terms of depth and level of complexity of the programmes and the amount of self-directed learning, both undergraduates' and postgraduates' experiences of HE are likely to be fairly similar. Similarly, it was deemed appropriate to also include international students in this study. Because even though the educational and cultural backgrounds of international students are likely to be different from those of home students, both groups of students share the same learning environment and have similar university experiences. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 12 ME students overall, with five undergraduate and seven postgraduate students and nine designated as home students and three international students.

The participants for this study were recruited on a voluntary basis. Participants self-identified as ME students, studying various courses at a variety of HEIs from diverse mission groups. The participants sample displayed the following demographic characteristics (see also Table 3.2 which provides a profile of each of the participants using individual participant codes for anonymity):

Gender:	8 women and 4 men.
Ethnicity:	3 African, 2 White and Black Caribbean, 2 Indian, 1 Pakistani, 1 White and Black African, 1 White and Asian, 1 Caribbean and 1 Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background.
Domicile:	9 UK-domiciled and 3 international students.
Degree level:	5 undergraduates and 7 postgraduate students.
Mode of study:	11 full-time students and 1 part-time student.

See also Figures 3.1 – 3.5 below for a breakdown of participants' demographic characteristics.

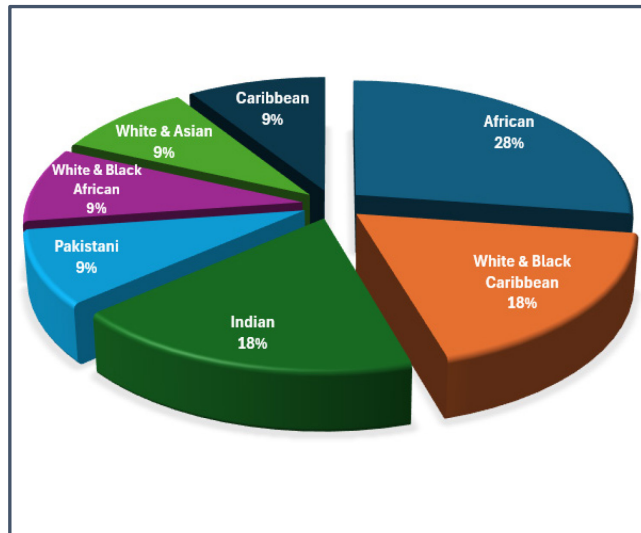


Figure 3.1: Participants by ethnicity

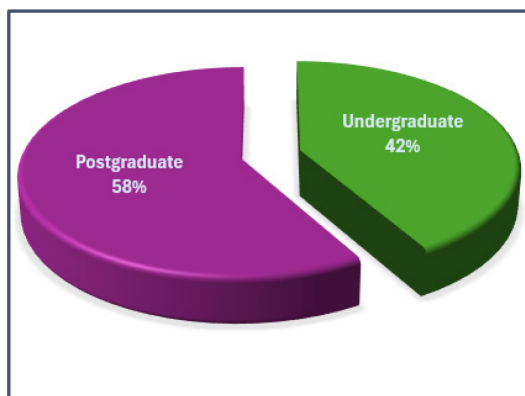


Figure 3.2: Participants by degree type

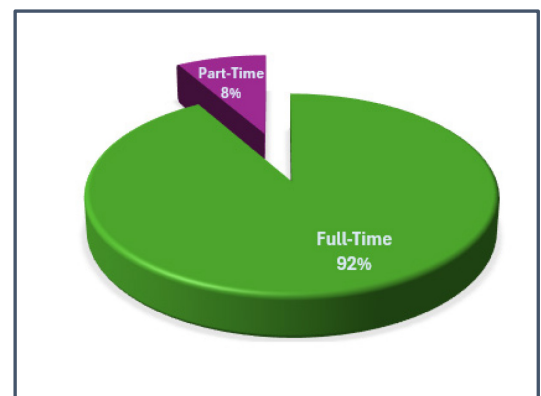


Figure 3.3: Participants by study mode

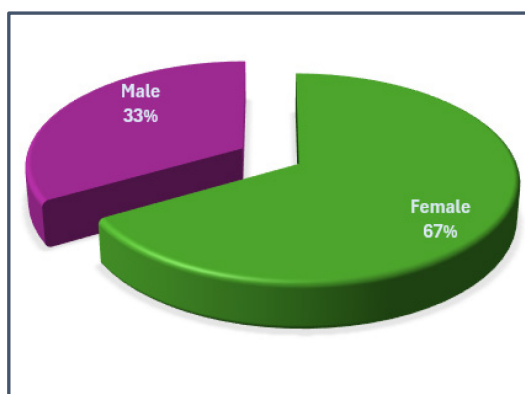


Figure 3.4: Participants by gender

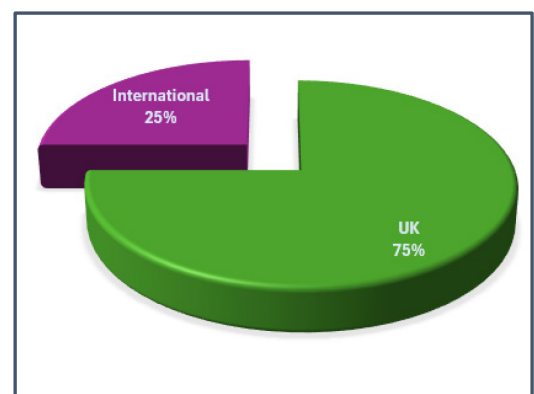


Figure 3.5: Participants by domicile

Table 3.2: Participants' profiles and codes

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Domicile	Degree level	Year of study	Mode of study	HEI mission group	Course	School/Faculty
SSI 1	Female	White and Black Caribbean	26 +	Home	PG		PT	University Alliance	PGCE Early years and primary teaching	School of Education
SSI 2	Female	Pakistani	21 - 23	Home	UG	Year 3	FT	Other	Event Management with Tourism	Business School
SSI 3	Female	White and Black African	26 +	Home	UG	Year 1	FT	MillionPlus	Film, TV and Production	
SSI 4	Male	Any other Black, Black British or Caribbean background	26 +	Home	PG		FT	MillionPlus	MSc by negotiated studies	
SSI 5	Female	African	26 +	Int	PG		FT	University Alliance	MSc Entrepreneurship and Business Development	Business School
SSI 6	Female	African	26 +	Home	UG	Year 1	FT	MillionPlus	BSc Social Work	School of Social Science
SSI 7	Male	Indian	24 – 25	Int	PG		FT	University Alliance	MBA	Business School
SSI 8	Female	Caribbean	26 +	Home	PG		FT	MillionPlus	BA in Education	School of Social Sciences and Professions
SSI 9	Male	African	26 +	Home	UG	Year 2	FT	MillionPlus	Criminology	School of Humanities and Social Science
SSI 10	Female	White and Black Caribbean	21 - 23	Home	PG		FT	Russell Group	MSc Int. Development (Poverty, Inequality and Development)	School of Environment, Education and Development
SSI 11	Male	Indian	26 +	Int	PG		FT	University Alliance	MSc Advanced Computer Science	School of Computing
SSI 12	Female	White and Asian	18 - 20	Home	UG	Year 3	FT	Other	BA in Criminology	Law and Criminology Department

Although a sample size of 12 ME students might seem a relatively small number, the focus of qualitative research is to gain insights rather than be able to make generalisations. Two key considerations guide sampling in qualitative research: appropriateness and adequacy (Morse & Field, 1995), whereby an adequate sample is one that sufficiently answers the research question (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Thus, the emphasis is less on sample size and more on sample adequacy, i.e., reaching data saturation, the point at which sufficient depth and breadth of information has been achieved (Bowen, 2008). Consequently, Guest et al. (2006) argue that saturation has become the 'gold standard' for determining purposive sample sizes in qualitative research. The concept of saturation originates from Glaser & Strauss' (1967) notion of 'theoretical saturation' in grounded theory, which refers to "the point at which gathering more data about a theoretical construct reveals no new properties, nor yields any further theoretical insights about the emerging grounded theory" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 611). However, in a broader context saturation is typically called 'data saturation' or 'thematic saturation' (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022) and is generally defined as 'information redundancy' (Braun & Clarke, 2019), i.e., the point at which a dataset does not provide any new information, codes or themes, which relate to the research question (Constantinou et al., 2017). In other words, data begin to repeat, which makes further data collection redundant, signifying that an adequate sample size has been reached (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Guest et al. (2006) argue that, despite the fact that saturation has become the 'gold standard' of quality in qualitative research, there is only limited practical guidance on how to determine when saturation has been reached and for estimating sample sizes for purposively sampled interviews in the literature. Subsequently, several researchers, have tried to provide some guidance on how many interviews need to be conducted in order to achieve data saturation for a thematic analysis (TA), which was the method used for identifying, analysing and reporting themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) within the qualitative data elicited from the semi-structured interviews. For example, Guest et al. (2006) suggest that under certain conditions saturation occurs between six to 12 interviews. Firstly, there has to be a certain degree of structure within the interviews, i.e., all participants need to be asked a similar set of questions, otherwise data saturation can never be achieved (Guest et al., 2006). Secondly, the sample needs to be relatively homogenous, which is generally the

case with purposive samples as participants are, by definition, chosen according to some common characteristics (Guest et al., 2006). In the case of this research, interviews were semi-structured in nature, thus all participants were asked similar questions, and the sample was relatively homogeneous in the sense that all participants were ME students studying at English HEIs and thus, were likely to have similar experiences of HE. Hennink & Kaiser (2022) conducted a systematic review of studies that empirically assessed saturation in qualitative research. They found that despite varied research topics and approaches to assessing saturation, the sample size for saturation ranged between five and 24 interviews. Other 'data saturation experiments' for or with TA have also concluded that data saturation can be achieved with similar sized samples of interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2019). For instance, Constantinou et al. (2017, p. 582) suggest that "all possible themes" were found after seven interviews. Francis et al. (2010) propose the use of a 10 + 3 criterion to determine the sample size in theory-based analysis. Ten refers to the size of the initial analysis sample, i.e., the sample size at which the first round of analysis will be completed. The + 3 is the 'stopping criterion', i.e., the number of interviews without any additional themes or ideas emerging, which signifies that data saturation has been achieved (Francis et al., 2010).

This study followed Francis et al.'s (2010) data saturation principles. First an initial analysis sample (n=10) was specified *a priori*. Then the stopping criterion was specified, that is, the number of consecutive interviews after the initial sample without new codes or themes emerging, e.g., three interviews with no new codes, before it could be concluded that data saturation had been reached. Thus, initially it was planned to conduct 10 + 3 semi-structured interviews, however one participant did not attend the interview. Nonetheless, as can be seen from Table 3.3, data saturation was achieved after five interviews as no new codes were identified after that. However, a further seven interviews were conducted to ensure depth and breadth of information.

Table 3.3: Codes identified in each interview

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	SSI 01	SSI 03	SSI 04	SSI 05	SSI 08	SSI 06	SSI 07	SSI 12	SSI 09	SSI 02	SSI 11	SSI 10
					Saturation							
Belonging	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
Equality & Inclusion	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Diversity of staff and students	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Friendships	✓				✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Relationships with peers	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stereotyping/racism/micro-aggressions			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
Academic engagement			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Social involvement	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
Academic staffs' attitudes & behaviours	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Academic staffs' competence & expertise		✓	✓	✓				✓			✓	
Inclusive learning & teaching		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Support & encouragement	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Curriculum content & design			✓	✓								✓
Diverse reading lists					✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
Inclusive & diverse curriculum	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Inclusive & diverse assessments					✓		✓	✓				✓
Assessment deadlines				✓	✓	✓				✓		✓
Assessment guidance & support				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Fair & balanced marking				✓		✓			✓		✓	
Feedback					✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
Non-academic staffs' competence & attitude	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		
Administrative/support systems & processes	✓	✓				✓		✓		✓	✓	
Availability & accessibility of support services	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Facilities & equipment	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

3.7 Data analysis

Although there is no singularly appropriate way to conduct data analysis for qualitative data, analysis is generally an ongoing, iterative process starting in the early stages of data collection and continuing throughout the study (Bradley et al., 2007). Maguire and Delahunt (2017) argue that data analysis is central to qualitative research as the ability of

the researchers to understand, describe and interpret experiences and perceptions is essential for uncovering meaning in a specific context.

This study utilised a thematic analysis (TA) to analyse the qualitative data elicited from the semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79) define a TA as “a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. Mills et al. (2009) argue that TA is a sensemaking approach, and as such it is a way for reducing, managing, organising and summarising large volumes of data without losing the context, for immersing oneself in the data, and for focusing the interpretation of data. One key advantage of TA is that it is a method rather than a methodology, thus it is not tied to a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The aim of a TA is to identify patterns, i.e., themes, that are important in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, rather than simply summarise data, a good thematic analysis should interpret and make sense of the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Themes can be identified in a couple of ways: in an inductive (bottom up) or in a theoretical or deductive (top down) way (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive TA is driven by the data itself, whereas a theoretical or deductive TA is driven by the research question(s) (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). As this study was concerned with identifying what factors impact on ME students’ perceptions of the quality of their HE experience, this was a deductive rather than an inductive TA.

For this study, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework for conducting a TA (Figure 3.6) was used. The first step consisted of becoming familiar with the data, which was achieved by transcribing the recordings of the semi-structured interviews and reading and re-reading the transcripts several times. It is important to immerse oneself in the data to be familiar with the depth and breadth of the content and be able to search for meanings and patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The second step involved the generation of initial codes. Codes are labels that have been assigned to data extracts, e.g., paragraphs, sentences or words, to classify concepts (Bradley et al., 2007), which represent important aspects of the data. Therefore, because data is being organised into meaningful groups, coding is part of the analysis (Tuckett, 2005).

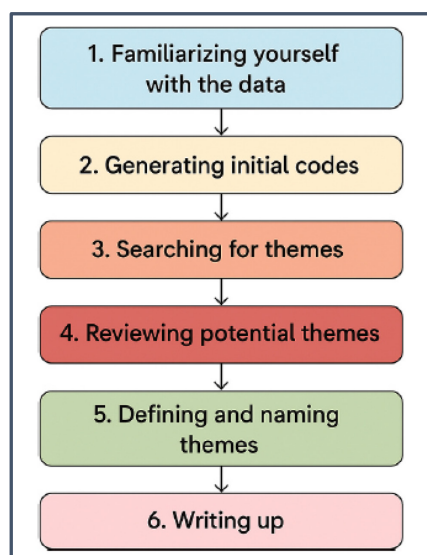


Figure 3.6: Six-step framework for conducting a thematic analysis (Ahmed et al., 2025, adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Although, data was analysed using a deductive rather than an inductive TA, open coding was used as there were no pre-set codes and codes were developed and modified during the coding process. For the coding process, NVivo was used to tag and collate data extracts from the semi-structured interview responses within each code. Figure 3.7 shows an example of codes applied to a short data extract.

Data extract	Coded for
“Yeah, I guess like getting involved with the student life as well, like to being a part of a Student Rep team really helped me to feel that I belonged there. Yeah. And there's definitely opportunities in the university. The university [...] is very diverse though. They really encourage students to get involved.” (SSI 08)	1. Belonging 2. Social involvement 3. Extracurricular activities 4. Inclusion 5. Diversity

Figure 3.7: Data extract, with codes applied

Step three comprised searching for themes. “A theme is a pattern that captures something significant or interesting about the data and/or research question” (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p. 3356). The initially developed codes were clustered together into potential themes and all data extracts relevant to each potential theme were collated. Figure 3.8 shows the

preliminary themes map with the codes associated with each theme. Most codes are associated with just one theme, although some codes are associated with more than one.

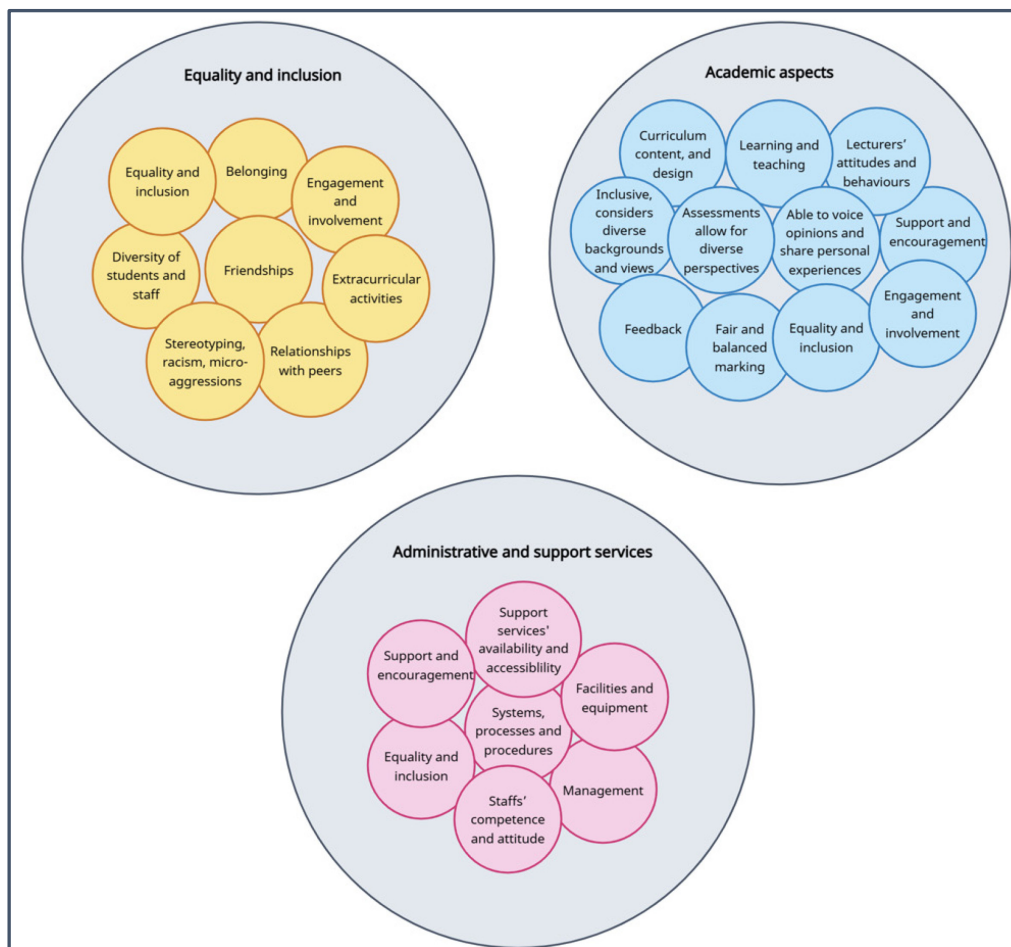


Figure 3.8: Preliminary themes and the codes associated with them

In step four the preliminary themes identified in step three were reviewed and modified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In other words, it was checked if themes made sense relative to the data extracts and the overall data set. This is necessary because during this step it may become apparent that some themes are not really themes, that two themes are very similar and thus need to be collapsed to form just one theme, or that themes need to be broken down into separate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Maguire & Delahunt (2017) make it clear that themes should be coherent and distinct from each other. Consequently, they suggest that it should be considered if the themes make sense, if the data supports the themes, whether the researcher is trying to fit too much into a theme and whether themes are really separate themes or if they overlap. Furthermore, it should be considered if there

are themes within themes (sub-themes) and if there are other themes within the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Based on the above considerations, it became apparent that first, it was more appropriate to divide the theme 'Academic aspects' into two separate themes, namely 'Academic staff' and 'Curriculum'. Second, the theme 'Equality and inclusion' was renamed as 'Belonging'. Figure 3.9 shows the refined themes of belonging, academic staff, curriculum and university support with the associated codes for each theme.

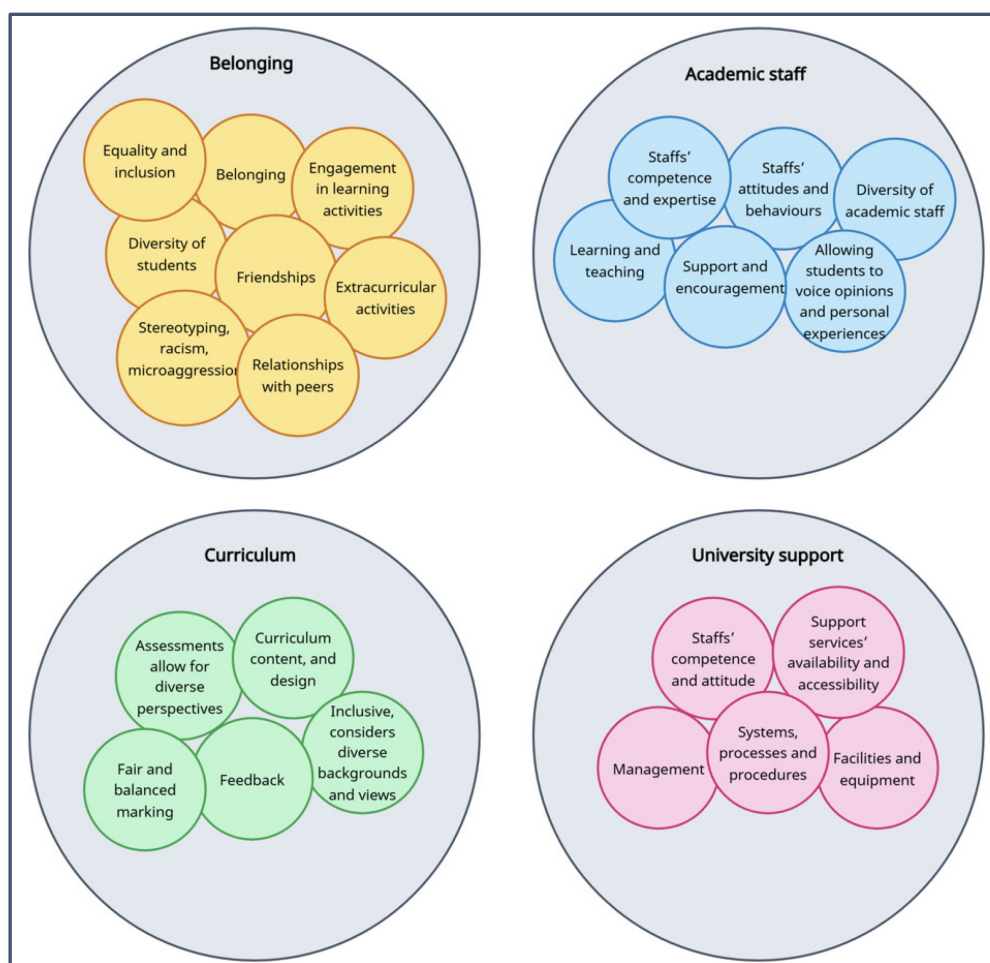


Figure 3.9: Refined themes with associated codes for each theme

Step five began when a satisfactory final thematic map of the data (Figure 3.10) had been produced. In step five, themes were defined and named in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 92) guidance to identify "the 'essence' of what each theme is about" and determine what aspect of the data each theme captures. It is vital to identify what 'story' each theme tells and how it fits into the overall picture (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, it is

important to consider the themes themselves, as well as their relation to the other themes. Additionally, part of the refinement is to identify any sub-themes, i.e., themes within a theme, as can be seen in Table 3.4 below.

Table 3.4: Definition of themes

Theme	What the theme is about – its ‘essence’
Belonging	Aspects of ME students’ HE experience which make them feel welcome and included and that they belong in HE and to their HEI. ‘Belonging’ has three sub-themes, which influence ME students’ sense of belonging: diversity of staff and students, friendships and relationships with peers, and academic engagement and social involvement.
Academic staff	Aspects relating to academic staff which affect ME students’ HE experience. ‘Academic staff’ has two sub-themes: academic staff’s competence and expertise, and their behaviours and attitudes.
Curriculum	Aspects relating to the curriculum which impact on ME students’ HE experience. ‘Curriculum’ has three sub-themes: inclusive, allowing for ME experiences and perspectives, considering diverse backgrounds and fair and balanced assessments, marking and feedback.
University support	Aspects relating to university support services. ‘University support’ has three sub-themes: i.e., available and accessible inclusive support services, individual academic and personal support and competence and attitude of support staff.

Figure 3.10 below shows the final thematic map, which illustrates the relationship between themes.

The sixth and final stage consisted of the write up of the analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step comprised of choosing the themes to be covered, choosing pertinent data extracts, analysing the data extracts, linking findings to the research question and the literature, and writing up the findings and conclusions from the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

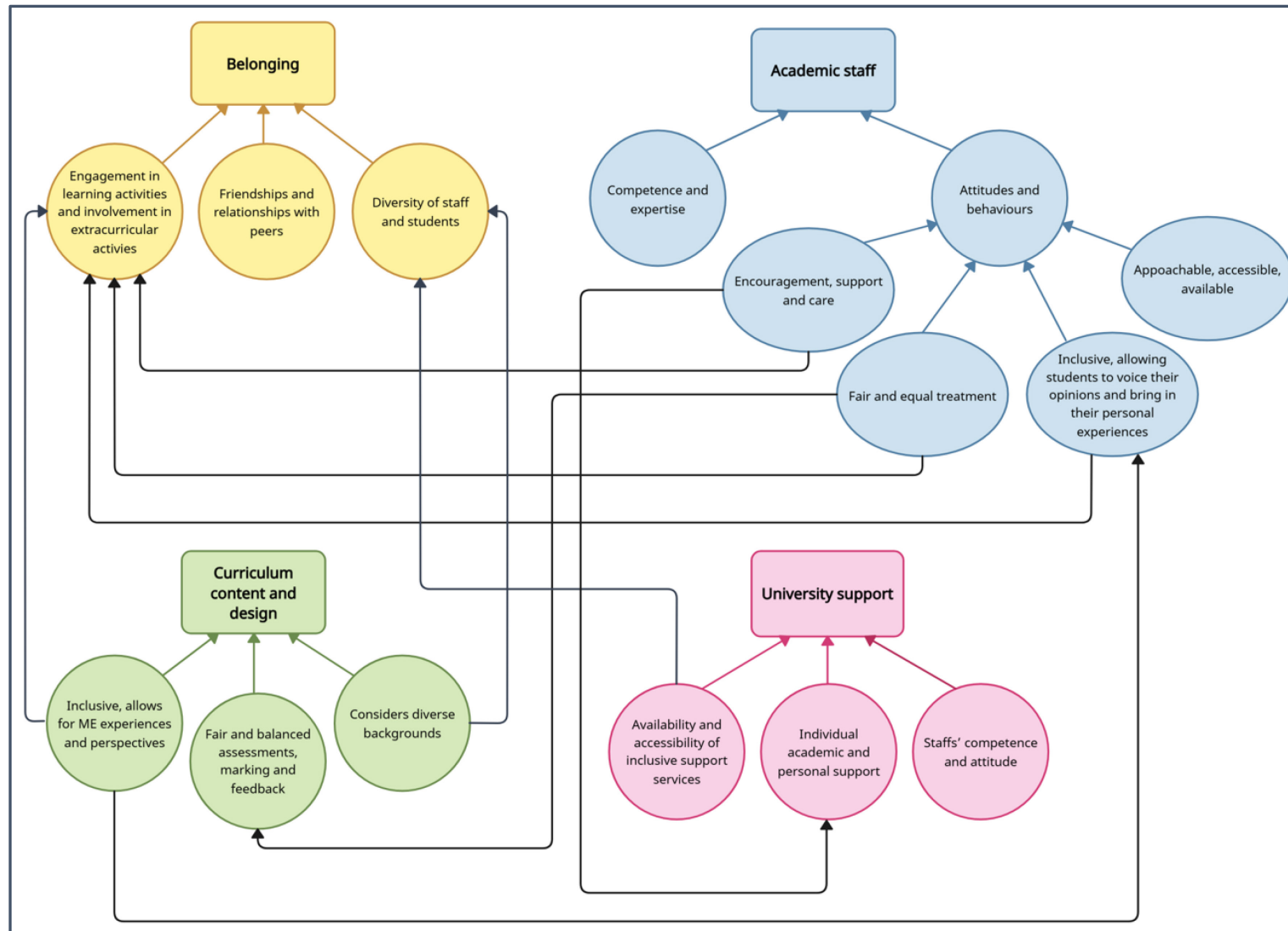


Figure 3.10: Final thematic map showing the relationship between themes.

3.8 Ethical considerations

Due to the nature of this study, i.e., the involvement of human participants (ME students), it is necessary to consider any ethical issues arising from the research. According to Saunders et al. (2007), research ethics are concerned with the appropriateness of the researcher's behaviour in relation to the rights of any individuals affected by the research. Gray (2014, p. 68) argues that research ethics are the "moral principles guiding research". Thus, how the research is designed and conducted needs to be both methodologically sound and morally defensible to all those involved (Gray, 2014). Consequently, the formulation of the research topic, the design of the research, the collection, processing and storage of data, the analysis of data and the write up of findings need to be done in a moral and responsible way (Saunders et al., 2007). Saunders et al. (2007, p. 181) suggest that a number of general ethical issues should be considered, such as the privacy of possible and actual participants, participants' consent to participate and the voluntary nature of participation as well as the right to withdraw partially or completely from the process. The confidentiality of data provided by individuals and participants' anonymity need to also be maintained. Furthermore, reactions of participants to the way in which data is collected and the effects on participants of the way in which data is used, analysed and reported, in particular the avoidance of embarrassment, stress, discomfort, pain and harm should be taken into consideration. Finally, possible deception of participants has to be avoided and the behaviour and objectivity of the researcher needs to be considered (Saunders et al., 2007).

During the ethics approval submission for this research the following key research ethics principles were considered: avoidance of harm (non-maleficence), voluntary participation and the right to withdraw partially or completely from the process, informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity (Saunders et al., 2007).

Moreover, this research fully complies with Sheffield Hallam University's ethics policy and thus, ethics approval was granted by the university research ethics committee (UREC) (Converis number ER43256154). In addition, the above-mentioned ethical considerations were also upheld across the different stages and duration of this research project and are considered below.

Avoidance of harm (non-maleficence)

The first ethical principle that was considered was avoidance of harm (non-maleficence). This means that it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the research does not cause any harm to participants (Saunders et al., 2007). Harm can comprise various forms, such as physical, psychological, economic, and social harm. (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Thus, the possibility of causing harm to participants was carefully assessed and close attention was given to ensuring that the way consent was obtained, confidentiality was preserved, data was collected, used, analysed and reported for this research project did not cause any harm to participants.

Voluntary participation

Regarding voluntary participation, i.e., not forcing anyone to participate in the research, care was taken not to pressurise anyone into taking part in the research, but instead, for students to volunteer to participate. Thus, once ethics approval had been received, an email outlining the purpose and nature of the research as well as the benefits of taking part was sent inviting ME students to email the researcher if they were interested in taking part in the research. Those ME students who expressed an interest in taking part were then emailed a participant information sheet ([Appendix 3](#)), which made it clear to them that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Although, participants were offered an Amazon voucher for taking part in the study, for which ethical approval was given, it was explained to them that the voucher was only intended as a small token of thanks and to reimburse them for their time. Besides, in order to ensure that the voucher did not induce prospective participants to take part in the study it had a value of only £10. It was also made clear that accepting the voucher did not affect their right to withdraw from the study and that they could keep the voucher even if they did decide to withdraw.

Right to withdraw

Regarding the right to withdraw partially or completely from the process, Gray (2014) states that researchers need to make it clear to participants that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point. Therefore, to comply with this ethical principle, students who expressed

interest in taking part in the study were emailed a participant information sheet prior to the interview. The participant information sheet explained that they had the right to withhold information during the semi-structured interviews (e.g., not answer certain questions or discuss certain topics) and/or to withdraw from the interview at any time and without giving a reason and/or withdraw any specific pieces of information for up to two weeks after the interview. Additionally, to reinforce participants' right to withdraw, they were also told about it at the beginning of their semi-structured interviews and again in the participant debrief sheet ([Appendix 4](#)), which was emailed to them after the interview.

Informed consent

Informed consent means that prospective participants are given as much information about the research project as possibly needed to make an informed decision as to whether they want to participate in the study, or not (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In terms of informed consent, the participant information sheet, which was emailed to participants prior to the interview, contained information about the purpose and nature of the study, the use and storage of the data collected, their right to withdraw, confidentiality of records and anonymity of participants. Additionally, in order to make sure prospective participants were aware of their participation rights and the use of data, they were asked to complete, sign and return a consent form ([Appendix 5](#)) prior to the interviews taking place. By signing the consent form participants confirmed they had read the participant information sheet and that they wished to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the participant information sheet.

Furthermore, they confirmed they had understood that they could withdraw from the study and consented to the information they provided (once anonymised) to be used in the current and future research. Obviously, if prospective participants had not returned the consent form, or had not agreed with any of the conditions set out in the participant information sheet, the interview would not have gone ahead. Fortunately, this was not the case for any of the prospective participants and all interviews went ahead as planned. Furthermore, another aspect of informed consent was to ask at the beginning of the interview for participants' permission to record the interview. None of the participants objected to the interviews being recorded, but one participant chose not to switch on the camera on their computer.

Confidentiality of records, anonymity of participants and data management

The final ethical principle that had to be considered was confidentiality of records and anonymity of participants. Bryman and Bell (2011) state that care should be taken to ensure that individuals and organisations are not identified or identifiable.

Participants were assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity in the participant information sheet and also at the beginning of the interview. To protect participants' anonymity, all interview transcripts have been anonymised, specifically, each participant has been assigned a pseudonym and gender-neutral pronouns (i.e., they, them, their) have been used throughout. This approach not only prevents participants' identification, but also aligns with the study's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, any reference to participants' HEIs, or any persons within their HEI, such as names of tutors or support staff, have been removed to ensure that nobody is able to connect the interview data to a specific participant, or their HEI. Gray (2014) posits that issues of anonymity and confidentiality need to also be considered in regard to how data is being stored in order to prevent anyone who is not authorised to access and use data. To ensure confidentiality of records only people working on the research project had access to the data. Besides, all data has been safely stored on a secure, password protected and encrypted Sheffield Hallam University shared drive for the duration of the study. After the research project is finished, data will be removed from the drive and deposited for ten years in the UK Data Archive.

This chapter discussed the research methodology for this study, which helped to answer the research questions and achieve the research aim and objectives. In particular, the research philosophy chosen, as well as the research approach and the research strategy for this study were presented. Furthermore, the data collection method and sampling strategy were outlined. Additionally, ethical considerations were also discussed. The next chapter discusses the findings from the semi-structured interviews.

4 Findings

In this chapter the findings from the semi-structured interviews with 12 ME students are presented. The purpose of the qualitative study was to identify ME students' views regarding their university experience and thus, obtain a better understanding of factors affecting ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with, their university experience with the aim of developing a conceptual model of ME students' HE experience and a SQ measurement scale fit for purpose in this context.

The first section of this chapter gives an overview of participants' reasons for attending university, their feelings about their decision to attend and their future aspirations. In the following sections, the four main themes relating to factors affecting participants' university experience are then explored.

4.1 Overview of participants' motivations and future aspirations

The analysis of the data from the interviews found that despite the general perception that ME students tend to be the first member of their family to have gone to university, this was not the case for the participants in this study. Only a third of the participants were, in fact, the first members of their immediate family to have gone to university, whilst two thirds had parents and/or siblings who had also gone to university.

Reasons for choosing to go to university and for recommending university to friends and family are varied, but many participants stated primarily instrumental reasons such as to prepare themselves for the labour market, to improve their career prospects and gain financial rewards. For example, SSI 04 perceived a university education as a means to acquire the technical skills required for a career in Film production: *"... to hone my skills [...] learn the technical side of stuff"*. Equally, SSI 08 gave gaining knowledge and understanding of the career field as a reason for going to university: *"... more understanding about the career field I wanna go in"*. Consequently, they felt that going to university would help them to find better paid work: *"better myself, to get a better job, better pay"* (SSI 08). Likewise, SSI 06 believed that a degree would help them to advance their career and improve their prospects: *"... further my career [...]"*

progress in life ...". Similarly, SSI 09 believed that a degree would help them to earn more money: "I wanted to go on with my education because I could see most of the people they are in university they're getting good money."

By contrast, some participants chose to go to university and recommend university to others for intrinsic reasons such as personal growth and development, and making a contribution to society. SSI 01 believed that going to university would help students to develop their own identity and determine what they wanted from life: *"... you can find yourself, so like my friends did find themselves at uni and decide what they wanted to do [...] it's good to go and [...] find out who you are."* Similarly, SSI 03 explained that although university was challenging, it was rewarding and led to personal growth: *"... it's a challenge that you, you push yourself to, to complete and it's something that is a challenge and is something that is bringing positivity and growth."* In addition, SSI 02 believed that going to university enabled them to become an independent learner: *"... I liked the whole idea of, you know, independent learning."* In comparison, SSI 06 explained that one reason for going to university was that they wanted *"to make a difference as well."*

When asked how they felt about their decision to have come to university, most participants thought they had made the right choice and were glad they had come to university. SSI 02 felt that they had gained a lot from coming to university such as making friends, learning and personal growth: *"... best decision I made [...] I met people who are now lifelong friends [...] I've learned so much and I grew as a person ...".* Similarly, SSI 03 believed that coming to university was a worthy investment in their future: *"I will never regret this. Absolutely. It's an investment for my future and I know that a big future is expecting me."* Likewise, SSI 10 felt that choosing to come to university had helped them to decide on the career they wanted to pursue and to get to know themselves better: *"... definitely one of the best decisions I've made [...] to have those three years to learn what you want to get into and learn about yourself ...".* Although for some of the participants coming to university had been challenging at times. For instance, for some of the mature participants going back to university meant personal sacrifices in terms of financial burden and putting strain on their personal life: *"... I'm proud of it because it's very hard, back to studies, back to student*

life, less money, less travel, more struggles, more, less time for yourself ...” (SSI 03)

However, despite the struggles and challenges participants were proud of their achievements:

“I’m very proud of my decision [...] it was a really big achievement for me. I honestly didn’t really see myself in a place of higher education when I was younger. [...] to actually finish it and get the degree and to pass everything and yeah, I’m, I’m really proud.” (SSI 08)

When asked if they would choose to go to university again, many participants stated that they were considering returning to university for further studies. For example SSI 06 explained that they would consider doing a Master’s degree: *“I would definitely want to go to university again. Study my Master’s. [...] I think it’s something that I would look into when I’m finished.”* Equally, SSI 08 noted that they would want to go on to a Master’s degree: *“I would definitely go back and do my Master’s.”* This was further supported by SSI 12 who hoped to do their Master’s after finishing their undergraduate degree: *“Yes, I wanna do a Master’s next year hopefully.”* A few participants also stated that they were considering a PhD: *“Yeah I am doing my PhD anyway. I’ve done the BA and I’m doing the Master’s and I’m doing PhD.” (SSI 04).* Likewise, SSI 07 believed that if it would be beneficial for their career they would do a PhD: *“if I ever get, I will get a chance to do PhD or something that adds more value to my profession then I will come to the university again.”* Furthermore, seven participants were already studying a postgraduate degree and, as such, had already chosen to go to university again.

4.2 Themes

Four main themes emerged from the participants’ university experience using a thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step framework. The four themes, which comprise a number of subthemes, as depicted in Figure 4.1 and discussed in more detail in the following sections of this chapter, are:

- **Belonging:** students’ sense of belonging to their HEI, which is affected by the diversity of staff and students, friendships, and relationships with peers from

other ethnic groups, as well as participants' engagement with learning activities and involvement in university life, such as extracurricular activities.

- **Academic staff:** their competence and expertise, as well as their attitudes and behaviours such as being accessible, available and approachable, being caring, supportive and encouraging, treating everyone fairly and equally, and valuing different perspectives and allowing students to bring in their personal experiences.
- **Curriculum:** content, design and delivery, which encompasses how inclusive it is, i.e., does it consider diverse backgrounds and views, and are assessments, marking and feedback fair and balanced.
- **University Support:** availability and accessibility of support services provided by the university, as well as individual academic support and pastoral care given to students.

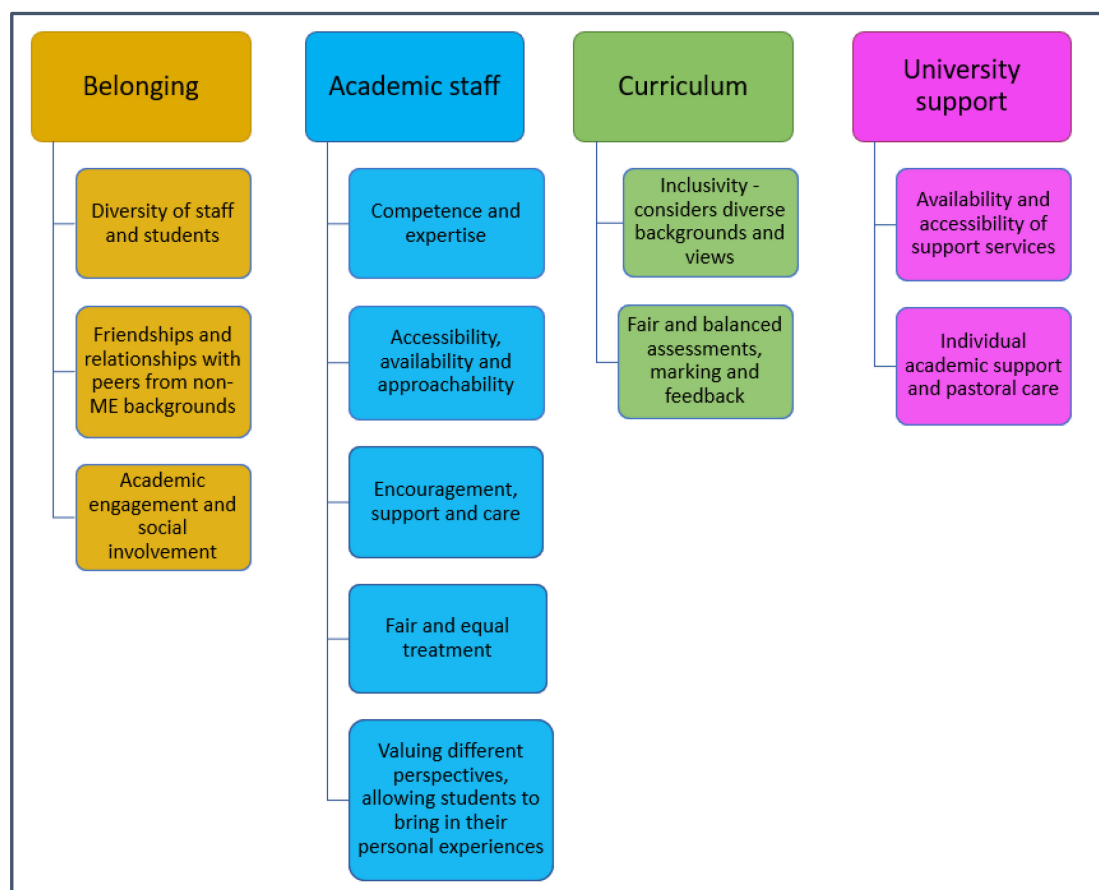


Figure 4.1: Main themes and subthemes from thematic analysis

4.2.1 Theme 1: Belonging

As demonstrated in Figure 4.1 above, the first theme that affects ME students' university experience to have emerged from the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews is 'belonging'. Even though 'sense of belonging' by its very nature is subjective, generally the majority of participants in this study felt they belong. For instance, SSI 06 stated that they felt *"as though I do belong on the course"*. Equally, SSI 07 saw themselves *"like a part of university"*. Likewise, SSI 01 felt that *"it [university] is for us, that we can go"*. Similarly, SSI 08 believed that their HEI is a *"comfortable space for someone like me. I can see myself there"*. In contrast, other participants stated that sometimes they did not feel as though they belong. For instance, SSI 10 when asked if they felt they belonged stated: *"yes and no"*. They explained that when there were no other ME students their sense of belonging was lower compared to when there were other ME students: *"when there was students that looked like me, spoke like me, definitely made it so much better, but when there wasn't, I would say no."* (SSI 10). Likewise, SSI 12 also stated that sometimes they felt like an imposter: *"sometimes I do feel like I belong and sometimes I get like a bit of imposter syndrome, [...] so, I think it depends."*

Interestingly, participants discussed a number of aspects that enhanced their sense of belonging, such as the level of diversity of academic staff and students on their course and at their HEI. Participants also emphasised the importance of friendships and relationships with peers from non-ME backgrounds for fostering a sense of belonging. Another aspect participants perceived as crucial for developing a sense of belonging was engagement with learning activities and involvement in university life such as taking part in extracurricular activities. These aspects will be discussed in more detail in the forthcoming sections.

4.2.1.1 Diversity of academic staff and students

Most participants identified diversity of staff as an important factor affecting their sense of belonging. However, their experiences with regard to diverse academic staff varied widely depending on their course and the type and location of their HEI. The

majority of participants reported that academic staff on their course were predominately White British, *"it's zero people, is not one single lecturer that's not White, male or female, on our film course"* (SSI 04). Similarly, SSI 05 stated that *"on my course there was no African lecturer. [...] So, most of them are British"*. This was further reinforced with SSI 10 suggesting that *"the majority of the lecturers were definitely White British"*. Equally, SSI 12 believed that most academic staff on their course were White: *"I've probably had a handful of staff that were from ethnic minorities."* However, a few participants had very diverse academic staff that were from different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and countries, for example, *"we have a teachers and staff, faculties from all around the globe."* (SSI 07), which was also supported by *"different backgrounds, yes, all of them"* (SSI 09). Nonetheless, regardless of their own experiences, overall most participants felt that there is a lack of diversity amongst academic staff in HE. Consequently, academics are perceived as being predominately White and not representative of the student body. Some participants feel that this lack of diversity of staff *"needs to change"* (SSI 04) and that even though universities are making an effort to recruit more staff from diverse backgrounds, more work needs to be done to increase numbers:

"A lot of the recruitment has been based around the recruitment of diverse members of staff. Um, I'd say it isn't 100% representative of the student body. We are a more diverse student body than the academic team" (SSI 08).

Despite the apparent lack of diversity of academic staff, participants believe that their HEI is welcoming and inclusive and that they try to make everyone feel part of the HE community and feel valued and respected. For example, SSI 02 feels that their university tries to include all students: *"So yeah, I feel like thingy, the university does, you know, try its best to include everyone."* Likewise, SSI 04 noted that everyone is treated with dignity and respect at their HEI: *"... people from all diverse backgrounds are treated with dignity and respect throughout all the time."* Similarly, SSI 08 believes that their HEI is working hard on being diverse and inclusive, which is very important for them as it makes them feel included and valued:

"... they're very big on equality, diversity and inclusion at [name of HEI]. I felt really included and actually for someone like me, like I said that, that's a big thing. Like to feel like my voice is valued, that my opinions are valued".

However, some participants argued that although universities portray themselves as being diverse and inclusive, this is either just for PR: *“there's a certain way to present the university as an inclusive environment [...] you always hear this word inclusivity. No, it's not like this, sincerely it is not like this. [...] It's not inclusive.”* (SSI 03), or a tick-box exercise: *“the whole educational system in the United Kingdom needs decolonising and it's nowhere near even starting yet. It's just become a buzzword and the box ticking load of old hogwash.”* (SSI 04).

