Academic skills: Enhancing BAME students' success in higher education

Dr Helen Elliott, Associate Professor
EdD, RGN, RSCN, RHV, SFHEA

Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals focus on offering a quality education; with the knowledge that 'education enables upward socioeconomic mobility' (UN. Org, 2015). An integral element of the United Nations goals is to reduce inequalities identified in education by 'ensuring no one is left behind'. Failure to meet the expected level of academic writing skills is likely to directly impact the student's achievement in their programme of study (Miyake *et al.*, 2010; Jordt *et al.*,2017),affecting their employment opportunities in the future (Office for Students, 2021).

If students cannot develop their academic skills, they are unlikely to meet their full potential when studying. The degree-awarding gap between white students and BAME (Black and minority ethnic) students indicates that BAME students are less likely to obtain a first or 2:1 degree, which is evidence of an ongoing issue (Office for Students, 2021).

Tabi (2016) suggests that many minority students face challenges due to a lack of skills to help them successfully navigate through higher education. The challenges BAME students face have been recognised and seen in the disparities in undergraduate degree completions across the different racial-ethnic groups and have become a national concern in the UK. The Office for Students (2021) has recognised a significant awarding gap for BAME students. The Advanced Higher Education Academy published data on the size of the ethnicity awarding gap and found a difference of 9.9 percentage points in the academic year 2019-2020 of BAME students who were awarded a first or 2:1 degree. While awarding gaps differ between institutions ranging from non-existent or very small, 16 institutions had a 20-percentage point difference in attainment (HEA 2020).

Tabi (2016) suggested that supportive strategies such as mentoring, tutoring, and providing a caring and nurturing environment can benefit BAME students. However, there appears to be a lack of evidence around academic writing and the impact poor writing skills can have on the attainment of BAME students in Higher Education, which requires further research.

This literature review explored the support and interventions BAME students received in higher education to enhance their success in academia. The opportunity to engage with peers, academic staff and networking groups supported students, increased grades, improved their academic success and overall experience in their Higher Education Institutes (Johnson, 2020).

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Peer reviews papers	Non-peer reviews papers
Higher Education Institutions	Further Education
BAME students	Non-BAME students
Undergraduate	Postgraduate
Primary research	Literature reviews/reports
Papers written in English	Non-English written papers
Published literature	Unpublished
National and international studies	

Keywords: (BAME OR BME OR Black OR Asian OR Ethnic OR Ethnic minority OR Ethnicity OR Minority OR People of colour) AND (Higher education OR University OR Undergraduate OR Bachelor's OR College) AND (Academic skills OR Academic writing OR Academic performance OR Learning abilities) AND (Academic support OR Academic programs OR Academic interventions) NOT (Postgraduate OR Doctorate OR Doctoral OR Masters) NOT (School OR Schools OR High school OR Middle school OR Primary school OR Pupils OR Teens OR Teenagers OR Adolescents OR Children)
Date: January 2017 - June 2022; Search mode: Advanced/ Boolean phrase.   Limit to: Peer-reviewed journal articles; Language: English

Identification of studies via databases and registers

Identification

Records identified from databases (*n* = 4)
- EbscoHost (*n* = 222)
- PubMed (*n* = 129)
- PsychNet (*n* = 44)
- Web of Science (*n* = 136)
Total records (*n* = 531)

Records removed before screening:
Duplicate records (*n* = 72)
Off-topic (*n* = 4)

Screening

Records screened (n = 455)

Records excluded based on title and abstract (*n* = 424)
- Peripheral or Off-topic
- Did not have the targeted population

Records sought for retrieval (*n* = 31)

Records unable to retrieve (no access) (*n* = 4)

Eligibility

Reports assessed for eligibility (*n* = 27)

Reports excluded based on full text (*n*=12):
- Peripheral or Off-topic (n= 5)
- Did not have the targeted population (n= 5)
- Other (n= 2)

Included

Studies included in review (*n* = 15)

Common Themes

A sense of belonging

Students need a sense of belonging and a drive to continue their education. Building a BAME community on campus helped them form close-knit bonds to gain the network's support. The students felt a sense of freedom to express themselves, share how to navigate systems, and find resources that supported their academic efforts. Learning from peers was the most beneficial, with the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences with like-minded people.

Mentoring/Coaching and Peer support

Coaches and mentors supported students who needed to balance their personal and professional lives. Academic support in learning how to stay organised and manage their academic workflow made a difference to students. Peer learning environments and the relationships with peer facilitators were helpful. Evidence suggests that supportive frameworks raise students' achievement, positively affect their academic performance, and significantly contribute to their academic success.

