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"When You Are in Rome, You Behave like the Romans": International Students' Experience of Integration Policies at a UK University

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Abstract: Set within the context of the calls for a critical approach to the integration of international students, this paper draws on decolonial theories to examine the experiences of international students from Asian and African countries as they make sense of institutional policies designed to support their integration. The study uses a phenomenological approach to analyse focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with international postgraduate students. The findings reveal how international students demand the decolonisation of a "Eurocentric" curriculum and a pedagogical framework that acknowledges their experiences and agencies as epistemic equals. Participants expressed diverse opinions about the institution's academic culture, while inclusion policies are perceived as "tokenistic gestures" that fail to address racial invalidation and microaggressions. Findings from this study suggest the need for institutions in "post-race" times to transcend superficial equality discourses that commodify diversity as "good business sense", targeting raced, mobile, and gendered "others" for inclusion by situating EDI strategies within a much longer history of global entanglements shaped by colonial, capitalist relations, rationalities, and subjectivities.

Keywords: diversity; policy; international student; epistemic justice; student experience; cultural integration

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1. Introduction

The rapid growth of international student mobility (ISM) has transformed both sending and receiving countries' educational, cultural, economic, and political discourses. The current state of International higher education (HE) has departed significantly from what Jane Knight (2004) famously defined as "integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of post-secondary education" (p. 11). Studies have highlighted the need for a critical reflection on what counts as internationalisation and whose interests are served or protected within the global drive for internationalisation (Brandenburg and de Wit 2011; Buckner and Stein 2020; Chan and Dimmock 2008; Madge et al. 2015; Marginson 2012; Murphy 2011). Internationalisation, or "global engagement", as it is currently dubbed, has impacted not only individual student-sojourners and teachers but also teaching and learning practices, institutional operations, and practices across various related fields. While there is an emerging strand of critical perspectives on internationalisation, such as Stier's (2004) internationalisation ideologies, Stein's (2021) work on "critical" internationalisation, Mittelmeier et al.'s (2023) focus on the agency of international students, and Mittelmeier's (2025) call to think beyond integration of international students—these perspectives and those advanced by this paper, have yet

to become dominant in either academic or popular literature. This is partly because the growth of internationalisation and international student recruitment continues to serve as new revenue sources for institutions battling public funding cuts (Gaffikin and Perry 2009; Lomer 2017).

During the 2022–2023 academic session, the UK hosted about 758,855 international students (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2024). Of these, 663,355 were non-EU students, and 95,505 were from the EU (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2024). Chinese students made up the largest group of international students, with 151,690 studying in the UK in 2021–22, followed by 126,535 students from India and 32,945 from Nigeria (up from 14,270 in 2020–21) (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2024). In 2022–23, the number of Indian students rose to 173,190, overtaking Chinese students (154,260) to become the largest group. Two policy events have shaped these enrolment trends. On the one hand, non-EU entrant enrolments increased by 25% in 2022–23, following a 33% rise in 2021–22, driven primarily by growth in postgraduate taught courses. This trend aligns with the introduction of the Graduate Immigration Route, which allows graduates to remain in the UK for up to two years (or three for doctoral students) to seek employment. On the other hand, EU entrant enrolments have declined since 2020–21, with an 8% drop between 2021–22 and 2022–23, reflecting the impact of Brexit and changes in international fee policies (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2024).

The UK's 2023 International Education Strategy outlines the social and economic benefits of hosting international students. It aims to enhance the economic viability of higher education institutions (HEIs) by continuing to be a top destination for internationally mobile students (UK Department for Education 2023). However, the build-up to the 2024 general elections in the UK ushered international students into the rhetoric of what has been described as the reincarnation of Theresa May's "hostile environment" immigration policies, where they were scapegoated within the immigration policy debates and public service breakdown (Mittelmeier 2024). In Scotland, more than 83,000 students studied at Scottish universities in 2022–23, with international students making up a quarter of the total student population (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2024). A recent report published jointly by Universities UK International (UUKi), the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), Kaplan International Pathways, and London Economics on the benefits and costs of international students in the UK shows that international students contribute about £49.3 billion to the economy. International students based in the single constituency of Glasgow Central are estimated to be worth £292 million to the UK economy alone, equivalent to £2720 per local resident (Higher Education Policy Institute 2023).