Nonetheless, most of the interviews suggest that participants value representation: *“I think representation 100% matters.”* (SSI 08). Participants emphasised the importance of having diverse academic staff and the positive impact it has on their university experience. In their view, seeing academic staff from diverse ethnic backgrounds makes the HE environment feel a more welcoming and safe place: *“just makes you feel more comfortable”* (SSI 05). It also makes ME students feel they fit in, are part of their HEI and that they belong in HE, *“I can see myself there like, as in, I'm represented in that environment”* (SSI 08). Moreover, participants believe that diverse academic staff can act as role models. Consequently, participants believe that seeing themselves reflected in these roles, would show them that people from ME backgrounds can achieve and be successful: *“if you could see yourself or someone that looks like you there then you can think it's possible for yourself also”* (SSI 08). Thus, feeling represented would motivate ME students to do well:

“So seeing that African lecturer would have just, oh my, would have just motivated me, you know, not to become a lecturer obviously, but you know, just to, you know, tell me though this is somebody like me, yes you can.” (SSI 05)

Furthermore, participants also felt that even though academic staff from non-ME backgrounds might be aware of ME students' backgrounds, they are not really able to relate to ME students: *“I don't think they can relate”* (SSI 10). In contrast, academic staff from ethnic backgrounds are perceived to be able to better understand the cultures and backgrounds ME students come from, and thus, can relate to ME students' problems and the challenges they face, and understand their perspectives and views. For example, SSI 01 expressed the view that having more academic staff from ME backgrounds would make it easier for ME students to approach them and ask questions or to talk about any problems or worries they might have:

“... if there is a kind of lecturer who has a similar kind of background to you [...] you can go talk to them if you want to talk something about culturally or anything [...] if you ever wanna talk about your course or anything”.

SSI 12 also agreed that ME students would find it easier to discuss any issues and concern with academic staff from ME backgrounds:

“... when you're from a minority background you would feel more comfortable going to someone who was in the same situation as you and had, you know, a similar perspective, you might feel that they might be more open to that”.

In addition, some participants also felt that having academic staff from diverse ethnic backgrounds would improve the understanding of students from non-ME backgrounds of different cultures, and diverse views and perspectives: *“if we did have like different ethnic background tutors so other people from our course could understand like their views and backgrounds on things.”* (SSI 02). This in turn would help ME students to feel more integrated and understood.

Nonetheless, despite a lack of diversity of staff, many participants reported that they have a good relationship with academic staff: *“I have a very, very good working relationship with the lecturers.”* (SSI 04), likewise SSI 06 noted: *“I have a good relationship with them.”* In contrast, SSI 10 reported that during their undergraduate degree they did not have a good relationship with academic staff: *“a majority of the time I didn't have the closest relationships with my tutors and lecturers.”*, which resulted in them not participating in seminars. Having a good relationship with academic staff is very important as it enhances a sense of belonging and consequently students' university experience. The relationships with academic staff will be further discussed in section 4.2.2.2.

As can be seen from the views outlined above, diversity of academic staff and feeling represented is an important aspect for participants. It fosters a sense of belonging and seeing academic staff who 'look and sound like them' makes them feel welcome and included. Furthermore, having more diverse academic staff motivates ME students to do well. Besides, it makes it easier for ME students to discuss any problems or issues as ME academic staff can relate better to their situation.

Another aspect affecting participants' sense of belonging and thus, impacting their university experience is the diversity of the student body. Seeing students from diverse ethnic backgrounds enhanced participants sense of belonging, whilst lack of diversity had a negative effect on their sense of belonging: *"when there was students that looked like me, spoke like me, definitely made it so much better, but when there wasn't, I would say no"* (SSI 10). However, the level of diversity of the student body depends on the course and the HEI. Some participants are studying courses with very diverse cohorts, for example, SSI 02 states that students on their Event Management and Tourism course are very diverse: *"Our course was very diverse. [...] Like we got different people from different backgrounds on our course."* Equally, SSI 03, who is studying Film and TV Production at a HEI in London, states that their course is quite diverse: *"It's a very diverse environment [...] the majority is British, but yeah, we can say that it's diverse."* By contrast, other participants are studying courses with predominately White students, *"... my course is so White"* (SSI 12) and *"A lot of White British."* (SSI 10). Despite a lack of diversity of students, participants do not feel disadvantaged and believe that they are treated fairly and equally: *"it wasn't a very diverse course. But I don't feel that I was penalised for my diversity, and I was just treated the same way"* (SSI 01).

Participants see diversity of students as something positive. It makes university feel more welcoming and inclusive as it is *"not dominated by one particular kind of culture"* (SSI 01). Therefore, they feel that they fit in, which makes them feel more comfortable in the university environment. Consequently, they are more confident to speak up and share their own experiences: *"I think having a more diverse group, it just, it makes you feel so much more comfortable to speak up."* (SSI 10). On the other hand, a lack of diversity of students makes participants feel different and 'other'. SSI 10 described how being on a course with predominately White peers made them feel *"out of my own comfort zone"* and *"the odd one out"*. Consequently, they were reluctant to put themselves out there and share their personal experiences: *"I didn't wanna share myself in a group that I didn't feel necessarily comfortable with."* (SSI 10). SSI 06 described how being in a predominately 'White' institution made them realise the difference between their own culture and that of their White peers, which they described as a 'culture shock', resulting in them feeling intimidated, isolated and alone:

"I've been to Uni previously in, not in London, outside of London, in York. And when I was at York, York is like predominantly White, there was no one of my complexion when I was attending university and I will say there was a big culture difference, like a culture shock for me, you know, you do feel a bit like intimidated and yeah, you just, you just feel like you're a bit isolated and alone."

In an effort to mitigate a feeling of 'otherness' or being different, two participants, chose a HEI with a high proportion of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds: *"I probably would still have travelled to [name of HEI] to go to that university because of the diversity, yeah."* (SSI 08). However, the need for diversity is not limited to ethnicity, but also relates to other student characteristics, such as age. For example, SSI 06 stated that they chose their HEI because of the ethnic mix and also its large proportion of adult learners: *"It influenced my choice because yeah, apart from it being very diverse, it's also a higher institution for adult learners."*

4.2.1.2 Friendships and relationships with peers from non-ME backgrounds

Another significant factor that enhances the sense of belonging is making friends, and relationships with peers from non-ME backgrounds. Participants emphasised the importance of peer support and peer learning. They explained that friends are there for each other during challenging times, and help and support each other in their learning, *"we'd always be there to help [...] support and guide and, you know, answer the questions if either the tutors weren't available"* (SSI 02). Friends also encourage each other to learn and attend lectures: *"friends which support you [...] and motivate you to learn and come to class"* (SSI 10). The importance to be friends with students on their course was also stressed: *"I think they [social friends] should be more specific to the groups you actually have classes with"* (SSI 10), which highlights the importance of peer learning and friendship groups as learning communities. However, for one participant friendship went beyond peer learning, for them friends *"were more like a family"* (SSI 02), which demonstrates that friends do not just provide academic support, but also emotional and social support.

With regard to making friends, some participants made friends through volunteering and joining societies: *"I made a few close friends through volunteering"* (SSI 01) and/or through other friends, *"I was making friends through friends, but then they became my*

friends.” (SSI 01). This is further supported with: *“I was sharing with one of the boys and his friends and then my friends, we kind of got together and became a big friendship group.”* (SSI 10). Students also make friends with students they share accommodation with as this comment from SSI 01 indicates: *“... a lot of your friends make friends with who they live with.”*

However, a couple of participants found it more difficult to make friends because they were commuting students. For example, SSI 01 stressed how they found it hard to make friends because they did not live with them:

“... so people on my course they all really made good friends with those they lived in the first year, but because I didn’t live with them in the first year I found it a bit harder to make as many friends as some of the others had made”.

In addition, because students had already established friendship groups with people they shared accommodation, it made it difficult for students who did not live in halls to join those groups of friends: *“people who went into uni accommodation, they kind of had their circle of friends at university already, whereas if you stayed at home, you didn’t get that”* (SSI 12).

Regarding the diversity of friends, some participants stated that they had made friends with some people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, *“within the university I have made friends with a diverse range of students.”* (SSI 08). However, many tended to socialise and study with other students from ethnic backgrounds, *“... in my personal friendship group we noticed that all of us that were together [...] We all grouped together that were ethnic minority, lower income.”* (SSI 10). Participants explained that socialising and studying with other ME students makes them feel more comfortable and better supported. They feel that it is easier for ME students to form friendships with other ME students because they can relate better to them, and they are able to better understand their views and perspectives. However, participants believe that this can lead to some degree of segregation between students from different ethnicities: *“all the Asian people grouped together and then all the Black people group together”* (SSI 08). SSI 12 agreed that there was some degree of segregation and that students *“stay in kind of groups at the same ethnicity, at least from what I can tell.”* However, they also feel that one reason why White students do not ‘mix’ with students from ethnic

backgrounds as much is because *“the lack of diversity on the course makes it difficult to form diverse friendship groups”* (SSI 12). Another reason for segregation is cultural and language differences, which make it difficult for ME students to form friendships with non-ME students. One international student found it extremely difficult to make friends in the UK and described mixing with White British people *“like conquering a mountain, climbing a Mount Everest”* (SSI 11). In their experience even just talking to British students or asking them questions was very difficult, which they put down to a language barrier: *“Like maybe because of the, the speech we share like my way of speaking English is quite different”* (SSI 11).

Participants also believe that a lack of understanding of cultural differences between ME and non-ME students leads to them being stereotyped. SSI 04, a mature, Black student at a rural university explained: *“Of course, I'm gonna get stereotyped by privileged kids that have never left their village in England and are White and are eighteen years old.”* Similarly, SSI 10 was also concerned about being judged because of their appearance and accent: *“I've definitely felt judged based on my appearance and accent, definitely. Not so much by staff, more by students.”*

Although participants reported that they had not experienced any racism at university, some participants described incidents that could generally be regarded as racist or microaggressions, such as students making fun of ME students' accent, *“I would say impersonations of my accent. Umm. Yeah, just made some not feel as comfortable”* (SSI 10). This affected their confidence and made them apprehensive to take part in discussions, *“It didn't make me feel as comfortable to speak up as I've mentioned.”* (SSI 10). Another participant described an incident in their first year when they were working in a group with White students and when they told them that they would be joining the meeting a bit later because they had to attend prayer time *“they seemed to have a problem with that”* (SSI 02).

Participants also referred to other subtle forms of racism, such as ME students being made to feel intimidated and uncomfortable by their peers from non-ME backgrounds during discussions in lectures or seminars. Some participants expressed the view that non-ME students made inappropriate comments: *“few students [...] made certain*

comments that were not really nice" (SSI 06). Other participants found that non-ME students dismissed the experiences, views and feelings of ME students, for instance, SSI 12 explained how *"their [non-ME students] thoughts have kind of invalidated the feelings of the other [ME] student ..."* and SSI 06 argued that non-ME students *"brush you off"*. As a result, participants altered their behaviours to try to avoid conflict, for example they tried to ignore the comments: *"just let it go, just let it go"* (SSI 06). They also refrained from discussing topics that might be controversial or might make non-ME students feel uncomfortable: *"There were also things I didn't feel like I could talk about, though, cause it might have been seen to be a bit controversial or, you know, I didn't wanna make anyone feel uncomfortable."* (SSI 08). Furthermore, some participants stopped contributing to discussions altogether, *"discourage them from sharing [their experiences]"* (SSI 12). However, rather than attributing these incidents to racism participants thought that the incidents were not malicious, but done unconsciously *"I don't know if that was conscious or yeah, or malicious even"* (SSI 10) or due to a lack of understanding of cultural differences. However, SSI 01 argued that it is also down to ME students to try to mix with diverse people and to educate their peers about their culture and help them develop a better understanding of cultural differences:

"... it's from your own part of you how willing you are to kind of put your thoughts out there and socialise with different people [...] it's about being flexible and willing, and people also making an effort with you trying to find that common ground, that common interest [...] being willing to expose some of your culture and you exposing them and them exposing you to some of their culture as well."

4.2.1.3 Academic engagement and social involvement

The final aspect that enhanced participants' sense of belonging is engagement in learning activities and involvement in university life. Many participants reported how taking part in extracurricular activities and getting involved in university life, such as being a Student Rep, a Student Union officer, or a volunteer in student groups and societies enhanced their sense of belonging. SSI 08 noted how being a student rep *"really helped me to feel that I belonged there"* and that if they had not done that *"I would have felt so detached from the university."* (SSI 08). However, getting involved

in extracurricular activities is not just a way to enhance their own sense of belonging and hence their own university experience, but they also see it as a way to help to improve other ME students' university experience: *"I'm the student rep of my class, so I'm a very, I'm a very present person in my university. I'm always around every offices, every places I'm working, everywhere."* (SSI 03). Another participant was concerned about ME students not receiving the support they needed, *"Now this thing goes back to what are we going to do about that? Where's the support?"* (SSI 04), which is why they set up and run the Race and Culture Inclusion Network at their HEI to help ME students to get the support they require: *"I'm there [...] and I'm there knocking on the door all the time."* (SSI 04).

Participants believe that it is important for ME students to get involved in social and extracurricular activities. Therefore, they recommend ME students should join different societies and do some volunteering as this would enhance their university experience: *"get involved in as many different things as possible. So, join different societies, join volunteering and then decide which ones you enjoy the most to keep on throughout the uni"* (SSI 01). However, some participants believe that many ME students do not get involved for three reasons, firstly, because they lack the motivation to get involved: *"they just can't be bothered"* (SSI 05), or *"I don't think they really interested in uhm uni life honestly, like actually getting involved."* (SSI 08). Secondly, because due to other commitments, such as family or work, they have not got the time to get involved: *"the issue is students don't want to engage, or they don't have the time [...] they've got other responsibilities and things like that."* (SSI 08). Thirdly, because they lack the confidence to get involved: *"they've got other things going on, including confidence issues."* (SSI 08).

Engagement in learning activities is another aspect that participants identified as being important for enhancing their university experience. Many participants reported that they feel comfortable to interact in class, *"I always interact with lecturers."* (SSI 04). They feel able to ask questions, *"if I had any question, I'd ask rather than waiting at the end of the lecture"* (SSI 02). Similarly, SSI 11 felt comfortable to ask questions:

"whenever I feel any doubt or any problems I reach out to them [tutors] instantly, even [...] if there are 300 or 3000 students in a class it doesn't

matter [...] even if it is a very naive question or a very foolish question, I used to carry on with my question because I felt that I'm here to learn and it shouldn't bother me what others are thinking about me."

They also participate in discussions and believe they can bring in their own experiences: *'Yeah, I can express my own, uh, experience, my own ideas and my own point of view.'* (SSI 07). Similarly, SSI 03 believe they can always bring in their own perspective from their own background:

"So, I can say yes, because I always try to involve my background and my hmm, and my personality in what I'm doing [...] So, they always value my knowledge about what I'm discussing of and the knowledge about what I'm writing ..." (SSI 03)

By contrast, other participants talked about lacking the confidence to engage in discussions or to ask questions. For example, SSI 10 described how they found it difficult to share personal experiences in class because *"it draws so much attention and makes you stand out so much that it's easier not to."* They then went on to explain how lacking the confidence to take part in class discussion had had a negative impact on their engagement, motivation and learning:

"... in undergrad I really, really found it difficult to talk up in classes and seminars and [...] it affected how much I learn and how much I engage with the classes because I don't know if it was a confidence issue or [...] but I think me not participating in the seminars was had like really, really bad impacts on how I felt motivated to attend classes [...] at the start, I'd attend all the classes and I wasn't speaking and I wasn't engaging and I didn't find it interesting and then I'd attend less and less as the semester went on." (SSI 10)

In addition, SSI 08 suggested that many ME students are reluctant to interact in class or ask questions because they do not want *"to look stupid or like they don't know what they're doing..."*. Interestingly, the same participant also expressed the view that having online lectures and seminars during lockdown encouraged more students to participate due to them being able to not be seen and 'hide behind the screen':

"... it was quite a weird space honestly online, but in a way that probably made it more equal [...] I noticed that when we were online, more students were asking questions [...] with their cameras turned off, you know, no one was shy online. [...] I'm guessing it's confidence you know, being able to hide behind the screen even." (SSI 08).

4.2.2 Theme 2: Academic staff

A second theme that emerged from the analysis of the interviews is academic staff and the role they play in enhancing ME students' university experience.

4.2.2.1 Academic staff's competence and expertise

Participants believe that competent and knowledgeable tutors are important for a good academic experience. For instance, SSI 02 believes that the knowledge and expertise of their tutors helped them with their learning and thus, improved their academic experience: *"... I've learned so much from, like, the tutors themselves, like with their expertise in events and what they teach."* Equally, SSI 03 feels that having well prepared, competent and knowledgeable tutors is a key factor affecting a student's academic experience:

"... competent tutors, knowledgeable tutors that they teach you how to work properly, how to work in the field, how to work in the industry, how to work in a, in a project. [...] So yeah, what we need, what we would need to have a great academic experience is prepared and knowledgeable tutors."

With regards to academic staff's teaching abilities participants also value staff who are not only knowledgeable, but who are also passionate about their subject area and the topics they teach:

"... they have the knowledge to talk about the topics. [...] You see that they're passionate about it. And yeah, absolutely, absolutely they are, they are very, very good uhm academic staff." (SSI 03)

Furthermore, SSI 03 also thinks it is important that academic staff involve all students in in-class activities: *"... she's a proper professional. She knows how to teach [...] and she knows how to support and to, and to involve every single person in the class."*

Similarly, SSI 08 believes that good teaching comprises interactive sessions where students are encouraged to actively engage with activities rather than just being talked at: *"Teaching wise I'd say interactive lessons were very useful. Lessons where, it wasn't taught to you, but, how can I explain this, it was worked out for you basically."*

However, many participants are quite dissatisfied with the teaching abilities of some academic staff, for example, SSI 02 observed that one lecturer seemed to lack subject

knowledge and thus, was not able to go into more depth on a topic or give students examples: *"...his teaching wasn't very good. So he'd just read off the board and he wouldn't like, you know, go into more depth at all [...] And he wouldn't give examples ..."* Similarly, SSI 03 is concerned that one of their tutors lacks practical knowledge and thus, is not able to adequately teach students the required technical skills: *"... my practise tutor is not able to sit with us in front of the editing software because he doesn't have any knowledge how to edit."* Another concern expressed by SSI 05 is that some academic staff were not very good at explaining things or at answering questions satisfactorily:

"... some tutors that I did not quite understand. I tried to ask, but I don't know if it's the way I asked or the ability of the tutor to answer. [...] Yeah, I think they were not very good at explaining it."

In the same way, SSI 11 feels that some teaching staff just follow a script and are not able to help students or answer questions:

"... other tutors were like, they will just come in the class and ask you to follow the lab sheet, which will, which was made 500 years ago [...] if you ask them any questions, they were not ready to answer ..."

Likewise, SSI 06 feels that improving teaching would improve their overall satisfaction with their academic experience: *"There's rooms for improvement [...] how they plan our lectures, how they teach the lectures itself, yeah, so, you know, it's teaching."*

In addition to academic staff's competence and expertise, participants also believe that the relationship they have with academic staff and staff's attitudes and behaviours are also very important for a good academic experience. These will be discussed further in the next section.

4.2.2.2 Academic staff's attitudes and behaviours

Most participants agreed that for a good academic experience the relationship students have with academic staff is essential. Many participants felt that their relationship with academic staff is good: *"My relationship with staff is very, very good."* (SSI 04). Equally, SSI 06 noted: *"I have a good relationship with them."* Participants value having a closer relationship with their tutors. For example, SSI 02 indicated that having a good relationship with their tutors had the biggest impact on their academic

experience. They felt that this relationship was based on staff looking after their students and giving them guidance whenever needed:

“... the students and the tutors they, they had such a like a close kind of relation where, you know thingy, keep an eye on all, then they'll always check up on all and you know so we have that, that guide there.” (SSI 02)

Furthermore, participants considered that to develop a better relationship between academic staff and students it was important that academic staff know who they are and know their names: *“... sometimes they don't even know your name so it can feel quite impersonable”* (SSI 12). Likewise, SSI 10 thought that academic staff knowing students' names showed that they engaged with students and that they cared about them: *“The tutors and lecturers have been a lot more engaged with us. Most of them know our names, which is nice and reach out to us.”* Interestingly, for SSI 10 students knowing academic staff was equally important as academic staff knowing students. In their view it made for a good academic experience because knowing their lecturers motivated them to do their work and attend lectures because they *“wanted to make a good impression”* (SSI 10).

For a good relationship between academic staff and students, academic staff's attitudes and behaviours are important, in particular, whether academic staff are:

- accessible, available and approachable,
- encourage, support and care for students,
- treat everyone fairly and equally, and
- value different perspectives and allow students to voice their opinions and views, and bring in their personal experiences.

These aspects will be discussed in more detail in the next few sections.

4.2.2.2.1 Accessibility, availability and approachability

With regards to academic staff, participants are concerned with accessibility, i.e., whether staff are easy to reach either in person or by email, and availability of academic staff, whether staff have time and are at students' disposal: *“I expect my tutors to be there for me when I need them [...] I expect my inquiries to be answered”*

(SSI 05). For SSI 06 accessible academic staff was also essential: *“access, more access to speak with our lecturers [...] being able to talk to them, you know, and quite often.”*. Generally academic staff seem to be accessible and available. Some participants noted that they can speak to them either after a lecture: *“Whenever I struggle with any topic or anything, I go after lecture, I go to my mentor, tutor and ask them that this is the point that I am not able to understand.”* (SSI 07), send them an email: *“I send them emails”* (SSI 05), or make an appointment with academic staff to ask questions or get help: *“... you could go during their appointment time [...] they had like office hours that you could go and talk to them in.”* (SSI 01). However, some students disagreed, they felt that academic staff were not always that easy to get hold of. For example, SSI 12 talked about their friend having problems getting in touch with their dissertation supervisor: *“... my friend had her dissertation supervisor didn't meet with her for the first three months, she just wasn't replying and the module leader was really unhelpful about it.”* Whilst SSI 07, an international student from India, noted the differences in universities' cultures between India and the UK. In India they could see their tutors whenever they needed, whereas in the UK they had to make an appointment first, which they felt impeded access to academic staff:

“... anytime I, if I am in campus, I don't need to book any appointment or anything I just state go away to my faculty and to the staff room and ask so this is my question this this I'm not getting if he's free he helps us every time, but here we need to for anything we need to make an appointment [...] this is the, I can say, disadvantage over here.” (SSI 07)

Additionally, some participants were also frustrated about contacting academic staff by email. SSI 06 noted that some staff do not respond to emails: *“Sometimes you'll send emails to them you might not hear from them ...”*. SSI 02 felt that some academic staff did not respond to emails in a timely manner: *“... some tutors you'd e-mail them and then you won't get, you won't get a reply until like 2-3 weeks later”*. And, SSI 07 was dissatisfied with academic staff not replying to emails out of office hours:

“... if you want to reach out to them during holidays or during Saturday, Sundays. [...]. So, we'll not be able to reach out to them to solve your issues or problem because they'll not be available to solve your problem on Saturdays and Sundays. This was the only thing that I had issue with.”

In addition to accessibility and availability of academic staff, participants also consider approachability to be essential, i.e., whether academic staff are friendly and welcoming, and are easy to talk to: *"... that's something that's really important, just having lecturers that are approachable."* (SSI 01). SSI 11 agreed that it is important that staff can be approached to discuss any problems or concerns, or to ask for help and support with assignments: *"... if you can reach out to the tutors more easily and if they are more approachable and they're ready to solve your problem, that's the most important thing for a student."* Many participants perceived academic staff to be friendly, welcoming and approachable: *"Everyone was really welcoming, the lecturers had time for me [...] and they were very friendly"* (SSI 01). Participants felt comfortable interacting with academic staff in lectures or tutorials: *"I always interact with lecturers."* (SSI 04) and were not afraid to ask them questions during or after lectures: *"I always asked in [class], even if it is a very naive question or a very foolish question, I used to carry on with my question because I felt that I'm here to learn ..."* (SSI 11). SSI 05 agreed and noted that *"... it was easy to ask question really and they were always willing to help."* In contrast, a few participants felt academic staff were not always approachable: *"... when you'd approach them in person and asked them they just brush you off, like they wouldn't, you know, actually reply to your question, they just ignore it."* (SSI 02). SSI 11 also found it difficult to approach some of their tutors and ask them questions: *"So, interacting with them [tutors] was really difficult or asking them questions about them or reaching out to them was a bit a tedious task for me."*

As mentioned above, the relationship students have with academic staff is important as it enhances their academic experience. However, in addition to staff being accessible, available and approachable it also encompasses academic staff encouraging and supporting students, as well as caring for students' academic progress and wellbeing. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

4.2.2.2.2 Encouragement, support and care

Encouragement, support and care is another aspect relating to academic staff's role that is considered vital by participants. Participants believe that feeling cared for and being supported by academic staff affects their academic experience. Some

participants were satisfied with the support they received from academic staff, for example SSI 02 felt that academic staff had been very supportive, which had really enhanced their academic experience:

“... so in my final year we did a live event module where we had to put up an event for a charity and the support that we got from the two tutors as well as like external stakeholders, I think that's what made the experience 10 times better than if we didn't get that support.”

Likewise, SSI 09 agreed that their lecturers gave students a lot of support and encouraged students to aspire to certain careers and further study:

“... they [lecturers] keep on encouraging us which kind of job you can do. [...] you can be a police and you can be this, and the lecturers, most of the lectures I've had they are wonderful. They keep on encouraging us that this is not the end. Don't just join this post and you stay there, go on, do Master's, go do PhD, go to big companies.”

However, other participants disagreed, they felt that there were occasions when they did not receive sufficient help and support from academic staff. For example, SSI 06 felt that when they asked academic staff for support with assessments, they just referred them to the lecture slides instead of giving them the help they needed: *“that's when you're like you're asking for help, but then they're like, oh, maybe go to the lectures, go on the slides, everything is there.”* Likewise, SSI 08 also indicated that there were occasions when they did not get sufficient support from their tutors, and were left to cope with problems by themselves, which caused them a lot of stress: *“... there were times when I needed a bit more support [...] and I was kind of left to myself and [...] I kind of drove myself crazy trying to figure out answers to things sometimes.”*

Participants were also concerned about whether academic staff care for students and pay sufficient attention to their wellbeing. SSI 12 felt that academic staff should look after their students' wellbeing: *“... attentiveness from staff [...] paying attention to students, like if someone suddenly doesn't turn up for three weeks, and that's really not like them, are they gonna check up on that person ...”* and be more aware of and deal with issues affecting students:

“awareness [...] current issues that are affecting students [...] if a student talks about something that might be concerning to them are they gonna take the safeguarding steps to you know address that cause ...” (SSI 12).

Similarly, SSI 11, an international student from India, noticed a difference in University culture between India and the UK with regard to academic staff caring for their students. They argued that tutors in India are more concerned with their students' progress and wellbeing compared to their UK counterparts and believes that academic staff in the UK should look after their students more:

"But like in India, tutors are always behind you. Like they will keep talking to you. Keep asking you like they're more interested in a student. It's not like only a professional that you are paying fee, and you are studying. And even if you're not studying, they're not bothered. So, it's more like a relationship, that relationship that we share in India a tutor will always keep on asking you that how is your studies going on. How's your project going on? Why are you not concentrating? So, it is more like they keep a track of your progress. [...] And here tutors are not bothered like even if I'm studying it's OK, even if you're not studying, it's your problem." (SSI 11)

However, SSI 12 contended that due to their personalities some lecturers are more caring and pay more attention to students' needs: *"... it comes down to personality [...] some members of staff are more empathetic and caring and attentive ..."*, and that some lecturers are more comfortable to discuss certain issues and topics with students than others:

"... because of my course we talk about very emotive topics and sometimes some lecturers will really say if anything we've talked about today has upset you or you want to talk about it, here is where you can go, I'm open for a chat, here are these numbers you can ring blah blah blah, others kind of just stick it on a slide and don't talk about it." (SSI 12)

4.2.2.2.3 Fair and equal treatment

Another aspect that participants perceive to be important in relation to academic staff is fair and equal treatment of everyone regardless of their ethnic background or culture. Most participants are of the opinion that they have not experienced any differential treatment due to their ethnicity: *"...it wasn't a very diverse course. But I don't feel that I was penalised for my diversity, and I was just treated the same way."* (SSI 01). They believe that everyone is given the same attention and encouragement: *"Yes, they give the same attention to everybody."* (SSI 09). Similarly, SSI 11 agreed that tutors gave the same support and attention to all students regardless of ethnicity: *"I*

never felt that tutors are given preference or extra support to any British student or any student from some other region or any other place.” By contrast, some participants believed that not all students were always treated fairly and equally. SSI 08 described a case where a White student had failed some modules, but was able to progress to the next year, whilst some ME students in the same situation had to leave the course. In their opinion the White student had been treated more favourably than the ME students in the same situation:

“... there was this girl and she was a White girl and she would not come into university ever. And she made it all the way to year 3. [...] she even failed some modules and still was able to get into the next year. And there were other students, minority students, who were going through the same thing and had to leave the course. [...] I feel like she might have got some special treatment honestly.” (SSI 08)

Another participant felt singled out when Muslims and Black people were portrayed as ‘terrorists’ and ‘criminals’ in one of their modules:

“A majority of the case studies they were around like Muslims around the, like the Black people [...] they kept reiterating the fact that all about terrorism and crimes and, you know the crimes that have been committed by these certain people, these certain groups, and I, I felt at that time a bit targeted. That they only used them case studies rather than case studies from like White people, like White background.” (SSI 02)

After these case studies some of their peers had developed a negative opinion of people from certain ethnic backgrounds and they felt they had to defend themselves and explain that not all Muslims are like that:

“I think that the one module that I mentioned, that where they used the examples from like Muslim backgrounds about terrorism and ISIS and stuff like that. Yeah, it did feel a bit stereotyped. And people had like different views on like them sort of people afterwards where I had to kind of, you know, put, get in, get involved and, you know, change their opinion because whatever media shows, it's not always true.” (SSI 02)

Surprisingly, two participants gave examples of incidents where they felt that a tutor from their own ethnic background treated them less favourably compared to White students. SSI 02 described how a Muslim tutor gave their group, which consisted of

students from diverse backgrounds, less attention and support compared to groups with predominately White students:

“... he didn't give us that, you know that attention, that support that we needed. And he wasn't really available compared to other students, so say White students, he'd give them more [...] he'd give them more guidance compared to our group.”

SSI 06 also referred to one occasion when a tutor from their own ethnic background treated them differently compared to students from other backgrounds, which did upset them:

“... a lecturer of mine I gave him my work. [...] I didn't complete the work fully, but I attempted to, and I did it, and I gave it to her, but the way she gave it back to me was just like kind of like here you go, like, not even, like no form of communication [...] she's from the same ethnic background as me. [...] I didn't like the way I was treated in that moment compared to someone else who's probably handed the work late or not even attempted at all, from a different background. You can tell there'll be a different kind of treatment.”

Interestingly, SSI 06 also suggested that academic staff should be given diversity training and should develop their knowledge of diverse topics as this would make their teaching more inclusive:

“... lecturers themselves should have some teaching on different ethnic backgrounds and diversity [...] different topics or range of topics, you know, because we're all coming from different backgrounds into university [...] So that their teaching will be better.”

4.2.2.2.4 Valuing different perspectives and allowing students to bring in their own personal experiences

Another important aspect regarding academic staff's role is whether academic staff value different perspectives and allow students to bring in their own personal experiences from their own ethnical and cultural backgrounds. Participants believe that they are able to express their own views and opinions: *“I can express my own, uh, experience, my own ideas and my own point of view.”* (SSI 07) and that they can bring in their own experiences: *“Social work is very diverse and you meet, you meet different people with different lived experiences, so due to that I feel like you can bring your own experience into it.”* (SSI 06). Similarly, SSI 08 notes that some, but not all, academic

staff encourage students to consider different views and perspectives: *“Yeah, we was also encouraged to answer questions critically and think about things from different perspectives. Only in some lessons, though.”* Being able to express their opinion and look at things from a different perspective is something that is crucial for SSI 08 as it allows for their voice as a ME student to be heard:

“Like as a minority ethnic student, I felt that that's important because, you know, obviously our education structures, our society, everything is built around the views of the hierarchy or the White man. So, for me, it was important to have my voice in that setting ...”

Equally, for SSI 02 it is also essential to be able to express their own views because they want their peers to understand that their perspectives and experiences might differ from theirs: *“Yes, I did bring in my views and my opinions. Because I wanted others to know that what I feel and what I view may be different to what others feel.”* (SSI 02). In contrast, as mentioned previously, SSI 08 felt that there were certain topics they did not want to discuss because they could have been perceived as being controversial or could have made some of their peers feel uncomfortable. Other participants also talked about being reluctant to share their own perspectives and personal experiences. This was due to not having a good relationship with academic staff, and the size and make up of classes, resulting in the environment not feeling safe. For instance, SSI 12 did not feel comfortable sharing personal experiences in larger groups because it did not feel like a ‘safe space’ because they did not really know their peers that well:

“I had a module this year that literally was only four of us [...] people would just, you know sharing honestly and it felt like a safe space to do that. But I think if it was in a larger group of maybe 20 students, no matter what that member of staff had done, I wouldn't have felt comfortable sharing because of that many people, you don't really get to know them so well.”

Likewise, since the majority of academic staff and students on their undergraduate course were White, SSI 10 felt uncomfortable to share personal experiences because they did not think they would be able to relate to their experiences or understand their perspectives:

“I think it's more about feeling comfortable enough to do so because when you draw in person experiences it's, you've got to do it in a kind of environment where you feel listened to ...”

Furthermore, SSI 10 also believed that their White peers had a closer relationship with academic staff than they did, and consequently, did engaged more in discussions, whereas they felt left out:

“... the majority of the students that would speak up in the class were White and perhaps were able to build a closer relationship with the academic staff because they engage more and they were able to build a connection, whereas for me, I don't feel that I was, uh, necessarily encouraged to speak up as much.”

In contrast, during their Master's degree they had a much better relationship with their tutors and their peers were much more diverse, thus, because they were better able to understand their views, they felt more comfortable to discuss their personal experiences:

“... why I feel personally more comfortable to speak up is because I understand that I've got these relationships with tutors that you know, you've got your voice is gonna be heard, you're gonna be listening to and yeah, and I think having a more diverse group, it just, it makes you feel so much more comfortable to speak up.” (SSI 10)

SSI 10 also felt that when students shared their own views and personal experiences it encouraged other student to also talk about their experiences:

“... for our degree [sociology] it's very much, you know, we talked about class and race and gender and really the personal issues that people can all relate to. So when people did engage, the discussions were interesting and it was a domino effect as well, as when one person spoke up, other people felt as so they could as well.”

Another reason for participants not feeling comfortable to share their own personal experiences is that it draws attention to them and leads to feelings of 'otherness': *“... sometimes for me, if I was spoke about personal experiences, I almost felt as though it draws so much attention and makes you stand out so much that it's easier not to.” (SSI 10).*

4.2.3 Theme 3: Curriculum

A third theme that affects participants' academic experience which emerged from the thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews was the curriculum. In particular,

aspects related to curriculum content, design and delivery. Participants were particularly concerned about whether the curriculum is inclusive and diverse, incorporates diverse backgrounds and views and is representative of ME students. Another aspect related to the curriculum that participants worried about was whether assessment, marking and feedback were fair and balanced.

4.2.3.1 Diversity and inclusion

Participants believed that a diverse and inclusive curriculum that is representative of ME students enhances their academic experience. It creates a more inclusive environment, which in turn improves a sense of belonging. Some participants also argued that a diverse and inclusive curriculum can help students from all backgrounds to better understand other cultures: *"... the modules that I remember taking, the ones that kind of diversified and let me learn about different cultures."* (SSI 01), which can change students' preconceptions and 'open people's eyes' about underrepresented groups of people and diversity issues:

"... that preconception of she's Black, she's single mother or even stuff to do with LGBTQ+ community [...] this course has really opened people's, students' eyes [...] to research more and just to find more knowledge about other topics ..." (SSI 06)

However, participants' experiences regarding a diverse and inclusive curriculum varied depending on the course they took. For instance, SSI 06 remarked that their Social Work course was very diverse as it covered a variety of diversity issues: *"we've had a lot of diverse topics, we talked about discrimination, we've talked about race [...] it's made the course very diverse"* (SSI 06). Likewise, SSI 01 noted that the curriculum for their first degree covered a variety of religions and cultures: *"... I did theology, it was diverse [...] when looking at religions, you are looking at different cultures as well because the way they overlap actually religion and culture, that was quite good."* Interestingly, some participants also had modules that specifically dealt with diversity issues. For example, SSI 01: *"I did a module on Black history [...] that was taught by a Black tutor as well."*, which was predominately taken by non-ME students, which they felt showed that they were interested in learning more about other ethnicities and cultures: *"it was more kind of English students [...] trying to find out about different*

ethnicities, that was good" (SSI 01). Similarly, SSI 10 had a 'Critical Whiteness Studies' module which explored how society is predominately viewed through a White lens: *"So we also did a module called Critical Whiteness Studies [...] to understand how society is viewed through the lens of the well basically White history."* (SSI 10).

In contrast, other participants reported that their curriculum did not include diverse backgrounds and perspectives and that most of the theories covered were by people, mostly men, from a White background: *"... when you're talking about criminology [...] a lot of these key theorists are White men who were very unethical in their practices and they still get talked about. So, I personally I don't think it's very diverse."* (SSI 12).

Equally, SSI 03 was dismayed that their Film course was not representative of ME students and did not cover Black culture or Black cinema:

"... we are not study Black cinema, we are not study Black culture, which is in cinema is quite important. [...] is the university system is what they included in, in the education, there's no enough education about minorities, there's no minorities, in this case, Black culture."

Likewise, SSI 02 was disappointed that most case studies on their Event Management course were UK and European based: *"... they [case studies] were UK and European based, yeah. They weren't really Asian based"*. They felt that more case studies from around the world representing different traditions and cultures should have been used: *"... they should have used examples worldwide. So where other people's cultures are incorporated."* (SSI 02).

Although, as mentioned above, the curriculum for some courses was diverse and inclusive and sometimes even included modules that specifically covered ethnic diversity issues, some participants felt that this was not sufficient and that the curriculum for every course should include more ethnic diversity issues: *"They should include more Black history [...] in every department of the university [...] because in every department there's a gap that is owned by the Black community."* (SSI 03).

Moreover, they believed that in general the curriculum is not sufficiently representative of students from ethnic backgrounds: *"There's no enough education about minorities, there's no minorities, and in this case, Black culture"* (SSI 03), and that decolonising the curriculum often is just a 'tick-box' exercise: *"it's all box ticking*

decolonise the educational system” (SSI 04). Furthermore, two participants also expressed the view that often the onus was on ME students themselves to bring ethnic diversity issues into the curriculum rather than diversity issues being naturally included in their courses. SSI 04 argued that it was down to the students on their Film course to incorporate diversity and *“to create the narratives”* (SSI 04). Equally, SSI 08 noted that for some of their modules ME students themselves had to incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences:

“... one of my modules, was more diverse than others [...] the others you kind of have to bring in your own diversity to it, if that makes sense. It was never like it was excluded or anything ...”.

When asked about how diverse the reading lists for their modules were, participants agreed that most reading lists were too Euro- or America-centric: *“... they recommend only just this the UK based books and authors [...] till now whatever I have studied was based on UK and the Western culture.”* (SSI 07), and that reading lists mostly included authors from predominately White backgrounds: *“... almost all the books which were suggested in my course [...] were from White background, about 90% of them ...”* (SSI 11). Likewise, SSI 08 argued that reading lists did not represent diverse backgrounds and views: *“some of the readings weren't from Black academics, or from the perspective of Black researchers ...”*. Interestingly, one participant found that reading lists included more authors from diverse ethnicities if the module leaders were from ethnic backgrounds themselves, consequently, the reading lists embodied diverse perspectives and lived experiences:

“... when I've had a module and the module leader is from an ethnic minority background that the reading list is so much more diverse, like there'll be Black authors and Italian authors and [...] all around the world, all these different perspectives and people who live different lives [...] so I think it kind of depends on who's really structured that module and set it up.” (SSI 12)

One participant insisted that the inclusion of authors from ethnic backgrounds on reading lists should not just be a token gesture, but is needed to represent different perspectives and experiences and to show appreciation for the contributions people from ME backgrounds have made to a subject area:

“I do want to see lots of diversity in the work and not just, you know, a Black book or a Black author chucked in now and then, you know, just for the tick box

exercise. But I actually really value those people's works and what they're saying and I am trying to understand it.” (SSI 08)

However, SSI 10 explained that academic staff on their course were conscious that reading lists were not very diverse, and thus, made students aware that this was problematic and encouraged non-ME students to question their own perspectives:

“... although a lot of the authors were White, they [lecturers] were aware of it and we were, we were made to understand how problematic, for example, anthropology was in the 1940s when it first became a discipline [...] we were made to understand that [...] the White students that were there, who were interested in these topics, they were taught how to not have that perspective and to problematise their own, their own Whiteness.”

4.2.3.2 Fair and balanced assessment, marking and feedback

Another aspect of the curriculum that participants were concerned about was whether assessment, marking and feedback is fair and balanced. With regard to assessments SSI 12 liked that on their course different assessment methods were used, which allows students to choose the type of assessment they prefer:

“... there was a real variety of different assessments. So if you uhm, you don't do so well in exams, you can pick just coursework [...] the way that they did presentations was really good. Like you could just do it with one member of staff [...] you could be recording it and do a screencast if that's how you're comfortable.”

Additionally, some participants explained that their assessments covered a variety of diverse topics: *“So, I think it's diverse. We have a lot of, we've had a lot of diverse topics ...”* (SSI 06). Likewise SSI 10 stated that students had a choice of topics: *“We usually had a choice of 6 topics, that was whatever interested us the most.”* (SSI 10).

Furthermore, participants felt that assessments allowed students to bring in experiences from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. For instance, SSI 12 explained that some of their assessments were reflections on their own personal experiences that allowed ME students to discuss their backgrounds:

“... how the assessment is on my course [...] a lot of modules were we've actually done reflection and like talked about your personal experiences [...] and you're more than welcome to talk about specific, you know, parts of your background that have influenced that if you want to ...”

However, one participant believed that the inclusion of ethnic diversity issues was mainly a token gesture rather than occurring naturally:

“There was a choice and I think they always tried to put something in for minoritized students to indulge in, but the majority of the questions were probably aimed at White students, honestly.” (SSI 08)

In regard to marking of assessments, one participant believed that all assignments were marked fairly and equally irrespective of a student’s ethnicity: *“I thought that it was quite fair the way they marked us [...] and they treated us like equally.”* (SSI 11). They thought that tutors were very clear about their expectations regarding the assignment and marked accordingly: *“They were very clear about what they're expecting from a student [...] what questions to answer and which area of research they want you to dig deep into.”* (SSI 11). Another participant also felt that marking was fair and balanced because assessments were marked by two members of staff: *“Yes, I think it is balanced because some of the assessments that we have is marked by two, it will be marked by our lecturer, it will be marked by someone else as well.”* (SSI 06). By contrast, SSI 05 was of the opinion that marks did not reflect the effort put in and felt that ME students were discriminated against by lecturers who mark down work by students from ethnic backgrounds:

“... some of the marks, you know we get [...] sometimes it's just so sad when you see you've worked hard and then you see a mark that you think I mean doesn't tally with what the work you've put in. So, I don't know, are they looking at my name and giving me the mark or they giving me the mark because of what I've done.”

Similarly, SSI 06 also felt that ME students were discriminated against and were given lower marks compared to White students: *“I think when it comes to ethnicity, there is, you can see, you can see that there's a difference there [...] there's definitely a different mark, yeah.”* However, SSI 06 also believed that marking assessments anonymously prevented non-ME tutors from marking ME students’ work down based on negative preconceptions of ME students’ abilities:

“... I feel like they'll [...] presume or prejudge that oh she's African, oh she's Caribbean, oh she's Indian, you know. But where it has got our student numbers you can't tell who's behind that piece of work that you're marking [...] so the fact that they don't know the face behind the assignment that they're marking, I think that's a positive. Because then if, if that's the case, then yes, then that's where discrimination will come into play [...] where your, your work is being marked.”

Another aspect with regards to assessment that was perceived as problematic by participants, was assignment deadlines. For example, SSI 10 was concerned that having assessment deadlines too close together was very detrimental for students who have to work alongside their studies, which is often the case for ME students:

“assignments due back to back, you know, within the space of a few days [...] for some of the students that have to work as well along with the degree, it really, really puts a lot of pressure on us.” Similarly, SSI 08 found that having several assessments due at the same time put a lot of strain on them and their family life:

“... deadline bunching [...] put a lot of pressure on students [...] all the deadlines were due at the same time, which meant I had to start all of them at the same time and work on all of them at the same time and juggle them all at the same time, which is really time consuming and pressurising and honestly had a big effect on my family life also.”

This view was shared by SSI 06 who argued that students’ backgrounds should be considered when setting deadlines so that students are given sufficient time to work on their assignments whilst also juggling family life:

“... you need to be accepting of the students that you're taking in as well, you know and looking at where they're coming from, their background [...] a lot of our students are parents [...] So sometimes giving extensions in our assessments or giving enough time for our assessments [...] or not [...] making them feel some type of way because they're running behind time ...”

Consequently, SSI 02 argued that being able to request extensions helps students to better balance university and home commitments: *“... asking for extensions on deadlines for uni workload [...] that helped me so much like in terms of balancing like work, work and home [...] I did get like anxiety [...] I did ask for extensions and they did actually help.”* Likewise, SSI 06 felt that applying for mitigating circumstances could help students with their studies: *“... student services where they can help you with like mitigation and all these kind of things. Yeah, I think if we have more access to them as well, that would be very helpful in our academic studies.”* This was further supported by SSI 11 who explained that extensions would benefit students facing issues completing their assignments:

“I have seen students panicking because of the deadlines and there should be, there should be some like facility for a student that if he is unable to complete in a given deadline because of health problems or because of mental issues or

anything [...] there should be some facility where students get an extension of four days, five days to complete their projects"

Another concern that was raised by one Muslim participant was the scheduling of assessments. SSI 02 felt that assessment deadlines did not consider religious holidays sufficiently: *"... I don't think [...] the whole deadline thing is well thought out in terms of like the Ramadan, in terms of Christmas and like the festive holidays."* Furthermore, they argued that whilst on the one hand no consideration was given to setting deadlines during the month of Ramadan:

"So basically, we've just had Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, and I feel like they should have considered that, you know when setting the deadlines and how many deadlines should be there in that month itself. Like it gets kind of hard on like Muslims when they're fasting and they're not there and they've not drunk and you know, they've got other religious commitments to like take part in." (SSI 02)

On the other hand, the Christmas period was safeguarded, and all the deadlines were set outside the Christmas break:

"... they could put like one of the deadlines in Christmas [...] I spoke to students and students said that we're not [...] bothered about the Christmas break. But we get four weeks anyway, so say that in the first two weeks we do the Christmas break and then after that we've got a deadline and we've had our Christmas break, but then we can get the work in as well." (SSI 02)

With regard to feedback, many participants were dissatisfied with the feedback they received. Participants felt that feedback was generic - students received similar comments: *"It's very blanket and generalised and I find that a lot of us get the exact same feedback word for word."* (SSI 12), which was also supported by SSI 10 who found comments were 'copied and pasted' instead of being specific to students' work: *"The comments, when discussing with friends, copied and pasted, we all got the same kind of comments if we were around the same mark."* Furthermore, feedback was perceived as vague and not very detailed: *"it was very vague, like we didn't get much like in depth feedback like it just be one or two sentences"* (SSI 02), which was further reinforced by: *"It [feedback] was very open-ended and kind of left you nowhere."* (SSI 08). Moreover, some participants were concerned that feedback was not very constructive. They felt it did not tell them what they had done well: *"... they didn't tell you what you did right as well so it kind of left you thinking you have done the whole*

assignment wrong" (SSI 08), and what they needed to have done differently for a better mark: *"... this is the reason why you've not got a first or why you've not got a 2:1. This is the specific reason, this is how you can improve that."* (SSI 12). Participants also believed that feedback provided little guidance on how they could move forward and improve their work for future assignments: *"... it wouldn't give us that much information that we'll what should we be looking out for to improve."* (SSI 02), this was supported by SSI 10 who also felt that feedback *"wasn't very helpful for future assessments."* Equally, SSI 12 was very disappointed that one of their tutors thought they should be pleased with the mark they achieved rather than helping them to understand how they could have achieved a higher mark:

"I approached my seminar tutor because some of her feedback confused me, I didn't know what she meant, and her response was 'aren't you happy with 65?' That was the first thing she said. I was like, well, yes, but that's not really why I'm here. I'm here because I don't understand the feedback you've given me and shouldn't you want me to improve? Why should I settle for one grade?" (SSI 12)

4.2.4 Theme 4: University support

The fourth theme which affected ME students' academic experience is support from their HEI. With regards to university support participants were concerned with availability and accessibility of a variety of support services, such as learning skills assistance, counselling and wellbeing services, and career services. Some participants felt that it is essential that HEIs provide support for students. For instance, SSI 02 noted that university support services are important as they help students with any issue or challenge they might face: *"And the services are important because they're like your first point of contact if you've got any problem or you want something clarifying."* Similarly, SSI 08 agreed that support services are vital because they can help students to successfully complete their studies:

"Yeah, very important. Especially like when I came in, like with not very much confidence, I think without those I wouldn't have, like I said, got through the course the way I did ..."