Additional programmes of study

Bespoke BAME study programmes can serve a critical role in the retention and persistence of students' efforts. Summer bridging programmes that occur before students start university reduce student attrition. The bridging programmes prepared students for their first writing module. Students who undertook additional programmes had higher grades in their subsequent writing courses. Also, students who participated in additional study had significantly better academic results than those who did not. A combination of study skills training, writing classes and weekly workshops run by peer facilitators increased students' academic performance in their courses. Self-efficacy and emotional satisfaction were evident in students who undertook an additional study and ended the term with higher emotional satisfaction.

Conclusion

Preparation sessions for BAME students before starting university should include academic skills, orientation to resources, and networking groups, which are essential to these students' success. Students need to have a sense of belonging with an opportunity to share their concerns and challenges with a coach or facilitator. In addition, the opportunity to share ideas and explore study skills in student-led peer support groups builds self-efficacy and resilience. Further research is needed to fully explore and measure the students' attainments before, during and after the interventions to obtain quantitative and qualitative data on their academic performance.
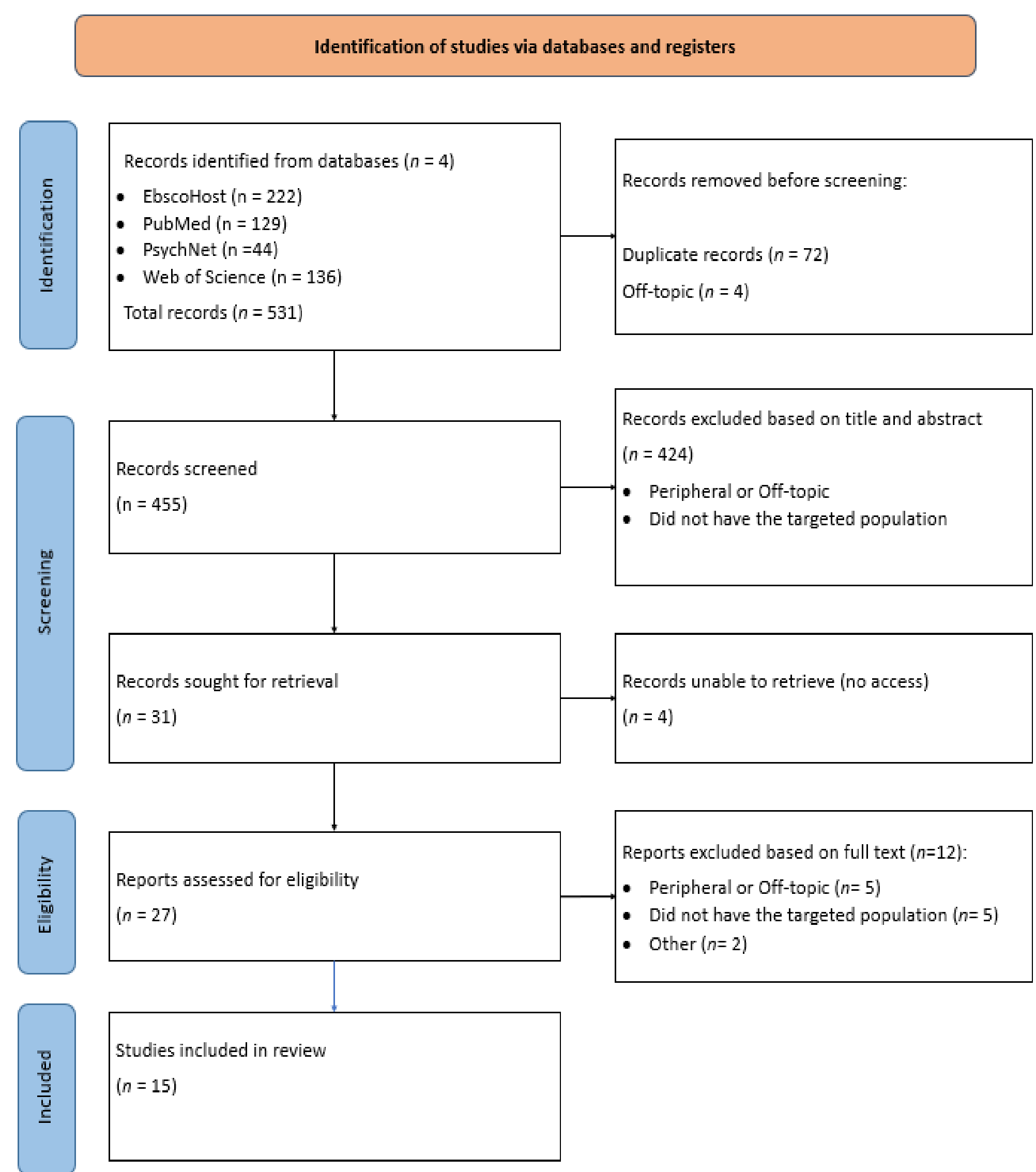
Brooms, D. (2018). "Building Us Up": Supporting Black Male College Students in A Black Male Initiative Program. CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY, 44(1), 141–155. Ghazzawi, D., Pattison, D., & Horn, C. (2021). Persistence Of Underrepresented Minorities In STEM Fields: Are Summer Bridge Programs Sufficient? FRONTIERS IN EDUCATION, 6. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/degree-awarding-gaps-a-targeted-approach/ https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/bame-student-attainment.pdf. https://onetribeglobal.com/united-nations-sustainability-development-goals/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIpNqukNtOgYkVWDmChDXSAMLEAAYASAAEgIfePD_BwE. Johnson, T. M., Bryant, A. L., Brooks, J., Santos, H., Jenerette, C., Lynn, M. R., & Rodgers, S. (2020). Utilizing Courageous Dialogue To Support Minority And Disadvantaged Background Nursing Students. Journal Of Professional Nursing: Official Journal Of The American Association Of Colleges Of Nursing, 36(1), 23–27. Jordt, H., Eddy, S. L., Brazil, R., Lau, I., Mann, C., Brownell, S. E., ... & Freeman, S. (2017). Values affirmation intervention reduces achievement gap between underrepresented minority and white students in introductory biology classes. CBE—Life Sciences Education, 16(3), ar41. Kodama, C., Han, C., Moss, T., Myers, B., & Farrugia, S. (2018). Getting College Students Back OnTrack: A Summer Bridge