This "big data" view of international HE and the reification of international students as numbers have shown that they seem to matter only in economic terms of costs and benefits. They have been popularly described as "cash cows" who lower educational standards (Lomer 2017). As international students continue to diversify UK HEIs, cross-subsidising UK research and supporting UK businesses (Higher Education Policy Institute 2023), research into universities' commitment to equality and diversity has shown that international students, especially those from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, face persistent challenges (Yu et al. 2024; Alexander and Arday 2015). The Equality Act of 2010 placed a substantial duty on universities, as well as other institutions, to promote equality and diversity. However, studies suggest that while universities commit to diversity in policies (Ahmed and Swan 2006), racism and discrimination still persist in university life (Ahmed 2012). Other studies have raised a number of issues, such as discrimination in university admissions (Warikoo 2016), classroom experiences and pedagogy (Coate 2009), assessment, access to work placements and employment, job applications and promotions (Law et al. 2004), the whiteness of the curriculum (Cheng

et al. 2018; Peters 2018), performative contradictions (Ahmed 2018; Kimura 2014), and Islamophobic and gendered racism (Saeed 2016).

Set within the context of these concerns about internationalisation policies and practices, this paper explores how international students recognise the persistent local and global power imbalances at both epistemic and material levels. In line with the calls for the decolonisation of the university, which has gained traction in recent years (Bhambra et al. 2018; Santos 2017), this paper, through the lived experiences of international students, asks how international students make sense of equality, diversity and inclusion policies of a Scottish university? In the rest of this paper, I examine the policy representations of international students in the literature before presenting the theoretical framework and methodology underpinning this study. I then present the results and discussion of the findings of the study, followed by the conclusion.

2. Policy Representations of International Students in the UK

Research indicates that national and institutional policies continually advance economic and national interests, positioning international students as commodities rather than active participants in the educational system (Hayes 2019; Sá and Sabzalieva 2018). For instance, hostile visa policies, higher tuition fees, and additional entry requirements impact international students, impeding their social and personal rights and reinforcing their economic value to host countries (Mittelmeier 2024; Walker 2014). These policies are frequently legitimised through narratives of national benefit, obscuring their discriminatory impact. Hayes (2018) highlights how such rhetoric portrays these measures as "doing good" for the country while ignoring international students' human rights and dignity. Consequently, policy frameworks often reduce students to objects of regulation rather than acknowledging them as "real people" deserving of equal treatment (Ahmed 2012; Hayes 2019; Marginson 2012). International students often become pawns in political and ideological games as their experiences are shaped by shifting policy priorities, leaving them "tossed backwards and forwards on the waves of ideological change" (Walker 2014, p. 341).

Rather than challenging the hegemonic policy and regulatory structures, internationalisation policies like those focusing on EDI often reinforce systems that "determine" international students' experiences within host countries (Hayes 2019). These policies could be seen as forms of discursive practice (Foucault 1972) that simultaneously produce certain types of knowledge (*discourse*) and enact tangible effects through their application (*practice*). For instance, Akdağ and Swanson (2018) conducted a discourse analysis of four internationalisation policy documents from two Scottish HEIs, spanning five years (2013–2019). They identified themes such as the prevalence of numerical metrics, the use of agricultural and building metaphors, and postcolonial assumptions. The dominance of numerical metrics illustrates the quantification and datafication of internationalisation discourses in particular and HE strategies in general. These documents frame internationalisation in terms of competitive rankings, with examples such as "11,200 students in 150 countries", "top in Scotland and 5th in the UK", and "student numbers grew by 10%" (Akdağ and Swanson 2018, p. 74). This numerical framing shows a tension between quantity and quality, as universities tend to prioritise data-driven representations over substantive diversity work. Such quantification stems from the broader neoliberal strategies that commodify education and colonise the "lifeworld", turning students' identities and experiences into objects for market consumption and return on investment (Habermas 1987; Murphy 2017).