In addition, SSI 12 also felt that HEIs had a moral duty to look after their students and support them as much as possible: *"I think it's also just important to me morally to know that they are supporting students in every way that they can."* In addition to

general support services provided by HEIs, participants also deemed individual academic support, such as personal tutoring, and pastoral care to be very important for a good university experience.

4.2.4.1 Availability and accessibility of support services

Although participants believed that a variety of general support services were available, their experiences with regards to accessibility of these services were mixed. SSI 02 believed that *“there’s sufficient access”* to support services. Likewise, SSI 09 also thought that students have sufficient access to support services: *“Yes, we have got access to those”*. Equally, SSI 10 explained that they never had problems accessing any of the services: *“... definitely very accessible.”* By comparison, other participants felt that not enough support is available and that access to some services is limited:

“Everything is appearance because to receive help [...] you need to be in contact with someone that is counting. [...] I needed to involve the president of the Student Union and ask for her help [...] So no, everything is advertised, everything is promoted but no, is not nothing accessible.” (SSI 03)

Likewise, SSI 12 felt that it was difficult to access support services due to long waiting times for some services and that the support provided was insufficient because of the limited time that was available to speak to support staff:

“... then there might be one [appointment] in six weeks time because they’re rammed full [...] by the time it comes, you’ve either resolved what the issue was, or 10 more have popped up and they don’t have time for the full kind of conversation. So, I think it can be, there’s definitely barriers to the services ...”

Additionally, SSI 12 also believed that support services did not have sufficient resources to deal effectively with the needs of some students:

“I don’t think they have enough staff and I don’t think that they’re funded enough [...] they’re actually quite limited in what they can really do in the time you actually get with these people one on one.”

Additionally, some participants expressed the view that the onus is on students to ask for the support they require: *“I think for some of us is just for us to reach out and get that support.”* (SSI 05). Similarly, SSI 08 believed that HEIs should be more proactive in offering support to students, they should not wait for students to ask for help; rather students *“should be reached out to”*. Participants argued that many ME students do

not ask for help, and thus, tend not to utilise the support services on offer: “... sometimes we have these services there to support us, but we don’t utilise them.” (SSI 06). Equally, SSI 08 agreed that students from ME backgrounds tend not to use the support services provided: “... marginalised communities probably don’t reach out to them [HEIs] as much for help ...”. Participants believed that there were a number of reasons why ME students, in particular, do not ask for help and support. SSI 06 felt that this was because many ME students have other commitments, and thus, do not find the time to use support services:

“... not making time to seek the support that they need [...] I think that’s the reason why, you know, we tend to just stand back and not get that help that we need. [...] it’s due to other commitments, [...] maybe they’ve got assignments, work, other things to do.”

On the other hand, SSI 08 believed that ME students do not ask for help because they lack confidence: “... I think it’s a confidence thing, no one wants to look stupid or like they don’t know what they’re doing ...”. Moreover, SSI 08 also felt that HEIs have not made students sufficiently aware of the importance of these services: “... I don’t think the importance of them [support services] have been stressed enough to students and they’re not reaching out.” Besides, SSI 07 argued that another possible reason for ME students not making use of support services could be that they do not know what help and support is available or how to access these services: “Actually, the issue is the, like some people, some students don’t know how to utilise the resource ...”. This is a view shared by SSI 08 who believed that HEIs need to communicate more effectively what support services are available so that students can make more use of them: “... more advertisement about the workshops that they [university] do put on [...] They have got things going on sometimes, but most students don’t know about it.” (SSI 08). Similarly, SSI 12 noted that HEIs need to do more to make students aware of the support services they provide:

“I think advertising what you’re doing, be very transparent about it. Please keep people up to date because they don’t know and if there are, you know more avenues of support and things that you’re developing tell people about it so they can access them if they need. Otherwise, you might think there’s not a big demand for a certain service, but there is, they just don’t know that it’s there.”

Furthermore, SSI 12 also argued that HEIs needed to be more open about the services available and ensure that there are no obstacles to students accessing these services:

"... just a sense of openness, a feeling like you really can go and speak to these services that they say that support you. And like there aren't barriers to that." Besides, SSI 12 also suggested that sometimes students are sent from one service to another, which can be very frustrating:

"... if you're like, ringing up, sometimes you're on hold for ages or they don't answer the emails because they're really swamped or you get tossed from person to person because this person doesn't know how to help, but this service might."

The support services participants had utilised were varied and included career services, learning skills support and counselling and wellbeing services. However, participants' experiences and satisfaction with these services were mixed. For example, some participants had used the career services and they were generally satisfied with the support they had received: *"... speak to somebody at the career. I kept postponing it [...] But eventually when I did I got a good response"* (SSI 05). Similarly, SSI 10 explained that career services had helped them find work during their studies:

"career service definitely they help with [...] further studies, looking for part time jobs. So that's where I found both of my, the jobs I've had during university [...] they've been really good."

Equally, SSI 12 felt that career services gave them good advice about career prospects and postgraduate studies:

"I've had a good experience with the career services. They gave me really good guidance about my Master's and stuff. [...] I am satisfied with how well they prepare you for stuff after university [...] they've really spent the time to go through that and, you know, talk about different options ..."

Two participants mentioned learning skills support at their HEI. SSI 08 was satisfied with the help and support they had received and felt that the workshops they provided had helped them to improve their academic skills: *"I found workshops that were created by the university very helpful and very useful at the time to help me with my study, cause I wasn't very confident in writing."* (SSI 08). Similarly, SSI 10 explained that their HEI offered learning skills support sessions that students could attend, which was very helpful: *"Learning skills, yeah, also the skills sessions as well that they hold, they're held weekly that you can just book into and go in the library. So yeah, definitely very accessible."*

Another participant (SSI 12) talked about their experience of the wellbeing services at their HEI. They were dissatisfied with the service because they felt that it was difficult to access the service due to very long waiting times: *"... there was a waiting list for that, that was a few months long, so that was quite inaccessible."* Furthermore, they believed that the support they were offered was inadequate due to the limited number of sessions wellbeing services were able to provide:

"...there was a really limited amount of sessions, it was less than 10 sessions that they could offer me [...] it was a bit off putting because they haven't met me, they don't know what my needs are and they've already giving me a number of this is what we can give you if you need more, can't help you ..." (SSI 12)

Consequently, they believed that some students did not get sufficient help: *"... a lot of students have really complex mental health needs and it can be difficult for them to get the help that they need to do well."* (SSI 12)

Additionally, some participants also talked about the food services at their HEIs. Some participants felt that these services did not cater sufficiently to a diverse student population. SSI 05 argued that food was important to people: *"... food is very important for loads of people ..."* because it reminded them of home: *"... sometimes you just want a bit of home, a taste of home ..."*, which is why they believed that their university needed to diversify its food offering more. Equally, SSI 02 thought that the food at their HEI was not very diverse and argued that there should be more halal, vegetarian and vegan options available: *"... there's not much options available like in terms of like halal and vegetarian and stuff like that."* By contrast, some participants explained that the food provision at their HEI was diverse and catered to a variety of dietary requirements, for example SSI 09 noted that their HEI provided halal food for students: *"... they bring for us halal [food] ..."*. Likewise, SSI 10 stated that their HEI offered food from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds: *"... they have uh selection of food, I think one of the stands is vegan another stand is like Thai Food, Indian Food, Ethiopian foods."* However, most participants felt that the food at their HEI was expensive. For example, SSI 02 believed that food was *"pricey"*. Equally, SSI 10 believed that the price of food is an issue and that *"it could be cheaper"*. Consequently, SSI 09 argued that instead of using the food services at university

students bought food elsewhere: *"... food is a bit expensive, that's why most of us have to go outside and buy cheaper food."* This was further supported by SSI 11 who explained that rather than buying expensive food at the university they would bring food from home: *"... it was expensive. So, I rarely use them. I would prefer more than more to cook by myself and carry them as a Tiffin box rather than purchasing stuff."*

Some participants also discussed the library services at their HEI. Most participants believe that the library facilities are adequate and spacious. For instance, SSI 02 stated: *"... the library was very modern. There was space."* Equally, SSI 06 noted that the library at their HEI is *"a big library"*. Likewise, SSI 09 suggested that there was always enough space for students to study in the library: *"Always, there's a very, very big space."* Furthermore, some participants explained that library facilities and service are very accessible. SSI 02 argued that *"... there's sufficient access ..."*. Similarly, SSI 11 stated that the library is open *"24/7"*. Likewise, SSI 06 noted the library was easily accessible due to it *"opening 24 hours or opening till 11 at night"*, which they argued was *"very helpful."* Additionally, some participants believed that the services provided were adequate and that sufficient library resources were available. SSI 07 argued that *"... mostly those books or those resources are available ..."*. Similarly, SSI 09 found that it was easy to find the books they needed: *"To get the books is very easy."* Likewise, SSI 10 explained that they never had any issues accessing the books they needed and that it was easy to find resources:

"... it's easy [...] they have laptops at the bottom on the, on the ground floor when you enter and you basically go in search a topic or search a specific book and it tells you the exact location in the library ..."

In contrast, SSI 12 felt that resources were not sufficient and that sometimes availability of certain books was limited: *"access to certain books is just getting more and more restricted each year, like they'll be textbooks that you could get that now they don't pay for anymore, so they don't have."*

However, despite most participants believing that in general library facilities and services are easily accessible, a few participants referred to limited information and guidance regarding what library resources are available and how to utilise them. For example, SSI 02 argued that the library did not have sufficient information about

booking study rooms: *"... they haven't got much information out there, like in terms of like booking a room or booking a quiet space like I had to find that information myself."*

Similarly, SSI 05 explained that at the beginning of their studies they had difficulties knowing how to use the library resources: *"Okay at the beginning was a bit difficult for me because I was trying to navigate the library resources and trying to learn how to use them and all ..."*. However, with the help of library staff and videos and guides they learned how to find and use resources:

"... the library there are people you can speak to. I spoke to them. They showed me how and then there are videos and write ups that you can also read. So bit by bit I was able to pick it know where to get a book, know where to see a journal and then it got easier by the day, yeah." (SSI 05)

Likewise, SSI 07 also stated that when they first started studying for their Master's degree in the UK they did not know how to utilise the library services: *"... at the very beginning when I came here, when I arrived I was, I was completely clueless [...] I was not aware that how, to how to use our resources provided ..."* Besides, they felt that nobody was available to tell students what resources were available and how to use them: *"... they don't know how to utilize the resource cause nobody is there to take the initiative and teach us about the resources."* (SSI 07).

Participants also talked about their experiences in dealing with staff in the library. For example, SSI 02 indicated that library staff was very friendly and helpful: *"Their attitude was good. I feel like they were really helpful."* Equally, SSI 07 felt that staff was always willing to help: *"When we need any help, they are ready to help. They're always there for, to help us."*. However, they also suggested that some students did not receive help from library staff because they did not know how to make an appointment:

"We can make appointment with library staff. We can go meet them personally. But that's depend upon us, how much we know how, how to utilize the resource. Because many students don't know how to make appointment." (SSI 07)

SSI 12 believed that if students speak to library staff in person staff are willing to assist, however, if students email them, staff do not always reply, or at least not in a timely manner, or their response can be not be very helpful:

"If you catch them like in person when you're like in a taught session, they're more likely to help. If you email them sometimes they're really funny, they don't reply for weeks or they're replying, be really blunt and unhelpful." (SSI 12)

One other service, which one Muslim participant mentioned, was the faith room at their university. They believed that providing a faith room for students showed that the university cared for, and was inclusive of students from different faiths:

"We've got the Chapel see like the faith area, which I feel that, you know, that's very inclusive of all faiths where people can go and, you know, reflect on their faith while being in uni itself." (SSI 02)

4.2.4.2 Individual academic support and pastoral care

Another aspect relating to university support that impacts participants' academic experience is individual academic support, e.g., personal tutoring, and personal support, e.g., pastoral care provided by their HEI. For example, SSI 01 felt that having additional academic support helped them with their studies and really improved their academic experience:

"I got extra tuition cause I was diagnosed with dyslexia. I used to have to go to social services and I've got an hour for each assignment to go through it and stuff, and I found that's so helpful, having that one-on-one, just reading for my assignment was brilliant, and the staff there were absolutely amazing."

Equally SSI 08 found that academic mentors supported them during their studies:

"...we had academic mentors who are really good." (SSI 08). Similarly, SSI 10 felt that having an academic advisor made a difference to their experience at university: *"I think having a good relationship with the person that supports you the most [...] uhm academic advisor is the position, that makes a difference."* Additionally, SSI 08 believed that providing additional academic support sessions would be beneficial:

"... more workshops like more focused workshops. [...] Let's do critical writing workshops. Let's do assessment writing, assignment writing workshops. Let's do critical reading workshops."

However, they felt that even though ME students should be encouraged to attend these workshops, sessions should not be targeted specifically at ME students, but should be available to all students:

"Not specifically targeted, but like encouraged I should say yeah. Cause I believe that all students should have access to all resources and. Yeah, but it's just, you

know, marginalised communities probably don't reach out to them as much for help ...” (SSI 08)

In addition to individual academic support, participants believed that individual pastoral care is also very important for a good academic experience. SSI 01 explained how meeting with their personal tutor is beneficial and demonstrates that HEIs do not just care for their students' academic progress, but also for their wellbeing:

“... you've got that personal lecturer who will check in on you when you have meetings with them, and the meetings are actually set in the course that you meet with them once a term, that's good and they not only ask you how you're getting on academically, they ask you how you're getting on personally as well. So that kind of providing that extra care for you on both sides, that being quite nice ...”

A few participants recommended that HEIs should value their students to a greater extent and show more support and care for them. SSI 03 argued that students should be viewed as individuals rather than just a 'number': *“... take care more about students because, and think more about students as a human being, not as a number.”* Equally, SSI 12 also believed that HEIs need to value their students more and stop regarding them as just an income stream:

“... we spend a lot of money, we get into a lot of debts goes to these places, you want to feel like they really value you as students and not just an income and I think that's really important.”

In summary, the study found four key themes related to ME students' university experience – belonging, academic staff, curriculum and university support. With regard to the first theme: 'belonging', it was found that ME students who feel they belong at university and feel included, valued and respected by their HEI are more likely to have a positive university experience. The study also found that belonging is influenced by the diversity of staff and students, the relationships ME students have with their peers, especially from non-ME backgrounds, and ME students' academic engagement and social involvement. The second theme to have emerged from this study is 'academic staff'. Academic staff have a profound impact on ME students' university experience and also affect their sense of belonging. The findings demonstrate that participants value academic staff who are competent and have good teaching abilities. Participants also attach importance to staffs' attitudes and behaviours, such as being accessible and approachable, encouraging students and

caring for their academic progress and wellbeing, treating everyone fairly and equally, and valuing diverse perspectives. The third theme, that was identified from the semi-structured interviews, is the 'curriculum'. The curriculum is critical in shaping ME students' university experience. A curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives and incorporates contributions from scholars from ME backgrounds makes participants feel included and their worldviews and lived experiences valued and respected. Another aspect of the curriculum that impacts on ME students' university experience is assessments, marking and feedback being fair and balanced. The final theme to have been found is 'university support'. In particular, the availability and accessibility of support services, such as learning skills support, counselling and wellbeing services and career services, impact ME students' university experience. In addition, individual academic support, i.e., personal tutoring, and pastoral care was deemed important by participants for a good university experience. These findings are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

5 Discussion of findings

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of the findings presented in chapter 4. The study aimed to identify criteria that ME students consider as essential for a positive university experience in order to develop a conceptual framework for evaluating ME students' perceived SQ in HE. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to compare the findings with both the extant theory and findings from previous research relating to SQ and student satisfaction in HE, with particular reference to the four key interrelated themes which emerged from the analysis.

The first theme to be discussed is 'belonging'. This study found that participants felt that they belong, they feel they fit in the HE environment and believe that they are accepted, included, valued and respected by their HEI. This study further found that participants' sense of belonging is influenced by the following three sub-themes: the level of diversity of staff and students, their friendship groups and relationships with peers, and their academic and social engagement.

The second theme to be considered is 'academic staff'. This explores the pivotal role academic staff play in enhancing ME students' university experience and fostering students' sense of belonging. The theme encompasses two sub-themes: academic staff's competence and expertise, and their attitudes and behaviours. The latter is further divided into: staff's accessibility, availability and approachability, staff's encouragement, support and care for students, staff's fair and equal treatment of students and staff's openness to diverse perspectives, allowing students to bring in their own personal experiences to class discussions and assignments.

'Curriculum', which is the third theme to be explored, is divided into two sub-themes: diversity and inclusion. This refers to a curriculum that reflects ME students' identities and experiences, incorporates a range of diverse perspectives, and ensures fair and balanced assessments, marking and feedback.

The fourth and final theme is 'university support' with its two sub-themes: the availability and accessibility of support services, and secondly, individual academic support and pastoral care that is provided to students.

The four themes and their associated sub-themes are discussed in more detail in the forthcoming sections.

5.2 Theme 1: Belonging

The following section is discussing the first theme to have emerged from this study, as explored in the previous chapter, 'belonging', which affects ME students' university experience, performance and overall satisfaction. First, participants' sense of belonging will be explored and whether they feel they matter to their HEI and are valued and included by their HEIs. Next, the factors that enhance their sense of belonging will be discussed. The first factor to be explored is the level of diversity of staff and students and the impact they have on students' sense of belonging, and also on the other two factors. The second factor is participants' friendships and their relationships with peers, and the effect these have on their university experience and their sense of belonging. Finally, the third factor - participants' engagement in learning activities and involvement in university life - will be explored.

Regarding participants' sense of belonging, this study found that most participants feel they belong. They believe that university is for people 'like them', and that they see themselves there. This contrasts to previous research which suggests that students from ethnic minority backgrounds find it more difficult to identify with university and to develop a strong sense of belonging (Russel & Jarvis, 2019), resulting in a sense of 'otherness' or isolation (Connor et al. 2004, Davies & Garrett, 2012). However, it is important to note that Davies and Garrett's (2012) study was conducted in a university with a predominantly 'White' demographic of students, which might have contributed to stronger feelings of being 'other' or isolation. By comparison, most participants in this study attend HEIs and/or study courses with relatively large numbers of ethnically diverse students, which may explain why they feel more represented and have a stronger sense of belonging. Moreover, although Russell and Jarvis' (2019) study was

carried out at a HEI with a relatively large proportion of ME students, their study focused on students who either had withdrawn or were at risk of being withdrawn from the university and thus, were probably less likely to engage academically and were more likely to feel that university was not for 'them' and that they did not belong. By comparison, participants in this study are more academically and socially engaged, which might explain why they feel more connected to their HEI and have a stronger sense of belonging and a more positive outlook on their university experience.

Sense of belonging encompasses students' feelings of 'fitting in' to the university environment and is also related to whether students feel that university is 'for them' (Keohane and Petrie, 2017). Sense of belonging is a fundamental human need (Maslow, 1943) and in a HE context is commonly understood to be the extent to which students feel connected to their HEI and the people within that HEI (Strayhorn, 2018). Tinto (2012, p. 66) defines a student's sense of belonging as "a generalised sense of membership that stems from a student's involvement in a variety of settings and the support they experience from those around them". Research has shown that 'belongingness' is essential for students' retention and success in HE (Ahn and Davis, 2023; Thomas, 2012; Thomas et al., 2017), and also significantly predicts students' satisfaction (Fan et al., 2021). Thus, to enhance students' sense of belonging, satisfaction, and success, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, HEIs need to provide a diverse, inclusive, and welcoming environment (Fan et al., 2021). However, Cureton and Gravestock (2019) argue that research relating to differential experiences of belonging based on ethnicity is limited. Therefore, this study addresses the knowledge gap in this important area as it explores ME students' sense of belonging and provides a more positive, alternative outlook than that provided by the existing literature. Furthermore, the vast majority of belonging literature focuses on student engagement, retention and success. Similarly, most research of ME students' experiences of HE is related to student engagement, retention and success. Only a very limited number of studies appear to focus specifically on belonging in relation to SQ and student satisfaction. Therefore, this study helps to close a gap in the knowledge as it examines sense of belonging in a SQ and student satisfaction context. Remarkably, no studies appear to focus specifically on ME students' SQ perceptions of HE. Consequently, this

study will also contribute to knowledge in this particular area as it investigates the relationship between ME students' sense of belonging and their perceived SQ and satisfaction with their university experience.

In addition to feeling that university is 'for them' and that they 'fit in', most participants in this study also feel that their HEIs are welcoming and inclusive, or at least try to be, and that they are made to feel part of the university community. They believe that they are included and that they matter, are valued and respected by their HEIs, which contributes towards their feelings of belonging. This supports previous research by Cheng (2004) which suggests that students' feelings of being accepted as a member of the learning community, being treated in a caring manner and valued as a person has a direct impact on their sense of belonging. Similarly, other research has shown that in an education setting, sense of belonging is influenced by students' feelings of being accepted, respected, and supported by others in the HE environment (Goodenow, 1993) and whether they matter, are valued, cared about and included regardless of their background (Smith et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2018). Likewise, Strayhorn (2019, pp. 28-29) defines sense of belonging as the "feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community". The feeling of mattering to others is closely linked to the concept of belonging (Hallam, 2023). 'Mattering' refers to feeling significant and important to others (Flett et al., 2019), which acts as a motive that influences how people behave (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering encompasses others paying attention to the individual, caring about them, appreciating them and depending on them (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). In an educational context, mattering refers to students believing that they matter as an individual to their HEI and others within their learning community, such as staff and peers, which enhances student engagement, persistence and academic success (Hamshire et al., 2025). By contrast, feelings of not mattering can lead to students feeling marginalised (Schlossberg, 1989). While the previous studies relate to more general student populations, this study has shown that inclusivity is also important for ME students and given the other key issues they have reported, inclusivity is likely to be even more critical from their perspective.

This study further revealed that participants' sense of belonging is affected by a number of interrelated factors. These factors include the diversity of both staff and students (see section 5.2.1), participants' friendships and relationships with peers (see section 5.2.2), as well as their academic engagement and social involvement (see section 5.2.3). This supports Thomas' (2012) research, which discovered that students' sense of belonging can be developed through supportive relationships with peers, meaningful interactions with staff and an HE experience, which is relevant to students' interests. Similarly, Russell and Jarvis (2019) found that feelings of belonging are influenced by students feeling integrated, their ability to make friends and engage with other students and by positive relationships with staff. However, it should be stressed that they researched the experiences of non-continuation students, irrespective of their ethnicity, whereas this study focuses on experiences of ME students who have continued with their studies. Therefore, it is possible to suggest this study shows that these factors are also relevant to ME students and continue to be important to those who choose to remain at university.

The three key factors, diversity of staff and students, friendships and relationships with peers, and academic engagement and social involvement, and how these affect ME students' university experience and sense of belonging will be discussed in more depth and detail in the following sections.

5.2.1 Diversity of academic staff and students

The findings of this study identified the importance of diversity of both academic staff and students as factors affecting participants' sense of belonging. Interviews clearly showed that participants feel that having diverse academic staff and students has an impact on their university experience. They believe that having more diverse staff and students makes them feel part of the HEI community and makes the university environment feel more welcoming and inclusive, which in turn increases their feelings of belonging. This finding is consistent with research by Davies et al. (2011) carried out at a small university in northern England with a low proportion of ME staff and students, which found that undergraduate ME students considered ethnic diversity of students and staff to be beneficial for their student experience and for enhancing their

sense of belonging. Similarly, ME medical students in Morrison et al.'s (2023) study highlight the need for greater diversification of staff and students in UK medical schools in order to make the learning environment more inclusive and welcoming, making everyone feel at ease.

Regarding the diversity of academic staff, participants' experiences vary depending on the courses they are studying, and the type and location of their HEI. However, the majority of participants have academic staff that are White British. Therefore, they believe that generally there appears to be a lack of diversity of academic staff. They perceive academic staff to be predominately White, and thus, not representative of the student body. This is not surprising as although 27.6% of undergraduate students in the UK are from ME backgrounds, only 11.9% of academic staff are (Advance HE, 2022).

However, despite the perceived lack of diversity of academic staff, most participants in this study feel that they belong, they feel part of their HEI and believe that university is for people 'like them'. This somewhat contradicts the notion that a university environment with few academic staff and senior leaders from ME backgrounds risks isolating ME students (Alexander & Arday, 2015; Connor et al., 2004) and that it negatively affects their sense of belonging (Davies & Garrett, 2012). It is possible to infer that a reason why many participants in this study have a stronger sense of belonging, in spite of a perceived lack of academic staff from ethnic backgrounds, might be because most participants feel that they have a good relationship with academic staff. This contrasts Cureton and Gravestock's (2019) argument that low numbers of ME academics in HE, and ME students' perceptions of White staff lacking cultural competence to understand ME students' perspectives, can make it harder for ME students to have a good relationship with academic staff. This study found that ME students' relationships with academic staff are influenced by academic staff's attitudes and behaviours, not just their ethnicity, which will be discussed in more detail in section 5.3.2. Indeed, most participants in this study consider academic staff to be friendly, welcoming and approachable. They feel comfortable interacting with academic staff both inside and outside the classroom. Furthermore, most participants also believe that academic staff give the same attention and encouragement to all

students and treat everyone fairly and equally regardless of their ethnicity. Consequently, they feel they have positive relationships with academic staff, which in turn enhances their sense of belonging. This finding is supported by previous research in this area, which found that ME students' sense of belonging is affected by their relationships with academic staff from different backgrounds (Keohane & Petrie, 2017; Thomas, 2020). Good productive relationships and positive interactions between students and academic staff help to instil feelings of belonging (Dost & Mazzoli Smith 2023; Russel & Jarvis, 2019). Similarly, Johnson et al. (2007) argue that positive interactions with academic staff can influence students' sense of belonging by making the HE environment feel more socially and academically supportive.

Nonetheless, participants emphasise the importance of having diverse academic staff and the positive impact it has on ME students' university experience. Participants believe that having more diverse academic staff would make the HE environment feel more welcoming, making ME students feel more comfortable and safe. Besides, they believe that staff from ethnic backgrounds better understand ME students' perspectives and views and can relate more effectively to ME students' problems and concerns. Thus, they suggest that ME students would find it easier to discuss any issues or concerns with them, which would make them feel better supported and cared for. This view is also expressed by full-time ME students studying health and social care related subjects at a post-1992 university in England in Bunce et al.'s (2021) study; they believed that a lack of relatedness due to low diversity on campus meant that staff did not understand the cultures and backgrounds ME students came from, or the challenges they faced. Smith (2017) also discovered that ME students felt that staff from non-ME backgrounds were not able to understand their perspectives. Similarly, undergraduate medical students in Morrison et al.'s (2023) study believe that having more diverse staff positively impacts on ME students' experiences because they have a better understanding of the difficulties faced by students from ethnic backgrounds.

Furthermore, some participants in this study feel that having more diverse staff can motivate ME students to do well as it demonstrates that people from ME backgrounds can achieve and be successful. This view is echoed by other research that found that

diverse staff can act as role models (de Sousa et al., 2021; Morrison et al., 2023; Smith, 2017). For example, a study by de Sousa et al. (2021) investigating the university experience of ME students in a business school of a HEI in the southeast of the UK found that students believe that seeing themselves reflected in staff at all levels would aspire them to senior roles in future. Likewise, Claridge et al. (2018) who explored HE experiences of medical and biomedical science undergraduate 'home' students at a healthcare-based university in London argue that role models from similar ethnic backgrounds are vital in aiding the attainment of ME adult learners and in making them feel empowered. Similarly, Smith (2017) found ME students referred to a lack of ME role models because the majority of staff at the HEI was White.

This study also identified that participants feel that having more diverse academic staff would help staff and students from non-ME backgrounds to gain a better understanding of diverse views and perspectives, which in turn would help ME students to feel more integrated and better understood. This is further supported by Jessop and Williams' (2009) research of ME students' experiences at a small, mainly 'White', institution in the south of England, which found that students believe that having more staff from ethnic backgrounds would result in greater cultural awareness amongst White lecturers and peers. Likewise, Morrison et al.'s (2023) study revealed that undergraduate ME medical students believe that having diverse staff facilitates a better understanding of different cultures, which would enhance ME students' experiences in medical schools. Equally, students in Davies et al.'s (2011) study stress that diverse academic staff could help sharing experiences and increasing awareness of other cultures.

This study also found that diversity of the student body is another factor that affects participants' university experience and sense of belonging. Participants indicated that having a diverse student body makes university feel more welcoming and inclusive because it is not dominated by one ethnic or religious culture. This supports findings of a quantitative study by Fan et al. (2021) who explored students' perceptions of their sense of belonging and their satisfaction with their campus experience in a HEI in the southeast of the US. They discovered that for 'underrepresented' students (i.e., non-White, non-heterosexual, and non-Christian) diversity is key to an inclusive and

welcoming campus climate, resulting in an enhanced sense of belonging and greater satisfaction with their university experience irrespective of their diverse backgrounds (Fan et al., 2021). However, it should be noted that Fan et al.'s (2011) study focused on undergraduates' and was carried out in a predominately 'White' HEI in the US. By comparison, this study found that diversity of the student population also affects students' university experience and sense of belonging in HEIs with significant numbers of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, this study also shows that diversity of the student body is not only relevant to 'underrepresented' students, including students from non-White backgrounds, in the US, but also to ME students in the UK.

This study revealed that a diverse, inclusive and welcoming HE environment makes participants feel more comfortable at university and makes them feel they *"fit in"* and are part of the HE community. This is consistent with the findings of Housee's (2011) study of ME students' everyday experiences at a university in the West Midlands. They found that diversity on campus impacts on how ME students feel and 'fit in' HEIs, namely, large numbers of students from ethnic backgrounds make ME students feel more at ease and less alienated (Housee, 2011). Similarly, Hussain and Bagguley (2007) discovered that the female Asian students in their study perceived that a 'sufficient' presence of students from diverse backgrounds, i.e., 30% or more, constitutes a 'critical mass', which makes the university environment feel more welcoming. A common ethnic and religious identity, along with shared experiences and understandings, offers these students important sources of support, thereby contributing to a more positive university experience (Hussain and Bagguley, 2007). It could be argued that many participants in this study also attend HEIs or study courses with larger numbers of students from ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, they see themselves, and their culture and religion represented in that space, which is likely to be the reason they feel more comfortable and thus, have a more positive experience of university.

Conversely, this study found that a lack of diversity of students in some participants' HEIs or courses makes them feel *"out of their comfort zone"* and like the *"odd one out"*, which makes them reluctant to speak up and share their personal experiences.

This is supported by Morrison et al.'s (2023) research in which they found that a lack of diversity amongst students led to ME students having difficulties in forming connections with peers from other ethnic backgrounds resulting in feelings of isolation and discomfort. One participant in this study, who had previously studied at a predominately 'White' institution, described being one of few students from an ethnic background as a "*culture shock*". They reported that the difference between their own cultural background and that of their White peers made them feel intimidated, isolated and alone. This finding is consistent with Morrison et al.'s (2023) study in which ME undergraduate medical students described not 'fitting in' with the dominant White culture of their schools, which led to feelings of isolation, being different and not belonging. Similarly, research by Davies and Garrett (2011) has also shown that ME students studying at a predominately 'White' institution can feel isolated and alone. Likewise, Bale et al. (2020) suggest that students who find they are the only ME student on their course can feel isolated.

For two participants in this study, diversity of students was so important that it even influenced their choice of HEI. This is consistent with Read et al.'s (2003) findings that ME students are aware of the role ethnicity has in the construction of 'belonging' and 'otherness' in HE. Their research at a post-1992 university in London with a high proportion of 'non-traditional' students in terms of class, maturity and ethnicity, found that 'non-traditional' students believe it is important to attend a HEI with a diverse student population in order to feel more comfortable (Read et al., 2003). Therefore, the desire to 'fit in' leads to ME students being attracted to an HEI because of its diverse demographic (Ball et al., 2002; NUS, 2011; Read et al., 2003; Sims, 2007). This is because students try to mitigate their position as 'other' by choosing a university that has a high proportion of students 'like them' (Read et al., 2003). Ball et al. (2002) also found that almost 40% of ME students in their study had considered the ethnic mix when deciding which HEI to apply to. They suggest that it is not the presence of significant numbers of the same ethnicity, but the general diversity of the student body that is important (Ball et al., 2002). However, Davies et al. (2011) argue that the majority of studies that found ethnic diversity influenced ME students' choice of HEI, were carried out at HEIs with a high ethnic demographic, which is the type of HEI both of the above participants study at.

This study has further developed previous research and contributes to knowledge that diversity of staff and students clearly impacts ME students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience. As the discussion in this section has shown, representation matters to ME students. Seeing people (staff and students) who look like them makes university feel more welcoming and inclusive and thus, makes ME students feel they belong and are part of the HE community, which in turn enhances their perceptions of their university experience. Furthermore, diversity of staff affects ME students' relationships with staff. Having diverse academic staff makes ME students feel that they are better understood and supported (Bunce et al., 2021; Morrison et al., 2023). Besides, diverse academic staff can also act as role models (de Sousa et al., 2021; Morrison et al., 2023; Smith, 2017), proving that people from ethnic backgrounds can achieve and be successful. In addition, having more diverse academic staff can help non-ME staff and students to develop a better understanding of diverse views and perspectives, which in turn makes ME students feel accepted and more integrated. Therefore, seeing more staff from ME backgrounds impacts ME students' sense of belonging to their HEI, which in turn influences their perceptions of the quality of their education. Moreover, this study found that diversity of students is just as, if not even more, important than diversity of staff because not only does it make the university environment feel more welcoming and inclusive, it also makes ME students feel that university is for people like 'them' and that they 'fit in'. By contrast, a lack of diversity can lead to ME students feeling different, isolated and that they do not belong (Bale et al., 2020; Davies & Garrett, 2011; Morrison et al., 2023). Differences in culture and religion can make it difficult to form connections with non-ME peers, which can result in ME students feeling intimidated and uncomfortable. Furthermore, diversity of students also affects ME students' ability to make friends and their relationships with non-ME peers (discussed in section 5.2.2), as well as their academic and social engagement (discussed in section 5.2.3).

5.2.2 Friendships and relationships with peers

This study found that another significant factor that enhances participants university experience and sense of belonging is making friends, and relationships with peers,

especially from non-ME backgrounds. This finding is consistent with other research in this area, that found that ME students' sense of belonging is affected by the ability to make friends, and their relationships with students from other ethnicities (Singh, 2011; Thomas, 2020). Similarly, Smith et al. (2021) suggest that likeminded friends and positive relationships with peers, help students to integrate, bond, and create a sense of belonging. Likewise, Rodriguez and Blaney (2021) found that connecting to other students who have similar interests and come from similar backgrounds creates a sense of belonging. Tinto (2006) argues that students who have positive relationships with peers and staff become more involved and committed to their HEI. Similarly, Dost and Mazzoli Smith (2023) suggest that trusting and supportive relationships with peers (and academic staff) foster a sense of belonging that affects engagement and performance and leads to more positive attitudes towards peers, lecturers and the HEI. Additionally, according to Duzevic et al. (2018), social integration also has a positive effect on student satisfaction. Thus, HEIs should encourage interactions between students and between students and staff by providing opportunities for students to take part in curricular and extracurricular activities (Duzevic et al., 2018).

The majority of participants in this study, irrespective of their level or year of study, course, or HEI, report how their friends enhance their university experience through the support, motivation and encouragement they provide to each other with their learning. This highlights the importance friends play in peer learning and the vital role of friendship groups as learning communities. This finding is reinforced in a study by Kauser et al. (2021), which found that having friends on their course enabled ME students to seek academic support from them when needed, which consequently improved their overall university experience. Similarly, Bradbury and Nieuwerburgh's (2023) small-scale study of academically and socially engaged ME students at a London University Business School, identified that it is important for ME students to have friends who they can ask for help and bounce ideas off as they provide practical support with their studies and help them to be committed and progress with their studies. A study by Lin et al. (2022) of ME students' HE experience in a post-92 university in England found that students believe that providing help and support to friends demonstrates that their friends matter to them and also that they themselves are important to and valued and appreciated by their friends. These feelings of

matterings lead to the development of a collaborative learning environment, which enhances ME students' university experience and helps them to succeed with their studies (Lin et al., 2022).

In addition, participants in this study also suggest that friends do not just support each other in their learning but are also there for each other during challenging times. This demonstrates that in addition to academic support, friends also play a vital role in providing emotional and social support. This is also consistent with research by Cureton and Gravestock (2019) who found that friends provide support, comfort and understanding during difficult times and therefore, are one of the most important sources of belonging. One participant even suggests that friends are "*more like family*". This aligns with Wilcox et al.'s (2005) qualitative research of first year social science students at the University of Brighton in the south of England, which found that 'making compatible friends' is critical because over time these friends become 'surrogate family members' and thus, are a key source of emotional and social support, providing a buffer when students experience difficulties and enhancing their sense of belonging and wellbeing. Although, both Cureton and Gravestock's (2019) and Wilcox et al.'s (2005) studies did not specifically focus on ME students, this study demonstrates that making friends who provide academic and social support is equally, or indeed it is possible to suggest, even more, important for ME students and impacts their university experience and sense of belonging.

Regarding their friendship groups, this study found that most participants tend to socialise and study with people from ME backgrounds. This is because it makes them feel more comfortable and better supported. Participants contend that friends from ME backgrounds can relate better to them because they understand their views and perspectives and have similar lived experiences. This is consistent with Housee's (2011) study which found that students preferred to stay in their 'own' ethnic groups because it gave them a sense of safety and empowerment. Similarly, Hammond et al. (2019) discovered that to develop a sense of belonging ME physiotherapy students looked towards other students they had an affinity with based on other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity. Hamshire et al.'s (2025) study found that ME students believed that their non-ME peers lack understanding of ME students' lived experiences

and are not able to relate to the issues ME students face, which resulted in feelings of not mattering to their non-ME peers, making it difficult to develop supportive relationships and thus, negatively affecting their sense of belonging.

However, this study also revealed that participants believe that having friends from predominately ME backgrounds can lead to some degree of segregation between students from different ethnicities. This is consistent with Cureton and Gravestock's (2019) research that showed that students tended to seek out students who were like them, leading to limited integration between students from different ethnic backgrounds. Participants in this study believe that difficulties in forming friendships with non-ME students are due to some non-ME students lacking understanding of cultural differences. Similarly, research by Kauser et al. (2021) found that ME students alluded to a lack of integration due to differences in cultural background. Likewise, Bunce et al. (2021) identified a lack of relatedness between ME and non-ME students inside and outside the classroom due to non-ME students (and staff) not understanding ME students' cultures and backgrounds. Lin et al.'s (2022) study also uncovered that non-ME students' lack of understanding of ME students' backgrounds, cultures and lived experiences led to ME students' feelings of not being valued or mattering to their peers, which had a negative effect on their sense of belonging. Therefore, lecturers should aid the development of integrative relationships by creating inclusive learning communities that are appreciative and respectful of cultural differences (Bunce et al., 2021).

Participants also believe that a lack of understanding of cultural differences leads to ME students being stereotyped by students from non-ME backgrounds. Furthermore, even though they reported that they had not experienced any racism at university, some participants described incidents that would generally be regarded as racist. However, they did not attribute these incidents to racism; instead, they held the view that these incidents were not malicious, but rather due to a lack of understanding of cultural differences. This is consistent with findings from other studies in this area (Bale et al., 2020; Jessop & Williams, 2009) which found that students downplayed racism and attributed these incidents as unintentional due to a lack of cultural awareness.

Moreover, participants also referred to other subtle forms of racism, such as ME students being intimidated and made to feel uncomfortable by White peers during discussions in class, not discussing certain topics because they did not want to make non-ME students feel uncomfortable or refraining to contribute to discussions altogether. This is consistent with research by the Royal Holloway Students' Union (2020) which discovered ME students' feelings of having to 'censor' their discussions. Likewise, research by Hammond et al. (2019) also found that students modified their behaviours, such as trying to avoid conflict, staying silent, ignoring comments and just 'taking it'. Similarly, Bunce and King's (2019) study uncovered that ME students felt they could not express their own views due to fearing that this could encourage disparagement and disdain from White peers. A study by Jessop and Williams (2009) identified that the most common subtle form of racism on campus were situations in which ME students felt uncomfortable because of the perceived awkwardness of their White peers towards them due to their ethnicity. Bunce et al. (2021) argue that being ignored or avoided by non-ME students results in ME students feeling isolated and their sense of belonging being negatively affected. Similarly, a study by Hamshire et al. (2025) found that instances of prejudice exacerbated ME students' feelings of not mattering, which had a negative impact on their sense of belonging. Likewise, research by Fan et al. (2021) has shown that a hostile racial university environment has negative effects on students' sense of belonging and their satisfaction with their university experience.

This study contributes to knowledge in the area of SQ in HE and student satisfaction because it has shown that ME students' perceptions of the quality of their education are affected by their sense of belonging, which in turn is affected by their ability to make friends and developing good relationships with non-ME peers. This study found that friends play an important role in supporting, encouraging and motivating each other in their learning. Besides, this study also found that in addition to academic support, friends also provide each other with emotional and social support. Therefore, friends are important for fostering a sense of belonging. However, many ME students prefer to make friends with other ME students, even though this can lead to some degree of segregation, because they can better relate to each other and better understand the challenges and problems they might face compared to their non-ME

peers. By contrast, non-ME students often lack understanding of different cultures and backgrounds, which can make forming friendships with them difficult and can affect their relationships with ME students. However, having good relationships with non-ME peers can make university feel more welcoming and inclusive and can make ME students more comfortable and confident to interact with their peers. Therefore, friendships and relationships with non-ME peers also affect ME students' academic engagement and social involvement, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

5.2.3 Academic engagement and social involvement

The findings of this study also indicate that participants' academic engagement, such as participating in learning activities, as well as their social involvement in university life (such as taking part in extracurricular activities) are also factors that positively affect their sense of belonging, and thus impact on their university experience. Many participants in this study partake in extracurricular activities and are involved in university life. In fact, five of the 12 participants are, or have been, student reps, SU officers, or volunteer in student groups and societies. This makes them feel more connected to their HEI, which helps them to develop a better sense of belonging, and thus enhances their university experience. This might also be a reason why many participants have more positive perceptions of and are more satisfied with their university experience and their HEI.

Previous research has shown repeatedly that academic and social engagement are important for students' belonging to their institutions (Astin, 1999; Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1987). Thomas (2012; 2020) suggests that academic and social engagement is closely related to belonging, as engagement generates belonging. Similarly, Ahn and Davis (2023) argue that students' sense of belonging tends to be determined mainly by their academic and social engagement. Likewise, Keohane and Petrie (2017) suggest that there is a significant overlap and interaction between sense of belonging and engagement, whereby students who do not feel they belong become more disengaged, which further reduces their sense of belonging. Furthermore, Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement postulates that students' academic and social

engagement is one of the most significant factors determining their retention. Similarly, Tinto's (1993) theory of integration emphasises the importance of students' involvement and engagement in their academic community for students' retention, because the more a student integrates and feels part of their HEI, the more likely they are to persist. Additionally, research has also shown that academic engagement and social involvement, not only affect a sense of belonging and student retention, but also positively influence students' satisfaction (Lazibat et al., 2014).

Interestingly, much of Tinto's (1984) research relating to academic and social engagement is based on first year 'traditional' college students in the US and Astin's (1975) theory of student involvement is based on a longitudinal study of college dropouts in the US. Therefore, this research contributes to knowledge in this area by showing that academic and social engagement is not only relevant for 'traditional' students, but also for 'non-traditional' (i.e., ME) students, and not only for first year students, but also for students at level two, three, four and five of their studies in the UK. This study also provides evidence from a UK context. It also contributes to knowledge by demonstrating that academic and social engagement are not only vital for student retention but are also important in relation to ME students' evaluation of the quality of their education. Additionally, Trowler (2010) notes that much of the student engagement literature and research originates from North America and Australasia. By comparison, whilst there is an emerging body of 'grey' literature from the UK in the form of project reports, unpublished conference papers, practitioner presentations and discussion documents, they are mostly based on small scale, single case studies. Hence, this research will also contribute to knowledge in this area by exploring academic and social engagement of ME students from different HEIs from various mission groups. Besides, Bradbury and Nieuwerburgh (2023) argue that there is a scarcity of qualitative research relating to student engagement in general, and research focusing specifically on ME students in particular. Therefore, this study will help to fill the gap in knowledge in this area by exploring the influence of academic and social involvement on ME students' sense of belonging and perceptions of the quality of their university experience.

Astin (1985, p. 36) defines student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience”. Similarly, Kuh (2009b, p. 683) posits that student engagement is “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities”. Academic engagement relates to the curriculum, learning activities and interactions between students and academic staff, whilst social involvement refers mainly to social interactions with friends and peers through student societies and clubs and other social spaces (Thomas, 2012). Engaged students devote time and energy to studying, spend time on campus, participate in student groups and societies and frequently interact with academic staff and peers (Astin, 1984). Furthermore, what students do at university, and how they experience it determines if they develop a learner identity and engage with the CoP (Russell & Jarvis, 2019). A student’s learner identity is positively linked with student engagement, which in turn is positively linked to a sense of belonging (Masika & Jones, 2016; Russell & Jarvis, 2019). Thus, according to Wenger’s (1998) social theory of learning, CoPs play a central role in engaging students in learning and fostering a sense of belonging. However, despite of the importance of student engagement for fostering a sense of belonging as well as for student retention and success, research suggests that increasing numbers of students do not engage, which is of great concern for HEIs (Eboka, 2019).