Writing Program. JOURNAL OF COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION-RESEARCH THEORY & PRACTICE, 20(3), 350–368. Miyake, A., Kost-Smith, L. E., Finkelstein, N. D., Pollock, S. J., Cohen, G. L., & Ito, T. A. (2010). Reducing the gender achievement gap in college science: A classroom study of values affirmation. Science, 330(6008), 1234-1237. Moores, E., Birdi, G. K., & Higson, H. E. (2017). Placement Work Experience May Mitigate Lower Achievement Levels of Black And Asian Vs. White Students At University. Frontiers In Psychology, 8, 1518. Ramírez, G., Covarrubias, R., Jackson, M., & Son, J. (2021). Making Hidden Resources Visible In A Minority Serving College Context. CULTURAL DIVERSITY & ETHNIC MINORITY PSYCHOLOGY, 27(2), 256–268. Sopcaga, F., Kokaua, J., Van Der Meer, J., Lameta-Huro, M., Zaharic, T., Richards, R., & Inder, M. (2017). Evaluating The Effectiveness of A Programme For Improving The Participation And Academic Success Of An Underrepresented Minority Group In New Zealand. EVALUATION AND PROGRAM PLANNING, 65, 20–29. Stanich, C., Pelch, M., Theobald, E., & Freeman, S. (2018). A New Approach to Supplementary Instruction Narrows Achievement and Affect Gaps for Underrepresented Minorities, First-Generation Students, And Women. CHEMISTRY EDUCATION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE, 19(3), 846–866. Tabi. M. (2016). Helping minority students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds successful in nursing: A nursing, workforce diversity project. Online Journal of Rural Nursing and Health Care, 16(1), 59-75. Wilson, D., & Lowry, K. (2017). One Goal, Two Institutions: How A Community College And 4-Year University Partner to Bridge Student College Readiness Gaps. COMMUNITY COLLEGE JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE, 41(4–5), 267–272. Museus, S. D., & Ravello, J. N. (2010). Characteristics of academic advising that contribute to racial and ethnic minority student success at predominantly white institutions. NACADA Journal, 30(1), 47-58. Broda, M., Yun, J., Schneider, B., Yeager, D. S., Walton, G. M., & Diemer, M. (2018). Reducing inequality in academic success for incoming college students: A randomized trial of growth mindset and belonging interventions. Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 11(3), 317-338. Burks, T. N. (2022). Improving Student Attitudes and Academic Performance in Introductory Biology Using a Project-Based Learning Community. Journal of microbiology & biology education, 23(1), e00216-21. Elks, M. L., Herbert-Carter, J., Smith, M., Klement, B., Knight, B. B., & Anachebe, N. F. (2018). Shifting the curve: fostering academic success in a diverse student body. Academic Medicine, 93(1), 66. McRell, A. S., Wilson, B. L., & Lexkoff, S. E. (2021). Writing Skills Development for Graduate Studies and Career Readiness in Science and Aging Fields: A Case Study Approach. Frontiers in Public Health, 1921. Acknowledgement of contribution: Radosina Zdtavkova