Akdağ and Swanson (2018) further critiqued the postcolonial assumptions of Scottish universities as they invoke their historical ties to the European Enlightenment, a period celebrated for its intellectual contributions but problematised by decolonial scholars for

its epistemic violence. Policy language reflects pride in institutional history—such as "our origins date back to…"—while simultaneously framing the university as modern and globally connected, evidenced by statements like "Scotland's international university with partnerships around the world" (Akdağ and Swanson 2018). Decolonial scholars, such as Bhambra et al. (2018), argue that these histories of power and knowledge perpetuate social discrimination. Decoloniality, conceptualised as "epistemic disobedience" (Mignolo 2011), challenges the assumption that Western European epistemologies are universal and calls for the recognition of diverse ways of knowing and of being.

Theoretical Framework

This paper, therefore, draws on decolonial theories to engage the historical and structural inequalities perpetuated by internationalisation policies in the UK HE. Decolonial approaches challenge how Western-centric narratives of development and education fuel neo-colonial power dynamics. Decolonial thoughts—arising from Black studies, Indigenous studies, modernity/coloniality studies, feminist studies, critical race theories, and postcolonial studies—contest the ideals of internationalisation strategies of HEIs. Western nations have historically positioned themselves as benevolently imparting international students with so-called universal knowledge and technical expertise that students need to lead their home countries along a linear path of economic and political modernisation (Khoo 2011; Mignolo 2011; Shahjahan et al. 2022). This Eurocentric framing perpetuates a "geo-politics of knowledge" (Mignolo 2011) and "ego-politics of knowledge" (Grosfoguel 2011) that presents Western epistemologies as universally applicable (Santos 2014), promoting a singular narrative of development while absolving the West's ongoing responsibility for colonialism (Bendix 2018). Also, it overlooks how international students from Global South countries have often been instrumentalised in maintaining international trade relations while expanding Western geopolitical influence and spreading liberal capitalism under the guise of development assistance (Bu 2003; Santos 2014).

3. Methods

The study in this paper adopted a phenomenological case study approach. Phenomenological research documents participants' lived experiences, while case studies focus on a specific, bounded unit of analysis (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The unit of analysis in this study was a Scottish university, with data collected through focus group discussions and interviews. Focus groups are increasingly used in qualitative research, a moderated method for gathering participants' views, perceptions, beliefs, and responses on predefined topics (Curtis et al. 2014; Merriam and Tisdell 2016). They are particularly effective for exploring collective perspectives, attitudes, and experiences (Winters and Carvalho 2014).

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring the inclusion of individuals meeting specific criteria (Curtis et al. 2014). The criteria were as follows: 1. enrollment as an international student at Oasis University (a pseudonym), 2. participation in a postgraduate taught programme, 3. self-identification as a Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) student. The acronym BAME or BME is a collective term used in official British government sources and Oasis University to categorise the global majority "people of colour" who now study, live, or work in the UK (Bhavnani et al. 2005). Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experiences of the university's inclusion and diversity policies, which is part of its internationalisation strategy (Hayes 2019; Akdağ and Swanson 2018). A total of ten postgraduate students from Africa and Asia participated in the study conducted on the Oasis University campus, a predominantly White public university in a politically conservative and historically significant region. At the time of the

study, Oasis University had approximately 28,000 students, including 7745 international students.

Participants were recruited through multiple strategies, including advertisements on student microblogs (e.g., WhatsApp and Facebook groups) and institutional student forums. Interested individuals received follow-up emails with study details. Snowball sampling (Merriam and Tisdell 2016) was also employed, with participants asked to inform other eligible students about the study and encourage them to contact the researcher. Focus group participants were provided with refreshments as a gesture of appreciation. Each participant signed a consent form, completed a demographic information sheet, and selected a pseudonym for anonymity. Table 1 provides a summary of participant demographics.

Table 1. Participants' profile.