Many participants in this study have had positive experiences of participating in extracurricular activities. They believe that taking part in extracurricular activities and getting involved with societies and clubs enhances their sense of belonging and positively affects their university experience. Therefore, they believe it is important that more ME students get involved in extracurricular activities. However, many consider lack of time due to family or work commitments as a barrier to getting involved. Previous studies also found that part-time employment prevented ME students from participating in extracurricular activities (Kauser et al., 2021). Besides, many ME students live at home and commute to university, thus they tend to prioritise academic engagement not realising the social and cultural benefits that can be gained from participating in extracurricular activities (Thomas & Jones, 2017). Additionally, previous research also identified cultural and religious reasons as barriers to ME

students' participation in extracurricular activities and social events because many centre around alcohol (Hammond et al., 2019; Ikhlaiq et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, despite these barriers, participants in this study recommend ME students should get involved in student societies as a way to enhance their university experience. This supports some previous research which suggests that students who are involved in student clubs and societies are more likely to have a stronger sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). As Strayhorn (2012) notes in relation to Black male college students in the US, student societies can help students to feel included and thus, contribute toward creating a sense of belonging. Likewise, Ahn and Davis (2020) contend that social engagement is one of the most significant factors in students' sense of belonging. In contrast, a few studies have found that many ME students avoid joining societies that are specifically linked to certain ethnic groups (Bunce et al., 2021; Davies & Garrett, 2012; Davies et al., 2011). This is because they are concerned that such societies can be exclusionary (Sims, 2008), which they believe could lead to further ethnic differentiation and segregation (Davies & Garrett, 2012; Davies et al., 2011). Therefore, they prefer to join societies and student groups based on their interests rather than their ethnicity (Davies & Garrett, 2012; Davies et al., 2011). However, Davies et al. (2011) argue that ME students' preferences to join societies based on their ethnicity depends on the level of diversity of students at a particular HEI. They suggest that studies at HEIs with a diverse student population have shown that students like to join ethnicity centred societies and clubs, whilst studies in predominantly 'White' HEIs have found that students prefer to join societies based on their interests, not their ethnicity, because they want to assimilate and belong to the majority mainstream interest groups.

Another important factor which enhances participants' university experience and thus, their sense of belonging, is academic engagement, i.e., participation in learning activities and discussions. Osterman's (2000) extensive literature review found that a sense of belonging in an educational environment is significantly linked to students' academic engagement. The findings of this study further indicate that most participants take part in discussions and feel comfortable to ask questions and bring in their own experiences (see also section 5.3.2.4 Valuing different perspectives and

allowing students to bring in their own personal experiences). Participants believe that contributing to discussions and expressing their opinions and views allows for ME students' voices to be heard and can also help non-ME students to better understand ME students' perspectives and lived experiences. This finding is consistent with a previous study by Blake et al. (2022), which found that active participation in class gave students a voice and made them feel included in debates, which in turn led to feelings of belonging. Tinto (2006) also stresses the importance of student engagement in the classroom and argues that for many students the classroom is the one, or maybe only, place where they meet peers and academic staff and if engagement does not take place there, it is unlikely it will take place elsewhere.

However, not all participants in this study take part in discussions or share their personal experiences in class. A few participants lack the confidence to engage in discussions. Interestingly, one participant thinks that online lectures and seminars during lockdown encouraged more ME students to participate due to them being able to *"hide behind the screen"*. This view is supported by Eboka (2019) who argues that lower levels of engagement of ME students are due to a lower self-esteem and a reduced sense of belonging. Other participants in this study refrain from talking about personal experiences because they feel that sharing personal experiences draws too much attention to them and makes them stand out even more. This is echoed by research carried out by Hammond et al. (2019), which found that ME students believed that discussions around ethnic differences *"put a massive magnifying glass over them"* (p. 5). Another reason why some participants in this study do not feel comfortable to contribute to discussions is due to the behaviours of students from non-ME backgrounds towards them, such as making fun of their accent, making inappropriate comments or dismissing ME students' experiences, views and feelings. Likewise, Blake et al. (2022) identified behaviours and attitudes of classmates, especially if not dealt with appropriately by staff, as barriers to inclusive teaching. This is further supported by research carried out by the NUS (2016, as cited in Eboka, 2019) which identified subtle forms of racism (through ignorance, unwitting prejudice, thoughtlessness and stereotyping) as barriers preventing ME students from engaging. Similarly, Hamshire et al.'s (2025) study found that instances of prejudice resulted in ME students feeling that

they did not matter and were not valued, which made them refrain from engaging in discussions in class.

The discussion of ME students' academic engagement and social involvement demonstrates that they can enhance ME students' sense of belonging and consequently positively affect their university experience. Thus, this study supports the literature which suggests that academic engagement and social involvement influence sense of belonging, whereby students who engage in academic and social activities tend to have a stronger sense of belonging (Ahn & Davis, 2023; Keohane & Petrie, 2017; Thomas, 2012; 2020). In addition, this study also supports the notion that academic engagement and social involvement positively contribute to student satisfaction (Lazibat et al., 2014). Involvement in student clubs and societies can help ME students feel included and integrated. Moreover, clubs and societies are also a source for making friends and provide ME students an opportunity to give each other emotional and social support, which helps to create a sense of belonging. Similarly, ME students' academic engagement such as participating in class discussions and learning activities makes ME students feel included and that their opinions are valued, which leads to feelings of belonging. However, academic engagement is also closely linked to ME students' relationships with their peers, especially from non-ME backgrounds, because inappropriate behaviours of non-ME peers, such as making fun of ME students' accents, making inappropriate comments or dismissing ME students' experiences, views and feelings, which can prevent ME students from engaging. Consequently, this can negatively impact their sense of belonging. As such, ME students' academic engagement and social involvement is influenced by the diversity of academic staff and students and the relationships ME students have with their non-ME peers.

In summary, as the above discussion of belonging demonstrates, a sense of belonging affects ME students' university experience and their perception of the quality of, and overall satisfaction with, HE. This study found that participants' sense of belonging is influenced by three key factors – the *diversity* of academic staff and students, their *friendships and relationships with peers*, and their *academic and social engagement*.

Diversity of academic staff and students affects ME students' sense of belonging because it makes an institution feel more welcoming and inclusive and makes ME students feel that they 'fit in'. Furthermore, it makes ME students feel more comfortable and safe because they find it easier to discuss their concerns and problems with staff from ME backgrounds and feel more able to contribute to discussions and share their personal experiences with a more diverse group of peers. Additionally, having more diverse staff and students can help non-ME students and staff to develop better cultural awareness, which makes ME students feel that their perspectives and lived experiences are better understood. Finally, academic staff from ME backgrounds can act as role models and can motivated them to do well and be successful. Therefore, all these aspects can enhance ME students' sense of belonging and their perceptions of the quality of their university experience.

ME students' friendships and relationships with non-ME peers also influence their sense of belonging and thus, affect their university experience. Friends provide academic as well as emotional and social support, which fosters sense of belonging. Furthermore, having good relationships with non-ME peers makes university feel more welcoming and inclusive. Besides, they also positively affect ME students' academic and social engagement because ME students feel more comfortable and confident to voice their opinions and interact with non-ME peers. Therefore, relationships with non-ME peers affect ME students' sense of belonging and also impact their university experience.

Lastly, academic engagement and social involvement is also a factor influencing ME students' sense of belonging and their perceptions of the quality of their university experience. Academic engagement affects ME students' sense of belonging because it makes them feel that their opinions and perspectives are respected and valued. In addition, social involvement can also make ME students feel included and integrated, and as such fosters a sense of belonging. This, in turn, positively affects their perception of the quality of their university experience.

The next section will explore the role academic staff play in enhancing ME students' university experience and also their sense of belonging. First, in section 5.3.1,

academic staff's competence and expertise will be examined. Next, in section 5.3.2, their attitudes and behaviours will be discussed.

5.3 Theme 2: Academic staff

The second theme to have emerged from this study is the impact academic staff have on ME students' university experience. Participants believe that academic staff play a vital role in enhancing ME students' university experience. In particular, academic staff's competence and expertise, as well as appropriate attitudes and behaviours are perceived to be crucial for a good university experience and a positive impact on their sense of belonging. Academic staff's attitudes and behaviours are seen to affect the interactions between students and academic staff, i.e., teacher-student-relationships (TSR), and influence the support and encouragement given to students. It is also important they treat everyone equally and fairly, and value different perspectives and experiences. This is consistent with Yusoff et al.'s (2015) findings which state that the characteristics of teaching staff is an important quality factor in HE. Similarly, Clemes et al. (2008) propose that interaction quality, which encompasses interactions with academic staff, is the most important quality dimension when evaluating perceptions of SQ in HE.

Academic staff's competence and expertise, as well as their attitudes and behaviours are discussed in more detail in the next few sub-sections. Firstly, participants' perceptions and experiences of academic staff's competence and expertise, i.e., their teaching abilities and subject knowledge, are explored. Next, aspects relating to academic staff's attitudes and behaviours, and how these affect participants' university experiences are examined. Firstly, participants' perceptions of academic staff's accessibility, availability and approachability are investigated. Secondly, participants' experiences regarding academic staff's encouragement, support and care for their students are studied. Thirdly, participants' views regarding whether staff treat all students regardless of their ethnicity fairly and equally are explored. Finally, participants' beliefs about staff valuing different perspectives and allowing them to bring in their own personal experiences are considered.

5.3.1 Competence and expertise

This study revealed that participants believe that competent and knowledgeable tutors are important for a good university experience and thus, affects their satisfaction. In particular, academic staff's teaching ability and their subject knowledge are valued highly by participants. Additionally, participants also appreciate teaching staff who are passionate about the subject they teach. This is consistent with Douglas et al.'s (2008) research of students' satisfaction in HE that identified academic staff's teaching ability and subject expertise as the most important aspects of universities' services. This is further supported by other research that found that students value academic staff's theoretical and practical knowledge, their qualifications, as well as their knowledge of new developments and research in their subject area (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). Equally, Hill et al. (2003) identified 'quality of the lecturer' as a factor impacting students' perceived quality of their education. They suggest that students appreciate lecturers who know their subject, are enthusiastic, are able to effectively communicate their knowledge, and are well prepared and organised. Additionally, academic staff's communication skills, i.e., the ability to explain subject matter, and the quality of instruction/delivery also impact students' satisfaction (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996). However, none of these studies focused specifically on ME students' satisfaction with teaching staff's expertise and knowledge. Therefore, this study helps to close a gap in knowledge in this area as it demonstrates that academic staff's expertise and knowledge impact ME students' perceptions of the quality of HE. Indeed, many participants in this study are dissatisfied with the quality of teaching. They believe that some of their teaching staff lack sufficient theoretical and technical knowledge. Therefore, they are not able to explain topics in detail, answer questions satisfactorily, or teach students the necessary technical skills, which has a negative impact on participants' university experience and overall satisfaction. In addition to academic staff's competence and expertise, participants also believe that the relationship they have with academic staff and staff's attitudes and behaviours are also very important for a good university experience, which will be discussed further in the following sections.

5.3.2 Academic staff's attitudes and behaviours

This study found that participants believe that for a good university experience it is also important to have a good relationship with academic staff. Most participants describe their relationships with academic staff as good. They believe that staff knowing who they are and knowing their names shows that students are valued and matter, resulting in good relationship with academic staff. This is consistent with the findings of Hallam's (2023) research which found that students feel that being seen as 'a name and a person' demonstrates that they matter as an individual, which enhances their relationships with staff. One participant also suggests that it is equally important for students to get to know academic staff as this encourages them 'to make a good impression', which motivates them to attend lectures and tutorials and do their work. Similarly, research by Hallam (2023) found that students believing they are valued and matter to staff and the relationship they have with staff resulted in them feeling accountable to staff and wanting to please staff and paying back the commitment demonstrated by staff by doing their best. A good relationship with academic staff also includes having lecturers who are easy to be with and help students to learn (Hill et al., 2003), which is developed by staff seeing a student as an individual with potential and by reaching out to students and encouraging interactions (Cureton and Gravestock, 2019). Good relationships between students and academic staff are important for student success (Kuh et al., 2006) and also affect students' perceived quality of education (Hill et al., 2003). Moreover, frequent and positive interactions with academic staff have been linked to feelings of mattering (Hallam, 2023; Lin et al., 2022) and an enhanced sense of belonging (Li et al., 2015).

Furthermore, participants believe that a variety of academic staff's attitudes and behaviours influence the relationships between them and students. In particular, whether academic staff are accessible, available and approachable, they encourage, support and care for students, treat everyone fairly and equally, and value different perspectives and allow students to voice their opinions and views, and bring in their own personal experiences. These aspects will be discussed in more detail in the next few sections.

5.3.2.1 Accessibility, availability and approachability

This study found that participants believe that having academic staff who are accessible, available, and approachable leads to positive relationships with staff and thus, enhances their university experience and their overall satisfaction. Most participants are of the opinion that it is important that academic staff are easy to reach and have time to speak to or meet with students. Additionally, participants also believe that it is essential that staff are approachable, that is, students should feel comfortable to interact with academic staff and should not be afraid to ask them questions or discuss any problems or concerns with them. Previous studies have also acknowledged the importance of accessibility and approachability for SQ in HE and student satisfaction. For instance, Firdaus (2006a, 2006c) found that ‘access’, i.e., approachability, ease of contact and availability of lecturers, was perceived by students as the most important dimension for determining the quality of the service they received. Likewise, Lazibat et al. (2014) identified ‘access’, i.e., approachability and responsiveness of staff as having a significant influence on student satisfaction. However, these studies did not specifically research ME students’ perceptions of the quality of their university experience. Therefore, this study will help to address the gap in knowledge as it demonstrates that accessibility, availability and approachability of academic staff is also of importance in the context of ME students’ university experience.

In addition to being important for student satisfaction, accessibility and approachability of academic staff inside and outside the class has also been found to be important for student learning (Kuh et al., 2003). And, whether staff is approachable and contactable has also been identified as a factor impacting ME students’ perceptions of academic support (NUS, 2011).

Although most participants in this study reported that academic staff generally are accessible, available and approachable, a couple of international students from India feel that academic staff do not take the same interest in students compared to tutors in their home country. They feel that it is more difficult to speak to staff as they need to make an appointment rather than being able to just go to see them whenever they

have a question or need help. Hagenauer and Volet (2014) argue that students studying outside their home country often have different expectations regarding teacher-student-relationships (TSR). Other participants talked about their frustrations when contacting staff via email as some staff did not respond to emails in a timely manner, or not at all, and some staff did not reply out of office hours. This is in line with Kauser et al.'s (2021) study which found that some ME students eventually refrained from seeking help and support because they did not get timely responses from staff when seeking course-related help. Similarly, Blake et al. (2022) found that ME students felt that when staff did not respond to emails, or when responses were slow, they felt they were not respected as a full member of the HE community. Furthermore, staff responding to emails improve students' relationships with staff and also enhance students' sense of belonging (Jones & Bell, 2025). Additionally, research has shown that communication can lead to both, student satisfaction and dissatisfaction because it is perceived as critical by students in relation to teaching, learning and assessment (Douglas et al., 2008).

5.3.2.2 Encouragement, support and care

This study found that participants also believe that academic staff who support, encourage and care for students helps to create positive relationships with academic staff, which in turn enhances their university experience and their overall satisfaction with HE. This finding is echoed by research carried out by Pereda et al. (2007) who identified the lecturer's role as teacher, who guides and motivates students as an important factor influencing students' perceptions of the quality of the HE services provided. Likewise, Hill et al. (2003) found that students believe that for a quality educational experience, academic staff should care about students' individual needs and should both encourage and support them. Equally, Firdaus (2006a) identified caring academic staff who respond to requests for assistance as a factor pertaining to the SQ dimension 'academic staff' in his HEdPERF model. Similarly, Teeroovengadum et al. (2016a) found that lecturers who give personal attention to students, and guide and advise students are attributes of what they call 'core educational quality'. Once again it should be noted that these aforementioned studies did not focus on ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and satisfaction with, their university. Hence,

this study will help to address the gap in knowledge as it shows that supportive and caring academic staff who encourage their students have an important role in the context of ME students' university experience.

Some participants in this study are satisfied with the level of support, encouragement and care they received. They feel that staff provide help and guidance with their assignments and support them with their learning. Educational support by lecturers has been identified as crucial to academic success (Housee, 2011). In addition, academic staff supporting students to succeed, also help students develop a sense of belonging (Bradbury & Nieuwerburgh, 2023). Besides, Dicker et al. (2017) found that caring staff who want students to succeed is a major factor influencing perceptions of quality in HE. On the other hand, a few participants feel that, on some occasions, they could have done with more help and support from academic staff. They feel that staff did not give them sufficient guidance with their assignments and left them to cope by themselves, which caused them unnecessary stress and anxiety. Previous studies also found that some ME students did not feel sufficiently supported to reach the high academic standards they wanted to achieve (Bunce et al., 2021). Bradbury and Nieuwerburgh (2023) stress the importance of support of lecturers for boosting students' self-esteem and empowering them to feel competent and able to succeed. Furthermore, a couple of participants in this study feel that academic staff should not just pay more attention to students' academic success but should also show more concern for their overall wellbeing. For example, one participant from India feels that students in India have a closer relationship with their tutors compared to students in the UK and that academic staff in the UK are not as concerned about students' progress and wellbeing compared to tutors in India.

However, despite their different experiences, most participants in this study believe that academic staff give all students, regardless of their ethnicity, the same attention, support and encouragement. This is contrary to some previous research in this area, which has found that ME students felt ignored or overlooked by staff and that staff was reluctant to help and give academic support when they asked for it (Bunce et al., 2021; Kauser et al., 2021). Similarly, ME students in Hamshire et al.'s (2025) research believed that compared to their White peers they had to lay claim to mattering and do

more to be valued as legitimate actors in their respective HE fields to get the same attention and support as their White counterparts. This is important because research has shown that ME students' perceptions of whether they are given the same level of attention and encouragement as their White counterparts affect their university experience (NUS, 2011; Bale et al., 2020). Besides, academic staff paying attention to ME students as individuals influences their feelings of mattering, which impacts on their sense of belonging (Hallam, 2023).

5.3.2.3 Fair and equal treatment

Another aspect that participants believe affects students' relationships with academic staff and impacts their university experience is fair and equal treatment of everyone regardless of their ethnicity. This finding is echoed throughout the pertinent literature. Equal treatment by lecturers, and fair and inclusive teaching, assessment and support have been identified as factors impacting ME students' university experience (NUS, 2011).

Most participants in this study believe that academic staff treat everyone fairly and equally and that they are not treated differently to their White peers. Participants are of the opinion that academic staff give the same level of attention, encouragement and support to all students regardless of their ethnicity. This finding is consistent with research by Davies et al. (2011) in which ME students felt that they had not been treated less favourably compared to their White counterparts. By contrast, a few participants in this study believe that there is differential treatment based on ethnicity. For example, one participant believes that a White student who had failed some modules was able to continue their studies, whilst ME students in the same situation had to leave the course. This is in line with other studies in this area, which found that there is a perception among ME students that their White peers receive more attention and are treated more favourably (Morrison et al., 2023). Surprisingly, two participants gave examples of incidents where they felt that a tutor from the same ethnic background as they treated them less favourably compared to other students. Possibly this was due to the tutors not wanting to appear to favour students from their own ethnic background.

Although most participants do not feel stereotyped or discriminated against, one participant gave an example of Muslims being portrayed as ‘terrorists’ and ‘criminals’ in one of their classes which made them feel singled out. Similar experiences were reported by students in a study by Bunce et al. (2021) who felt that people from ethnic backgrounds were often depicted as having a lower intellectual ability, more mental health problems, or as being ‘bad people’ and ‘criminals’. Furthermore, the participant also explained that after that class their peers had a negative opinion of Muslims and thus, they felt they had to defend Muslims and explain that most of them are not like that. This is supported by the Royal Holloway Students’ Union’s (2020) findings that students who are alone, or in a minority of ME students on their course felt they were put on the spot and pressured to speak on behalf of the ME community during discussions.

5.3.2.4 Valuing different perspectives and allowing students to bring in their own personal experiences

Another factor that enhances relationships with academic staff and improves students’ university experience and sense of belonging is staff valuing different perspectives and allowing students to bring in their own personal experiences. Most participants feel that most, but not all, academic staff allow students to express their own views and bring in their personal experiences from their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This contrasts with other research which found that ME students reported not being able to express their views and feeling that they had to remain silent and avoid contributing their ideas to discussions because they believed their views were considered irrelevant and superfluous by White staff and peers (Bunce & King, 2019). Likewise, Hamshire et al. (2025) found that when ME students thought their value was not acknowledged it made them refrain from participating in discussions because they felt that they and their contributions did not matter, resulting in feelings of marginalisation and not belonging. Similarly, Davies and Garrett’s (2012) study uncovered that some students felt awkward participating in discussions regarding ethnicity and that these discussions had increased their feelings of isolation and thus, weakened their sense of belonging. One reason for participants in this study possibly

feeling more confident to voice their opinions is that many are involved with the SU and student societies and therefore, appear to feel strongly about diversity issues. This is possibly also a reason why they agreed to take part in this research.

Furthermore, one participant in this study suggests that ME students being able to express their opinions and approach topics from different perspectives is very important as it allows for ME students' voices to be heard. Moreover, another participant argues that ME students expressing their views and perspectives can also help their White peers to better understand the differences between their own and ME students' perspectives and experiences. This finding is in line with other studies in this area which found that students welcomed inclusive discussions based on the belief that different people had different perceptions and experiences and thus, should be allowed to speak (Housee, 2011). Similarly, Simons and Belton's (2021) study found that students in underrepresented groups believed that it was essential for them to be able to express their views, because their voices should not just be heard, but should be respected and understood as a viable consideration. Blake et al. (2022) found that students who feel that their voices are valued by tutors (and peers) had an increased sense of belonging. Equally, Hamshire et al. (2025) found that being heard makes ME students feel valued, which in turn enhances their feelings of mattering and belonging.

However, not all participants feel able to voice their opinions or share their personal experiences. For example, one participant feels reluctant to discuss certain topics or voice their opinions because they fear it could upset their peers or be perceived to be controversial. Previous research also found that ME students are of the opinion that it is better to remain silent and to not get involved in discussions that are culturally and racially sensitive (Bunce et al., 2021). Similarly, Kauser et al. (2021) found that students from ethnic backgrounds would remain reserved in class and would allow their White peers to be outspoken and have their voices heard. Some participants in this study are not comfortable to voice their opinions or share their own personal experiences because they do not have a good relationship with academic staff. Other participants remain silent because of the size and make up of lectures and seminars, which they believe makes the environment feel not 'safe'. And one participant feels that sharing their own personal experiences draws too much attention on them. This finding is

consistent with Hammond et al.'s (2019) study which found that ME students believe that discussions around ethnic differences put a spotlight on them.

Moreover, one participant suggests that tutors do not always encourage ME students to participate in discussions, and thus it is easier to remain silent. Research by Housee (2011) found that students felt that it was the lecturer's responsibility to facilitate class participation. Thus, the literature recommends a teaching style that invites diverse voices to inform classroom discussions (Bowl, 2005) and to make teaching more culturally responsive by drawing on students' cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2002).

As can be seen from this discussion, academic staff play a vital role in enhancing ME students' university experience and their overall satisfaction with, and perceptions of, the quality of their education. Academic staff's competence and expertise is another important factor that impacts participants' experience and satisfaction. In particular, participants value tutors who have a good knowledge and are enthusiastic about the subject they teach. Furthermore, participants appreciate academic staff who have good teaching abilities, specifically, who are able to explain concepts well, teach students the necessary technical skills and answer students' questions satisfactorily. Additionally, academic staff's attitudes and behaviours also affect participants' university experience. They influence the relationships between students and staff, which are important for student success, and affect students' perceived quality of education. Moreover, positive relationships with academic staff can help to develop students' sense of belonging. This study has shown that for a positive relationship with staff it is important that staff are easily accessible, have time for students and are friendly, welcoming and approachable. Furthermore, it is also vital that staff encourage, support and care for students. Academic staff's support helps students to succeed and to develop a sense of belonging. In particular, it is important that all students, irrespective of their ethnicity are given the same encouragement and attention. Another factor identified in this study that affects participants' relationships with academic staff and thus, impacts their academic experience and sense of belonging is the fair and equal treatment of everyone regardless of their ethnicity. Lastly, staff valuing different perspectives and allowing students to express their own views and to bring in their personal experiences is also a factor which helps to develop

more positive relationships between participants and academic staff. Therefore, it improves participants' university experience and generates a better sense of belonging.

In the next section the 'curriculum', which is the third theme identified in this study, which also improves participants' university experiences and enhances their sense of belonging will be discussed.

5.4 Theme 3: Curriculum

The third theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews is the curriculum, which is discussed in this section. Participants believe that the curriculum is crucial for enhancing ME students' university experience and also fosters their sense of belonging. In particular, whether the curriculum is inclusive and reflects diverse perspectives is important as it makes ME students feel included and their backgrounds, worldviews and lived experiences valued and respected. Additionally, assessment, marking and feedback and whether these are fair and balanced, are also important for a good university experience. First, in section 5.4.1, whether or not participants perceive the curriculum to be inclusive, diverse and representative of ME students is explored. Next, in section 5.4.2, whether participants belief that assessments, marking and feedback are fair and balanced is discussed.

5.4.1 Diversity and inclusion

This study found that participants believe that a curriculum that is representative of ME students creates a more inclusive environment and therefore, improves ME students' university experience and enhances their sense of belonging. This finding is consistent with Bale et al.'s (2020) research, which found that a diverse curriculum creates a more inclusive environment by showing that ME scholars are valued, and by providing ME students with a wider range of creative and theoretical concepts that they can apply to their own work. Furthermore, Jessop and Williams (2009) suggest that an inclusive curriculum, including pedagogy, interactions in class, and responsiveness to students' histories and experiences, is vital for achieving equality and diversity. Besides, a curriculum that includes the lived experiences of people from

minoritised backgrounds enhances ME students' feelings of mattering and belonging (Hamshire et al., 2025). Consequently, Smith et al. (2021) argue that a diverse curriculum in which students can see themselves represented and their values included is fundamental for fostering a sense of belonging.

According to Singh (2011) the notion of an inclusive curriculum is conceptualised in different ways in the literature, some view an inclusive curriculum primarily in relation to the content of what is being taught, whilst others have a much broader perspective including such things as course design, teaching, learning and assessment methods and strategies, as well as course content and pedagogy. For this study, the latter view of an inclusive curriculum will be adopted. Thus, an inclusive curriculum requires the development, design and delivery of a programme of study that minimises barriers that students, regardless of their cultural and ethnic background, may face in accessing and engaging with the curriculum (Morrison et al., 2023).

A study by de Sousa et al. (2021) revealed that issues relating to an inclusive curriculum also impacted ME students' success, therefore the curriculum should be designed in a way that reflects the diversity of students on a course. Previous research has shown that in addition to students' success, the curriculum also affects students' satisfaction with their university experience. For example, Clemes et al. (2008) who surveyed commerce students at a New Zealand university found that course content is a significant sub-dimension of interaction quality, which students perceive as the most important primary dimension of SQ. Likewise, Hill et al. (2003) who conducted focus groups with nursing students at a UK university found that for a quality education, students value a curriculum that introduces them to new perspectives and takes students' experiences into account. Although Clemes et al.'s (2008) and Hill et al.'s (2003) research did not specifically study ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and satisfaction with their HE experience, it is reasonable to assume that their findings are equally, if not more, pertinent to ME students.

As mentioned above, participants believe that a diverse and inclusive curriculum enhances ME students' sense of belonging and thus, improves their university experience. As such, they are concerned about the general lack of inclusion of diverse

backgrounds and perspectives. This is echoed by previous research relating to ME students' university experience which shows that ME students are worried about the curriculum not reflecting issues of diversity, equality and discrimination and not considering diverse backgrounds and views (Bale et al., 2020; NUS, 2011; Smith, 2017). Furthermore, participants in this study are of the opinion that generally, the curriculum is not sufficiently representative of students from ethnic backgrounds. For instance, one participant is dismayed that their course does not cover Black culture or Black cinema. Whilst another participant feels that case studies should incorporate a wider range of examples of different traditions and cultures from around the world rather than focusing only on examples from the UK or Europe. This finding is supported by Bale et al.'s (2020) study in which ME students perceived the curriculum to be too Europe- or America-centric. Similarly, students in Jessop and Williams' (2009) study believed there were gaps in the curriculum as not many modules dealt with African and Asian countries, and contributions of non-Western countries to film, literature and business practices were largely ignored. Likewise, ME students in Bunce et al.'s (2021) study considered course material to be restrictive and lacking relevance for students from ethnic backgrounds. Consequently, a curriculum which does not address the issues of diversity and inclusion that ME students regularly face, results in ME students not being able to study areas of personal interest or relevance to them (Bunce & King, 2019). Therefore, ME students have to engage with a curriculum that does not reflect their socialisation, worldview, history or lived experiences (Arday et al., 2022), which arguably represents a barrier to ME students' learning, and thus negatively impacts their university experience. Furthermore, a Eurocentric curriculum that does not reflect ME students' history, worldview or lived experience has been identified as a major contributor to ME students' lack of engagement, marginalisation and diminished sense of belonging (Arday et al., 2022). The curriculum reflects a constructed narrative of what is relevant to a discipline at a given time, hence predominately White European canons at university result in particular types of knowledge being omitted from curricula and thus, have a negative impact on ME students' engagement and sense of belonging (Arday et al., 2021). Likewise, Bunce et al. (2021) argue that ME students' learner autonomy, which is linked to students developing a sense of belonging, is constrained by a narrow curriculum, which prevents them from expressing their views because their perspectives are seen as irrelevant. Similarly,

Hamshire et al. (2025) suggest that ME students' perception of a lack of inclusion of their lived experiences in curricula that are predominately centred around Whiteness leads to feelings of marginalisation and not mattering, which negatively impacts their sense of belonging. Besides, a Eurocentric curriculum also prevents White students from broadening and challenging their own worldview (Arday et al., 2021).

One participant in this study is also concerned that most theories that are taught in their discipline are by White, mostly male, scholars. Similarly, some participants believe that reading lists for their course tend to be too Euro- or America-centric and predominately include authors from White backgrounds. One participant noted that it is essential to include authors from different ethnicities in order to represent different experiences and perspectives and show appreciation for the contributions scholars from ME backgrounds have made to a subject area. This view is echoed by Arday et al. (2022) who argue that many curricula are largely based on White scholars and ignore the positive contribution of ME scholars, thus they cannot reflect a multicultural and diverse society. Likewise, Bale et al. (2020) state that an inclusive curriculum demonstrates that ME practitioners are valued and can be successful. Therefore, de Sousa et al. (2021) recommend that all subject areas should diversify their reading lists by including authors from different ethnic backgrounds. Interestingly, one participant in this study states that reading lists tend to be more diverse and include authors from different ethnicities when module leaders are from ethnic backgrounds themselves.

Furthermore, even though some participants in this study state that their course includes modules that specifically deal with ethnic diversity issues, they feel that this is not sufficient and that, as far as is practical, every module and every curriculum should incorporate ethnic diversity issues. This is consistent with findings from other studies (Davies & Garrett, 2012) in which students believed that diversity issues were not naturally included in their course. Similarly, Jessop and Williams' (2009) study revealed that students perceived cultural diversity in the curriculum to be 'patchy' and thus, felt that a more consistently diverse and inclusive curriculum is needed. Two participants in this study are also of the opinion that often the onus is on ME students themselves to bring in diversity and that the inclusion of diversity issues is often 'tokenistic' and no more than a 'tick-box' exercise. Similarly, Arday et al. (2022) suggest that despite the

persistent calls to decolonise the curriculum and diversify the canon at universities, topics related to race and ethnicity are often taught as add-ons, or specialist modules, rather than being an integrated part of the curriculum, resulting in attempts to decolonise the curriculum being perceived as tokenistic.

This study further revealed that participants believe that an inclusive and diverse curriculum also can lead to interest in, and a better understanding of, other cultures. This can change non-ME students' preconceptions and open their eyes to diversity issues and people in underrepresented groups. These findings are in line with Davies et al.'s (2011) study, which found that discussions of diversity lead to the sharing of knowledge and interest in other cultures. Likewise, research by de Sousa et al. (2021) revealed that students consider celebrating diverse cultures to be good for developing an understanding of different cultures. Thus, an inclusive curriculum also builds intercultural competencies that are vital for the future success of all students in a diverse world (Ross et al., 2018).

This study validates findings from previous research, which found that ME students believe that the curriculum does not adequately include diverse backgrounds and perspectives and is not sufficiently representative of ME students. However, it must be stressed that this study explored the curriculum in a different context compared to previous studies, namely from a ME student perspective in relation to the quality of their university experience. Therefore, it contributes to knowledge relating to ME students' SQ perceptions of their HE experience.

5.4.2 Fair and balanced assessment, marking and feedback

Another aspect related to the curriculum, which enhances students' university experience, is assessment, marking and feedback and participants in this study were concerned about these being fair and balanced. This issue was also raised in a study by the NUS (2011), which found that ME students worry about whether assessments are unbiased, marking procedures are transparent and feedback is fair. Richardson (2018) argues that teaching and assessment practices adopted by certain HEIs and subject areas are to some extent responsible for the awarding gap. Most HEIs still use

‘traditional’ modes of assessments that value specific knowledge and modes of knowing despite inclusive assessment methods that offer students more choice and use more creative modes of assessments having been proposed (Arday et al., 2022).

Regarding assessments, most participants in this study are satisfied that students have a choice of topics for their assignments and that topics are diverse and allow students to bring in experiences from their own cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This is supported by de Sousa et al.’s (2021) research which found that ME students felt that assessments should allow students to include examples from their own experiences and identity in order to reflect the diversity in the classroom. They suggest collaborations between ME students and staff on writing assessment briefs could provide ME students with opportunities to interject their own identity into the curriculum (de Sousa et al., 2021). Likewise, Blake et al. (2022) found that students believe that empowering ME students by giving them autonomy and ownership over their assessments would make a course more inclusive.

One participant in this study is glad that on their course a mix of different assessments methods (e.g., exams, coursework, presentations) are used, which they believe enables students to choose the type of assessment they are most comfortable with and are most likely to do well in. This is consistent with the views of students in Blake et al.’s (2022) study who believe that being able to choose their preferred mode of assessment not only makes the course more inclusive, but it also makes it less likely that they would need to request mitigation. Moreover, Kauser et al. (2021) found that students not being able to choose their preferred assessment method led to dissatisfaction with their course. Therefore, allowing ME students to choose a preferred assessment method, to choose a topic and to be able to bring in their experiences from their own cultural and ethnic backgrounds enhances their sense of belonging and increases their satisfaction with their course.

With regard to the marking of assessments, participants have mixed feelings; some believe that assignments are marked fairly and equally, whilst others are concerned about lecturers marking down work by students from ethnic backgrounds due to prejudices held and negative preconceptions of ME students’ abilities. Previous studies

also highlighted ME students' beliefs that their assignments are marked down due to the marker's lack of understanding of their cultural perspective and stereotypical perceptions of ME people lacking intellectual ability (Bunce et al., 2021). Likewise, research by Hammond et al. (2019) found that students perceived the existence of differences in marking practices. However, participants in this study also believe that the practice of assignments being marked by two staff members ensures fair and balanced marking, and that anonymous marking prevents non-ME tutors from marking ME students' work down based on biases and prejudices. This is supported by the concerns of students regarding a lack of transparency in marking in a study by the NUS (2011), thus they insisted on robust procedures for anonymous marking to avoid discrimination.

Another aspect relating to assessments, which is considered problematic by some participants in this study, is assignment deadlines. Some participants are worried that assignment deadlines are too close together. They believe that this puts a lot of strain on students, particularly those who have work and family commitments, which is often the case for ME students. A further issue raised by a Muslim participant, is that insufficient consideration is given to setting deadlines during religious holidays. They argue that whilst assignment deadlines are scheduled during the month of Ramadan, the Christmas period is safeguarded. This view was also expressed by students in Nicholson's (2022) study who criticised that when it comes to assessments, Christmas is protected, compared with other celebrations such as Eid and Diwali. Research by Yusoff et al. (2015) in Malaysian private HEIs found that course workload and the way timetables are organised influence 'student assessments and learning experiences', which is a driver of business students' satisfaction.

Feedback is another aspect associated with assessment. This study found that many participants are dissatisfied with the feedback they receive. They believe that a lot of the feedback is very generic and that students receive similar comments that are 'copied and pasted' instead of receiving feedback that is specific to their work. Furthermore, participants perceive feedback to be vague and lacking sufficient detail regarding what they did well and what they could have done differently to achieve a higher mark. Consequently, participants feel that feedback is not very constructive and

provides only limited guidance on how they can improve future assignments. This is echoed by Blake et al.'s (2022) research, in which students not knowing where they went wrong and how to improve future assessments led to feelings of disappointment and anxiety about upcoming assessments. In addition, Housee (2011) found that students valued constructive and positive feedback, and that students who received constructive feedback, even if they had failed their assessment, perceived their assignment and feedback as fair and were more satisfied with their grade. Similarly, Hill et al. (2003) identified that feedback influenced how students perceived the quality of their education; in particular, students value feedback that is constructive and positive. Likewise, Yusoff et al. (2015) found that the usefulness of feedback on students' performance is a factor that drives student satisfaction. Dicker et al. (2017) also found that students identified the quality of feedback they received as an important indicator of quality in HE. Besides, Blake et al. (2022) posit that offering constructive feedback so students feel empowered and confident to develop their work helps ME students to develop learner autonomy, which in turn is linked to a stronger sense of belonging.

As the discussion of the curriculum demonstrates, a diverse and inclusive curriculum is essential for enhancing ME students' university experience and fostering a sense of belonging. In particular, whether the curriculum is inclusive and reflects diverse perspectives is important for ME students. A curriculum that represents ME students' worldviews, values and perspectives makes ME students feel included and valued, whereas a curriculum that is too Euro- or America-centric can alienate ME students and make them feel marginalised and isolated. A curriculum that does not reflect ME students' perspectives and lived experiences results in ME students not being able to study areas of personal interest or relevance to them, which can negatively impact their university experience. This study also found that participants are concerned about the lack of inclusion and diversity of reading lists, which seem to feature predominantly White, mostly male, scholars and thus, fail to acknowledge and appreciate the contributions ME scholars have made to a subject area. Some participants also feel that the inclusion of diversity issues is often 'tokenistic' and no more than a 'tick-box' exercise.

This study also found that another aspect impacting on ME students university experience is assessment, marking and feedback. Participants are concerned about assessments being biased, marking procedures lacking transparency and feedback not being constructive. Allowing students to choose assignment topics and to bring in their experiences from their cultural and ethnic backgrounds makes a course more inclusive, which enhances their sense of belonging and improves their university experience. With regard to marking practices, some participants are worried that ME students' assignments are marked down based on biases and prejudices. Thus, they suggest that transparent marking procedures, such as assignments being marked by two staff and anonymous marking of students' work, can prevent this from happening. In regard to feedback, this study found that many participants are dissatisfied with the feedback they receive, perceiving it as generic, vague and unhelpful. Consequently, participants feel feedback provides only limited guidance on how to improve future assignments resulting in feelings of disappointment.

In the next section 'university support', the fourth theme identified in this study, which also improves participants' university experiences and enhances their sense of belonging, will be discussed.

5.5 Theme 4: University support

This study found that the fourth theme that affects ME students' university experience is 'university support', that is, the support services and facilities that are provided by their HEI. Support services and facilities include learning skills assistance, counselling and wellbeing services, career services, library services and food provisions. Participants in this study are particularly concerned about the availability and accessibility of the support services, as well as the additional individual academic support, i.e., personal tutoring, and pastoral care their HEIs provide. These are discussed further in the next two sub-sections.

This study found that participants believe that it is essential for HEIs to provide support services, because not only do these support students with their studies, but they also help them to deal with other issues and challenges they may face. This finding is

supported by research by Hill et al. (2003), which found that students believe the provision of a 'student support unit' is important for a quality education experience. Equally, a study of business students' satisfaction in Malaysian private HEIs by Yusoff et al. (2015) found that the quality of student support facilities provided, such as IT resources and learning support, drive students' satisfaction. Likewise, research relating to SQ in HE suggests that administrative and support systems and processes are important for delivering services to students and as such, influence their perceptions of the quality of their university experience (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Lazibat et al., 2014; Sultan & Wong, 2013; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). Processes and systems should be appropriate, easy to access, clear and easy to understand. Having access to these resources, shows ME students' that they matter and that the HEI cares about them. Additionally, Blake et al. (2022) argue that providing inclusive support systems is essential for fostering a sense of belonging. Therefore, the provision of these services demonstrates that the HEI supports and cares for their students in every way possible, which makes students feel valued and that they matter, which in turn increases their sense of belonging.

5.5.1 Availability and accessibility of support services

All participants are satisfied that a variety of support services and facilities, such as learning skills assistance, counselling and wellbeing services, career services, library services and food provisions are available at their HEI. However, participants' experiences accessing these support services are somewhat mixed. Some participants believe that sufficient support is available and that support services are easily accessible, whilst others feel that there is not enough support and that access to support services is limited. For instance, one participant explains that waiting times for certain services are very long and that some support services do not have sufficient resources to deal effectively with students' needs. Douglas et al. (2015) identified access to support services as a critical factor for student satisfaction, whereby accessibility of support services leads to satisfaction, whilst inaccessibility leads to dissatisfaction. Likewise, Dicker et al.'s (2017) study found that ensuring accessibility of support services matters to students. Furthermore, the same participant also suggests that sometimes students are sent from one service to another because no

one seems to be able to help, which is very frustrating for students and can result in students not receiving the support they need. Similarly, medical students in Ikhtlaq et al.'s (2023) study also talked about being 'bounced between people' resulting in students' perceptions of a tokenistic support system that made them feel isolated and not cared for. Blake et al. (2022) suggest that a more diverse student body means that students' needs are also more diverse, but because tutors might be unsure about what support can be provided or where it is within the HEI, students may not receive the adequate support as and when they need it.

Furthermore, some participants also expressed the view that although support services are available, the onus is on students to ask for help and support. However, participants argue that many ME students do not ask for help and support for a variety of reasons. One participant believes that one of the reasons preventing ME students from utilising the services provided is lack of time due to work and family commitments. Another participant argues that some ME students lack the confidence to ask for help and that they do not want to *"look stupid"* or *"like they don't know what they are doing"*. This view is further supported by Blake et al. (2022) who argue that waiting for students to ask for help requires them firstly to have the self-confidence to do so and secondly, they have to feel that they have a problem that needs to be 'fixed'. However, the negative connotations of needing to be 'fixed' can prevent ME students from seeking support (Blake et al., 2022). A third participant thinks that another reason why ME students do not use support services is that they do not know what support is available, or how to access support services. This is consistent with Kauser et al.'s (2021) study that found that some students were not aware of support services and thus felt unsupported, whilst other students were aware of the services, but did not know how to access them and hence were unable to seek support. Likewise, Dicker et al. (2017) suggest that for HEIs it is not only the provision of support, but also articulating what is available that is important. Additionally, Russell and Jarvis (2019) argue that students not knowing what support is available, or perceiving support to be insufficient hinders their development of a HE learner identity. Consequently, participants in this study feel that HEIs need to communicate more effectively what type of support services are available and how to access them in order to allow students to make more use of them.

Furthermore, participants believe that HEIs should not wait for students to ask for help and support, but should be more proactive in offering support to students instead. This finding is in line with Hill et al. (2003) who suggest that for a quality education academic staff should be more proactive in seeking out students who require additional support. Likewise, Stevenson (2012) found that staff should reach out to help students who are reluctant to utilise the support services provided. However, HEIs need to be mindful not to target ME students with the support that is offered as ME students might perceive this as another way of 'othering' and therefore, it could increase their feelings of alienation (Blake et al., 2022). Implying that students have a deficit, can prevent students from seeking support due to the negative connotations that they are 'less than' or 'other' compared to students who do not ask for this support (Blake et al., 2022).

The type of support services that participants commented on include, learning skills support, counselling and wellbeing services, and career services. With regard to learning skills support, two participants note that their HEIs provide workshops and support sessions that help students to develop the necessary academic skills to be successful with their studies. They believe learning skills support at their HEI is easily accessible and consider it an important service to be provided by their HEI. Career services were also commented on by a few participants. They are satisfied with the support and guidance they have received and note that career services have helped them to find work during their studies and provided them with valuable advice about career prospects and postgraduate studies.

One participant described their experience with wellbeing services at their HEI. They feel that the service is not very accessible because the waiting times are very long. Additionally, they are of the opinion that the support they were offered was inadequate as wellbeing services could only provide a limited number of sessions even before they had assessed their needs. Consequently, they believe that some students are not getting sufficient help from wellbeing services. This is further supported by the views of medical students in Ikhlaq et al.'s (2023) study who described support as prescriptive: 'we've met, great, we've done our job, you must be better now'.

A few participants also talked about the library services and facilities at their HEI. Most of them believe that library facilities are spacious and modern and that library services are appropriate and easily accessible and that sufficient resources are available. This is consistent with Teeroovengadum et al.'s (2016a) findings that availability of adequate library infrastructure is an attribute of physical environment quality of HE services. Equally, Hill et al. (2003) identified readily available library and IT services as important for a quality education. Likewise, students in Dicker et al.'s (2017) study believe that library and IT services positively impact their university experience. However, participants in this study note that many students do not use library services because they do not know what resources are available and how to access them. Therefore, they suggest that more information is needed of what resources are available and more guidance should be provided on how to use the services and facilities, e.g., how to book a study rooms, or how to make an appointment with library staff. Regarding library staff, participants in this study are of the opinion that the staff's attitudes are good and that they are always friendly and willing to help. Research relating to SQ in HE has shown that non-academic staff's friendliness, politeness, willingness to help students and their ability to solve their problems and answer queries effectively and efficiently are aspects that influence students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience (Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Sultan & Wong, 2013; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a).

Participants also talked about the food services provided by their HEIs. Participants feel that food provision is very important as it can create a sense of home and being made to feel they belong. However, the food services vary between the different HEIs - some cater to a variety of dietary needs (e.g., halal, vegetarian and vegan) and also provide foods from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Indian, Thai and Ethiopian food). By contrast, the food provision of other HEIs is not very diverse and does not cater for different dietary requirements. Additionally, many participants perceive the food to be quite expensive. Consequently, because of the lack of choice and the cost of food on campus, some participants either bring their own food from home or go somewhere else to eat. Previous research by Islam et al. (2018) found that lack of provision of halal food led to Muslim students feeling excluded and thus, had a

negative impact on their sense of belonging. Additionally, it also affected their social and academic engagement because they had to go off campus to eat, which meant that they spent less time socialising or studying on campus (Islam et al., 2018).

One Muslim participant also mentioned that their HEI provides a faith room, which they believe shows that the university cares for and is inclusive of students from different cultural and ethnical backgrounds. Previous research by Islam et al. (2018) found that having a prayer room on campus was the biggest factor influencing Muslim students' sense of belonging. They also found that the Muslim prayer room at their HEI had a dual function of being a place for both worship and socialising (Islam et al., 2018).

5.5.2 Individual academic support and pastoral care

In addition to general support provided by their HEI, participants believe that additional individual academic support and pastoral care are also important for a good university experience. Van Ryzin (2011) argues that students' perceptions of the individualised support they receive, including assistance with their learning as well as personal support and care, shapes their sense of belonging.

In regard to individual academic support, participants are of the opinion that it helps students to improve their academic skills, which in turn improves their university experience. Participants recommend that individual academic support should comprise individual academic tutoring and additional academic support sessions. However, one participant suggests that additional academic support sessions should not be targeted specifically at ME students, but instead should be available to all students. This finding is consistent with other research that uncovered that, even though students wanted additional support, such as extra seminar classes, drop-in sessions and mentoring, they did not want to be singled out for additional support as they felt that this would be inadvertent racism (Stevenson, 2012; Kauser et al., 2021). Therefore, Stevenson (2012) suggests that support sessions should be open to all students, but should be more diverse and varied.

In addition to individual academic support, a few participants also talked about the importance of personal support such as the provision of pastoral care. They believe that this shows that their HEI does not only care for students' academic progress, but also for their wellbeing. This makes students feel that they are not just being perceived as a 'number' or 'income' by their HEI, but that they are valued and that they matter as an individual to their HEI. This is consistent with Kauser et al. (2021) who found that students wanted more support services to help them not only with their academic, but also their personal needs. In particular, personal tutoring, i.e., looking after the total welfare of students by providing information, guidance and support (Alves, 2019), has the potential to enhance a student's learning experience (Stevenson, 2009). Personal tutors can make ME students feel that there is someone who knows them and is looking out for them, thus positive tutor-tutee relationships may help to enhance students' sense of belonging (Alves, 2019). Similarly, Hallam (2023) argues that having personal tutors who provide motivation and encouragement makes students feel that they are important to their tutors and their HEI, increasing their sense of mattering and belonging. Equally, Zawada (2024) suggests that support systems that focus on the student as an individual such as personal tutoring, enable students to build connections and feel reassured that somebody is taking a special interest in them, which increases students' sense of being noticed and their feelings of mattering. However, Rana et al. (2022) posit that personal tutoring and pastoral care should be culturally sensitive to all backgrounds as it otherwise could deter ME students from utilising it. Furthermore, it has been suggested that it is easier for ME students to talk openly or confide in personal tutors from ME backgrounds as they are more able to understand ME students' concerns and perspectives (Rana et al., 2022). This is further supported by Seuou et al.'s (2023) findings that indicate that increasing the representation of academic and support staff from diverse backgrounds may encourage ME students to seek pastoral and academic support. Additionally, previous research by Cureton and Gravestock (2019) found that positive pastoral interactions are very important in relation to students' sense of belonging. In fact, their research uncovered that when students were unsure whether university was for them, positive pastoral interactions "regenerated a sense of belonging, reignited a lost sense of belonging or ignited belongingness that was not there before" (Cureton & Gravestock, 2019, Presentation and discussion of the data).

The discussion of the fourth theme 'university support', demonstrates that availability and accessibility of support services and facilities, such as learning skills assistance, counselling and wellbeing services, library and IT facilities, enhance ME students' university experience. Availability of these services and facilities shows ME students that they are cared for and that they matter to their HEI, which also enhances their sense of belonging. However, participants believe that accessibility of some of these services can be difficult due to long waiting times and lack of sufficient resources for some of the services. Furthermore, participants also feel that HEIs wait for students to seek help rather than being proactive in offering support, resulting in ME students not getting the help they need, which negatively impacts on their university experience. ME students in particular, appear to be reluctant to utilise support services for a variety of reasons such as not having the time to get support due to work and family commitments, lacking the confidence to ask for help and not wanting to 'look stupid' or not being aware of what support is available and how to access it. Thus, HEIs need to be more proactive in offering support to ME students without specifically targeting them in order to avoid making ME students feel 'other' or 'less than', increasing their feelings of alienation.

The study also found that participants are of the opinion that in addition to general support, individual academic and personal support, i.e., personal tutoring and pastoral care, are also important for a good university experience. Personal tutors can help students improve their academic skills, provide guidance on assignments and support their learning progress, which can positively impact their academic success and thus, improve their university experience. In addition, personal tutors can also offer emotional and personal support, showing care not just for students' academic progress, but also their overall wellbeing. However, personal tutoring and pastoral care should be culturally sensitive so as to not deter ME students from utilising it.

In summary, the discussion of the findings has shown that a sense of belonging, supportive and caring academic staff who treat everyone fairly and equally and value different perspectives, a diverse and inclusive curriculum, and academic support and pastoral care are vital for ME students' positive university experience. Therefore, this

study contributes to knowledge in the area of ME students' university experience by providing information on ME students' personal experiences and perceptions of HE. Additionally, even though, previous research has shown the importance of belonging in relation to ME students' university experience, the vast majority of studies have examined sense of belonging in a different context. They examine sense of belonging in a student engagement context, or from a student success and retention perspective (Read et al., 2003; Thomas 2012; Wilcox et al., 2005), rather than from a SQ perspective. Thus, it appears that, to date, there are no studies that have considered sense of belonging when evaluating students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience. Therefore, this study also contributes to knowledge in this area as it examines belonging from a SQ perspective. Moreover, a SQ model to specifically evaluate ME students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience has yet to be developed. Therefore, this study will address a gap in knowledge in this area as well as it proposes a conceptual framework for a SQ model for evaluating ME students' perceptions of SQ in HE (MESQHE), which includes 'belonging' as a primary SQ dimension. Additionally, it also develops a ME students' perceived SQ of HE measurement scale for subsequent use in quantitative studies. The conceptual framework will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

5.6 Conceptual framework for ME students' perceived SQ in HE (MESQHE)

SQ in HE has a significant effect on students' satisfaction, thus it is critical that HEIs identify which SQ attributes or dimensions affect their satisfaction. Moreover, because SQ is understood as perceived quality, i.e., from the perspective of the consumer or user of the service (Zeithaml, 1987), customers themselves should determine SQ dimensions rather than the service provider (Cronin & Taylor, 1994). Consequently, as students are considered to be the primary consumers of HE, dimensions for evaluating the SQ of HE services should be determined by students (Onditi & Wechuli, 2017), who in this context are ME students. Therefore, developing a conceptual model of SQ in HE and a scale to measure SQ in HE from a ME student perspective, which is underpinned by SQ dimensions that are relevant for ME students will lead to enhanced understanding and opportunities for improvement of their HE experience. This section

of the chapter therefore presents the conceptual SQ model for evaluating ME students' perceptions of, and satisfaction with, their university experience, based on an extensive literature review and the evaluation of the findings of this study.

Based on the extant literature (reviewed in chapter 2), the SQ model presented below (Figure 5.1) adopts Dabholkar et al.'s (1996) view that SQ perceptions are both multi-dimensional and multi-level, i.e., hierarchical. A hierarchical conceptualisation of SQ is appropriate in a HE context because it captures the complexity of student perceptions of HE services (Chong & Ahmed, 2012). In addition, a 'performance-only' operationalisation of SQ is also adopted because it is considered more suitable in a HE context due to the problems with capturing students' expectations (Oldfield & Baron, 2000). Besides, a 'performance-only' approach has outperformed both 'expectation-(dis)confirmation' and 'importance-performance' models in previous research (Fallon & Schofield, 2003).

Furthermore, the SQ model also adopts the view, as suggested by Rust and Oliver (1994), that a customer's overall perception of SQ is based on their evaluation of three dimensions of the service encounter: (1) the interaction between the customer and the service provider, (2) the service environment in which the service encounter is taking place, and (3) the outcome of the service. Therefore, the SQ model (Figure 5.1) incorporates the three primary SQ dimensions used in Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical model: interaction quality, physical environment quality, and outcome quality. The SQ model also adopts Teeroovengadum et al.'s (2016a) understanding of outcome quality as transformative quality based on Harvey and Green's (1993) conceptualisation of 'quality as transformation'. However, the qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews shows that sense of belonging is another critical SQ dimension that affects ME students' overall perceptions of the quality of their university experience. Therefore, based on the findings of the primary research, this study advocates that belonging is a primary dimension of ME students' perceived SQ of their university experience and their satisfaction. Thus, the originally proposed framework (Figure 5.2) has been amended to include an additional primary SQ dimension relating to 'belonging' (highlighted in **yellow** in Figure 5.1).

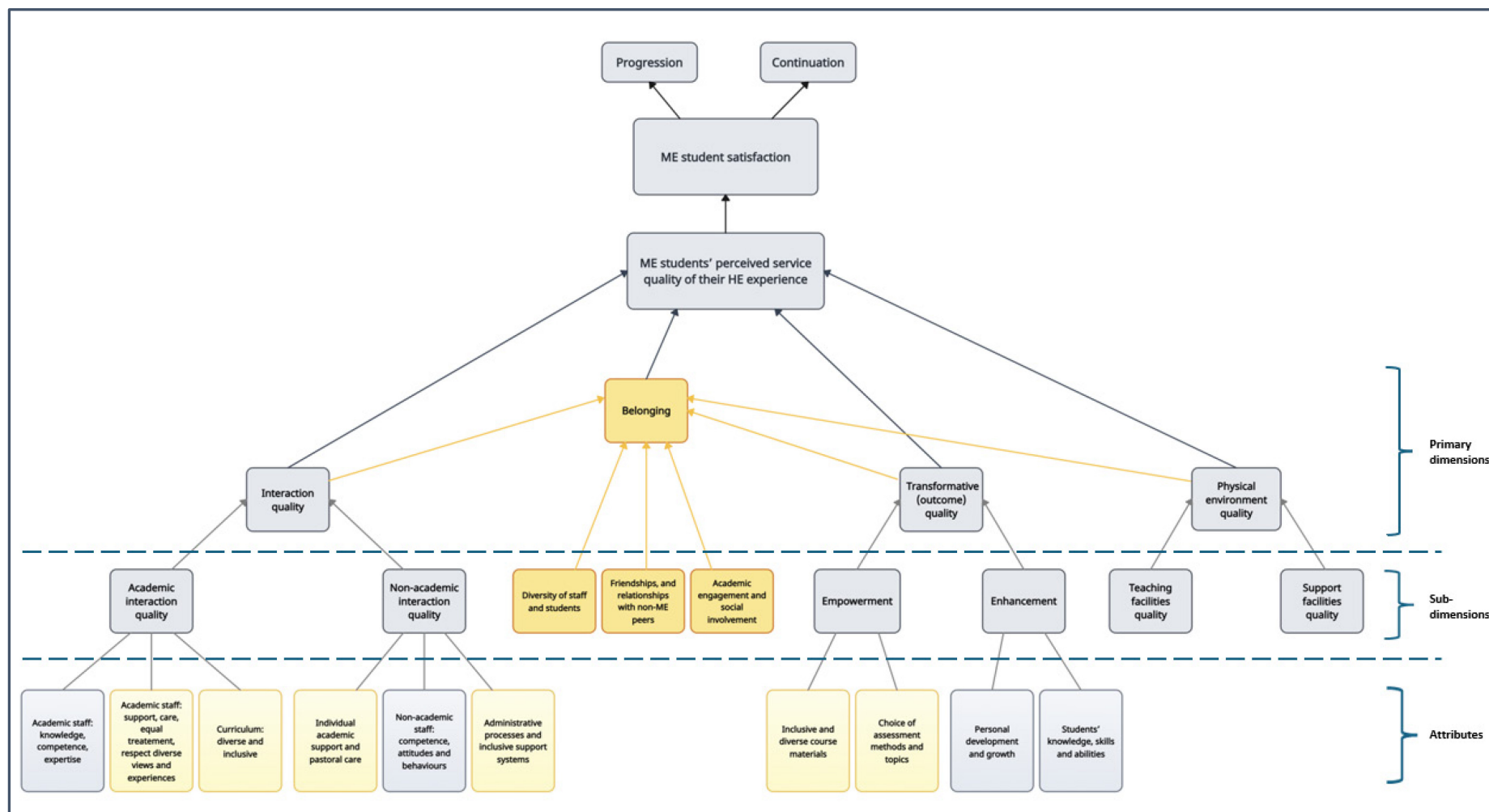


Figure 5.1: Conceptual framework for ME students' perceived SQ in HE (MESQHE)

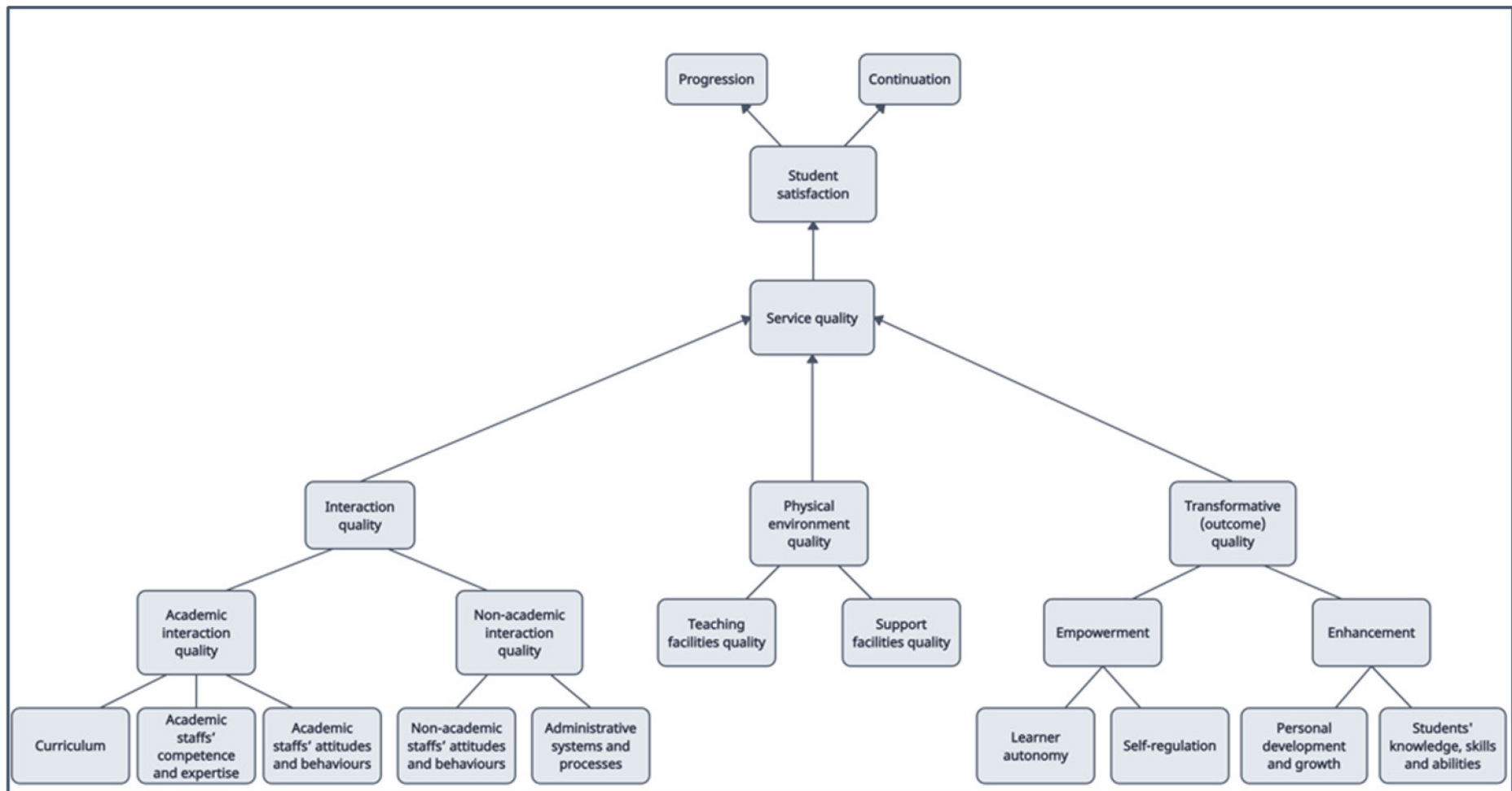


Figure 5.2: Originally proposed conceptual framework

Furthermore, Cronin and Taylor (1994) suggest that dimensions of SQ need to be confirmed specifically for each individual research setting. Therefore, based on the findings of this study of ME students' perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the quality of HE, some of the sub-dimensions and attributes to evaluate the sub-dimensions differ from sub-dimensions and attributes identified in previous studies in different research settings. This supports the view that the dimensionality of the SQ construct is dependent on the service industry under investigation, and that industry and cultural-specific measures of SQ need to be developed (Clemes et al., 2001; Dabholkar et al., 1996).

This study proposes a hierarchical SQ model (Figure 5.1) consisting of three levels: primary dimensions, sub-dimensions, and attributes or factors for evaluating the sub-dimensions. The model suggests that ME students' perceptions of each of the four primary dimensions are the basis for their overall SQ experiences. ME students evaluate each primary dimension based on its sub-dimensions, which in turn are evaluated based on relevant attributes or factors. In other words, ME students' SQ perceptions are formed from their evaluation of the HEI's performance on multiple dimensions at multiple levels, which they then combine to arrive at an overall perception of the SQ of their university experience. These SQ perceptions are then assumed to influence their overall satisfaction with their university experience and their continuation, attainment and progression.

5.6.1 Primary dimensions

The first level of the SQ model comprises the four primary SQ dimensions affecting ME students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience: belonging, interactive quality, transformative quality and physical environment quality.

This study found that a sense of belonging is critical for enhancing ME students' university experience. A sense of belonging makes them feel connected to their HEI, accepted, respected and that they are valued and matter. Therefore, a stronger sense of belonging leads to ME students' enhanced perceptions of the quality of their university experience, resulting in satisfaction with their university experience or more

precisely, satisfaction with their educational experience at the university they studied at. Consequently, this study advocates that belonging is a primary dimension of ME students' perceived SQ of their university experience.

Furthermore, this study adds support to other research in SQ and student satisfaction in HE, which have identified that interaction quality is an important primary dimension when assessing SQ in HE (Clemes et al., 2008; Pereda et al., 2007; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). Interaction quality relates to the delivery of the service (i.e., functional quality) and encompasses all the interactions between the HEI and their students that are required to deliver educational services. Thus, perceptions of interaction quality influence students' SQ perceptions of, and their overall satisfaction with, their university experience. The findings of this study demonstrate that interaction quality is also important for ME students. In addition, this study also suggests that interaction quality influences ME students' sense of belonging (shown by the **yellow** arrow in the model). Frequent and positive interactions with academic staff foster good academic staff-student relationships for ME students, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging (Dost and Mazzoli Smith, 2023).

Transformative quality is another primary dimension of ME students' perceived quality of their university experience and relates to the outcome of the service (technical quality). Given the HE context of this study, it is essential when evaluating SQ that the focus is not exclusively on the delivery of the service, but that the outcome of the service is also considered (Teeroovengadum et al., 2019). An education of quality enables transformation in a student, i.e., it enhances students and empowers students (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996). Furthermore, transformative quality also impacts sense of belonging (shown by the **yellow** arrow). The literature suggests that there is a strong link between students having autonomy and feeling empowered to make choices about their learning and students developing a sense of belonging (Blake et al., 2022).

Physical environment quality has also been identified in previous studies as a primary dimension of SQ in HE (Clemes et al., 2008; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). Physical environment quality relates to the physical or 'built'

environment, i.e., the 'servicescape' (Bitner, 1992) in which the service takes place. Due to the intangibility of services, the physical environment can have a significant influence on perceptions of the overall quality of the service encounter (Bitner, 1992) and thus, should be included in any evaluation of SQ. In addition, physical environment quality also impacts on ME students' sense of belonging (shown by the **yellow** arrow). For instance, providing a prayer room and catering for different dietary requirements, such as halal, vegan and vegetarian food, can make ME students feel more welcome, cared about and included, regardless of their cultural and ethnical background, enhancing their feelings of belonging and positively affecting their university experience.

5.6.2 Sub-dimensions

The second level of the hierarchical structure consists of the sub-dimensions (Figure 5.1). Brady and Cronin (2001) suggest that customers tend to divide SQ dimensions into various sub-dimensions and then combine their evaluations of the sub-dimensions to form their perceptions of the primary dimensions.

The qualitative study identified three sub-dimensions pertaining to belonging. The first sub-dimension is diversity of academic staff and students. Greater diversity of academic staff and students makes the university environment feel more welcoming and inclusive, which makes ME students feel more integrated and better understood. This fosters ME students' sense of belonging to their HEI, which in turn influences their perceptions of the quality of their education. The second sub-dimension of belonging is friendships, and relationships with peers. Friends provide academic, as well as social and emotional support and positive relationships with non-ME peers make ME students more comfortable and confident to interact with them and to engage in academic and social activities. Thus, friends and good relationships with non-ME peers affect ME students' sense of belonging and university experience. The third sub-dimension of belonging is academic engagement and social involvement. Academic and social engagement make ME students feel included, accepted and valued, which leads to feelings of belonging and a better university experience.

Regarding interaction quality, this study proposes that it comprises the two sub-dimensions: academic and non-academic interaction quality. Academic interaction quality relates to ME students' perceptions of their interactions with academic staff and the curriculum. By contrast, non-academic interaction quality relates to the interactions with non-academic staff, i.e., administrative and support staff; it also relates to the administrative processes and systems that support the functioning of academic activities, and to support services that aid students with their learning and other individual needs. These support services include, but are not limited to, learning skills assistance, counselling and wellbeing services, career services, library services and food provisions.

The literature suggests that transformative quality consists of two sub-dimensions. The first sub-dimension is empowerment. Thus, a high quality education gives students, at least some, decision-making authority over their transformation process (Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996). The second sub-dimension is enhancement, i.e., it improves students in terms of their knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes.

Regarding physical environment quality, based on the literature review, this study proposes that it comprises two sub-dimensions; teaching facilities (e.g., lecture theatres and seminar rooms) and support facilities (e.g., library, IT and food facilities).

5.6.3 Attributes

The third level of the SQ model encompasses the attributes or factors used by ME students to evaluate the sub-dimensions. This study supports previous research in this area which found that attributes relating to academic interaction quality include academic staff's expertise and competence (Ibrahim et al., 2012; Nguyen et al., 2024; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a) and their attitudes and behaviours (Firdaus, 2006a; Firdaus 2006c; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a). Students, regardless of their ethnicity, perceive staff's subject knowledge and teaching abilities, as well as their accessibility, approachability, friendliness and helpfulness to be important aspects of quality in HE. However, this study proposes that in addition, for ME students it is particularly important that staff are supportive, encouraging and caring, that they treat everyone

fairly and equally regardless of their ethnic background, and that they value different perspectives and allow ME students to bring in their own personal experiences (highlighted in **yellow** in the SQ model). Furthermore, this study also adds empirical support to previous research that the curriculum is another attribute of academic interaction quality. Students perceive that for a quality education, a curriculum that is relevant, innovative, and up to date is important (Alhamad et al., 2024; Clemons & Jance, 2024; Hill et al., 2003; Latif et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2024). Additionally, this study identified that for ME students it is also very important that the curriculum is inclusive, representative of ME students and considers diverse backgrounds and views, and that assessments, marking and feedback are fair and balanced.

Attributes of the second sub-dimension of interaction quality, non-academic interaction quality, encompass non-academic staff's competence, attitude and behaviour, which include staff's friendliness, willingness to help and their ability to solve ME students' problems (Clemes et al., 2008; Firdaus, 2006a, Kankhuni et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2024). Non-academic interaction quality also relates to the administrative processes and systems that support the functioning of academic activities and the support services that aid students with their learning and other individual needs. Processes and systems need to be accessible and availability, appropriate, easy to access, clear and easy to understand (Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Clemons & Jance, 2024; Firdaus, 2006a; Nguyen et al., 2024). In addition, this study found that for ME students, it is particularly important that support services are culturally sensitive, inclusive and diverse, i.e., appropriate for an ever more diverse student body, and that HEIs are proactive in offering support to ME students rather than waiting for them to ask for it. Moreover, ME students consider additional individual academic support and pastoral care to also be important for a quality university experience (highlighted in **yellow**).

Regarding the first sub-dimension of transformative quality, enhancement, the literature suggests that attributes consist of students' personal development and growth, and gaining knowledge, skills and abilities. Regarding the attributes of the second sub-dimension, empowerment, this study adds support to the literature that they comprise giving students a choice of assessment methods and topics and

developing and delivering course materials that are inclusive and diverse (highlighted in *yellow*). Course materials that have relevance for ME students and cover issues of diversity and inclusion (Bunce & King, 2019) and giving students a choice of modules, assignment topics or assessment types (Blake et al., 2022) can help ME students to develop learner autonomy and foster a sense of belonging.

Lastly, regarding the sub-dimensions of physical environment quality, teaching facilities and support facilities quality, based on the literature review, it is proposed that the attributes to assess both are layout, design, availability, accessibility and sufficiency of facilities and resources. In addition, this study has found that ME students value support facilities and services that are inclusive and are considerate of the needs of a diverse student population.

5.7 Development and expert validation of the MESQHE scale

To be able to utilise the MESQHE model in empirical studies it needed to be operationalised, i.e., a measurement tool needed to be developed. In this section the development of a SQ scale for evaluating ME students' perceptions of the quality of their HE experience is discussed. First, the identification of SQ scale items is explained. The various steps of the SQ questionnaire design, including expert validation, protocol analysis and piloting, are also described. Lastly, the amendments to the SQ questionnaire resulting from the pre-test and pilot study are outlined.

Cresswell (2009) suggests that a sequential approach to instrument development comprises three steps. The first step is to obtain themes and specific statements from participants in an initial qualitative data collection. In the second step these themes and statements should then be used as specific items for scales to create a survey instrument that is grounded in the views of the participants. The third and final step is the validation of the instrument with a large sample representative of the population of interest (although, this is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it will form part of the candidate's future research). Likewise, Galaczi and Khabbazzbashi (2016) suggest an exploratory sequential design for developing a new scale, which typically consists of three stages: the first stage would be exploratory, the second stage would result in

instrument development and the third would involve a large-scale quantitative administration of the instrument.

Similarly, Gehlbach and Brinkworth (2011) developed a rigorous and reliable six-step process to design survey scales. The first step is a thorough literature review to define the construct in relation to the literature on the subject and to identify how existing measures of the construct (or related constructs) might be useful in the development of a new scale. The second step in Gehlbach and Brinkworth's (2011) scale development process consists of focus groups and/or interviews with a sample of participants from the target population. Step three consists of synthesising the literature review with focus group and/or interview data to reconcile the differences between the conceptualisations of the construct in the literature with that of the target population to develop a conceptualisation with which both parties are likely to agree. Step four encompasses the development of preliminary items. The fifth step is expert validation of preliminary items with the aim of reviewing the items and providing feedback on how they could be improved, eliminated, or strengthened by the addition of possible missing items (Gehlbach & Brinkworth, 2011). The sixth, and final step is 'cognitive pre-testing' or 'cognitive interviewing' to find out how respondents understand and answer each item. Gehlbach and Brinkworth (2011) also suggest that after these six steps have been followed, the scale should be piloted with a sample of potential respondents.

In accordance with the aforementioned approaches to instrument development, a draft ME students' perceived SQ in HE (MESQHE) scale ([Appendix 7](#)) was developed, which was based on a thorough review of the literature and the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews. The SQ scale comprises four primary SQ dimensions, namely belonging, interaction quality, physical environment quality and transformative quality. For each primary dimension items for inclusion in the SQ scale were generated. New scale items were formulated based on participants' statements from the semi-structured interviews and items from other SQ scales in a HE context were adapted to improve their applicability to ME students' quality perceptions. Table 5.1 below shows the primary data and literature sources of each scale item for the 'belonging' dimension and highlights how the primary data supports and reinforces

many of the issues found in the literature (see [Appendix 6](#) for a table showing the primary data and literature sources for each of the scale items of all the dimensions). This process generated an initial pool of 104 items ([Appendix 7](#)).

Table 5.1: Primary data and literature sources for ‘belonging’ scale items

Service quality attributes	Literature	Sample statements from semi-structured interviews
Belonging		
Diversity of staff and students		
1. My institution feels welcoming and inclusive	Morrison et al., 2023	<i>‘it’s very welcoming’ (SSI 01); ‘the university does [...] try its best to include everyone’ (SSI 02); ‘they’re very big on equality, diversity and inclusion’ (SSI 08); ‘I think they tried to be inclusive’ (SSI 10)</i>
2. I feel valued and respected by my institution	Goodenow, 1993; Smith et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2018	<i>‘people from all diverse backgrounds are treated with dignity and respect’ (SSI 04)</i>
3. I feel university is for me and that I fit in	Keohane & Petrie, 2017	<i>‘[it university] is for us, that we can go’ (SSI 01); ‘I feel myself like a part of university’ (SSI 07); ‘I can see myself there’ (SSI 08)</i>
4. I feel isolated and alone	Alexander & Arday, 2015; Connor et al., 2004; Davies & Garrett, 2012	<i>‘I’ve been to Uni previously [...] there was no one of my complexion [...] you just feel like you’re a bit isolated and alone.’ (SSI 06)</i>
5. Many academic staff at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	Davies et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2023	<i>‘they’ve been varied, diverse as well in themselves ... We’ve got some Black, we’ve got Asian lecturers’ (SSI 01); ‘most of the staff are from [...] my ethnic background or even my race’ (SSI 06); ‘we have uhm teachers and staff, faculties from all around the globe.’ (SSI 07); ‘different backgrounds, yes, all of them’ (SSI 09)</i>
6. Most academic staff at my institution are White	Davies et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2023	<i>‘it’s zero people, is not one single lecturer that’s not White, male or female, on our film course’ (SSI 04); ‘most of them are British’ (SSI 05); ‘the majority of the lecturers were definitely white British’ (SSI 10); ‘I’ve probably had a handful of staff that were from ethnic minorities.’ (SSI 12)</i>
7. I have a good relationship with academic staff at my university	Cureton & Gravestock, 2019; Dost & Mazzoli Smith 2023; Russel & Jarvis, 2019; Johnson et al., 2007	<i>‘My relationship with staff is very, very good.’ (SSI 04); ‘I have a good relationship with them.’ (SSI 06); ‘my relation with the academic staff is really nice’ (SSI 07); ‘a majority of the time I didn’t have the closest relationships with my tutors and lecturers’ (SSI 10)</i>
8. Many students at my institution are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds		<i>‘Our course got really diverse. Like we got different people from different backgrounds on our course.’ (SSI 02); ‘It’s a very diverse environment’ (SSI 03); ‘Students on my course, the majority of the students are from my background’ (SSI 06); ‘it’s mainly BAME students who attend the university. BAME mature students’ (SSI 08)</i>
9. Most students at my institution are White		<i>‘most of my course was just mainly, it was all just White, like English’ (SSI 01); ‘A lot of White British [...] I could probably count on my hands how many people were Black and Asian, wasn’t really many.’ (SSI 10); ‘my course is so White’ (SSI 12)</i>
Friends and relationships with peers		
10. I have many friends at university	Singh, 2011; Thomas, 2020	<i>‘I did make friends with quite a few of people’ (SSI 01); ‘I actually have a large group of [friends]’ (SSI 05); ‘I’ve made loads of friends’ (SSI 08); ‘I have like maybe a handful of friends from my course [...] I’ve actually found it really hard to build friendships.’ (SSI 12)</i>
11. My friends at university are mostly from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	Cureton & Gravestock’s (2019); Hammond et al., 2019; Housee (2011)	<i>‘... in my personal friendship group [...] We all grouped together that were ethnic minority, lower income.’ (SSI 10); ‘I haven’t had any friend in a class apart from all the Indians who are from like same ethnic background.’ (SSI 11)</i>
12. I have many friends at university from White backgrounds		<i>‘I made friends of everyone, Black, Asian, White ...’ (SSI 08); ‘... mixing with British people was like next to, like, conquering a mountain, climbing a Mount Everest’ (SSI 11)</i>
13. It is easy to make friends with students from different ethnic backgrounds		<i>‘... they [friends] were quite diverse’ (SSI 01); ‘within the university I have made friends with a diverse range of students’ (SSI 08)</i>
14. I have a good relationship with fellow White students	Pereda et al., 2007; Singh, 2011; Smith et al., 2021; Thomas, 2020	<i>‘... it was difficult to talk to them [British students] or even if you want to ask questions or talk to them, it was very difficult ...’ (SSI 11)</i>
15. Most of my fellow students value and respect my views and personal experiences	Bunce & King, 2019	<i>‘I joined volunteer groups [...] it just helped me to, I mean, see any people from diverse backgrounds, listening to their stories, tell them my stories.’ (SSI 05); ‘I also experienced like [students] brush you off.’ (SSI 06); ‘... they’re from an ethnic background and they’ve spoken about maybe feeling like they were racially profiled by police and unfairly stopped and searched [...] other students have kind of responded to that and [...] their thoughts have kind of invalidated the feelings of the other student.’ (SSI 12)</i>
16. My friends at university support me in my learning	Bradbury & Nieuwerburgh (2023); Kauser et al., 2021	<i>‘... we’d always be there to help [...] support and guide and, you know, answer the questions if either the tutors weren’t available ...’ (SSI 02); ‘friends which support you [...] and motivate you to learn and come to class.’ (SSI 10)</i>
17. When I have a problem, my friends at university are always there for me	Cureton & Gravestock (2019)	<i>‘we’d [friends] always be there to help you’ (SSI 02); ‘social friends which support you’ (SSI 10);</i>
18. My friends at university are like family to me	Wilcox et al., 2005	<i>‘we were more like a family’ (SSI 02);</i>
19. I have experienced stereotyping, racism and/or microaggressions from fellow students	Bale et al., 2020; Jessop & Williams, 2009	<i>‘I was in a group with White students and I told [them] that I won’t be able to attend the Zoom, [...] because I’ve got a prayer time to attend and they seemed to have a problem with that.’ (SSI 02); ‘Of course I’m gonna get stereotyped by privileged kids that have never left their</i>

		<i>village in England and are White and are eighteen years old.' (SSI 04); 'few students [...] made certain comments that were not really nice' (SSI 06)</i>
20. Many of my fellow students have a good understanding of cultural differences	Bunce et al., 2021; Kauser et al., 2021	<i>'... being willing to expose some of your culture and you exposing them and them exposing you to some of their culture as well.' (SSI 01); '... that preconception of she's Black, she's single mother or even stuff to do with LGBTQ+ community [...] this course has really opened people's, students' eyes ...' (SSI 06)</i>
21. I feel comfortable to express my views and share my personal experiences in class	Bunce & King, 2019; Jessop & Williams, 2009	<i>'Yes, I did bring in my views and my opinions. Because I wanted others to know that what I feel and what I view may be different to what others feel.' (SSI 02); 'There were also things I didn't feel like I could talk about, though, cause it might have been seen to be a bit controversial or, you know, I didn't wanna make anyone feel uncomfortable.' (SSI 08)</i>
22. I tend to study and socialise with students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	Hammond et al., 2019; Housee (2011)	<i>'I haven't had any friend in a class apart from all the Indians who are from like same ethnic background.' (SSI 11)</i>
Academic engagement and social involvement		
23. There are many extracurricular activities available at my university, e.g., volunteering, joining student clubs and societies, being a student rep	Abbas, 2020; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Teeroovengadam et al., 2016	
24. I take part in extracurricular activities		<i>'I did some volunteering.' (SSI 01); 'I did the student ambassador role' (SSI 02); 'I'm the student rep of my class' (SSI 03); 'I run the race and cultural inclusion network at the student union' (SSI 04); 'I joined different societies. [...] I joined volunteer groups as well.' (SSI 05); 'I was the Student Rep for three years. [...] I've got some volunteering done.' (SSI 08)</i>
25. It is easy to take part in extracurricular activities	Pereda et al., 2007	<i>'I probably could have joined some more clubs if I'd known about them in my first year' (SSI 01)</i>
26. Taking part in extracurricular activities has social and cultural benefits	Thomas & Jones, 2017	<i>'the benefits of it [being involved] is far greater than not doing it' (SSI 08)</i>
27. I do not take part in extracurricular activities for cultural or religious reasons	Hammond et al., 2019; Ikhlaq et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2018	
28. I do not have time for extracurricular activities	Kauser et al., 2021	<i>'they don't have the time or you know they've got other responsibilities' (SSI 08)</i>
29. I prefer to be involved in ethnicity centred student societies and clubs	Bunce et al., 2021; Davies & Garrett, 2012; Davies et al., 2011	
30. I take part in discussions and other learning activities in class		<i>'I was very interactive in my lessons.' (SSI 08)</i>
31. Participating in discussion gives students from ethnic backgrounds a voice	Blake et al., 2022	<i>'I wanted others to know that what I feel and what I view may be different to what others feel.' (SSI 02); 'as a minority ethnic student, [...] our education structures, our society, everything is built around the views of the hierarchy or the White man. So for me, it was important to have my voice in that setting' (SSI 08)</i>
32. I do not share my personal experiences in class because it draws too much attention to me	Hammond et al., 2019	<i>'when we were online, more students were asking questions [...] with their cameras turned off [...] being able to hide behind the screen' (SSI 08); 'it draws so much attention and makes you stand out so much that it's easier not to' (SSI 10);</i>
33. I do not take part in discussions because of the behaviours of fellow White students, e.g. making fun of my accent, making inappropriate comments or dismissing my experiences, views and feelings	Blake et al., 2022; Bunce & King, 2019; Hammond et al., 2019; Jessop & Williams, 2009	<i>'few students [...] made certain comments that were not really nice' (SSI 06); 'impersonations of my accent. Umm. Yeah, just made some not feel as comfortable' (SSI 10); 'their [non-ME students] thoughts have kind of invalidated the feelings of the other student [...] discourage them from sharing' (SSI 12)</i>

Saunders et al. (2007) recommend that initially, a group of experts should be asked to comment on the questions' representativeness and suitability as well as the overall structure of the questionnaire. This will confirm content validity and allow for necessary changes to be made prior to pilot testing (Saunders et al., 2007). Similarly, Green et al. (1988) suggest that colleagues who are not involved with the questionnaire design should review it before pre-testing, as compared to the pre-test sample they are more likely to find technical errors such as double-barrelled questions, leading questions and ambiguous questions. Consequently, the draft MESQHE scale was presented to some experts in the field, i.e., academics, to evaluate the relevance

of each item as well as the clarity of the items. Based on their feedback, confusing, ambiguous and double-barrelled items were eliminated or revised. For instance, some items were reworded, e.g., 'Teaching facilities are modern and visually appealing' was changed to 'Teaching facilities are fit for purpose'. Other items were separated into two items, for example, 'Academic staff are knowledgeable and have expertise in their subject' was split into 'Academic staff are knowledgeable' and 'Academic staff have expertise in their subject'. Furthermore, some items were added, e.g., 'It is easy to make friends with students from different ethnic backgrounds'. Additionally, the order of some of the items was also changed to improve the sequencing of the SQ items, for example, 'My friends are mostly from minoritised ethnic backgrounds' was moved from item 14 to item 10. All these changes resulted in a preliminary SQ scale with 121 items ([Appendix 8](#)).

The primary SQ dimension '*belonging*' consists of 33 items. Items are based on statements of participants relating to their sense of belonging and the literature relating to belonging, student engagement and ME students' experiences of HE. Nine items relate to the diversity of staff and students, 13 items relate to friends and relationships with peers and a further 11 items relate to academic engagement and social involvement.

The primary dimension '*interaction quality*' comprises a total of 50 items and is divided into two sub-dimensions 'academic interaction quality' with 38 items and 'non-academic interaction quality' with 12 items. Items are based on participants' comments and previous SQ in HE research. Of the 38 items relating to academic interaction quality, 24 items relate to academic staff's knowledge and expertise and attitudes and behaviours and a further 14 items relate to the curriculum. Of the 12 items relating to non-academic interaction quality, four items are linked to non-academic staff's competences, attitudes and behaviours, six items to administrative processes and support systems and two items to individual academic support and pastoral care. The '*physical environment quality*' dimension is divided into two sub-dimensions 'teaching facilities quality' and 'support facilities quality'. Teaching facilities quality includes four items and support facilities quality consists of 18 items. Finally, the '*transformative quality*' dimension comprises a total of 16 items of which nine

items relate to students' enhancement and seven items to the empowerment of students.

The SQ scale was then included in a draft SQ questionnaire, which comprised three sections ([Appendix 8](#)). The first section consisted of the preliminary SQ scale with a total of 121 SQ items, which respondents were asked to rate on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A seven-point Likert scale was chosen because, according to Symonds (1924, as cited in Preston & Colman, 2000), it is more reliable than a five-point Likert scale in that it allows for a wider differentiation of responses. In other words, it allows for greater granularity in responses by giving respondents a wider range of options to choose from. This allows the researcher to capture more nuanced opinions and attitudes. Furthermore, the scale consisted of items that were both positively and negatively worded. Gray (2014) argues that with some respondents, a pattern of answering Likert-type questions in the same way quickly sets in, that is, if they have ticked 'strongly agree' for the first few questions, they tend to tick all remaining questions with this response. Therefore, Saunders et al. (2007) recommend including both positive and negative statements to ensure that respondents read each one carefully and think about which box to tick. The second section of the SQ questionnaire included questions regarding respondents' overall rating of the SQ, their level of satisfaction, the likelihood of them continuing to postgraduate study, and of recommending their course/HEI to others as well as three open-ended questions about what they like most/least about studying at their university and any suggestions what their HEI could do to improve ME students' university experience. The third section contained questions pertaining to the respondent's profile, such as their age, gender, ethnicity, domicile and level, year and mode of study.

After the draft MESQHE questionnaire was developed the next step was to pre-test it. Figure 5.3 shows the steps involved in pre-testing the questionnaire. The purpose of pre-testing is to reveal a questionnaire's potential effectiveness prior to its final distribution to the target population. Pre-testing comprises two key areas, pre-testing individual questions and checking the overall design of the questionnaire (Reynolds et al., 1993). Thus, individual questions, were pre-tested for any double-barrelled and

ambiguous questions, relevance of individual questions, omissions or errors of questions to make changes if necessary and avoid common method bias. Furthermore, the logical flow of the questionnaire was also checked. The pre-testing consisted of a protocol analysis and a pilot test, which are discussed in the next section.

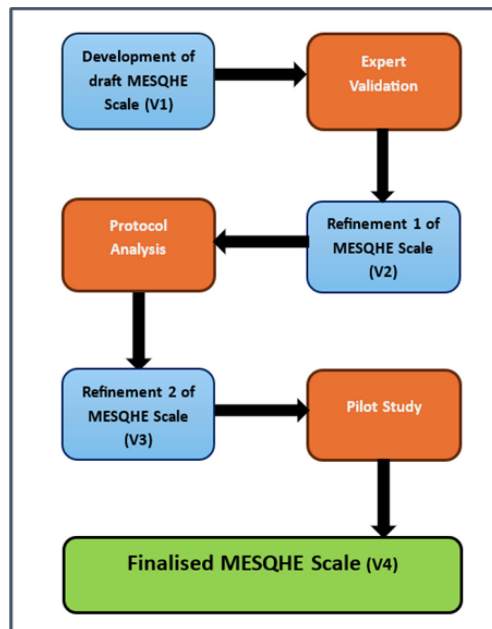


Figure 5.3: Steps involved in pre-testing and refining the MESQHE scale

5.8 Protocol analysis and pilot test of the MESQHE questionnaire

As part of the pre-test of the draft SQ questionnaire a protocol analysis was conducted. A protocol analysis is a method used to determine respondents' reactions to the questionnaire, where respondents think out aloud whilst they complete the questionnaire (Reynolds et al., 1993). For the protocol analysis the draft questionnaire was given to a couple of ME students, who had not been part of the qualitative sample, for feedback. Participants were asked to comment on the instructions for completing the questionnaire, the appropriateness, clarity and wording of individual items and questions, and the overall length of the questionnaire and time needed to complete it. Furthermore, they were asked if they felt any questions should be deleted or added.

Their feedback resulted in a few changes to the SQ questionnaire ([Appendix 9](#)).

Regarding the first part of the questionnaire, the SQ scale, participants felt that instead

of only asking about the diversity of students at their HEI it would be better to also ask about diversity of students on their course. They felt that because the diversity of students varies greatly depending on the course a student studies, even though the university as a whole might be quite diverse, the course might not be, which could affect students' sense of belonging. Consequently, in addition to the question 'Many students at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds', the question 'Many students on my course are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds' was added to the SQ scale. Furthermore, participants were not sure what exactly was meant with the statement 'Curriculum is inclusive'. Thus, to make the meaning of the statement clearer and easier to understand, the wording was changed to 'Curriculum is inclusive, i.e., it reflects minoritised ethnic students' histories, worldviews or lived experiences'. Similarly, participants were unsure about the meaning of 'Course content incorporates ethnic diversity issues'. Therefore, the statement was amended to 'Course content incorporates issues of diversity and inclusion faced by minoritised ethnic students'. Regarding the statement 'non-academic staff are approachable', one participant suggested that it would be beneficial to specify who exactly is meant by non-academic staff. Consequently, the wording of the statement was changed to 'non-academic staff (i.e., administrative and support staff) are approachable'. One participant also recommended that it would be beneficial to specify what pastoral care is. As a result, the statement was reworded to include 'Personal tutors provide pastoral care to students, such as looking after students' overall wellbeing and providing social and emotional support'. Additionally, one participant suggested that it would be useful to specify what exactly is meant by 'food provision is good'. Consequently, the SQ item was divided into the three separate items: 'Quality of food is good', 'Variety of food is good' and 'Price of food is good' to be more specific and avoid any misunderstandings. Lastly, in relation to the second part of the questionnaire, regarding respondents' overall opinion about their university experience, participants failed to distinguish between 'I would recommend university to my family and friends' and 'I would recommend this university to my family and friends'. Therefore, 'this university' was underlined to make it stand out more and avoid respondents thinking it was the same question. [Appendix 9](#) shows the refined SQ questionnaire with the changes from the protocol analysis.

Once the protocol analysis was conducted and the changes were made, a pilot test was carried out. The purpose of piloting a questionnaire is to ensure respondents will have no problems completing it (Saunders et al., 2007). Gray (2014, p. 372) argues that because a questionnaire is a 'one-shot' attempt at gathering data, piloting the questionnaire is vital to ensure that it is accurate, unambiguous and simple to complete. Thus, piloting a questionnaire helps to establish the questionnaire's face validity, i.e., whether it appears to make sense (Saunders et al., 2007). When piloting a questionnaire the quality of questions should be checked, i.e., whether respondents have any problems understanding and answering any questions (Gray, 2014), if any questions are unclear or ambiguous and if respondents are uneasy about answering any of the questions (Saunders et al., 2007). In addition, other aspects of the questionnaire that should be piloted include the sequence of questions, the clarity of the instructions given to respondents and how long it takes to complete the questionnaire (Gray, 2014).

Reynolds et al. (1993) argue that in the literature the recommended pilot sample size is generally small, ranging from 5 – 10 to 50 – 100. Regarding the pre-test sample, literature suggests that its characteristics should be as similar as possible to the target group of the study (Reynolds et al., 1993). Hence, the questionnaire was piloted on seven ME students both undergraduates and postgraduates studying a variety of courses at two different HEIs from different mission groups.

The pilot test consisted of the participants completing the MESQHE questionnaire, followed by a short pilot test questionnaire containing a few additional questions relating to the SQ questionnaire's design ([Appendix 2](#)). Both questionnaires were completed sequentially before final submission. Respondents were asked about their views regarding the clarity of the instructions for completing the questionnaire, the wording of individual statements and questions, i.e., whether the statements/questions are easy to understand and unambiguous. Furthermore, they were also asked about the validity of questions, i.e., whether a question should be deleted or modified, and if they believed it should be modified, how it should be modified. Finally, their views about the structure and length of the questionnaire were also elicited.

Based on the pilot test questionnaire it was found that all pilot study participants agreed that the instructions for completing the questionnaire were clear. Similarly, most participants agreed that the questions were easy to understand and that they had no difficulties answering them. Besides, none of the pilot study participants felt uneasy about answering any of the questions. However, a few participants suggested modifications to some of the questions, which resulted in a few more changes being made to the MESQHE scale ([Appendix 10](#)). For instance, one respondent suggested that it should be specified who is meant by 'academic staff' because they felt that not everyone would know who exactly was being referred to. Therefore, the statement 'Many academic staff at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds' was changed to 'Many academic staff, e.g., lecturers, tutors and/or professors, at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds'. The same participant also recommended that questions using English turns-of-phrases such as 'state-of-the-art' should be reworded to be more inclusive as some international students may not have heard these phrases and thus, may not know what they mean. Hence, the statement 'Equipment in the teaching facilities is state-of-the-art', for example, was changed to 'Equipment in the teaching facilities is modern'. Additionally, in relation to SQ items regarding students' personal development and transformation, one respondent felt that respondents might feel unable to comment on the wider student population's experiences but would be able to comment on their own experience. Thus, the wording of the statements relating to transformative quality were amended to reflect respondents' own personal experiences rather than the experience of the wider student population, for example, 'Students knowledge is improved' was amended to 'My knowledge is improved', 'Students acquire relevant abilities and skills' was modified to 'I am acquiring relevant abilities and skills' and so forth.

Furthermore, with regards to the order of questions, the majority of pilot study participants agreed that it was good. However, one participant suggested that the order of some questions relating to library and IT facilities and services should be changed because the questions were very similar and thus, some respondents might find it confusing and might not realise that they are in fact different questions. By changing the order of these questions, it became more noticeable that the questions

are different, which would make respondents consider their responses more carefully. Finally, six of the seven pilot study participants were of the opinion that there were no other questions that needed to be asked. However, one participant proposed that asking some additional questions relating to a student's course would be beneficial. Thus, the question 'Many academic staff in my school/faculty/department are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds' was added. Besides, with regards to the second part of the questionnaire relating to respondents' overall opinion about their university experience, they felt that students may have very different views regarding their course compared to their views regarding their university as a whole. As a result the questions 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your course?', 'If I could, I would choose to study the same course again', 'If I could start over again, I would choose to study a different course' and 'I would recommend this course to my family and friends' were added to this section.

All these changes resulted in a finalised MESQHE questionnaire ([Appendix 11](#)) consisting of three parts. The first part contains the finalised MESQHE scale comprising 124 SQ items. The second part contains 16 questions relating to respondents' overall opinion of their university and course experience. The third part includes eight questions regarding respondents' demographic characteristics.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Introduction

This thesis has examined ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and their satisfaction/ dissatisfaction with, their HE experience. The purpose of this qualitative study, from a pragmatist perspective, was to identify the key factors which affect their perceptions to develop a comprehensive model of ME students' perceived SQ in HE. This model can be utilised by HEIs to improve the level of quality of their services and thus improve ME students' satisfaction with their HE experience.

This chapter first presents a brief overview of the research. Subsequently, the key findings of the research are recapped with reference to the research questions. Then the study's contribution to knowledge is presented. This is followed by its contribution to practice and recommendations for HEIs. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the research and opportunities for future research and some final reflections.

6.2 Overview of the study

Quality of HE and students' satisfaction with their experience have received increased attention in recent years due to major changes in the UK HE sector over the past two decades, which are driven by globalisation and marketisation of HE. Therefore, it is more important than ever for HEIs to achieve high levels of SQ and ensure their students, who arguably are considered to be their main 'customers', are satisfied with their experience because these factors are linked to student loyalty, retention and achievement (Bell & Brooks, 2018). However, ME students appear to be comparatively less satisfied with their university experience, which research suggests might be one reason for the disparities in outcomes between ME students and their White peers, such as the awarding gap and lower rates of continuation and progression to graduate employment or postgraduate study (Neves & Hillman, 2019; NUS, 2011). ME students are less likely to graduate with a good (1:1 or 2:1) degree and are also less likely to

progress to graduate employment or continue to postgraduate studies (Neves & Hillman, 2019; NUS, 2011). To address these disparities HEIs need to critically reflect on their practices and improve ME students' university experience. Therefore, it is crucial that HEIs better understand what factors, and to what extent, influence ME students' perceptions of, and their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with, the quality of their university experience in order to make improvements to their practices and increase ME students' satisfaction with their university experience. To identify areas for improvement, it is necessary for HEIs to first measure ME students' SQ perceptions. However, while SQ and student satisfaction have been explored in the HE context to some extent, the question of how best to measure SQ in HE remains unresolved and there is still no universally accepted model for measuring SQ in HE. Although some HE-specific instruments have been developed, such as HEdPERF (Firdaus, 2006a), HiEduQUAL (Latif et al., 2019), EduQUAL (Mahapatra & Khan, 2007), HESQUAL (Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a), these are rarely applied to measure SQ in English HEIs. Moreover, to date, no empirical research has been conducted specifically on ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction with their university experience. Therefore, as the purpose of this study was to explore the quality of ME students' university experience, a SQ model and scale to specifically evaluate ME students' SQ perceptions of HE was developed. As SQ should be determined by the stakeholders, in this case, students, who are considered a major stakeholder of HE, an instrument to measure SQ in HE therefore needs to consider students' perspectives. Consequently, the SQ model and scale are based on ME students' own perceptions of the quality of their university experience and the key factors affecting their perceptions. Thus, this SQ scale will be providing empirical insights into SQ constructs and satisfaction from ME students' own perspectives. As a result, this research addresses the gap in ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction research, whilst also helping HEIs understand how ME students evaluate their services, enabling them to identify key priorities for improvements of their HE provision for ME students.

The following section gives a brief overview of the methodology for this research study, i.e., how the research was designed and undertaken. The research philosophy that was adopted for this study is pragmatism, which emphasises practical solutions to real-world problems and is not committed to a single research philosophy. Pragmatism

attempts to reconcile objectivism and subjectivism (Saunders et al., 2019), believing that although one reality exists independently, it is perceived differently by individuals based on their experiences (Maarouf, 2019). Thus, knowledge is both socially constructed and based upon the reality of the world individuals experience and live in (Johnston et al., 2007). Furthermore, because pragmatism focuses on practical solutions to real-world problems and ‘what works’ (Maarouf, 2019), it allows researchers to use the best research methods available to get workable answers to their research questions. This research believes that SQ is a construct that exists, but that different individuals have different perceptions of it, which change over time based on their experiences. Moreover, the aim of this study is to explore a practical problem, i.e., ME students’ lower levels of satisfaction with their university experience, which research suggests may be one of the reasons for the disparities in outcomes of ME students compared to their White peers, and to find workable solutions to that problem, i.e., uncover areas for improvement to increase their satisfaction. Therefore, pragmatism is considered as a suitable research philosophy for this study.

This study used an abductive research approach, i.e., by conducting parallel and equal engagement with the pertinent literature and empirical data (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) a conceptual framework of ME students’ perceived SQ of their HE experience was developed. Thus, consistent with the abductive approach, a qualitative method was chosen for this exploratory study. Moreover, some scale development approaches in the literature also suggest the use of a qualitative study (Cresswell, 2009; Galaczi & Khabbazzashi, 2016; Gehlbach & Brinkworth, 2011). For instance, Gehlbach and Brinkworth (2011) suggest that as part of the scale development process a qualitative study is needed to elicit whether the researcher’s conceptualisation of the construct under investigation corresponds with that of the respondents. In addition, Cresswell (2009) argues that qualitative data collection allows to identify themes and to obtain specific statements from participants, which in this case were used in the development of a bespoke ME students’ SQ in HE model and scale items in a survey instrument, which is grounded in participants’ views, respectively. Therefore, for this research a qualitative study was considered most appropriate to gain valuable insights about ME students’ perceptions and opinions regarding their experiences at university and to

elicit the factors which influence their experiences and thus, affect their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with HE.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the data collection method for this exploratory qualitative study because they strike a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing researchers to guide conversations whilst letting participants freely express their experiences and views, leading to rich, insightful data (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Gray, 2014; Saunders et al., 2007). In total 12 semi-structured interviews with ME students were conducted, which lasted between one and one and a half hours and took place online using MS Teams over a period of six weeks in May and June 2023. The study used purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method (Bryman & Bell, 2011), to target a specific group, namely ME students studying at HEIs in England. Participants were selected based on particular characteristics to gain valuable insights into their HE experiences. Initially, the sample focused on undergraduate ME students designated as home students, but due to unexpected challenges during the recruitment process, postgraduate and international students were also included. Thus, the final sample of 12 consisted of five undergraduate and seven postgraduate students, nine UK-domiciled and three international students studying at a variety of HEIs in England from different mission groups. The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, where no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection (Constantinou et al., 2017). Saturation was achieved after five interviews, but seven additional interviews were conducted to ensure depth and breadth of information.

To analyse the qualitative data collected from the semi-structured interviews a thematic analysis (TA) following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework was utilised. By transcribing and reading and re-reading the interviews familiarisation with the data was achieved. As this study is concerned with identifying factors affecting ME students' perceptions of their university experience, open coding was used. The initial codes were clustered together into potential themes, which were then reviewed, refined and defined. This resulted in four main themes: belonging, academic staff, curriculum and university support, each with associated sub-themes.

Based on the findings from the primary qualitative study, accompanied by an extensive literature review, which included literature on SQ, student satisfaction and ME students' university experiences, a comprehensive conceptual framework of ME students' perceived SQ of HE was developed. This framework was then used as the basis for the design of a draft SQ scale to measure ME students' perceptions of the SQ of, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with, their university experience, which was designed to be included in a self-administered SQ questionnaire. The SQ questionnaire consists of three parts, the first part encompasses the SQ scale, the second part contains questions about respondents' overall opinions about their university experience and the third part contains questions regarding respondents' demographic characteristics.

'Experts', i.e., academics, reviewed the draft SQ questionnaire for content validity, i.e., representativeness and suitability of SQ items. Based on their feedback, some changes were made, such as SQ items were added, removed, reworded or reordered. The draft SQ questionnaire was also subjected to a protocol analysis and a pilot study. The protocol analysis and pilot study resulted in further refinements of the questionnaire, such as the modification of some questions to improve clarity, the addition of new questions and the reordering of some questions. This instrument can be used in future studies to quantitatively examine the generalisability of the findings from this thesis and by HEIs to identify SQ issues from ME student perspectives within their universities at institutional, faculty and programme levels.

6.3 Key findings of this study

In this section the key findings of this study will be outlined. It will be explained how this research achieved the research aim and objectives.

Research aim:

To explore the quality of ME students' university experience through the lens of both education and SQ theories.

This study set out to explore ME students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience. More specifically, it sought to develop a SQ model and SQ scale for evaluating ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their university experience. First a thorough literature review was undertaken to explore theories and concepts related to quality in HE and student satisfaction. Pertinent generic as well as HE specific SQ models were also examined to identify how these models conceptualise SQ and what SQ dimensions they include. Additionally, a qualitative exploratory study comprising of semi-structured interviews with ME students was also conducted. The purpose of the qualitative study was to elicit ME students' perceptions of their university experience and identify what aspects influence their perceptions.

Research objective one:

To explore ME students' perceptions of their university experience

To explore ME students' perceptions of their university experience, a qualitative study utilising semi-structured interviews was carried out. The purpose of the qualitative study was to gain rich, detailed data about ME students' views and opinions regarding their university experience and discover what factors influence their experience of HE. In particular, the qualitative study helped to obtain in-depth insights into participants' views and opinions about academic staff's attitudes and behaviours, their relationships with peers, course content and design, teaching, learning and assessment strategies, and available support mechanisms. In addition, participants' views regarding support services and facilities such as learning skills assistance, wellbeing and counselling services, library and IT facilities and food facilities offered by their HEIs were also elicited.

To date, no single universally accepted model for measuring SQ in a HE context exists. Combined with the fact that although it has been suggested in the literature that industry and culturally specific measures of SQ need to be developed (Clemes et al., 2001; Dabholkar et al., 1996), any currently available SQ instruments do not adequately address ME students' unique experiences in HE. Therefore, it was essential to conduct a qualitative study to gain insights into ME students' experiences in HE to

develop a bespoke SQ framework and SQ scale specifically for evaluating ME students' SQ perceptions of HE, which is essential for identifying key priorities for improvements to HE provisions.

Research objective two:

To identify factors affecting ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and satisfaction/ dissatisfaction with, their university experience

The semi-structured interviews were also essential for identifying critical factors from ME students' own perspectives. Four key factors (quality dimensions), namely belonging, academic staff, curriculum and university support, were found to influence ME students' perceptions of their university experience. The study found that sense of belonging is essential for ME students' positive university experience and perceptions of SQ in HE. In a HE context, belonging is the extent to which students feel connected to their HEI and the people within that HEI, in particular, academic staff and peers (Strayhorn, 2018). Furthermore, a student's sense of mattering, i.e., feeling significant and important to others (Schlossberg, 1989), also affects their sense of belonging. In an educational context, mattering refers to students' belief that they matter to their HEI and the people within that HEI (Schieferrecke & Card, 2013). Therefore, for a good university experience it is important that ME students feel that they matter, are accepted, valued and respected, and that they are supported and cared about by others in their HEI regardless of their background (Goodenow, 1993; Smith et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2018). A sense of belonging helps ME students' feel that they 'fit in' and that university is for 'them' (Keohane and Petrie, 2017) and reduces feelings of isolation and 'otherness' (Connor et al. 2004, Davies & Garrett, 2012).

This study further revealed that ME students' sense of belonging was influenced by the diversity of staff and students at their HEI, their friendships and relationships with peers, in particular from non-ME backgrounds, and their academic and social engagement. Representation of diverse ethnicities amongst staff and students makes ME students feel that HE is a place where everyone, regardless of their ethnicity and/or race, matters, is welcome, respected and included. Similarly, supportive friendships and positive relationships with peers, especially from non-ME backgrounds,

also contribute to inclusivity and enhance ME students' sense of belonging. Besides, they also positively affect ME students' academic and social engagement, which is another factor impacting on ME students' sense of belonging. Having good relationships with peers makes ME students feel accepted and respected; thus they feel more confident and comfortable to participate in class activities and engage in discussions. Expressing their own perspectives and sharing their personal experiences allows ME students' voices to be heard, making them feel they matter and thus, fostering their sense of belonging. Likewise, social involvement, such as participation in extracurricular activities, can help to improve ME students' connection to their HEI and make them feel more included and integrated in the HE community, enhancing their sense of belonging.

The second factor that emerged from the qualitative study was 'Academic staff'. In particular, academic staff's competence, knowledge and expertise, as well as their attitudes and behaviours significantly influence ME students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience and their sense of belonging. Competent and knowledgeable staff, who can explain concepts clearly, teach necessary technical skills and answer questions effectively inspire confidence and create a positive learning environment, which can enhance ME students' university experience. Furthermore, staff who are passionate about their subject motivate students and improve their engagement. This enhances ME students' confidence in their academic abilities, which strengthens their connections to their HEI. Consequently, by influencing ME students' perceptions of the quality of their education and their overall university experience academic staff's competence and expertise plays a vital role in fostering ME students' sense of belonging. Equally, academic staff's attitudes and behaviours also influence ME students' university experience and play a significant role in enhancing their sense of belonging. Academic staff who are accessible, available and approachable make ME students feel more comfortable interacting with them and seeking help. This leads to positive relationships with academic staff, which have been linked to feelings of mattering (Hallam, 2023; Lin et al., 2022). Furthermore, staff providing encouragement and support and showing concern for both ME students' academic progress as well as their overall wellbeing make ME students feel that staff pay attention to them and care about them, which positively affects their feeling of mattering. Moreover, academic

staff treating everyone fairly and equally, regardless of ethnicity, reinforces inclusivity and helps ME students feel integrated in the HE community, thus it improves ME students' university experience and enhances their sense of belonging. Similarly, valuing diverse perspectives and allowing all students to express their views and share their personal experiences from their cultural and ethnic backgrounds creates a safe and inclusive environment and shows ME students' that their perspectives and experiences matter, are valued and respected, fostering their sense of belonging.

The third factor that affects ME students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience is the 'Curriculum'. A diverse and inclusive curriculum is essential for ME students' overall university experience and their sense of belonging. A curriculum that reflects diverse perspectives and contributions from scholars from ME backgrounds shows that their views and experiences are valued and respected (Arday et al., 2022; Bale et al., 2020), making ME students feel included and enhancing their feelings of mattering (Hamshire et al., 2025). Furthermore, including issues of equality, diversity and inclusion allows ME students to engage with a curriculum that is more relevant to them and study areas of personal interest and relevance (Bunce & King, 2019). This enhances their engagement and positively impacts their university experience. On the other hand, curricula that are too focused on White European or American perspectives fail to reflect ME students' socialisation, worldview, history or lived experiences, which can alienate ME students and diminish their sense of belonging (Arday et al, 2022). Besides, a narrow curriculum can constrain ME students' learner autonomy, making them feel that their perspectives are irrelevant (Bunce et al., 2021). Consequently, a lack of inclusion of lived experiences of people from minoritised backgrounds in curricula can lead to feelings of not mattering and marginalisation (Hamshire et al., 2025), which negatively impacts on ME students university experience and sense of belonging. Furthermore, the superficial inclusion of diversity issues, often perceived by ME students to be no more than a 'tick-box' exercise or 'tokenistic', can make them feel marginalised rather than genuinely included.

Another important aspect relating to the curriculum, which impacts on ME students' university experience, is fair and balanced assessment, marking and feedback. Allowing ME students to choose assignment topics that are relevant to them and to

incorporate their own cultural and ethnic experiences enhances a course's inclusivity. This, in turn, enhances ME students' sense of belonging and also increases their satisfaction with their course. Besides, inclusive assessment methods that offer students more choice and use more creative modes of assessment empower ME students by giving them more autonomy and ownership over their assessments (Blake et al., 2022). Assignment deadlines can also have a negative impact on ME students' university experience. For instance, having assignment deadline close together can put an undue strain on students with family and work commitments, which are common amongst ME students. Similarly, scheduling deadlines during religious holidays, such as Ramadan, without consideration, can make ME students feel discriminated against. Likewise, putting robust marking procedures in place, such as anonymous marking and assignments being marked by two academics, can prevent biases and prejudices affecting marking and thus, ensure transparency of marking and thus, enhance ME students' feelings of fairness and equality. Additionally, providing constructive and detailed feedback allows ME students to improve their academic performance and thus, enhances their overall university experience. Besides, it also helps students to develop learner autonomy, which is linked to a stronger sense of belonging (Blake et al., 2022).

The final factor that emerged from the semi-structured interviews is 'University support'. Availability and accessibility of support services, such as learning skills assistance, counselling and career services, demonstrate to ME students' that they matter and that their HEI cares about them. This makes them feel valued and supported, increasing their sense of belonging. However, ME students face a number of issues when accessing support services, such as lack of awareness of availability of support services, unclear processes of how to access them, long waiting times and insufficient resources to provide the assistance needed. In addition, a lack of confidence or fear of 'looking stupid', negative connotations associated with needing help, such as feeling 'less than' or 'other', and time constraints due to family and work commitment can make ME students reluctant to access these services. Consequently, more effective communication of availability and accessibility of support services and proactively offering support to ME students, rather than waiting for them to ask for help, would ensure that ME students receive the support they need, diminishing

feelings of isolation and not being cared for. However, specifically targeted support for ME students might risk reinforcing ME students' feelings of 'othering' and increase their feelings of alienation. Thus, it is important that HEIs find the right balance between the two. Thus, providing inclusive and culturally sensitive support systems make it more likely that ME students utilise these services and therefore, receive the support they require. In addition to general support services, providing individual academic support and pastoral care also positively impact on ME students' university experience. In particular, personal tutoring plays a vital role in supporting students not only academically, but also emotionally and socially, making a significant difference to ME students' university experience. By providing academic guidance personal tutors help ME students improve their academic skills, which can positively impact their academic performance. Additionally, by providing pastoral care, that is, offering personal, social and emotional support, personal tutors contribute to ME students' wellbeing and mental health. This makes ME students feel that they are not just seen as a 'number' or 'income', but that they are cared about and that they matter as an individual to their HEI. Positive relationships with personal tutors make ME students feel that somebody is taking a special interest in them, which increases their sense of being noticed and their feelings of mattering (Zawada, 2024) and thus, reducing feelings of isolation and uncertainty whether university is 'for them'. Support staff and personal tutors from minoritised backgrounds can generally better understand and relate to ME students' concerns and perspectives, leading to more open communication and fostering trust, making ME students more likely to seek academic and pastoral support (Rana et al., 2022; Seuwo, 2023). However, irrespective of the ethnicity of staff, personal tutoring needs to be culturally sensitive, otherwise it could deter ME students from utilising it (Rana et al., 2022).

Research objective 3:

To determine the primary dimensions of SQ as perceived by ME students

Based on the above key factors affecting ME students' perceptions of their university experience, and an extensive literature review, the primary dimensions of SQ were determined. In particular, Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical model of perceived

SQ was instrumental for determining service dimensions. Their model is based on Rust and Oliver's (1994) view that customers' SQ perceptions are influenced by their evaluations of the three dimensions of the service encounter: the customer-service provider interactions, the service environment and the outcome of the service. Therefore, Brady and Cronin (2001) termed their three primary dimensions: interaction quality, physical environment quality and outcome quality.

In a HE context interaction quality relates to the interactions between staff, both academic and non-academic, and students as well as the systems and processes required for providing university services. This study has shown that positive interactions with academic and administrative and support staff influence ME students' SQ perceptions and are crucial for a good university experience. Additionally, this study also found that administrative systems and support services are important for a positive university experience. Therefore, in line with Brady and Cronin (2001), interaction quality was adopted as a primary dimension of SQ.

Due to the intangibility of services, the 'servicescape' (Bitner, 1992), i.e., the physical environment in which a service takes place, can also significantly influence customers' perceptions of the quality of the service (Bitner, 1992). This study showed that the availability, accessibility and quality of teaching and support facilities, such as library, IT and food facilities, influence ME students' university experience. Consequently, Brady and Cronin's (2001) physical environment quality was also included as a primary dimension of ME students' perceived SQ.

The third primary SQ dimension that was adopted is Brady and Cronin's (2001) outcome quality. However, as per Teeroovengadum et al.'s (2016a) HESQUAL model, outcome quality is operationalised as transformative quality, based on Harvey and Green's (1993) and Harvey and Knight's (1996) conceptualisation of quality in HE as 'quality as transformation'. Transformative quality relates to a students' enhancement in terms of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes, and empowerment, that is, ownership over their learning (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

However, this study determined another primary dimension in relation to ME students' perceived SQ of HE, namely 'belonging'. This study found that ME students' sense of belonging is essential for a positive university experience. Moreover, without a sense of belonging the other three primary dimensions might not be sufficient for ME students to form positive SQ perceptions of their HE experience. However, to date, belonging has been omitted as a primary dimension in any previous SQ conceptualisation in a HE context. Therefore, in addition to the three primary dimensions from Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical model and Teeroovengadum et al.'s (2016a) HESQUAL model, belonging was identified as an essential primary dimension of ME students' perceived SQ of HE.

Consequently, the four primary dimensions of ME students' perceived SQ of HE that were determined are interaction quality, physical environment quality, transformative quality and belonging. These four primary dimensions formed the basis for a conceptual framework for a SQ model to evaluate ME students' perceptions of SQ in HE (MESQHE) (Figure 6.1), discussed under research objective 4.

Research objective 4:

To develop a conceptual framework for evaluating ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their university experience.

The development of the conceptual framework was informed by pertinent SQ models and theories, such as Dabholkar et al.'s (1996) hierarchical conceptualisation of SQ, which posits that quality perceptions are not only multi-dimensional, but also multi-level. In other words, customers form their SQ perceptions based on an evaluation of performance at multiple levels and then combine these evaluations to form their overall SQ perception of an organisation's performance (Brady and Cronin, 2001). Furthermore, Cronin and Taylor's (1992) 'performance-only' operationalisation of SQ, namely that a customer's evaluation of a service is based solely on performance, was also adopted. Additionally, Brady and Cronin's (2001) hierarchical SQ model and Teeroovengadum et al.'s (2016a) HESQUAL model also significantly informed the development of this SQ model. Accordingly, the conceptual framework for the SQ model for evaluating ME students' perceptions of their university experience is

hierarchical, i.e., it consists of three levels: primary dimensions, sub-dimensions and attributes or factors. ME students' perceptions of each of the four primary dimensions (belonging, interaction quality, physical environment quality and transformative quality) are the basis for their overall perception of the quality of HE.

Each primary dimension is evaluated based on its sub-dimensions, which, in turn, are evaluated based on relevant attributes or factors. However, the exact nature and number of sub-dimensions and attributes for each primary dimension need to be identified for each research context. Therefore, in the context of ME students' perceived SQ in HE, the primary dimension 'belonging' is influenced by ME students' evaluation of three sub-dimensions: diversity of staff and students, friendships and relationships with peers, academic engagement and social involvement. Moreover, this study also found that sense of belonging is not only influenced by its three sub-dimensions, but also by the other three primary dimensions. The two sub-dimensions pertaining to interaction quality are academic and non-academic interaction quality. Physical environment quality consists of two sub-dimensions, namely teaching facilities and support facilities and transformative quality also encompasses two sub-dimensions, empowerment and enhancement of students.

Based on the conceptual framework outlined above, a draft SQ scale for evaluating ME students' perceived SQ of their university experience was then developed and included in a self-administered questionnaire. Through secondary sources and findings from the semi-structured interviews, items for inclusion in the draft SQ scale were identified. Literature was reviewed to identify SQ attributes relevant to HE. This included literature on SQ, student satisfaction, educational theories and ME students' experiences in HE. Consequently, items from existing SQ scales related to HE were identified and adapted to be applicable to ME students' quality perceptions. Through the primary qualitative study ME students' own perspectives of critical SQ attributes of HE were elicited. Study participants' statements were then used for formulating additional new SQ items, which had not previously been included in other SQ scales, but were pertinent for ME students' quality perceptions.

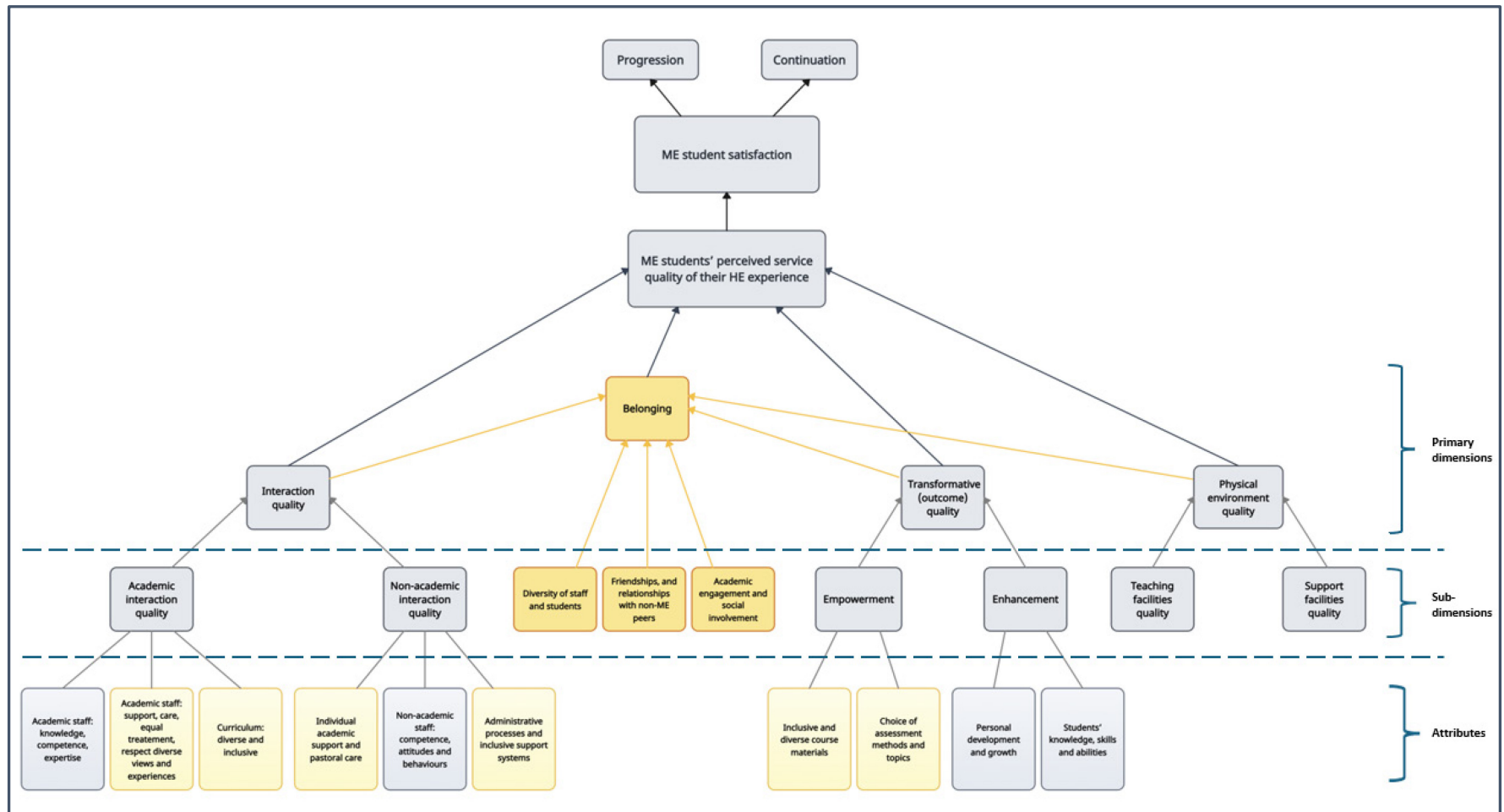


Figure 6.1: Conceptual framework for ME students' perceived SQ in HE (MESQHE)

6.4 Contribution to knowledge

This study contributes to knowledge in several ways as outlined below.

Development of a conceptual framework (MESQHE)

This study is the first to propose a conceptual framework - (MESQHE) (Figure 6.1) - for a SQ model designed specifically to evaluate ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their university experience. Whilst, to date, only a limited number of SQ models in HE exist, none have been specifically designed for the UK context or developed explicitly from the perspective of ME students. Therefore, this study contributes to knowledge in the area of SQ in HE in general, and to SQ in HE from a ME students' perspective, in particular.

Inclusion of 'belonging' as a primary SQ dimension

This study is also the first to incorporate 'belonging' as a primary SQ dimension within the MESQHE framework for evaluating SQ in HE (highlighted in **yellow** in Figure 6.1). Although, belonging has been discussed in relation to engagement, retention and success (O'Keeffe, 2013; Russell & Jarvis, 2019; Thomas, 2012), it has not previously been conceptualised as a key component of SQ in HE. This study demonstrates that 'belonging' is central to ME students' perceptions of, and satisfaction with, the quality of their university experience, thereby advancing understanding of belonging as a critical dimension of SQ in HE in general and specifically for ME students.

Examining 'belonging' in a new context

Despite existing literature on belonging, no studies have examined it in the context of SQ and student satisfaction. Consequently, a clearer understanding of belonging and how it impacts on SQ and student satisfaction, especially for different ethnic groups, is still lacking. In fact, to date, there are no other studies that have considered sense of belonging when evaluating students' SQ perceptions of HE. Therefore, this study is addressing this gap by exploring how belonging influences ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction with their university experience, offering new insights into ethnicity and both SQ and satisfaction.

Proposal of a hierarchical, multi-dimensional ME student specific SQ model

This study proposes a SQ model that adopts a performance-only conceptualisation of SQ and is multi-dimensional and hierarchical. As the SQ model was developed on the basis of a qualitative study, which served to gather rich data about ME students' own views and opinions regarding the quality of their university experience, it is grounded in ME students' own perspectives, making it relevant and applicable to this specific segment of the student population. The SQ model comprises four primary SQ dimensions – belonging, interaction quality, physical environment quality and transformative quality - each with sub-dimensions and attributes, which are specifically relevant to ME students. This also adds support to the notion that SQ dimensions and attributes are context specific and shaped by industry and cultural settings (Clemes et al., 2001; Dabholkar et al., 1996). The first primary dimension, as mentioned above, is belonging. In addition, this study also identifies interaction quality, both academic and non-academic, as another primary SQ dimension that is relevant to ME students. This reinforces the importance of interaction quality in shaping ME students' perceptions of SQ and also highlights the role that positive interactions with staff play in fostering a sense of belonging and for improving ME students' satisfaction. Physical environment quality is another primary SQ dimension found to impact ME students' perceptions of their university experience, adding support to the belief that physical environment quality influences the perceptions of the quality of the service encounter (Bitner, 1992). Furthermore, this study adopts the concept of transformative quality, emphasising the importance of empowerment and enhancement of students. This approach aligns with the idea of 'quality as transformation' (Harvey & Knight, 1996). Thus, this model also supports the notion that in a HE context both technical quality, i.e., transformative quality, as well as functional quality need to be included when evaluating SQ. Gill et al. (2022) suggest that the literature on transformative quality includes few empirical contributions. As such, the inclusion of transformative quality in the MESQHE model will augment the body of empirical work on transformative quality.

Development of a ME student specific SQ scale

This study also introduces a new SQ scale to specifically measure ME students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience. Although some attempts have been made to develop a scale to measure SQ in HE, the challenge to develop an

adequate model for measuring SQ in HE remains unresolved (Chong & Ahmed, 2012). Indeed, despite the notion that cultural differences affect perceived SQ (Clemes et al., 2001; Clemes et al., 2008), none of the existing SQ instruments have been devised to specifically measure HE SQ perceptions of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. However, given the focus of this study on ME students' HE SQ perceptions, a SQ scale with the specific purpose of measuring students from ME backgrounds' SQ perceptions (MESQHE) had to be developed. Thus, with the development of such an instrument, this study extends not only knowledge in the area of development of SQ instruments in a HE context, but also in the area of development of SQ scales for specific segments of the student population, that is, students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, this research also contributes to knowledge about SQ perceptions of students from different ethnic backgrounds and expands the understanding about their perceptions being influenced by cultural differences. What is more, as this study employed a rigorous scale development process, including qualitative data collection, expert validation, protocol analysis and pilot testing, it provides a replicable methodological approach for future context-specific scale development. Furthermore, the application of the MESQHE scale enables HEIs to assess ME students' perceptions and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their HE experience. These insights into how ME students experience and evaluate HEI's service provision can inform targeted improvements and strategic interventions aimed at enhancing SQ and student satisfaction. Thus, in future the scale can also contribute to practice.

Exploring ME students' university experience through a new lens

Unlike most prior research, which focuses on student engagement, retention and success when exploring ME students' university experience (Read et al., 2003; Thomas 2012; Wilcox et al., 2005), this study examines ME students' university experience through the lens of SQ and student satisfaction. More precisely, this research examines ME students' perceptions of the quality of, and their satisfaction with, their university experience. Dicker et al. (2017) argue that although there are concerns about ME students' lower levels of satisfaction with their university experience, the impact of ethnicity on student perceptions of quality in HE is not clear and thus, needs to be investigated further. Therefore, as this study provides valuable information about ME

students' personal experiences and perceptions of HE, it adds to knowledge of ME students' university experience in general. In addition, because it examines SQ from a ME students' perspective, it also adds to the understanding of how ethnicity impacts on SQ perceptions, in particular.

Methodological and contextual breadth and depth

This study moves beyond the limitations of previous single HEI and single discipline research by including ME students from multiple UK HEIs studying on a variety of courses across different disciplines. It also departs from the predominantly quantitative research pertaining to quality in HE and student satisfaction by employing a qualitative approach, enabling the acquisition of rich, nuanced insights into ME students' SQ perceptions and satisfaction and the factors that most influence their perceptions. This qualitative approach allowed students to express their own views and opinions regarding their university experience and enabled the identification of rich details relating to both the breadth of their experience and their strength of feeling about particular issues. Thus, this study contributes to the voice of ME students and adds to knowledge about ME students' university experience.

Contributing to equity, diversity and inclusion discourse

Furthermore, the findings of this study emphasise the significance of inclusivity in HE. They show the importance of diverse staff and student representation, inclusive curricula and culturally sensitive support services. Thus, these findings contribute to the broader discourse on equity, diversity and inclusion in HE.

Therefore, as illustrated above, this research contributes significantly to knowledge across a number of areas where both research and understanding are lacking. This is captured within the new conceptual framework for ME students' perceived SQ in HE (MESQHE), which has belonging at its core and highlights the key issues from a ME student perspective.

6.5 Contribution to practice

There is limited research to date on ME students' SQ perceptions of HE. However, previous research found that perceptions of SQ vary significantly among students from different ethnic backgrounds, thus they recommend that HEIs should identify discriminating SQ dimensions of different segments to create suitable targeted strategies (Clemes et al., 2001). The framework that was developed in this study identifies primary SQ dimensions, SQ sub-dimensions and attributes that are specifically relevant to ME students when evaluating their university experience. This will enable HEIs to formulate strategies for their HE provision that are specifically targeted at ME students. Similarly, the SQ questionnaire will enable HEI management to measure ME students' perceptions and satisfaction. Thus, both the framework and SQ instrument can provide HEIs with valuable information on how ME students evaluate the services provided. This information will assist HEIs to identify areas for improvement and to develop and implement strategies to improve levels of SQ and enhance ME students' satisfaction. Thus, adopting a customer-centric approach that focuses on understanding key stakeholders', namely students', own perspectives can help HEIs to determine how their services should be designed, re-designed and effectively managed.

6.6 Recommendations for HEIs

Achieving high levels of SQ and student satisfaction is of utmost importance in a highly competitive market such as HE. Therefore, to improve ME students' perception of, and satisfaction with, their university experience, based on the findings of this research, it is recommended that HEIs should focus their efforts on aspects of the four SQ dimensions of this new SQ framework that are particularly relevant to ME students' experiences in HE.

6.6.1 Belonging

This study has revealed the importance of ME students' sense of belonging in relation to their SQ perceptions and satisfaction with their university experience. Therefore, it

is essential that HEIs foster ME students' sense of belonging by creating an environment that is inclusive and where ME students feel valued, respected and that they matter. To achieve this HEIs should increase diversity of both staff and students, encourage more integration between ME students and their peers from non-ME backgrounds and encourage academic and social engagement of ME students.

HEIs need to actively increase diversity of staff as this creates a more inclusive environment that fosters a greater sense of belonging. Increased diversity of academic staff provides role models for ME students and motivates them to do well. In addition, increased diversity of support staff encourages ME students to seek support as they believe that support staff from ME backgrounds can better relate to them and better understand their concerns and problems. Thus, increased diversity of staff helps to develop ME students' sense of mattering and belonging. Additionally, HEIs should provide diversity training for both academic and non-academic staff to ensure a better understanding of ME students' perspectives and the challenges they might face. This will enable academic and support staff to support ME students more effectively.

To foster more positive relationships and encourage more integration between ME and non-ME students, academic staff should organise group projects and activities that require collaboration. However, academic staff need to take an active role in managing these activities. For instance, for paired activities staff should prompt all students to move around the room and engage with students beyond their friendship groups to mitigate the tendency of many ME students to sit together. In addition, for group projects/activities academic staff should be proactive in the formation of diverse groups to discourage ME students from working exclusively with one another and encourage social interaction and sharing of ideas and diverse experiences.

Furthermore, courses need to incorporate diverse perspectives and examples from various cultures to broaden students' worldview, especially students from non-ME backgrounds, and foster a better mutual understanding. These practices can help to develop more trusting and supportive relationships with non-ME peers and a better understanding and valuing of each other's experiences and perspectives and make ME students feel more comfortable and confident to interact with their peers and share

their views and experiences. This will increase ME students' academic and social engagement and foster ME students' sense of mattering and belonging.

As previously discussed in section 5.2.3, academic and social engagement are also important for fostering ME students' sense of belonging. Therefore, academic staff should encourage academic engagement by creating an inclusive learning environment where cultural differences are appreciated and respected (Bunce et al., 2021) and where students are actively encouraged to voice their views and opinions. To achieve this, academic staff need to create a safe and inclusive environment by addressing inappropriate behaviours of non-ME students, such as dismissive comments or stereotyping of ME students. Thus, each school/department should have an 'EDI champion' to provide academic staff with diversity training so that they can spot inappropriate behaviour and can deal with it effectively. In addition to encouraging academic engagement, HEIs should also promote ME students' social involvement, that is, participation in extracurricular activities. HEIs need to highlight the social and cultural benefits of taking part in extracurricular activities (Thomas & Jones, 2017). Social involvement fosters ME students' sense of belonging and improves their overall university experience, it makes them feel more included and integrated and encourages them to form friendships and build supportive relationships with non-ME students. Thus, personal tutors should encourage ME students to join student clubs and societies, in particular, ones that are interest-based rather than ethnicity-based as these are spaces where ME students can connect with students from other ethnic backgrounds who share similar interests to them. Additionally, schools/departments should organise extracurricular activities, accounting for the barriers preventing ME students' participation, such as family or work commitments and/or cultural or religious reasons. Therefore, social events should be culturally sensitive, i.e., there should be no alcohol available, and vegan, vegetarian and halal food options should be offered. Besides, more extracurricular activities, such as networking and career events or volunteering activities should be scheduled at lunchtime or late afternoon to allow ME students who have family or work commitments or who commute to university to be able to take part in these activities.

6.6.2 Interaction quality

To improve academic interaction quality, namely the interactions between academic staff and ME students, academic staff need to foster positive relationships with ME students' by being more accessible and approachable. They need to make time for students, respond to queries in a timely manner, and create an environment where ME students feel comfortable to seek help. It is also important that academic staff show genuine care for both ME students' academic progress and their wellbeing and are proactive in offering support when needed, because ME students might be reluctant to ask for it. These practices enhance ME students' sense of belonging and also improve their perceptions of, and satisfaction with, their university experience.

Additionally, academic staff should ensure that teaching is culturally responsive by incorporating diverse cultural and ethnic perspectives into the course content and reading lists. This ensures that ME students see their backgrounds represented and valued. Besides, academic staff should value diverse perspectives and should actively encourage ME students' participation in discussions in class and to share their views and personal experiences (Housee, 2011; Jessop & Williams, 2009). This shows ME students that their voices are being heard and that their views matter. As mentioned above, to facilitate discussions, especially of sensitive topics, it is vital that academic staff create a safe and respectful learning environment by actively managing classroom dynamics to prevent inappropriate comments and behaviours. In addition, academic staff need to ensure the fair and equal treatment of all students regardless of their ethnicity. By implementing these practices, academic staff can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that enhances ME students' sense of belonging and overall university experience. To support academic staff in creating inclusive learning environments each school/department should have an 'EDI champion', i.e., an individual who has an interest in fostering inclusive learning and teaching practices (Smith, 2017). However, the onus to be an EDI champion should not solely lie with staff from ME backgrounds. The role of an EDI champion should comprise of, but is not limited to, organising EDI and 'unconscious bias' training and inclusive practice workshops, working with course teams to assess course content, course materials and reading lists to see if diversity could be increased. Besides, departments/schools

should dedicate some team meetings to discussing diversity issues and sharing inclusive practice.

Furthermore, a curriculum that is diverse and inclusive can foster ME students' sense of belonging and improve their university experience. Therefore, HEIs need to ensure that curricula include diverse perspectives rather than being solely Euro- or America-centric as this enables ME students to study areas of personal interest and relevance to them (Bunce & King, 2019). Moreover, HEIs need to avoid 'tokenism' and move beyond 'tick-box' exercises when including diversity issues (Arday, 2022; Givens, 1999) and need to ensure that, as far as is practical, issues of diversity, equality and inclusion are integrated in every module and course, rather than being limited to specialist modules or treated as add-ons (Davies & Garrett, 2012; Jessop & Williams, 2009). Therefore, each school/department should establish a working group consisting of academic staff and ME student representatives to assess the diversity of the curriculum and work on diversification of the curriculum, including course content, course materials, case studies and reading lists. Furthermore, SUs should have ME student advocates whose role it is to identify and challenge curricula where diversity could be increased. In addition, a working group consisting of academic staff and academic librarians should also be established to review reading lists and ensure that more works from ME authors are included. Additionally, assessments, marking and feedback need to be balanced and fair. Utilising a variety of assessment methods and giving students a choice of assignment topics gives ME students more autonomy over their learning, making a course more inclusive. Consequently, schools/departments should work in collaboration with ME students to design assessments that are more inclusive. Furthermore, by implementing robust marking procedures schools/departments can ensure that marking is unbiased and transparent. Academic staff should communicate clearly the marking process, marking criteria and submission requirements. Moreover, providing specific and constructive feedback that helps ME students to understand how to improve their work, will empower them to succeed.

Non-academic interaction quality is equally important for ME students' sense of belonging and their overall university experience. For instance, it is essential for HEIs to provide support services that are inclusive and culturally sensitive to the diverse

needs of a more diverse student body. This could also include providing staff diversity training to ensure that support staff provide welcoming and inclusive services to students from diverse backgrounds. Whilst avoiding 'othering', HEIs should proactively reach out to ME students who may be reluctant to seek help, ensuring they feel supported without being singled out. HEIs should also improve accessibility to support services for ME students by proactively communicating what range of support services are available and by providing clear guidance on how to access these services. Additionally, HEIs should simplify the process for accessing these services to avoid students being 'bounced' between services and ensure that staff are trained to direct students to the appropriate services. Besides, HEIs should try to reduce waiting times for services, which will ensure that students receive timely and effective support. By addressing these areas, HEIs can create a more inclusive and accessible environment that supports ME students more efficiently and effectively and enhances their sense of mattering and belonging.

Personal tutoring can also make a significant difference to ME students' university experience. Personal tutoring should encompass both academic and personal support as this helps ME students feel the HEI cares not only for their academic progress, but also their wellbeing. In addition, HEIs need to make sure that personal tutoring is inclusive and culturally sensitive to avoid deterring ME students from utilising the service (Rana et al., 2022). Personal tutors should also proactively reach out to ME students rather than waiting for them to ask for help. However, they need to avoid targeting ME students specifically as this could reinforce their feelings of 'othering'. Furthermore, HEIs should actively increase the number of personal tutors from ME backgrounds because these tutors would be better equipped to relate to ME students' concerns and perspectives. ME students would therefore feel more comfortable to confide in them and would feel better understood. Nonetheless, regardless of their ethnicity, all personal tutors should be given diversity training to better understand ME students' perspectives and backgrounds and thus, provide more effective support.

6.6.3 Physical environment quality

HEIs need to ensure that campus facilities cater to diverse cultural and religious needs. For instance, food services need to provide food options that cater to the dietary needs of a diverse student body, such as halal, vegetarian or vegan, as this creates a sense of mattering and belonging. Moreover, although many HEIs do cater to a variety of dietary requirements, it is essential that available food options are clearly advertised and labelled as many students appear to lack awareness of what is on offer.

Additionally, food services should also offer weekly or monthly specials of foods from different cultures. This would foster ME students' sense of mattering and belonging and also provide a way for non-ME students to experience and learn about different cultures. Furthermore, food services could ensure that food facilities remain open after sunset during the period of Ramadan, which would positively impact on Muslim students' wellbeing and sense of mattering and belonging. Similarly, estate services need to ensure the provision of spaces for worship or reflection, such as prayer rooms, as these spaces are particularly important for students from ethnic and religious backgrounds. Providing these facilities makes these students feel included and that they matter to their HEI and thus, fosters their sense of belonging. In addition, the provision of such facilities also encourages ME students to spend more time on campus, facilitating academic and social engagement, thereby enhancing their overall university experience.

6.6.4 Transformative quality

Transformative quality, that is, the enhancement and empowerment of students, influences ME students' overall university experience. One way for HEIs to empower students is to ensure that course materials reflect a diverse and multicultural society by including diverse perspectives and incorporating contributions from ME scholars. That way ME students can see that their views and experiences are valued and respected. Similarly, giving ME students a voice by actively inviting them to express their opinions and views and bring in their own cultural and personal experiences shows ME students that their perspectives matter and that their contributions are considered relevant. Furthermore, HEIs can empower ME students by involving them in the decision-making

process, such as collaborating with staff on curriculum design and development and/or assignment writing (de Sousa et al., 2021).

6.7 Limitations of research

The fact that participants self-selected to take part in the primary research may have affected the outcomes of the study somewhat. Participants willingness to partake in the research may result from them being more concerned with equality and diversity issues and that they felt it was important for their voices to be heard by sharing their experiences of HE. Furthermore, many participants were involved in extracurricular activities such as being student reps, being engaged in student unions and student societies. Maybe that is why they generally felt more positive about their HEI and their university experience. Besides, this may also be a reason why many felt a stronger sense of belonging.

Another limitation of this research, notwithstanding the indications of data saturation, is the relatively small sample of 12 ME students involved in the qualitative study. As previously outlined (see section 3.6), significant difficulties in recruitment were encountered. ME students appeared to be reluctant to participate in this research, thus participant recruitment was a constant challenge. It is possible, as suggested by Davies and Garrett (2012), that the reason for these difficulties in recruitment could have been ME students not wanting to be defined by their ethnicity and a distrust of targeted discussion of equality and diversity issues. Similarly, ME students might have perceived participation in this study as yet another form of 'othering' or marginalisation. As such, this study does not claim to provide findings that can be generalised for the entire ME student population, but rather for this relatively small, but diverse group of ME students useful insights relating to their university experience were gained.

Another limitation, which has been discussed previously (see section 3.5), is the positionality of the researcher as a White researcher and the related limitation of 'race of interviewer effect' and the 'racial matching' of researcher and participants. It is

believed that due to the 'race of interviewer effect' participants avoid giving answers they believe might offend a researcher from a different ethnical or racial background and that they tend to be more open and give more honest responses to researchers from their own ethnicity and race (Hatchett & Schuman, 1975). Thus, Schaeffer, (1980) recommends the 'racial matching' of the researcher and the participant when topics related to ethnicity and race are being explored. This is based on the believe that a racially matched researcher will have a better understanding of their ethnic community and the issues they face and thus, will receive better co-operation from participants (Papadopoulos & Lees, 2007). Consequently, it could be the case that in this study, participants were not completely open with the researcher during the semi-structured interviews and that they might have held back some of their true feelings, views and opinions. Similarly, participants might have felt uneasy to discuss certain aspects of their university experience with a White researcher or might have wondered why a White researcher would conduct research relating to ME diversity and equality issues.

6.8 Future research opportunities

The SQ scale, which is based on the exploratory qualitative study and an extensive literature review, was developed in line with one of the research objectives. The purpose of the SQ instrument is to collect data about ME students' perceptions of SQ and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with their university experience. However, the validity and reliability of this new instrument still need to be demonstrated. Therefore, as part of future research a SQ questionnaire containing the SQ scale will need to be distributed online using MS Forms ([available by clicking here](#)) to a large sample (n = 384 according to Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) of ME students' studying at English HEIs to test the factorial composition of the items generated (Bartholomew et. al., 2010). An exploratory and a confirmatory factor analysis will need to be conducted to assess the scale's dimensionality (the number of common factors needed to account for the correlation among items) (Netemeyer et al., 2003). The scales' construct validity (the extent to which the scale measures what it is intended to measure), convergent validity (the extent to which responses from alternative measurements of the same construct share variance), and discriminant validity (the degree to which two measures

designed to measure similar, but conceptually different constructs, are related) (Netemeyer et al., 2003) also need to be assessed. Furthermore, scale reliability will need to be assessed using Cronbach's coefficient alpha to measure internal consistency, i.e., the homogeneity of items within the scale (DeVellis, 2003). In addition, the influence of SQ on other constructs, such as satisfaction, retention, continuation and achievement (success) needs to be verified. However, once the SQ scale has been validated, it has the potential to demonstrate empirically the quantitative contribution of certain SQ dimensions, particularly belonging, to ME students' overall satisfaction with their university experience. This has not been done before, and whilst it is beyond the scope of this thesis to validate this tool, once it has been tested it will facilitate further research evaluating ME students' perceptions of, and satisfaction with, their university experience. Thus, it has the potential to contribute to future knowledge in this area.

Due to the relatively small scale of this research, ME students were treated as a homogenous group, despite the fact that there is significant diversity between ethnic groups. Therefore, in future research it would be interesting to identify the specific factors influencing the SQ perceptions of different ethnicities and to evaluate perceived SQ in HE for separate ethnic groups as this is still an area in which research is scarce in the UK.

Another future research opportunity is the validation and application of the SQ scale to other groups of underrepresented students, such as disabled, LGBTQ+ and/or mature students. For these students, the feeling they matter and are being included, accepted, valued and respected by the HE community could also be essential for a good university experience. Thus, a sense of belonging could potentially be a critical dimension of their SQ perceptions and their satisfaction with their HE experience.

6.9 Final thoughts

Due to pressure from right-wing parties and media equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives and policies are increasingly under attack. Thus, now more than ever it

is essential for HEIs to create a HE environment that is inclusive and welcoming. They need to create a safe space where ME students feel they matter and are part of a community that values and respects the views and contributions of people from ME backgrounds.

Although HEIs are aware of the awarding gap and disparities in continuation and progression rates, it is surprising to find the structural barriers ME students continue to face and shocking to identify ME students' experiences at university, such as being subjected to stereotyping, microaggressions and even racism by peers and, to some extent, even academic staff. Thus, it is imperative for HEIs to understand what shapes ME students' HE experience and bring down these barriers to be more inclusive. Moreover, it is essential for HEIs to make improvements to their provisions for several other reasons. Firstly, HE is a highly competitive market, thus disparities in outcomes can negatively impact metrics such as student retention and student success, all of which influence institutional performance and reputation. Furthermore, enhancing ME students' HE experience and tackling the disparities in outcomes is a moral imperative and a legal and societal necessity. HEIs have a moral duty to ensure that all students, regardless of background, have equal opportunities to succeed. In addition, the Equality Act 2010 requires institutions to eliminate discrimination and advance equality of opportunity. Therefore, HEIs have a legal duty under the 'Equality Duty' (as created in the Equality Act 2010) to not just avoid discrimination, but to actively promote equality, and to positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, requiring equality considerations to be reflected in the design of policies and the delivery of services (Equality and Human Rights Commission). Finally, students who underachieve are less likely to access graduate employment or postgraduate study, which leads to limited diversity of leadership across sectors.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview schedule

Interview schedule semi-structured interviews

Welcome

Hello and welcome to this session.

My name is Micaela Raffuzzi and I am a PhD student at Sheffield Hallam University. I would like to thank you for taking the time to join me to discuss your academic experience.

You have been invited to take part because I am interested to discuss your views regarding your academic experience to obtain a better understanding of minoritised ethnic students' evaluation of the quality of their university experience.

The purpose of this research is to explore your perceptions of the quality of your university experience, and to develop a service quality scale to measure minoritised ethnic undergraduate students' service quality perceptions in order to identify areas for improvement.

You have been given a participant information sheet and a consent form, but just to reiterate, participation is entirely voluntary: it is entirely up to you if you want to take part. But even if you do decide to take part, you are still free to withhold information i.e. not answer a particular question, or discuss particular topics, or withdraw from the interview at any time and without giving a reason. You also have the right, if you feel uncomfortable with anything that you have shared, to withdraw any specific pieces of information for up to two weeks after the interview.

All responses are valid—there are no right or wrong answers. I am simply interested in your views and opinions.

Speak as openly as you feel comfortable, but try to avoid revealing sensitive information about yourself.

Try to stay on topic; I may need to interrupt so that we can cover all the areas of interest.

I am recording the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments. People often say very helpful things in these discussions and I cannot write fast enough to get them all down.

Finally, although we will be on a first name basis in this session, I will not use any names in my PhD thesis or presentation at academic conferences and peer reviewed academic journals and reports. You can be assured of complete confidentiality.

Opening question

First, please tell me your first name, where you study, what you study and the year of study you are in.

Introductory question

Q.01 What made you choose to come to university?

Q.02 Are you the first member of your family to go to university?

Transition questions

Q.03 How do you feel about your decision to have come to university?

Key questions

Q.04 Thinking about students' academic experience in general, in your view what makes for a good experience? Why?

Q.05 What do you think are the key factors that impact on academic experience?

Q.06 Now, tell me about your own academic experience. Tell me about a good or a bad experience you have had. Why was it a good/bad experience?

Learning, teaching and assessment

Q.07 What is your experience regarding learning, teaching and assessment? Do you feel it is fair and inclusive? Why?

Q.08 How would you describe your relationship with academic staff? Are they approachable? Are they supportive? Are they available? Do you find it easy to ask them questions?

Q.09 How diverse is academic staff on your course/uni?

Q.10 Do you feel comfortable interacting with lecturers during lectures, or do you prefer to speak to them privately, or do you avoid personal contact with them?

Q.11 Do you feel that academic staff treat everyone equally and fairly? Do you feel they give the same attention and encouragement to all students regardless of their ethnicity?

Q.12 Do you feel your opinions are valued? Do you feel you can bring in your own experiences? Can you give an example.

Q.13 How do you feel about assessment, is it fair and balanced?

Q.14 Do you feel your University is a welcoming and inclusive environment?

Q.15 Have you experienced any barriers to your learning experience at the university? / Are there any cultural or identity differences you've felt at your time at the university, and have these impacted your learning experience?

Q.16 How would you describe your relationship with other students?

Q.17 How diverse is the student body at your HEI/on your course?

Curriculum content and design

Q.18 Do you feel the curriculum is representative of you? Is it diverse and inclusive? Are diverse backgrounds and views represented?

Q.19 Have you ever felt you've been stereotyped whilst at university by staff or other students? Can you give an example?

Q.20 Do you feel you belong? Why? Can you give an example?

Support services and facilities

Q.21 What about the support services at your university? Do you feel that there is sufficient access to support services (e.g., learning skills assistance, counselling, career planning etc.)?

Q.22 How important is it for you to have access to support services?

Q.23 What about the facilities provided by your university? How would you rate the facilities and how important are the facilities to you?

Rating items

Now that you have shared with me what makes for a good university experience, I would like you to rank the items you have identified by importance.

Q.24 Of all the areas you mentioned, which ones are the most important to you? Which are your top three?

Q.25 Which ones are the least important to you?

Ending questions

Q.26 Overall how satisfied are you with your experience at university?

Q.27 What aspects are you most satisfied with and why?

Q.28 What are you least satisfied with and why?

Q.29 Would you choose to come to university again? Why?

Q.30 Would you recommend university to your family and friends? Why?

Q.31 If you had the opportunity to give advice to your higher education institution, what advice would you give them? What improvements could be made?

Summary

Short summary of the key questions and what emerged from the discussions and then ask: Is this an accurate summary?

I wanted you to evaluate your academic experience. I wanted to identify what your perceptions regarding the quality of your academic experience are and what you think could be done to improve it. Is there anything that we missed? Is there anything else that we should have talked about?

Thank you

Thank you very much for taking the time to take part in this research, it is very much appreciated. As mentioned in the participant information sheet you will receive a £10 Amazon voucher as a small token of thanks for taking part in my study and as a small compensation for your time. Furthermore, if you would like to find out about the results of this study, you can email me (see contact details on the Participant information sheet) and I will send you the findings.

Appendix 2 MESQHE survey pilot test questionnaire

Before you submit your answers just a few questions about the questionnaire itself

This section relates to the questionnaire itself - how long it took to complete, how easy it was to complete, how easy it was to understand the instructions and questions and if in your opinion there are any improvements that could be made to the questionnaire.

How long did it take you to complete the questionnaire? *

Enter your answer

Instructions for completing the questionnaire were clear *

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

If in your opinion instructions were not clear, can you please state how they could be improved

Enter your answer

Questions were easy to understand *

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

If there were some questions you did not understand, can you please specify which questions and how they could be worded more clearly

Enter your answer

Were there any questions that you found difficult to answer because you either did not want to answer or did not know how to answer? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

If yes, please specify which questions and how the questions could be improved 

Enter your answer

Were there any questions that you felt uneasy to answer * 

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

If yes, can you please specify which questions and how they could be improved 

Enter your answer

In your opinion were there any other questions that could have been asked? * 

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't know

If yes, can you please specify what other questions you believe should have been asked 

Enter your answer

The order of the questions was good * 

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

If in your opinion the order of some questions could be improved, please specify which questions and in which order 

Enter your answer

Layout of the questionnaire was good * 

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

If in your opinion the layout could be improved, please state how it could be improved 

Enter your answer

Are there any other comments regarding the questionnaire you wish to make? 

Enter your answer

Appendix 3 Participant information sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

You are being invited to take part in research on minoritised ethnic students' perceptions of quality of their academic experience. Micaela Raffuzzi, PhD student at Sheffield Hallam University, is leading this research. Before you decide to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Title of Project

Minoritised ethnic students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience.

Legal basis for research for studies.

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of **public tasks that are in the public interest**. A full statement of your rights can be found at: www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research. However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by UREC with Converis number ER43256154. Further information at: www.shu.ac.uk/research/excellence/ethics-and-integrity

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this research is to obtain a better understanding of minoritised ethnic students' evaluation of the quality of their university experience in order to identify areas for improvement. More specifically, this research seeks to develop a measurement tool to evaluate minoritised ethnic students' perceptions of service quality in a higher education context.

Why have you been asked to take part?

You are invited to partake in this study because we are interested in minoritised ethnic students' views and experiences of their academic experience.

What will I be required to do?

You will be invited to take part in an individual semi-structured interview to discuss your academic experience and talk about the services and facilities provided by your higher education institution. Micaela Raffuzzi, PhD student, will lead the discussion and will guide you through the various aspects we want to explore. Ideally, we would like to audio record your responses (and will require your consent for this). There are no right or wrong answers – we are simply interested in your opinions. The interview will take around two hours and will be arranged at a convenient time and place for all the people involved. As a small token of thanks for taking part, you will be offered a £10 Amazon voucher as compensation for your time.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is entirely voluntary: – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet and complete the Participant Consent Form to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate. If you do decide to take part you are still free to withhold information i.e. not participate in particular discussions or withdraw from the interview at any time and without giving a reason. Please note down your participant number (which is on the Consent Form) and provide this to the lead researcher if you seek to

withdraw from the study at a later date. In the event that you withdraw from the study you are free to keep the £10 voucher that you were given for taking part.

Are there any possible risks or disadvantages in taking part?

We do not anticipate any disadvantage or risks to participants.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

By sharing your experiences with us, you will be helping us to better understand minoritised ethnic students' perceptions of their university experience, and provide us and higher education institutions, with valuable information regarding minoritised students' evaluation of the services provided, which will be used to identify key priorities for improvement to academic provision.

When will I have the opportunity to discuss my participation?

If you would like to discuss your participation before the interview, you can contact Micaela Raffuzzi by email (see contact details below). You will be provided with a Participant Debrief Sheet after the interview, which will include contact details if you wish to discuss your participation further.

Will anyone be able to connect me with what is recorded and reported?

Your participation in this interview will involve the collection of personal data via audio recording including your ethnicity, year of study, higher education institution. We will not ask for any sensitive data to be disclosed. If sensitive data is volunteered during the interview it will be removed/anonymised at transcript production stage. If you feel uncomfortable with anything that you have shared you will have the right to withdraw any specific pieces of information for up to two weeks after the interview. The interview notes will be disposed of as regular waste paper or digital deletion once transcripts have been made and checked.

Who will have access to it?

Access to the data will be restricted to staff working on the research project (you can find the names and contact details of the research team below). It is possible that, in the future, researchers working on related projects might ask to look at the transcripts from our interviews to help them with their own work. We would like your approval now that we can share the transcripts with them if this happens.

What will happen to the information when this study is over?

The information will be safely stored on a secure, password protected and encrypted Sheffield Hallam University shared drive. After the project is finished, information will be removed from the drive and deposited for ten years in the UK Data Archive.

How will you use what you find out?

The results of this study will be used to prepare a PhD thesis and may be presented at academic conferences and published in peer reviewed academic journals and reports. Quotes or key findings will always be anonymised in any formal outputs unless you have given your prior and explicit written permission to attribute them to you by name. Information may also be kept for future research.

How can I find out about the results of the study?

If you would like to find out about the results of this study, please contact Micaela Raffuzzi (see contact details below) who will send you the findings.

What do I do now?

If you are interested in participating in the research or if you have any questions, please contact Micaela Raffuzzi (see contact details below) for further information and to ask any questions you might have. You will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

Researcher/Research Team Details:

Micaela Raffuzzi

Email: Micaela.Raffuzzi@student.shu.ac.uk

Concerns and Complaints

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, details of who to contact are given below.

You should contact the Data Protection Officer if: • you have a query about how your data is used by the University • you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately) • you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data DPO@shu.ac.uk	You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (Dr XXXXXXXX) if: • you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated ethicssupport@shu.ac.uk
Postal address: Sheffield Hallam University, Howard Street, Sheffield S1 1WBT	

Appendix 4 Participant debrief sheet

Participant Debrief Form

Title of study: *Minoritised ethnic students' perceptions of the quality of their university experience.*

Thank you for taking the time to take part in this research project.

The aim of this research project is to obtain a better understanding of minoritised ethnic students' evaluation of the quality of their university experience in order to identify areas for improvement. More specifically, this research seeks to develop a measurement tool to evaluate minoritised ethnic students' perceptions of service quality in a higher education context.

If you would like any further information about this research project or if you would like to find out about the results of this study, please contact Micaela Raffuzzi (see contact details below).

If you wish to withdraw from this research or if you feel uncomfortable with anything that you have shared and wish to withdraw any specific pieces of information email Micaela Raffuzzi and provide your participant number (which is on the Consent Form) no later than two weeks after the interview.

If any of the issues in this study were distressing and you feel you need additional support, please contact one of the organisations below for help:

- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students' mental health support <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/student-life/for-bame-students/>
- The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network <https://www.baatn.org.uk/>
- Black minds matter UK <https://www.blackmindsmatteruk.com/>

Thank you again for your participation!

Researcher Details:

Researcher: Micaela Raffuzzi

Email: Micaela.Raffuzzi@student.shu.ac.uk

Appendix 5 Participant consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF RESEARCH STUDY:

Minoritised ethnic undergraduate students' perception of the quality of their academic experience

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

	YES	NO
1. I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.	☐	☐
2. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.	☐	☐
3. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet, without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.	☐	☐
4. I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
5. I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.	☐	☐
6. I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes.	☐	☐

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Participant's Name (Printed):

Participant Number: SSI

Contact details:

Researcher's Name (Printed): Micaela Raffuzzi

Researcher's Signature: *Micaela Raffuzzi*

Researcher's contact details:

Micaela Raffuzzi

Email: Micaela.Raffuzzi@student.shu.ac.uk

Please keep your copy of the consent form and the information sheet together.

Appendix 6 Primary data and literature sources for each of the scale items

Service quality attributes	Literature	Sample statements from semi-structured interviews
Belonging		
Diversity of staff and students		
1. My institution feels welcoming and inclusive	Morrison et al., 2023	<i>'it's very welcoming' (SSI 01); 'the university does [...] try its best to include everyone' (SSI 02); 'they're very big on equality, diversity and inclusion' (SSI 08); 'I think they tried to be inclusive' (SSI 10)</i>
2. I feel valued and respected by my institution	Goodenow, 1993; Smith et al., 2021; Strayhorn, 2018	<i>'people from all diverse backgrounds are treated with dignity and respect' (SSI 04)</i>
3. I feel university is for me and that I fit in	Keohane & Petrie, 2017	<i>'it [university] is for us, that we can go' (SSI 01); 'I feel myself like a part of university' (SSI 07); 'I can see myself there' (SSI 08)</i>
4. I feel isolated and alone	Alexander & Arday, 2015; Connor et al., 2004; Davies & Garrett, 2012	<i>'I've been to Uni previously [...] there was no one of my complexion [...] you just feel like you're a bit isolated and alone.' (SSI 06)</i>
5. Many academic staff at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	Davies et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2023	<i>'they've been varied, diverse as well in themselves ... We've got some Black, we've got Asian lecturers' (SSI 01); 'most of the staff are from [...] my ethnic background or even my race' (SSI 06); 'we have uhm teachers and staff, faculties from all around the globe.' (SSI 07); 'different backgrounds, yes, all of them' (SSI 09)</i>
6. Most academic staff at my institution are White	Davies et al., 2011; Morrison et al., 2023	<i>'it's zero people, is not one single lecturer that's not White, male or female, on our film course' (SSI 04); 'most of them are British' (SSI 05); 'the majority of the lecturers were definitely white British' (SSI 10); 'I've probably had a handful of staff that were from ethnic minorities.' (SSI 12)</i>
7. I have a good relationship with academic staff at my university	Cureton & Gravestock, 2019; Dost & Mazzoli Smith 2023; Russel & Jarvis, 2019; Johnson et al., 2007	<i>'My relationship with staff is very, very good.' (SSI 04); 'I have a good relationship with them.' (SSI 06); 'my relation with the academic staff is really nice' (SSI 07); 'a majority of the time I didn't have the closest relationships with my tutors and lecturers' (SSI 10)</i>
8. Many students at my institution are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds		<i>'Our course got really diverse. Like we got different people from different backgrounds on our course.' (SSI 02); 'It's a very diverse environment' (SSI 03); 'Students on my course, the majority of the</i>

		<i>students are from my background’ (SSI 06); ‘it’s mainly BAME students who attend the university. BAME mature students’ (SSI 08)</i>
9. Most students at my institution are White		<i>‘most of my course was just mainly, it was all just White, like English’ (SSI 01); ‘A lot of White British [...] I could probably count on my hands how many people were Black and Asian, wasn’t really many.’ (SSI 10); ‘my course is so White’ (SSI 12)</i>
Friends and relationships with peers		
10. I have many friends at university	Singh, 2011; Thomas, 2020	<i>‘I did make friends with quite a few of people’ (SSI 01); ‘I actually have a large group of [friends]’ (SSI 05); ‘I’ve made loads of friends’ (SSI 08); ‘I have like maybe a handful of friends from my course [...] I’ve actually found it really hard to build friendships.’ (SSI 12)</i>
11. My friends at university are mostly from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	Cureton & Gravestock’s (2019); Hammond et al., 2019; Housee (2011)	<i>‘... in my personal friendship group [...] We all grouped together that were ethnic minority, lower income.’ (SSI 10); ‘I haven’t had any friend in a class apart from all the Indians who are from like same ethnic background.’ (SSI 11)</i>
12. I have many friends at university from White backgrounds		<i>‘I made friends of everyone, Black, Asian, White ...’ (SSI 08); ‘... mixing with British people was like next to, like, conquering a mountain, climbing a Mount Everest’ (SSI 11)</i>
13. It is easy to make friends with students from different ethnic backgrounds		<i>‘... they [friends] were quite diverse’ (SSI 01); ‘within the university I have made friends with a diverse range of students’ (SSI 08)</i>
14. I have a good relationship with fellow White students	Pereda et al., 2007; Singh, 2011; Smith et al., 2021; Thomas, 2020	<i>‘... it was difficult to talk to them [British students] or even if you want to ask questions or talk to them, it was very difficult ...’ (SSI 11)</i>
15. Most of my fellow students value and respect my views and personal experiences	Bunce & King, 2019	<i>‘I joined volunteer groups [...] it just helped me to, I mean, see any people from diverse backgrounds, listening to their stories, tell them my stories.’ (SSI 05); ‘I also experienced like [students] brush you off.’ (SSI 06); ‘... they’re from an ethnic background and they’ve spoken about maybe feeling like they were racially profiled by police and unfairly stopped and searched [...] other students have kind of responded to that and [...] their thoughts have kind of invalidated the feelings of the other student.’ (SSI 12)</i>

16. My friends at university support me in my learning	Bradbury & Nieuwerburgh (2023); Kauser et al., 2021	<i>'... we'd always be there to help [...] support and guide and, you know, answer the questions if either the tutors weren't available ...' (SSI 02); 'friends which support you [...] and motivate you to learn and come to class.' (SSI 10)</i>
17. When I have a problem, my friends at university are always there for me	Cureton & Gravestock (2019)	<i>'we'd [friends] always be there to help you' (SSI 02); 'social friends which support you' (SSI 10);</i>
18. My friends at university are like family to me	Wilcox et al., 2005	<i>'we were more like a family' (SSI 02);</i>
19. I have experienced stereotyping, racism and/or microaggressions from fellow students	Bale et al., 2020; Jessop & Williams, 2009	<i>'I was in a group with White students and I told [them] that I won't be able to attend the Zoom, [...] because I've got a prayer time to attend and they seemed to have a problem with that.' (SSI 02); 'Of course I'm gonna get stereotyped by privileged kids that have never left their village in England and are White and are eighteen years old.' (SSI 04); 'few students [...] made certain comments that were not really nice' (SSI 06)</i>
20. Many of my fellow students have a good understanding of cultural differences	Bunce et al., 2021; Kauser et al., 2021	<i>'... being willing to expose some of your culture and you exposing them and them exposing you to some of their culture as well.' (SSI 01); '... that preconception of she's Black, she's single mother or even stuff to do with LGBTQ+ community [...] this course has really opened people's, students' eyes ...' (SSI 06)</i>
21. I feel comfortable to express my views and share my personal experiences in class	Bunce & King, 2019; Jessop & Williams, 2009	<i>'Yes, I did bring in my views and my opinions. Because I wanted others to know that what I feel and what I view may be different to what others feel.' (SSI 02); 'There were also things I didn't feel like I could talk about, though, cause it might have been seen to be a bit controversial or, you know, I didn't wanna make anyone feel uncomfortable.' (SSI 08)</i>
22. I tend to study and socialise with students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	Hammond et al., 2019; Housee (2011)	<i>'I haven't had any friend in a class apart from all the Indians who are from like same ethnic background.' (SSI 11)</i>
Academic engagement and social involvement		
23. There are many extracurricular activities available at my university, e.g., volunteering,	Abbas, 2020; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016	

joining student clubs and societies, being a student rep		
24. I take part in extracurricular activities		<i>'I did some volunteering.'</i> (SSI 01); <i>'I did the student ambassador role'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'I'm the student rep of my class'</i> (SSI 03); <i>'I run the race and cultural inclusion network at the student union'</i> (SSI 04); <i>'I joined different societies. [...] I joined volunteer groups as well.'</i> (SSI 05); <i>'I was the Student Rep for three years. [...] I've got some volunteering done.'</i> (SSI 08)
25. It is easy to take part in extracurricular activities	Pereda et al., 2007	<i>'I probably could have joined some more clubs if I'd known about them in my first year'</i> (SSI 01)
26. Taking part in extracurricular activities has social and cultural benefits	Thomas & Jones, 2017	<i>'the benefits of it [being involved] is far greater than not doing it'</i> (SSI 08)
27. I do not take part in extracurricular activities for cultural or religious reasons	Hammond et al., 2019; Ikhlaq et al., 2023; Islam et al., 2018	
28. I do not have time for extracurricular activities	Kauser et al., 2021	<i>'they don't have the time or you know they've got other responsibilities'</i> (SSI 08)
29. I prefer to be involved in ethnicity centred student societies and clubs	Bunce et al., 2021; Davies & Garrett, 2012; Davies et al., 2011	
30. I take part in discussions and other learning activities in class		<i>'I was very interactive in my lessons.'</i> (SSI 08)
31. Participating in discussion gives students from ethnic backgrounds a voice	Blake et al., 2022	<i>'I wanted others to know that what I feel and what I view may be different to what others feel.'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'as a minority ethnic student, [...] our education structures, our society, everything is built around the views of the hierarchy or the White man. So for me, it was important to have my voice in that setting'</i> (SSI 08)
32. I do not share my personal experiences in class because it draws too much attention to me	Hammond et al., 2019	<i>'when we were online, more students were asking questions [...] with their cameras turned off [...] being able to hide behind the screen'</i> (SSI 08); <i>'it draws so much attention and makes you stand out so much that it's easier not to'</i> (SSI 10);
33. I do not take part in discussions because of the behaviours of fellow White students, e.g.	Blake et al., 2022; Bunce & King, 2019; Hammond et al., 2019; Jessop & Williams, 2009	<i>'few students [...] made certain comments that were not really nice'</i> (SSI 06); <i>'impersonations of my accent. Umm. Yeah, just made some not feel as comfortable'</i> (SSI 10); <i>'their [non-ME</i>

making fun of my accent, making inappropriate comments or dismissing my experiences, views and feelings		<i>students] thoughts have kind of invalidated the feelings of the other student [...] discourage them from sharing'</i> (SSI 12)

Interaction quality		
Academic interaction quality		
Academic staff's knowledge, competence and expertise		
1. Academic staff are knowledgeable	Abbas, 2020; Firdaus, 2006a; Sultan & Wong, 2010; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a; Yusoff et al., 2015	<i>'my practise tutor is not able to sit with us in front of the editing software because he doesn't have any knowledge how to edit.'</i> (SSI 03)
2. Academic staff have expertise in their subject	Abbas, 2020; Firdaus, 2006a; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Yusoff et al., 2015	<i>'... I've learned so much from, like, the tutors themselves, like with their expertise in events ...'</i> (SSI 02)
3. Academic staff are engaging	Abbas, 2020	<i>'... they're passionate about it. And yeah, absolutely, absolutely they are, they are very, very good uhm academic staff.'</i> (SSI 03)
4. Academic staff have good teaching abilities	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Clemes et al., 2008; Latif et al., 2019; Sultan & Wong, 2010	<i>'... his teaching wasn't very good. So he'd just read off the board and he wouldn't like, you know, go into more depth at all [...] And he wouldn't give examples ...'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'There's rooms for improvement [...] how they teach the lectures itself, yeah, so, you know, it's teaching.'</i> (SSI 06); <i>'... other tutors were like, they will just come in the class and ask you to follow the lab sheet, which will, which was made 500 years ago [...] if you ask them any questions, they were not ready to answer ...'</i> (SSI 11)
5. Course materials are clear	Yusoff et al., 2015	
6. Lectures are well organised	Clemes et al., 2008; Latif et al., 2019; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996	<i>'There's rooms for improvement in terms of the scheduling and how they plan our lectures.'</i> (SSI 06)
7. Lectures are insightful	Sutherland et al., 2019	
8. Seminars/tutorials are invaluable	Sutherland et al., 2019	
9. Academic staff communicate concepts and theories well	Firdaus, 2006a; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996	<i>'... some tutors that I did not quite understand. [...] Yeah, I think they were not very good at explaining it.'</i> (SSI 05)
Academic staff's accessibility, availability and approachability		
10. Academic staff are approachable	Yusoff et al., 2015	<i>'I found the lecturers were always approachable'</i> (SSI 01); <i>'when you'd approach them in person and asked them they just brush</i>

		<i>you off, like they wouldn't, you know, actually reply to your question, they just ignore it.'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'they were always willing to help.'</i> (SSI 05)
11. It is easy to contact academic staff	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Clemes et al., 2008; Pereda et al., 2007	<i>'I've been able to reach them most times from the beginning of my studies.'</i> (SSI 05)
12. I feel comfortable to interact with academic staff	Clemes et al., 2008	<i>'I always interact with lecturers. Yeah, you're not gonna learn nothing if you don't ask questions.'</i> (SSI 04); <i>'Whenever I struggle with any topic or anything, I go after lecture, I go to my mentor, tutor and ask them [...] or sometime I make appointment with them to ask questions that I have.'</i> (SSI 07)
13. Academic staff always have time to speak to students	Firdaus, 2006a; Teeroovengadam et al., 2016a	<i>'lecturers had time for me and I could ask them questions'</i> (SSI 01)
14. Academic staff respond to emails in a timely manner	Blake et al., 2022	<i>'some tutors you'd e-mail them and then you won't get, you won't get a reply until like 2-3 weeks later.'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'Sometimes you'll send emails to them you might not hear from them'</i> (SSI 05)
Encouragement, support and care		
15. Academic staff support students with their learning	Abbas, 2020; Clemes et al., 2008; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007	<i>'... there were times when I needed a bit more support [...] and I was kind of left to myself [...] I kind of drove myself crazy trying to figure out answers to things sometimes.'</i> (SSI 08); <i>'So the lecturers, most of the lecturers, they're so helpful. Because me when I didn't know about writing with my own words I went to one of the lecturers who showed me how to do it'</i> (SSI 09)
16. Academic staff provide sufficient guidance for assignments		<i>'they should do more. You know, like examples between like the difference of an essay between a 2:2, a 2:1 and a first so, like students can see that all of the difference between each three categories and what they should be like looking out for.'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'you're asking for help, but then they're like, oh, maybe go to the lectures, go on the slides, everything is there.'</i> (SSI 06)
17. Academic staff care for their students' wellbeing	Clemes et al., 2008	<i>'1 to 1 Zoom calls [...] that time between you and your tutor, where you can ask and they can really, you know put their full attention on your work and your wellbeing and everything'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'we talk about very emotive topics and sometimes some lecturers will really say if anything we've talked about today has</i>

		<i>upset you or you want to talk about it, here is where you can go, I'm open for a chat, here are these numbers you can ring'</i> (SSI 12)
18. Academic staff give personal attention to students	Abbas, 2020; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Sultan & Wong, 2010; Teeroovengadam et al., 2016a	<i>'... in India, tutors are always behind you. [...] they're more interested in a student. [...] they keep a track of your progress. [...] And here tutors are not bothered like even if I'm studying it's OK, even if you're not studying, it's your problem.'</i> (SSI 11)

Fair and equal treatment		
19. Academic staff treat everyone fairly	Abbas, 2020	<i>'...it wasn't a very diverse course. But I don't feel that I was penalised for my diversity, and I was just treated the same way.'</i> (SSI 01); <i>'I feel like sometimes they did have favourites I would say. I felt that yeah, there was definitely some favour among students and disfavour among some students.'</i> (SSI 08); <i>'So tutors were quite fair in their teaching.'</i> (SSI 11)
20. Teaching is inclusive	NUS, 2011	<i>'I had quiet open minded tutors [...] They were both very open minded and I think they never question my, my background or my culture [...] they always value my knowledge about what I'm discussing ...'</i> (SSI 03)
21. Academic staff give all students equal attention, encouragement and support	NUS, 2011	<i>'Yes, they give the same attention to everybody.'</i> (SSI 09); <i>'I never felt that tutors are given preference or extra support to any British student or any student from some other region or any other place.'</i> (SSI 11)
Valuing different perspectives and allowing for personal experiences		
22. Academic staff allow students to express their own views and bring in their own personal experiences	Davies & Garrett, 2012	<i>'Social work is very diverse and you meet, you meet different people with different lived experiences, so due to that I feel like you can bring your own experience into it.'</i> (SSI 06); <i>'I can express my own, uh, experience, my own ideas and my own point of view.'</i> (SSI 07); <i>'you got that space to say your views and they will respect it [...] people would just, you know sharing honestly and it felt like a safe space to do that.'</i> (SSI 12)
23. Academic staff value different perspectives	Bunce & King, 2019	<i>'we was also encouraged to answer questions critically and think about things from different perspectives. Only in some lessons, though.'</i> (SSI 08)

24. All students are encouraged to participate in discussions	Abbas 2020; Clemes et al., 2008; Latif et al., 2019	<i>'I could speak during workshops.'</i> (SSI 05); <i>'always encouraged by tutors, and they always appreciated it when people spoke about [...] we talked about class and race and gender and really the personal issues that people can all relate to. So when people did engage, the discussions were interesting and it was a domino effect as well as when one person spoke up, other people felt as so they could as well.'</i> (SSI 10)

Curriculum		
25. Course content is relevant for my future career	Abbas 2020; Clemes et al., 2008; Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	
Diverse and inclusive		
26. Curriculum is inclusive	Arday et al., 2022; Bale et al., 2020; Bunce et al., 2021; NUS, 2011	<i>'... there's no enough education about minorities, there's no minorities, in this case, Black culture.'</i> (SSI 03)
27. Curriculum considers diverse backgrounds and views	Bale et al., 2020; NUS, 2011; Smith, 2017	<i>'... we've had a lot of diverse topics, we talked about discrimination, we've talked about race [...] it's made the course very diverse.'</i> (SSI 06); <i>'... a lot of these key theorists are White men who were very unethical in their practices and they still get talked about. So, I personally I don't think it's very diverse.'</i> (SSI 12)
28. Curriculum is very Euro- or America-centric	Bale et al., 2020; Jessop & Williams (2009)	<i>'... they [case studies] were UK and European based, yeah. They weren't really Asian based [...] they should have used examples worldwide. So where other people's cultures are incorporated.'</i> (SSI 02)
29. Course content incorporates ethnic diversity issues	Bunce & King, 2019; Davies & Garrett, 2012; Jessop & Williams, 2009; NUS, 2011	<i>'They should include more Black history [...] in every department of the university [...] because in every department there's a gap that is owned by the Black community.'</i> (SSI 03)
30. Reading lists predominately include authors from White backgrounds	Arday et al., 2022; Bale et al., 2020; de Sousa et al., 2021	<i>'most of the literature was not diverse. It's like all White'</i> (SSI 08); <i>'... almost all the books which were suggested in my course [...] were from White background, about 90% of them ...'</i> (SSI 11); <i>'... when I've had a module and the module leader is from an ethnic minority background that the reading list is so much more diverse,</i>

		<i>like there'll be Black authors and Italian authors and [...] all around the world, all these different perspectives and people who live different lives.'</i> (SSI 12)
Fair and balanced assessment, marking and feedback		
31. Assessments are appropriate and relevant	Yusoff et al., 2015	
32. Assignment topics are diverse and allow me to bring in my own personal experiences	Blake et al., 2022; de Sousa et al., 2021	<i>'We have a lot of, we've had a lot of diverse topics ...'</i> (SSI 06); <i>'... a lot of modules were we've actually done reflection and like talked about your personal experiences [...] and you're more than welcome to talk about specific, you know, parts of your background that have influenced that if you want to ...'</i> (SSI 12)
33. Students are given a choice of topics for their assignments		<i>'There was a choice and I think they always tried to put something in for minoritized students ...'</i> (SSI 08); <i>'We usually had a choice of 6 topics, that was whatever interested us the most.'</i> (SSI 10)
34. Assignment deadlines are planned well	Nicholson, 2022; Yusoff et al., 2015	<i>'we've just had Ramadan [...] and I feel like they should have considered that, you know when setting the deadlines and how many deadlines should be there in that month itself.'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'... deadline bunching [...] put a lot of pressure on students [...] all the deadlines were due at the same time, which meant I had to start all of them at the same time and work on all of them at the same time and juggle them all at the same time ...'</i> (SSI 08)
35. Assignments are marked fairly	Abbas, 2020; Bunce et al., 2021 ; NUS, 2011; Yusoff et al., 2015	<i>'So, I don't know, are they looking at my name and giving me the mark or they giving me the mark because of what I've done.'</i> (SSI 05); <i>'I think when it comes to ethnicity, there is, you can see, you can see that there's a difference there [...] there's definitely a different mark, yeah.'</i> (SSI 06); <i>'I thought that it was quite fair the way they marked us [...] and they treated us like equally.'</i> (SSI 11)
36. Marking procedures are transparent	Hammond et al., 2019; NUS, 2011	<i>'Yes, I think it is balanced because some of the assessments that we have is marked by two, it will be marked by our lecturer, it will be marked by someone else as well.'</i> (SSI 06)
37. Feedback is detailed	Pereda et al., 2007	<i>'feedback, it was very, it was very vague, like we didn't get much like in depth feedback like it just be one or two sentences'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'It's very blanket and generalized and I find that a lot of us get the exact same feedback word for word.'</i> (SSI 12)

38. Feedback is constructive and provides guidance on what I need to improve for future assignments	Abbas, 2020; Blake et al., 2022; Firdaus, 2006a; Hill et al., 2003; Housee, 2011; Yusoff et al., 2015	<i>'it wouldn't give us that much information that we'll what should we be looking out for to improve.'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'wasn't very helpful for future assessments'</i> (SSI 10); <i>'... don't really know what you've done well or how to get that grade again, or how to get better than it.'</i> (SSI 12)

Non-academic interaction quality		
Non-academic staff's competence, attitudes and behaviours		
1. Non-academic staff are approachable	Abbas, 2020; Holdford & Reinders, 2001	<i>'... there are people you can speak to ...'</i> (SSI 05); <i>'We can make appointment with library staff.'</i> (SSI 07)
2. Non-academic staff are always willing to help	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Clemes et al., 2008; Firdaus, 2006a; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	<i>'... they were really helpful ...'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'When we need any help, they are ready to help. They're always there for, to help us.'</i> (SSI 07); <i>'If you catch them like in person [...] they're more likely to help.'</i> (SSI 12)
3. Non-academic staff are competent	Abbas, 2020; Firdaus, 2006a; Sultan & Wong, 2013; Yusoff et al., 2015	<i>'... you get tossed from person to person because this person doesn't know how to help, but this service might. This service doesn't, this one might.'</i> (SSI12)
4. Non-academic staff communicate well	Abbas, 2020; Firdaus, 2006a	<i>'If you email them sometimes they're really funny, they don't reply for weeks or they're replying, be really blunt and unhelpful.'</i> (SSI 12)
Administrative processes and inclusive support systems		
5. Administrative and support systems are appropriate	Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	
6. Administrative and support processes are clear	Abbas, 2020; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	<i>'... some student don't know how to utilize the resource. At the very beginning when I came here when I arrived I was, I was completely clueless cause the education system over my place is different.'</i> (SSI 07)
7. Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are available	Abbas, 2020; Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Hill et al., 2003	<i>'... there is counselling, there's career planning ...'</i> (SSI 06); <i>'... career services [...] counselling service and other mental health support [...] Learning skills ...'</i> (SSI 10)
8. Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are easily accessible	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Douglas et al., 2015; Firdaus, 2006a	<i>'So no, everything is advertised, everything is promoted but no, is not nothing accessible.'</i> (SSI 03); <i>'...wellbeing service is quite hard to access ...'</i> (SSI 12)

9. My institution communicates clearly what support services are available and how to access these	Kauser et al., 2021	<i>'... more advertisement about the workshops that they [university] do put on [...] They have got things going on sometimes, but most students don't know about it.'</i> (SSI 08); <i>'I think advertising what you're doing, be very transparent about it. Please keep people up to date because they don't know and if there are, you know more avenues of support and things that you're developing tell people about it so they can access them if they need.'</i> (SSI 12)
10. Support services are appropriate for the needs of a diverse student population	Blake et al., 2022	<i>'... a lot of students have really complex mental health needs and it can be difficult for them to get the help that they need to do well.'</i> (SSI 12)
Individual academic support and pastoral care		
11. Personal tutors provide individual academic support to students	Lee et al., 2019	<i>'I got extra tuition cause I was diagnosed with dyslexia. [...] and I found that's so helpful, having that one-on-one ...'</i> (SSI 01); <i>'...we had academic mentors who are really good.'</i> (SSI 08)
12. Personal tutors provide pastoral care to students	Alves, 2019; Cureton & Gravestock, 2019; Purdy, 2013, as cited in Alves, 2019; Stevenson, 2009	<i>'... that pastoral care was really good cause you could go and talk to them and they would just checking on you, just to see generally how you were doing.'</i> (SSI 01)

Physical environment quality		
Teaching facilities quality		
1. Teaching facilities are fit for purpose	Abbas, 2020; Firdaus, 2006a; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	<i>'We had a class that for several months we didn't have the heat during the winter time.'</i> (SSI 03); <i>'...facilities are good.'</i> (SSI 04); <i>'They were good [...] you could hear the tutors well.'</i> (SSI 08); <i>'The lecture theatres are really good for the most part.'</i> (SSI 10)
2. Layout of teaching facilities is good	Clemes et al., 2008; Yusoff et al., 2015	<i>'Lecture halls, classrooms they're spacious.'</i> (SSI 06); <i>'They were good sizes.'</i> (SSI 08)
3. Teaching facilities are well equipped	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Clemes et al., 2008; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	<i>'... the classrooms, they are good, large screens.'</i> (SSI 05); <i>'We don't have properly studios, we don't have properly recording labs ...'</i> (SSI 03); <i>'All the classes had three monitors and the speakers.'</i> (SSI 11)
4. Equipment in the teaching facilities is state-of-the-art	Holdford & Reinders, 2001; Pereda et al., 2007	<i>'... we don't have properly uhm equipment for just to, we have the basic equipment'</i> (SSI 03)
Support facilities quality		

5. Library facilities are fit for purpose	Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	'... the library was very modern.' (SSI 02); '...I'll say the library during like this time now if I was supposed to library is gonna be packed.' (SSI 06); 'Ah, library is OK.' (SSI 09)
6. Library services are appropriate	Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	'We can make appointment with library staff. We can go meet them personally. [...] We have study room of the meeting room option. We can book a meeting room, rest room, silent room.' (SSI 07)
7. Layout of library facilities is good		'There was space.' (SSI 02); '... there's a very, very big space.' (SSI 09); ... 'it's so difficult to get a space in the library.' (SSI 10)
8. Library facilities are easily accessible	Hill et al., 2003; Ibrahim et al., 2012	'... in terms of the library, like opening 24 hours or opening till 11 at night, it's very helpful.' (SSI 06); '24/7 library.' (SSI 11)
9. Library services are easily accessible	Hill et al., 2003	'...they don't know how to utilize the resource cause nobody is there to take the initiative and teach us about the resources.' (SSI 07); 'To get the books is very easy.' (SSI 09); '...at the bottom on the, on the ground floor when you enter and you basically go in search a topic or search a specific book and it tells you the exact location in the library.' (SSI 10)
10. Library resources are appropriate	Abbas, 2020; Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012	'... the access to certain books is just getting more and more restricted each year like they'll be textbooks that you could get that now they don't pay for anymore, so they don't have.' (SSI 12)
11. There are sufficient library resources	Ibrahim et al., 2012; Pereda et al., 2007	'The library has loads of resources just for you to go in there and get it.' (SSI 05); 'Oh, sometimes some books like, I like reading physical hard copy of book, so sometimes those, the books are not available on time.' (SSI 07)
12. IT facilities are easily accessible		
13. IT facilities are fit for purpose	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	
14. Layout of IT facilities is good		
15. IT services are easily accessible	Clemes et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2003	'... access to electronic devices. Yes, they were accessible, it was not very difficult, but it was only for a certain period of time.' (SSI 11)
16. IT services are appropriate	Hill et al., 2003	'... for my project, obviously I need a lots of like other electronic devices [...] but we were not able to carry them to home. Like it was only for a specific period of time like from 12:00 to 4:00. That was a problem for me ...' (SSI 11)

17. There are sufficient IT resources	Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Pereda et al., 2007	
18. IT equipment is state-of-the-art	Clemes et al., 2008; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Pereda et al., 2007	
19. Food service facilities are appropriate	Abbas, 2020; Annamdevula & Bellamkonda, 2012; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	<i>'there's an issue there like in terms of like kitchen facilities [...] Like so microwave for instance, we got 2 microwaves in the whole building, you know, in the whole like lunch area. So when everyone's [...] queueing up to use the microwave...' (SSI 06)</i> <i>'Canteen's good.'</i> (SSI 10)
20. Layout of food facilities is good		<i>'... there's not enough space even for having a proper lunch, to sit.'</i> (SSI 03); <i>'... the way that the dining area is set out, it kind of just spills all out to the entrance.'</i> (SSI 12)
21. Food provision is good		<i>'... the food that's provided on campus, yeah, I feel like it's pricey'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'... food is a bit expensive, that's why most of us have to go outside and buy cheaper food.'</i> (SSI 07); <i>'... food is a bit expensive, that's why most of us have to go outside and buy cheaper food.'</i> (SSI 09); <i>'Food quality was I would say it was like OK-ish.'</i> (SSI 11)
22. Food services cater to a variety of dietary needs (e.g., halal, kosher, vegetarian, vegan)		<i>'... there's not much options available like in terms of like halal and vegetarian and stuff like that.'</i> (SSI 02); <i>'...the food is not diverse.'</i> (SSI 05); <i>'... they have uh selection of food, I think one of the stands is vegan another stand is like Thai Food, Indian Food, Ethiopian foods.'</i> (SSI 10)

Transformative quality		
Enhancement		
1. Students acquire relevant knowledge	Clemes et al., 2008; Gill et al., 2022; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	<i>'I was really, really interested in sociology and I knew that eventually I would pursue a career in that field. Umm. And I wanted to learn more...' (SSI 10); '... you gain a lot of knowledge through doing a Master's degree.'</i> (SSI 11)
2. Students' abilities and skills are improved	Clemes et al., 2008; Duque, 2014; Gill et al., 2022; Latif et al., 2019; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	<i>'... to hone my skills [...] learn the technical side of stuff...' (SSI 03); 'I'm still getting more skill, personal development ...'</i> (SSI 09)

3. Students' problem-solving skills are developed	Abbas 2020; Clemes et al., 2008; Gill et al., 2022; Mahapatra & Khan, 2007; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	
4. Students' self-confidence is increased	Abbas, 2020; Gill et al., 2022; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	
5. Students' self-awareness is improved	Duque, 2014; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	'... you can find yourself [...] it's good to go [...] find out who you are.' (SSI 01)
6. Students are enabled to overcome their prejudices	Abbas, 2020; Clemes et al., 2008; Gill et al., 2022; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	'...because at the type of course we're doing some people, that preconception of she's Black, she's single mother or even stuff to do with LGBTQ+ community [...] I feel like this course has really opened people's, students' eyes as well.' (SSI 06)
7. Students' understanding of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds is improved	Abbas, 2020; Clemes et al., 2008; Gill et al., 2022; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	
8. Students are enabled to become more emotionally stable, e.g., remain calm, relaxed, not anxious or easily upset	Abbas, 2020; Gill et al., 2022; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	
9. Students' critical thinking is developed	Abbas, 2020; Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	'... we was also encouraged to answer questions critically and think about things from different perspectives. Only in some lessons, though.' (SSI 08)
Empowerment		
10. Students are enabled to become independent learners	Clemes et al., 2008; Harvey & Knight, 1996	'... I liked the whole idea of, you know, independent learning.' (SSI 02)
11. Students are given control over their own learning	Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Teeroovengadum et al., 2016a	
12. Students are allowed to pursue their ideas	Bunce et al., 2021; Bunce & King, 2019	'I can express my own, uh, experience, my own ideas and my own point of view.' (SSI 07)
13. Students are allowed to bring in their own views and personal experiences	Blake et al., 2022; Bunce et al., 2021; Bunce & King, 2019; de Sousa et al., 2021	'Yes, I did bring in my views and my opinions.' (SSI 02); '...I always try to involve my background and my uhm, and my personality in what I'm doing ...' (SSI 03);
14. Students are encouraged to actively participate in their learning	Gill et al., 2022; Harvey & Knight, 1996	

15. Students can choose assessment topics that are personally relevant to them	Blake et al., 2022; de Sousa et al., 2021	<i>'... a lot of modules were we've actually done reflection and like talked about your personal experiences [...] and you're more than welcome to talk about specific, you know, parts of your background that have influenced that if you want to ...'</i> (SSI 12)
16. Students are given a choice of assessment methods	Blake et al., 2022; Kauser et al., 2021	<i>'... we were given the option instead of doing the 7000 word dissertation instead to do a 22 minute video dissertation.'</i> (SSI 04); <i>'... there was a real variety of different assessments. So if you uhm, you don't do so well in exams, you can pick just coursework [...] the way that they did presentations was really good. Like you could just do it with one member of staff [...] you could be recording it and do a screencast if that's how you're comfortable.'</i> (SSI 12)

Appendix 7 Draft MESQHE scale

DRAFT MESQHE SCALE

Belonging	
Diversity of staff and students	1. Many academic staff at my institution are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds
	2. Academic staff at my institution are predominately White
	3. Many students at my institution are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds
	4. My institution feels welcoming and inclusive
	5. Most students at my institution are White
	6. I have a good relationship with academic staff
	7. I feel university is for me and that I fit in
	8. I feel included, valued and respected by my institution
Friends and relationships with peers	9. I have many friends from White backgrounds
	10. My fellow students value and respect my views and personal experiences
	11. I have a good relationship with fellow White students
	12. My friends support me in my learning
	13. When I have a problem my friends are always there for me
	14. My friends are like family to me
	15. My friends are mostly from minoritised ethnic backgrounds
	16. I have experienced stereotyping, racism and microaggressions from fellow students
	17. My fellow students have a good understanding of cultural differences
	18. I feel comfortable to express my views and share my personal experiences in class
Academic engagement and social involvement	19. I take part in extracurricular activities, e.g., being a student rep, SU officer, or volunteer in student groups or societies
	20. I am involved in student clubs and societies
	21. I do not have time for extracurricular activities
	22. I feel isolated and alone
	23. I take part in discussions and other learning activities in class

Interaction quality	
Academic staffs' knowledge, competence and expertise	24. Academic staff are knowledgeable and have expertise in their subject
	25. Academic staff are enthusiastic and engaging
	26. Academic staff have good teaching abilities
	27. Course materials are clear
	28. Lectures/seminars/workshops are well structured and organised
	29. Instructions are clear
Academic staffs' accessibility, availability and approachability	30. Academic staff are approachable
	31. It is easy to contact academic staff
	32. I feel comfortable to interact with academic staff
	33. Academic staff always have time to speak to or meet with students
	34. Academic staff respond to emails in a timely manner
Encouragement, support and care	35. Academic staff care about students' individual needs and support them with their learning
	36. Academic staff provide sufficient guidance for assignments
	37. Academic staff are supportive and care for their students' wellbeing
	38. Academic staff give personal attention to students
Fair and equal treatment	39. Academic staff treat everyone equally and fairly
	40. Teaching is inclusive
	41. Academic staff give all students equal attention and support
Valuing different perspectives and allowing for personal experiences	42. Academic staff allow students to express their own views and bring in their own personal experiences
	43. Academic staff value different perspectives
	44. All students are encouraged to participate in discussions
Diverse and inclusive curriculum	45. Course content is appropriate and relevant for my future career
	46. Curriculum is inclusive
	47. Curriculum considers diverse backgrounds and views
	48. Curriculum is very Euro- or America-centric
	49. Course content incorporates ethnic diversity issues
	50. Reading lists predominately include authors from White backgrounds
Fair and balanced assessment, marking and feedback	51. Assessments are appropriate and relevant
	52. Assignment topics are diverse and allow me to bring in my own personal experiences
	53. I have a choice of topics for my assignments
	54. Assignment deadlines are planned well
	55. Assignments are marked fairly and equally

	56. Marking procedures are transparent
	57. Feedback is specific and detailed
	58. Feedback is constructive and provides guidance on what I need to improve for future assignments
Non-academic staffs' competence, attitudes and behaviours	59. Non-academic staff are approachable
	60. Non-academic staff are supportive and willing to help
	61. Non-academic staff are competent
Administrative processes and inclusive support systems	62. Administrative and support processes and systems are clear
	63. Non-academic staff communicate well
	64. Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are available
	65. Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are easily accessible
	66. My institution communicates clearly what support services are available and how to access these
	67. Support services are appropriate for the needs of a diverse student population
Individual academic support and pastoral care	68. Personal tutors provide individual academic support to students
	69. Personal tutors provide personal support to students, e.g., pastoral care
Physical environment quality	
Teaching facilities quality	70. Teaching facilities are modern
	71. Teaching facilities are visually appealing
	72. Layout and space of teaching facilities is good
	73. Teaching facilities are well equipped
	74. Equipment in the teaching facilities is state-of-the-art
Support facilities quality	75. Library facilities and services are appropriate
	76. Library facilities are modern and visually appealing
	77. Layout and space of library facilities is good
	78. Library facilities and services are easily accessible
	79. Library resources are appropriate
	80. There are sufficient library resources
	81. IT facilities and services are appropriate
	82. Layout and space of IT facilities is good
	83. IT facilities are modern and visually appealing
	84. IT facilities are easily accessible
	85. There are sufficient IT resources
	86. IT equipment is state-of-the-art
	87. Food service facilities are modern and visually appealing

	88. Layout and space of food facilities is good
	89. Food provision is good
	90. Food services cater to a variety of dietary needs (e.g. halal, kosher, vegetarian, vegan)
Transformative quality	
Enhancement	91. Students' knowledge, abilities and skills are improved
	92. Students acquire relevant knowledge and skills to perform well in their future job
	93. Students' problem-solving skills are being developed
	94. Students' self-confidence is increased
	95. Students' self-awareness is improved
	96. Students are enabled to overcome their prejudices and improve their understanding of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds
	97. Students are enabled to become more emotionally stable, e.g. remain calm, relaxed, not anxious or easily upset
Empowerment	98. Students' critical thinking is developed
	99. Students are enabled to become independent learners
	100. Students are given control over their own learning
	101. Students are allowed to pursue ideas and bring in their own views and personal experiences
	102. Students are encouraged to actively participate in their learning
	103. Students are able to choose project and assessment topics that are personally relevant to them
	104. Students are given a choice of assessments

Appendix 8 Draft MESQHE questionnaire after expert validation

MINORITISED ETHNIC STUDENT SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION (MESQHE) SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research on the perceived quality of minoritised ethnic students' higher education experience. This will provide valuable information regarding minoritised students' evaluations of the services provided and will be used to identify key priorities for improvements in academic provision.

To participate in this survey, you must be a student from a minoritised ethnic background studying at a higher education institution in England.

All information you provide is completely anonymous. Participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time by closing your web browser and your data will be deleted. Likewise, if there are any questions you do not wish to answer, just leave them blank. However, once you have pressed the 'submit' button at the end of the questionnaire, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study or adjust your answers because your data will be collected anonymously and therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

The questionnaire should take approx. 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire comprises three parts. The first section relates to your perceptions of the service quality provided by your higher education institution. The second part of the questionnaire relates to your overall opinion regarding your university experience. The third part contains some demographic questions.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important you understand why the survey is being carried out and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the participant information via this link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UU5EazyOMUuj1GOgtPzDtnYe_zfS1Sg/edit?usp=sharing&oid=114207849925298744063&rtpof=true&sd=true

If anything about taking part is not clear, or you would like more information, please contact Micaela Raffuzzi - Email: Micaela.Raffuzzi@student.shu.ac.uk

Informed consent

By selecting 'YES' below, you consent to participate in this study and confirm that you have read the participant information and understand that your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary, that you are free to withdraw at any time, but that once you have pressed 'submit', you cannot go back into the survey to adjust any answers, nor can you withdraw your answers because they are being submitted anonymously and therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

- ☐ Yes, I consent to take part in the survey
- ☐ No, I do not want to take part in the survey

Section 1: Your perceptions of the quality of your sense of belonging to your university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your sense of belonging to your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Belonging								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Diversity of staff and students	1. My institution feels welcoming and inclusive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	2. I feel valued and respected by my institution	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	3. I feel university is for me and that I fit in	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	4. I feel isolated and alone	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	5. Many academic staff at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	6. Most academic staff at my institution are White	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	7. I have a good relationship with academic staff at my university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8. Many students at my institution are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	9. Most students at my institution are White	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Friends and relationships with peers	10. I have many friends at university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	11. Many of my friends at my university are from White backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	12. Most of my fellow students value and respect my views and personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	13. I have a good relationship with fellow White students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	14. It is easy to make friends with students from different ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	15. My friends are mostly from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	16. My friends support me in my learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	17. When I have a problem, my friends are always there for me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	18. My friends are like family to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	19. I have experienced stereotyping, racism and microaggressions from fellow students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	20. Many of my fellow students have a good understanding of cultural differences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	21. I feel comfortable to express my views and share my personal experiences in class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	22. I tend to study and socialise with students from ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic engagement and social involvement	23. There are many extracurricular activities available at my university, e.g., volunteering, being involved in student clubs and societies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	24. It is easy to take part in extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	25. I take part in extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	26. Taking part in extracurricular activities has social and cultural benefits	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	27. I do not take part in extracurricular activities for cultural or religious reasons	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	28. I do not have time for extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	29. I prefer to be involved in ethnicity centred student societies and clubs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	30. I take part in discussions and other learning activities in class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	31. Participating in discussion gives students from ethnic backgrounds a voice	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	32. I do not share my personal experiences in class because it draws too much attention to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	33. I do not take part in discussions because of the behaviours of fellow White students, e.g.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	making fun of my accent, making inappropriate comments or dismissing my experiences, views and feelings							

Section 2: Your perceptions of the quality of academic interaction at your university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic interaction at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Academic Interaction quality								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staffs' knowledge, competence and expertise	1. Academic staff are knowledgeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	2. Academic staff have expertise in their subject	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	3. Academic staff are engaging	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	4. Academic staff have good teaching abilities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	5. Course materials are clear	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	6. Lectures are well organised	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	7. Lectures are insightful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8. Seminars/tutorials are invaluable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	9. Academic staff give clear instructions about learning activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staffs' accessibility, availability and approachability	10. Academic staff are approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	11. It is easy to contact academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	12. I feel comfortable to interact with academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	13. Academic staff always have time to speak to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	14. Academic staff respond to emails in a timely manner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Encouragement, support and care	15. Academic staff support students with their learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	16. Academic staff provide sufficient guidance for assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	17. Academic staff care for their students' wellbeing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	18. Academic staff give personal attention to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fair and equal treatment	19. Academic staff treat everyone fairly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	20. Teaching is inclusive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	21. Academic staff give all students equal attention, encouragement and support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Valuing different perspectives and allowing for personal experiences	22. Academic staff allow students to express their own views and bring in their own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	23. Academic staff value different perspectives	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	24. All students are encouraged to participate in discussions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Curriculum	25. Course content is relevant for my future career	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Diverse and inclusive	26. Curriculum is inclusive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	27. Curriculum considers diverse backgrounds and views	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	28. Curriculum is very Euro- or America-centric	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	29. Course content incorporates ethnic diversity issues	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	30. Reading lists predominately include authors from White backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fair and balanced assessment, marking and feedback	31. Assessments are appropriate and relevant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	32. Assignment topics are diverse and allow me to bring in my own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	33. Students are given a choice of topics for their assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	34. Assignment deadlines are planned well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	35. Assignments are marked fairly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	36. Marking procedures are transparent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	37. Feedback is detailed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	38. Feedback is constructive and provides guidance on what I need to improve for future assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 3: Your perceptions of the quality of non-academic interaction at your university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of non-academic interaction at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Non-academic interaction quality								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Non-academic staffs' competence, attitudes and behaviours	1. Non-academic staff are approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	2. Non-academic staff are always willing to help	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	3. Non-academic staff are competent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	4. Non-academic staff communicate well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Administrative processes and inclusive support systems	5. Administrative and support systems are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	6. Administrative and support processes are clear	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	7. Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are available	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8. Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	9. My institution communicates clearly what support services are available and how to access these	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	10. Support services are appropriate for the needs of a diverse student population	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Individual academic support and pastoral care	11. Personal tutors provide individual academic support to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	12. Personal tutors provide pastoral care to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 4: Your perceptions of the quality of physical facilities and resources at your university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of the physical facilities and resources at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Physical environment quality								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Teaching facilities quality	1. Teaching facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	2. Layout of teaching facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	3. Teaching facilities are well equipped	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	4. Equipment in the teaching facilities is state-of-the-art	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support facilities quality	5. Library facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	6. Library services are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	7. Layout of library facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	8. Library facilities are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	9. Library services are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	10. Library resources are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	11. There are sufficient library resources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	12. IT facilities are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	13. IT facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	14. Layout of IT facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	15. IT services are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	16. IT services are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	17. There are sufficient IT resources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	18. IT equipment is state-of-the-art	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	19. Food service facilities are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	20. Layout of food facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	21. Food provision is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	22. Food services cater to a variety of dietary needs (e.g., halal, kosher, vegetarian, vegan)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 5: Your perceptions of the quality of students' personal development and transformation

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of students' personal development.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Transformative quality								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Enhancement	1. Students' knowledge, abilities and skills are improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	2. Students acquire relevant knowledge and skills	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	3. Students' problem-solving skills are being developed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	4. Students' self-confidence is increased	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	5. Students' self-awareness is improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	6. Students are enabled to overcome their prejudices	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	7. Students' understanding of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds is improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	8. Students are enabled to become more emotionally stable, e.g., remain calm, relaxed, not anxious or easily upset	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	9. Students' critical thinking is developed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Empowerment	10. Students are enabled to become independent learners	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	11. Students are given control over their own learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	12. Students are allowed to pursue ideas	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	13. Students are allowed to bring in their own ideas or personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	14. Students are encouraged to actively participate in their learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	15. Students can choose assessment topics that are personally relevant to them	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	16. Students are given a choice of assessment methods	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 6: Your overall opinion about your university experience

For each question below select the option that most closely reflects your opinion.

Q1: Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience at university?

Extremely dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Satisfied	Extremely satisfied
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q2: Overall, my university experience is better than expected.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q3: If I could, I would choose to come to this university again.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q4: If I could start over again, I would choose to go to a different university.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q5: I would recommend university to my family and friends

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q6: I would recommend this university to my family and friends

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q7: I would stay at, or return to, this university to do a post-graduate degree

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q8: I would change to a different university to do a post-graduate degree

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q9: I do not want to do a post-graduate degree

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q10: What do you like most about studying at your university?

Q11: What do you like least about studying at your university?

Q12: What would you suggest your university could do to improve the university experience for minoritised ethnic students?

Section 7: About you

Your answers will be used for purely statistical purposes and your anonymity will be maintained. Please answer the question by selecting the appropriate option.

Gender:

- Male ☐
- Female ☐
- Non-binary ☐
- Prefer not to say ☐

Age:

_____ years

- Prefer not to say ☐

Ethnicity:

Asian or Asian British

- Indian ☐
- Pakistani ☐
- Bangladeshi ☐
- Chinese ☐
- Any other Asian background ☐

Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

- Caribbean ☐
- African ☐
- Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background ☐

Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

- White and Black Caribbean ☐
- White and Black African ☐
- White and Asian ☐
- Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background ☐

Your domicile

Home ☐

International ☐

Level of study:

Undergraduate ☐

Postgraduate ☐

Year of study:

Year 1 ☐

Year 2 ☐

Year 3 ☐

Year 4 ☐

Mode of study:

Full time ☐

Part time ☐

What course do you study?

Name of your higher education institution:

By clicking on the 'Submit' button below, you are consenting to participate in this study and thus, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study or adjust your answers because your data will be collected anonymously and, therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

[Submit](#)

Appendix 9 Draft MESQHE questionnaire after the protocol analysis

MINORITISED ETHNIC STUDENT SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION (MESQHE) SURVEY - Protocol Analysis

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research on the perceived quality of minoritised ethnic students' higher education experience. This will provide valuable information regarding minoritised students' evaluations of the services provided and will be used to identify key priorities for improvements in academic provision.

To participate in this survey, you must be a student from a minoritised ethnic background studying at a higher education institution in England.

All information you provide is completely anonymous. Participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time by closing your web browser and your data will be deleted. Likewise, if there are any questions you do not wish to answer, just leave them blank. However, once you have pressed the 'submit' button at the end of the questionnaire, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study or adjust your answers because your data will be collected anonymously and therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

The questionnaire should take approx. 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire comprises three parts. The first section relates to your perceptions of the service quality provided by your higher education institution. The second part of the questionnaire relates to your overall opinion regarding your university experience. The third part contains some demographic questions.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important you understand why the survey is being carried out and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the participant information via this link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UU5EazyOMUuj1GOgtPzDtnYe_zfS1Sg/edit?usp=sharing&oid=114207849925298744063&rtpof=true&sd=true

If anything about taking part is not clear, or you would like more information, please contact Micaela Raffuzzi - Email: Micaela.Raffuzzi@student.shu.ac.uk

Informed consent

By selecting 'YES' below, you consent to participate in this study and confirm that you have read the participant information and understand that your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary, that you are free to withdraw at any time, but that once you have pressed 'submit', you cannot go back into the survey to adjust any answers, nor can you withdraw your answers because they are being submitted anonymously and therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

- ☐ Yes, I consent to take part in the survey
- ☐ No, I do not want to take part in the survey

Section 1: Your perceptions of your sense of belonging to your university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your sense of belonging to your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Belonging								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Diversity of staff and students	34. My institution feels welcoming and inclusive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	35. I feel valued and respected by my institution	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	36. I feel university is for me and that I fit in	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	37. I feel isolated and alone	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	38. Many academic staff at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	39. Most academic staff at my university are White	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	40. I have a good relationship with academic staff at my university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	41. Many students at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	42. Most students at my university are White							
	43. Many students on my course are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Friends and relationships with peers	44. I have many friends at university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	45. My friends at university are mostly from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	46. I have many friends at university from White backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	47. It is easy to make friends with students from different ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	48. I have a good relationship with fellow White students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	49. Most of my fellow students value and respect my views and personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	50. My friends at university support me in my learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	51. When I have a problem, my friends at university are always there for me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	52. My friends at university are like family to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	53. I have experienced stereotyping, racism and/or microaggressions from fellow students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	54. Many of my fellow students have a good understanding of cultural differences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	55. I feel comfortable to express my views and share my personal experiences in class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	56. I tend to study and socialise with students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic engagement and social involvement	57. There are many extracurricular activities available at my university, e.g., volunteering, being involved in student clubs and societies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	58. I take part in extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	59. It is easy to take part in extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	60. Taking part in extracurricular activities has social and cultural benefits	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	61. I do not take part in extracurricular activities for cultural or religious reasons	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	62. I do not have time for extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	63. I prefer to be involved in ethnicity centred student societies and clubs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	64. I take part in discussions and other learning activities in class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	65. Participating in discussion gives students from ethnic backgrounds a voice	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	66. I do not share my personal experiences in class because it draws too much attention to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	67. I do not take part in discussions because of the behaviours of fellow White students, e.g. making fun of my accent, making inappropriate comments or dismissing my experiences, views and feelings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 2: Your perceptions of the quality of academic interaction at your university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic interaction at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Academic Interaction quality								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staffs' knowledge, competence and expertise	39. Academic staff are knowledgeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	40. Academic staff have expertise in their subject	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	41. Academic staff are engaging	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	42. Academic staff have good teaching abilities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	43. Course materials are clear	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	44. Lectures are well organised	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	45. Lectures are insightful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	46. Seminars/tutorials are invaluable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staffs' accessibility,	47. Academic staff communicate concepts and theories well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	48. Academic staff are approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	49. It is easy to contact academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

availability and approachability	50. I feel comfortable to interact with academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	51. Academic staff always have time to speak to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	52. Academic staff respond to emails in a timely manner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Encouragement, support and care	53. Academic staff support students with their learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	54. Academic staff provide sufficient guidance for assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	55. Academic staff care for their students' wellbeing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	56. Academic staff give personal attention to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Fair and equal treatment	57. Academic staff treat everyone fairly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	58. Teaching is inclusive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	59. Academic staff give all students equal attention, encouragement and support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Valuing different perspectives and allowing for personal experiences	60. Academic staff allow students to express their own views and bring in their own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	61. Academic staff value different perspectives	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	62. All students are encouraged to participate in discussions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Curriculum	63. Course content is relevant for my future career	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Diverse and inclusive	64. Curriculum considers diverse backgrounds and views	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	65. Curriculum is inclusive, i.e., it reflects minoritised ethnic students' histories, worldviews or lived experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	66. Course content incorporates issues of diversity and inclusion faced by minoritised ethnic students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Fair and balanced assessment, marking and feedback	67. Curriculum is very Euro- or America-centric	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	68. Reading lists predominately include authors from White backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	69. Assessments are appropriate and relevant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	70. Assignment topics are diverse and allow me to bring in my own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	71. Students are given a choice of topics for their assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	72. Assignment deadlines are planned well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	73. Assignments are marked fairly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	74. Marking procedures are transparent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	75. Feedback is detailed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	76. Feedback is constructive and provides guidance on what I need to improve for future assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 3: Your perceptions of the quality of non-academic interaction at your university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of non-academic interaction at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Non-academic interaction quality								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Non-academic staffs' competence, attitudes and behaviours	13. Non-academic staff (i.e., administrative and support staff) are approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	14. Non-academic staff are always willing to help	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	15. Non-academic staff are competent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	16. Non-academic staff communicate well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Administrative processes and inclusive support systems	17. Administrative and support systems are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	18. Administrative and support processes are clear	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	19. Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are available	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	20. Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	21. My institution communicates clearly what support services are available and how to access these	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	22. Support services are appropriate for the needs of a diverse student population	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Individual academic support and pastoral care	23. Personal tutors provide individual academic support to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	24. Personal tutors provide pastoral care to students, such as looking after students' overall wellbeing and providing social and emotional support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 4: Your perceptions of the quality of physical facilities and resources at your university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of the physical facilities and resources at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Physical environment quality								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
	23. Teaching facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	24. Layout of teaching facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Teaching facilities quality	25. Teaching facilities are well equipped	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	26. Equipment in the teaching facilities is state-of-the-art	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support facilities quality	27. Library facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	28. Library services are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	29. Layout of library facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	30. Library facilities are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	31. Library services are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	32. Library resources are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	33. There are sufficient library resources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	34. IT facilities are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	35. IT facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	36. Layout of IT facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	37. IT services are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	38. IT services are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	39. There are sufficient IT resources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	40. IT equipment is state-of-the-art	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	41. Food service facilities are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	42. Layout of food facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	43. Quality of food is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	44. Variety of food is good							
	45. Food services cater to a variety of dietary needs (e.g., halal, kosher, vegetarian, vegan)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	46. Price of food is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 5: Your perceptions of the quality of students' personal development and transformation

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of students' personal development.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Transformative quality								
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Enhancement	17. Students' knowledge, abilities and skills are improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	18. Students acquire relevant knowledge and skills	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	19. Students' problem-solving skills are being developed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	20. Students' self-confidence is increased	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	21. Students' self-awareness is improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	22. Students are enabled to overcome their prejudices	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	23. Students' understanding of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds is improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	24. Students are enabled to become more emotionally stable, e.g., remain calm, relaxed, not anxious or easily upset	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	25. Students' critical thinking is developed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Empowerment	26. Students are enabled to become independent learners	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	27. Students are given control over their own learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	28. Students are allowed to pursue ideas	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	29. Students are allowed to bring in their own ideas or personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	30. Students are encouraged to actively participate in their learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	31. Students can choose assessment topics that are personally relevant to them	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	32. Students are given a choice of assessment methods	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 6: Your overall opinion about your university experience

For each question below select the option that most closely reflects your opinion.

Q1: Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience at university?

Extremely dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Satisfied	Extremely satisfied
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q2: Overall, my university experience is better than expected.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q3: If I could, I would choose to come to this university again.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q4: If I could start over again, I would choose to go to a different university.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q5: I would recommend university to my family and friends

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q6: I would recommend [this university](#) to my family and friends

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q7: I would stay at, or return to, this university to do a post-graduate degree

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q8: I would change to a different university to do a post-graduate degree

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q9: I do not want to do a post-graduate degree

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q10: What do you like most about studying at your university?

Q11: What do you like least about studying at your university?

Q12: What would you suggest your university could do to improve the university experience for minoritised ethnic students?

Section 7: About you

Your answers will be used for purely statistical purposes and your anonymity will be maintained. Please answer the question by selecting the appropriate option.

Gender:

- Male ☐
- Female ☐
- Non-binary ☐
- Prefer not to say ☐

Age:

_____ years

- Prefer not to say ☐

Ethnicity:

Asian or Asian British

- Indian ☐
- Pakistani ☐
- Bangladeshi ☐
- Chinese ☐
- Any other Asian background ☐

Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

- Caribbean ☐
- African ☐
- Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background ☐

Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

- White and Black Caribbean ☐
- White and Black African ☐
- White and Asian ☐
- Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background ☐

Your domicile

Home ☐
International ☐

Level of study:

Undergraduate ☐
Postgraduate ☐

Year of study:

Year 1 ☐
Year 2 ☐
Year 3 ☐
Year 4 ☐

Mode of study:

Full time ☐
Part time ☐

What course do you study?

Name of your higher education institution:

By clicking on the 'Submit' button below, you are consenting to participate in this study and thus, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study or adjust your answers because your data will be collected anonymously and, therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

[Submit](#)

Appendix 10 Draft MESQHE questionnaire after the pilot study

MINORITISED ETHNIC STUDENT SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION (MESQHE) SURVEY - Pilot

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research on the perceived quality of minoritised ethnic students' higher education experience. This will provide valuable information regarding minoritised students' evaluations of the services provided and will be used to identify key priorities for improvements in academic provision.

To participate in this survey, you must be a student from a minoritised ethnic background studying at a higher education institution in England.

All information you provide is completely anonymous. Participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time by closing your web browser and your data will be deleted. Likewise, if there are any questions you do not wish to answer, just leave them blank. However, once you have pressed the 'submit' button at the end of the questionnaire, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study or adjust your answers because your data will be collected anonymously and therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

The questionnaire should take approx. 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire comprises three parts. The first section relates to your perceptions of the service quality provided by your higher education institution. The second part of the questionnaire relates to your overall opinion regarding your university experience. The third part contains some demographic questions.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important you understand why the survey is being carried out and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the participant information via this link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UU5EazyOMUuj1GOgtPzDtnYe_zfS1Sg/edit?usp=sharing&oid=114207849925298744063&rtpof=true&sd=true

If anything about taking part is not clear, or you would like more information, please contact Micaela Raffuzzi - Email: Micaela.Raffuzzi@student.shu.ac.uk

Informed consent

By selecting 'YES' below, you consent to participate in this study and confirm that you have read the participant information and understand that your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary, that you are free to withdraw at any time, but that once you have pressed 'submit', you cannot go back into the survey to adjust any answers, nor can you withdraw your answers because they are being submitted anonymously and therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

- ☐ Yes, I consent to take part in the survey
- ☐ No, I do not want to take part in the survey

Section 1: Your perceptions of your sense of belonging to your university

Diversity of academic staff and students at my university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to the diversity of academic staff and students at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
My institution feels welcoming and inclusive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel valued and respected by my institution	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel university is for me and that I fit in	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel excluded, isolated and/or alone	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many academic staff, e.g., lecturers, tutors and/or professors, at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many academic staff in my school/faculty/department are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have a good relationship with academic staff at my university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many students at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most students at my university are White	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many students on my course are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

My friends at university and my relationship with fellow students

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your friends at university and your relationship to fellow students.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I have many friends at university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My friends at university are mostly from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many of my friends at university are from White backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It is easy to make friends with students from different ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have a good relationship with fellow White students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most of my fellow students value and respect my views and personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My friends at university support me in my learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When I have a problem, my friends at university are always there for me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My friends at university are like family to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have experienced stereotyping, racism and/or microaggressions from fellow students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many of my fellow students have a good understanding of cultural differences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel comfortable to express my views and share my personal experiences in class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I tend to study and socialise with students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

My academic engagement and social involvement

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your academic engagement and social involvement at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
There are many extracurricular activities available at my university, e.g., volunteering, being involved in student clubs and societies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I take part in extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It is easy to take part in extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Taking part in extracurricular activities has social and cultural benefits	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I do not take part in extracurricular activities for cultural or religious reasons	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I do not have time for extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I prefer to be involved in ethnicity centred student societies and clubs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I take part in discussions and other learning activities in class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Participating in discussion gives students from ethnic backgrounds a voice	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I do not share my personal experiences in class because it draws too much attention to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I do not take part in discussions because of the behaviours of fellow White students, e.g., making fun of my accent, making inappropriate comments or dismissing my experiences, views and feelings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 2: Your perceptions of the quality of academic interaction at your university

Academic staff's knowledge and competence

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff's knowledge and competence.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff, e.g., lecturers, tutors and/or professors, are knowledgeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff have expertise in their subject	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff are engaging	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff have good teaching abilities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Course materials are clear	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Lectures are well organised	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Lectures are insightful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Seminars/tutorials are invaluable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff communicate concepts and theories well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Academic staff's accessibility, availability and approachability

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff's accessibility, availability and approachability.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff are approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It is easy to contact academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel comfortable to interact with academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff always have time to speak to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff respond to emails in a timely manner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Academic staff's encouragement, support and care

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff's encouragement and support of, and care for, students.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff support students with their learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff provide sufficient guidance for assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff care for their students' wellbeing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff give personal attention to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Academic staff's fair and equal treatment of students

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff's fair and equal treatment of students.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff treat everyone fairly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teaching is inclusive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff give all students equal attention, encouragement and support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Academic staff valuing different perspectives and allowing for personal experiences

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff valuing different perspectives and allowing for personal experiences of students.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff allow students to express their own views and bring in their own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff value different perspectives	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
All students are encouraged to participate in discussions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Curriculum

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of the curriculum.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Course content is relevant for my future career	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Curriculum considers diverse backgrounds and views	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Curriculum is inclusive, i.e., it reflects minoritised ethnic students' histories, worldviews or lived experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Course content incorporates issues of diversity and inclusion faced by minoritised ethnic students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Curriculum is very Europe- or America-centric	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Reading lists predominately include authors from White backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Fair and balanced assessment, marking and feedback

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of assessment, marking and feedback.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Assessments are appropriate and relevant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Assignment topics are diverse and allow me to bring in my own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Students are given a choice of topics for their assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Assignment deadlines are planned well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Assignments are marked fairly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Marking procedures are transparent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Feedback is detailed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Feedback is constructive and provides guidance on what I need to improve for future assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 3: Your perceptions of the quality of non-academic interaction at your university

Non-academic staffs' competence, attitudes and behaviours

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of non-academic, i.e., administrative and support staff's competence, attitudes and behaviours.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Non-academic staff, i.e., administrative and support staff, are approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Non-academic staff are always willing to help	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Non-academic staff are competent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Non-academic staff communicate well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Administrative processes and inclusive support systems

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of administrative processes and support systems at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Administrative and support systems are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Administrative and support processes are clear	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are available	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support services (e.g. Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My institution communicates clearly what support services are available and how to access these	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support services are appropriate for the needs of a diverse student population	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Individual academic support and pastoral care

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of individual academic support and pastoral care at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Personal tutors provide individual academic support to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Personal tutors provide pastoral care to students, e.g., looking after students' overall wellbeing and providing social and emotional support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 4: Your perceptions of the quality of your university's physical facilities

Teaching facilities

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of the teaching facilities and resources at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Teaching facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Layout of teaching facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teaching facilities are well equipped	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Equipment in the teaching facilities is modern	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Support facilities

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of the support facilities and resources at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Library facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Library facilities are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Layout of library facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Library resources are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
There are sufficient library resources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Library services are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Library services are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT facilities are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Layout of IT facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT services are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT services are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
There are sufficient IT resources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT equipment is modern	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Food service facilities are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Layout of food facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Quality of food is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Variety of food is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Food services cater to a variety of dietary needs (e.g., halal, kosher, vegetarian, vegan)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Price of food is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 5: Your perceptions of the quality of students' transformation

My enhancement

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of your enhancement, i.e., your personal development.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I acquire relevant knowledge	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

My abilities and skills are improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My problem-solving skills are being developed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My self-confidence is increased	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My self-awareness is improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am enabled to overcome my prejudices	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My understanding of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds is improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am enabled to become more emotionally stable, e.g., remain calm, relaxed, less anxious or easily upset	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My critical thinking is developed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

My empowerment

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of your empowerment, i.e., giving you some decision-making authority over your learning process.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am enabled to become an independent learner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am given control over my own learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am allowed to pursue my own ideas	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am allowed to bring in my own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am encouraged to actively participate in my learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I can choose assessment topics that are personally relevant to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am given a choice of assessment methods	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 6: Your overall opinion about your university experience

For each question below select the option that most closely reflects your opinion.

Q1: Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience at university?

Extremely dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Satisfied	Extremely satisfied
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q2: Overall, my university experience is better than expected.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q3: If I could, I would choose to come to this university again.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q4: If I could start over again, I would choose to go to a different university.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q5: Overall, how satisfied are you with your course?

Extremely dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Satisfied	Extremely satisfied
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q6: If I could, I would choose to study the same course again.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q7: I would recommend university to my family and friends.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q8: I would recommend this university to my family and friends.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q9: I would recommend my course to my family and friends.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q10: I would stay at, or return to, this university to do a post-graduate degree.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q11: I would change to a different university to do a post-graduate degree.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q12: I do not want to do a post-graduate degree

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q13: What do you like most about studying at your university?

Q14: What do you like least about studying at your university?

Q15: What would you suggest your university could do to improve the university experience for minoritised ethnic students?

Section 7: About you

Your answers will be used for purely statistical purposes and your anonymity will be maintained. Please answer the question by selecting the appropriate option.

Your gender:

- Male ☐
- Female ☐
- Non-binary ☐
- Prefer not to say ☐

Your age:

_____ years

- Prefer not to say ☐

Your ethnicity:

Asian or Asian British

- Indian ☐
- Pakistani ☐
- Bangladeshi ☐
- Chinese ☐
- Any other Asian background ☐

Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

- Caribbean ☐
- African ☐
- Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background ☐

Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

- White and Black Caribbean ☐
- White and Black African ☐
- White and Asian ☐
- Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background ☐

Your domicile

Home ☐
International ☐

Level of study:

Undergraduate ☐
Postgraduate ☐

Year of study:

Year 1 ☐
Year 2 ☐
Year 3 ☐
Year 4 ☐

Mode of study:

Full time ☐
Part time ☐

What course do you study?

Name of your higher education institution:

By clicking on the 'Submit' button below, you are consenting to participate in this study and thus, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study or adjust your answers because your data will be collected anonymously and, therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

[Submit](#)

Appendix 11 Finalised MESQHE questionnaire

MINORITISED ETHNIC STUDENTS SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION (MESQHE) SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research on the perceived quality of minoritised ethnic students' higher education experience. This will provide valuable information regarding minoritised students' evaluations of the services provided and will be used to identify key priorities for improvements in academic provision.

To participate in this survey, you must be a student from a minoritised ethnic background studying at a higher education institution in England.

All information you provide is completely anonymous. Participation in the survey is entirely voluntary and you can withdraw at any time by closing your web browser and your data will be deleted. Likewise, if there are any questions you do not wish to answer, just leave them blank. However, once you have pressed the 'submit' button at the end of the questionnaire, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study or adjust your answers because your data will be collected anonymously and therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

The questionnaire should take approx. 20 minutes to complete. The questionnaire comprises three parts. The first section relates to your perceptions of the service quality provided by your higher education institution. The second part of the questionnaire relates to your overall opinion regarding your university experience. The third part contains some demographic questions.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important you understand why the survey is being carried out and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the participant information via this link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1UU5EazyOMUuj1GOgtPzDtnYe_zfS1Sg/edit?usp=sharing&oid=114207849925298744063&rtpof=true&sd=true

If anything about taking part is not clear, or you would like more information, please contact Micaela Raffuzzi - Email: Micaela.Raffuzzi@student.shu.ac.uk

Informed consent

By selecting 'YES' below, you consent to participate in this study and confirm that you have read the participant information and understand that your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary, that you are free to withdraw at any time, but that once you have pressed 'submit', you cannot go back into the survey to adjust any answers, nor can you withdraw your answers because they are being submitted anonymously and therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

- ☐ Yes, I consent to take part in the survey
- ☐ No, I do not want to take part in the survey

Section 1: Your perceptions of your sense of belonging to your university

Diversity of academic staff and students at my university

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to the diversity of academic staff and students at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
My institution feels welcoming and inclusive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel valued and respected by my institution	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel university is for me and that I fit in	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel excluded, isolated and/or alone	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many academic staff, e.g., lecturers, tutors and/or professors, at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many academic staff in my school/faculty/department are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have a good relationship with academic staff at my university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many students at my university are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most students at my university are White	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many students on my course are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

My friends at university and my relationship with fellow students

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your friends at university and your relationship to fellow students.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I have many friends at university	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My friends at university are mostly from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many of my friends at university are from White backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It is easy to make friends with students from different ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have a good relationship with fellow White students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Most of my fellow students value and respect my views and personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My friends at university support me in my learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
When I have a problem, my friends at university are always there for me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My friends at university are like family to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I have experienced stereotyping, racism and/or microaggressions from fellow students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Many of my fellow students have a good understanding of cultural differences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel comfortable to express my views and share my personal experiences in class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I tend to study and socialise with students from minoritised ethnic backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

My academic engagement and social involvement

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your academic engagement and social involvement at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
There are many extracurricular activities available at my university, e.g., volunteering, being involved in student clubs and societies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I take part in extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It is easy to take part in extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Taking part in extracurricular activities has social and cultural benefits	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I do not take part in extracurricular activities for cultural or religious reasons	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I do not have time for extracurricular activities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I prefer to be involved in ethnicity centred student societies and clubs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I take part in discussions and other learning activities in class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Participating in discussion gives students from ethnic backgrounds a voice	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I do not share my personal experiences in class because it draws too much attention to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I do not take part in discussions because of the behaviours of fellow White students, e.g., making fun of my accent, making inappropriate comments or dismissing my experiences, views and feelings	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 2: Your perceptions of the quality of academic interaction at your university

Academic staff's knowledge and competence

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff's knowledge and competence.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff, e.g., lecturers, tutors and/or professors, are knowledgeable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff have expertise in their subject	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff are engaging	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff have good teaching abilities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Course materials are clear	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Lectures are well structured	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Lectures are insightful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Seminars/tutorials are invaluable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff communicate concepts and theories well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Academic staff's accessibility, availability and approachability

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff's accessibility, availability and approachability.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff are approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It is easy to contact academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I feel comfortable to interact with academic staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff always have time to speak to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff respond to emails in a timely manner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Academic staff's encouragement, support and care

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff's encouragement and support of, and care for, students.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff support students with their learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff provide useful guidance for assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff care for their students' wellbeing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Academic staff give personal attention to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Academic staff's fair and equal treatment of students

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff's fair and equal treatment of students.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff treat everyone fairly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teaching is inclusive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff give all students equal attention, encouragement and support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Academic staff valuing different perspectives and allowing for personal experiences

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of academic staff valuing different perspectives and allowing for personal experiences of students.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Academic staff allow students to express their own views and bring in their own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Academic staff value different perspectives	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

All students are encouraged to participate in discussions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Curriculum

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of the curriculum.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Course content is relevant for my future career	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Curriculum considers diverse backgrounds and views	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Curriculum is inclusive, i.e., it reflects minoritised ethnic students' histories, worldviews or lived experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Course content incorporates issues of diversity and inclusion faced by minoritised ethnic students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Curriculum is very Europe- or America-centric	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Reading lists predominately include authors from White backgrounds	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Fair and balanced assessment, marking and feedback

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of assessment, marking and feedback.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Assessments are appropriate and relevant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Assignment topics are diverse and allow me to bring in my own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Students are given a choice of topics for their assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Assignment deadlines are planned well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Assignments are marked fairly	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Marking procedures are transparent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Feedback is detailed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Feedback is constructive and provides guidance on what I need to improve for future assignments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 3: Your perceptions of the quality of non-academic interaction at your university

Non-academic staff's competence, attitudes and behaviours

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of non-academic, i.e., administrative and support staff's competence, attitudes and behaviours.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Non-academic staff, e.g., administrative and support staff, are approachable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Non-academic staff are always willing to help	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Non-academic staff are competent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Non-academic staff communicate well	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Administrative processes and inclusive support systems

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of administrative processes and support systems at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Administrative and support systems are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Administrative and support processes are clear	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Support services (e.g., Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are available	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support services (e.g., Learning skills, Careers, Wellbeing) are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My institution communicates clearly what support services are available and how to access these	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Support services are appropriate for the needs of a diverse student population	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Individual academic support and pastoral care

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of individual academic support and pastoral care at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Personal tutors provide individual academic support to students	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Personal tutors provide pastoral care to students, e.g., looking after students' overall wellbeing and providing social and emotional support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 4: Your perceptions of the quality of your university's physical facilities

Teaching facilities

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of the teaching facilities and resources at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Teaching facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Layout of teaching facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teaching facilities are well equipped	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Equipment in the teaching facilities is modern	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Support facilities

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of the support facilities and resources at your university.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
Library facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Library facilities are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Layout of library facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Library resources are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
There are sufficient library resources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Library services are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Library services are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT facilities are fit for purpose	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT facilities are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Layout of IT facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT services are easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT services are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
There are sufficient IT resources	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
IT equipment is modern	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Food service facilities are appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Layout of food facilities is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Quality of food is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Variety of food is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Food services cater to a variety of dietary needs (e.g., halal, kosher, vegetarian, vegan)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Price of food is good	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 5: Your perceptions of the quality of students' transformation

My enhancement

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of your enhancement, i.e., your personal development.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am acquiring relevant knowledge	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My abilities and skills are improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My problem-solving skills are being developed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My self-confidence is increased	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My self-awareness is improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

I am enabled to overcome my prejudices	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My understanding of students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds is improved	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am enabled to become more emotionally stable, e.g., remain calm, relaxed, less anxious or easily upset	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
My critical thinking is developed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

My empowerment

For each statement below, please rate your level of agreement/disagreement as it relates to your experience of your empowerment, i.e., giving you some decision-making authority over your learning process.

There are no right or wrong answers; just select the option that most closely reflects your level of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
I am enabled to become an independent learner	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am given control over my own learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am allowed to pursue my own ideas	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am allowed to bring in my own personal experiences	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am encouraged to actively participate in my learning	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I can choose assessment topics that are personally relevant to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am given a choice of assessment methods	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Section 6: Your overall opinion about your university experience

For each question below select the option that most closely reflects your opinion.

Q1: Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience at university?

Extremely dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Satisfied	Extremely satisfied
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q2: Overall, my university experience is better than expected.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q3: If I could, I would choose to come to this university again.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q4: If I could start over again, I would choose to go to a different university.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q5: Overall, how satisfied are you with your course?

Extremely dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Satisfied	Extremely satisfied
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q6: If I could, I would choose to study the same course again.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q7: I would recommend university to my family and friends.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q8: I would recommend this university to my family and friends.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q9: I would recommend my course to my family and friends.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q10: I would stay at, or return to, this university to do a post-graduate degree.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q11: I would change to a different university to do a post-graduate degree.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q12: I do not want to do a post-graduate degree

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Slightly disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly agree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Q13: What do you like most about studying at your university?

Q14: What do you like least about studying at your university?

Q15: What would you suggest your university could do to improve the university experience for minoritised ethnic students?

Section 7: About you

Your answers will be used for purely statistical purposes and your anonymity will be maintained. Please answer the question by selecting the appropriate option.

Your gender:

- Male ☐
- Female ☐
- Non-binary ☐
- Prefer not to say ☐

Your age:

_____ years

- Prefer not to say ☐

Your ethnicity:

Asian or Asian British

- Indian ☐
- Pakistani ☐
- Bangladeshi ☐
- Chinese ☐
- Any other Asian background ☐

Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

- Caribbean ☐
- African ☐
- Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background ☐

Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

- White and Black Caribbean ☐
- White and Black African ☐
- White and Asian ☐
- Any other Mixed or multiple ethnic background ☐

Your domicile

Home ☐

International ☐

Your level of study:

Undergraduate ☐

Postgraduate ☐

Your year of study:

Year 1 ☐

Year 2 ☐

Year 3 ☐

Year 4 ☐

Your mode of study:

Full time ☐

Part time ☐

What course do you study?

Name of your higher education institution:

By clicking on the 'Submit' button below, you are consenting to participate in this study and thus, you will no longer be able to withdraw from the study or adjust your answers because your data will be collected anonymously and, therefore, we will not be able to connect you to your answers.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

[Submit](#)