Pseudonym	Nationality	Gender	Course Description
Lei	Chinese	Male	Social sciences
Chuks	Nigerian	Male	Social sciences
Xiu	Chinese	Female	Social sciences
Janne	Indian	Female	Social sciences
Fatima	Nigerian	Female	Social sciences
Kenne	Nigerian	Female	Social sciences
Yemi	Nigerian	Male	Life sciences
Sofi	Indonesian	Female	Social sciences
Amaka	Nigerian	Female	Life sciences
Patrice	Kenyan	Male	Engineering

As an international student, I drew on my insider status to design and moderate the focus group discussions. This helped build rapport and trust with participants, enabling a relaxed and comfortable environment. One of the downsides of focus group discussion is the dominant effect of outspoken participants, like Amaka and Sofi in this study, while reticent participants, like Fatima, would need to be encouraged to contribute to ensure equal participation (Ochieng et al. 2018). Discussions began with interactive questions using a presentation platform (Mentimeter) to elicit initial perceptions and guide the conversation. Open-ended questions reflecting significant themes such as decolonisation of the curriculum, cultural integration, language barriers, and interactions were later used to probe for discussion. Following the focus group discussions, three participants volunteered for one-on-one interviews lasting approximately 30 min each. These interviews further explored their experiences of the curriculum and perceptions of the university's EDI policies. The focus group discussion lasted approximately 120 min and, along with the interviews, was audiotaped, transcribed, and analysed manually.

Data analysis, informed by the decolonial framework, followed an iterative open and axial coding process (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Open coding involved identifying initial codes and concepts, while axial coding connected these codes to develop overarching themes. Salient quotes were highlighted, and codes such as *curriculum*, *academic culture*, *language challenges*, *micro-aggressions*, and *policy rhetoric* were grouped and further developed into themes. I employed member checking to enhance trustworthiness, where participants reviewed their transcripts and the initial coding scheme (Curtis et al. 2014). In line with emerging debates on international student research (Mittelmeier et al. 2023) and decolonising methodology, I reflected on my positionality as both a researcher and an international student. This reflexive, intersectional, and power-conscious approach underlines the importance of positioning participants as expert knowers in research. My insider perspective informed data collection and interpretation while ensuring an ethical

and respectful engagement with participants (Curtis et al. 2014). As this study uses a small sample of 10 international BAME students and Oasis University as a case study, it is not in its intent to lay claim to the generalisability of the findings across the UK HE sector but to offer a contextual discussion of a specific case study.

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the results and discusses the findings from the data in light of the existing literature. Five salient themes that emerged during data analysis have been presented in a narrative form. Participants narrated their engagements with the Eurocentric curriculum, academic culture, language anxiety, encounters with racism, and perceived tokenistic gestures of inclusion policy of the institution.

4.1. Eurocentric Curriculum

In this study, participants shared experiences of how their identities have been excluded and less discussed in the university's curriculum. Even when their identities were discussed, it came as an example of the bad apples. Discussing the content of their reading lists, theories, case studies, and overall course structure, the majority evocatively expressed dissatisfaction about how the university privileges European cultures and values through the curriculum. Xiu narrated her experience of these epistemic inequalities as follows:

> *"There is a lack of a reading list from China; theories, values, and cultures displayed in my course are so Western. I think when they mention anything from other countries, they have Western stereotypes."* (Xiu, Female, Chinese, Social Sciences)

From another perspective, Kenne shared how she has just "lived" and learned to be a "Roman" by adjusting to the obvious epistemic silencing of the global majority in her modules:

> *"When you are in Rome, you behave like the Romans. But still, maybe because I am studying (name of the course), I feel like it should be able to reflect perspectives from all over the world. But unfortunately, I have just a single convener who tries to be global in her approach to the curriculum. Otherwise, I feel like it's Eurocentric."* (Kenne, Nigeria, Female, Social Sciences)

Kenne's comment highlights how the university's strategy has placed the responsibility of integration on students seeking international education. They have to change their ways of being and knowing to get the best out of the system. Amaka was also concerned that the initial focus of her course was only on Scotland, especially when she recounted that the problems she is trying to solve in her community do not align with the context of Scotland:

> *"Initially, when we started the course, we were focusing on Scotland. . .which wasn't fulfilling at some point, but we later had classes where we were given case studies from Tanzania and Kenya. I could relate very well with those studies. I was really interested in learning when those familiar case studies came as we proceed in the middle of the course."* (Amaka, Female, Nigerian, Life Sciences)

Regarding the extent of international elements in the curriculum, students studying social sciences held different perceptions from students in science and technology. Some of the participants narrated that they see Engineering and Pure Sciences as having "universal status" and a sort of "international standard" across cultures. They do not seem bothered about their own culture and values not being represented. Still, social science theories and practices are perceived to vary with countries and cultural orientations, and this might require a greater level of internationalisation (Patrice). Participants from social sciences felt the need for the university to include perspectives from all over the world, especially from their ethnical or racial backgrounds (Kenne). When asked about the percentage they

would like their course contents to reflect their racial background and context, students in social science courses opted for 70% of the curriculum, while students from science and engineering desired just 40%, as they appreciate the Euro-American best standards in science and technology.

However, participants from Asian countries acknowledged that some of their lecturers do include case studies from Asia but most specifically from China. Still, they challenge this homogenisation, as they feel countries in Asia have different contexts, as Sofi and Janne from Indonesia and India, respectively, held the views that China is not a total representation of Asian cultures and tutors should not assume diversity by just focusing their case studies on China. Sofi from Indonesia narrated, for example:

> *"The reading list that my lecturer gave me has some studies from Asia, but mostly from China...but I am from Indonesia. Nothing! I mostly raise my voice during a few seminars to get issues in my context discussed. It is very limited . . . not limited. Zero!"* (Sofi, Female, Indonesian, Social Sciences)

Participants also agreed that getting a master's degree certificate from a UK university is not as important as using the knowledge gained to solve various problems in their home countries. Two participants, Janne and Patrice, described their engagements with the curriculum as a great leap in their careers as they have been able to learn so many things that could be useful back home. However, the majority of the participants raised concerns about the applicability of the knowledge and skills they have acquired. Amaka felt there is a "big gap" between the knowledge acquired and future career prospects. She narrated,

> *"I feel like there is gap. There is very big gap. . . 90% of my course, my classes, reading list is beneficial for someone who wants to live here and work here. If you want to go back to a country like mine or a continent like mine. You will need much more information and much more knowledge."* (Amaka, Female, Nigerian, Life Sciences)

Sofi further highlights that attempts to decolonise or diversify the curriculum are sometimes met with resistance from students who do not see this knowledge as relevant to their own realities. In Sofi's statement below, resistance is framed as an exclusionary stance or structural privilege taken by classmates from "white countries", who dismiss the discussion of Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* because they do not see its applicability to their experiences.

> *"At the end of my studies, I want to go back to my country, Indonesia. I want to apply my knowledge gained from here. For example, in one of my courses, we discussed about Freire's oppression theory in pedagogy. My classmates, most people from white countries don't want us to discuss the theory because they feel it's not useful to them, but the theory is useful for me because we have been colonised. It's really helpful to students in my country. If the university wants to achieve internationalisation, I suppose they should highlight theories and concepts from other parts of the world. Otherwise, what I learn here will not be useful when I go back to my country."* (Sofi, Female, Indonesian, Social Sciences)

As highlighted by the participants, the Eurocentric nature of the curriculum aligns with the findings of Cheng et al. (2018), who noted that some Scottish HEIs fail to deliver truly internationalised curricula. Academics often exclude international case studies and perspectives, particularly in science and engineering disciplines, perpetuating what Santos (2014) refers to as the "universality" of European scientific knowledge. This "universality" discourages academics from integrating diverse international elements into teaching and learning, forcing students to adapt to the existing Eurocentric status quo. Structural and productive power dynamics embedded in the curriculum perpetuate the centre-periphery dominance of the global knowledge system (Marginson and Xu 2021). Within the dis-

course of internationalisation, such dynamics undermine alternative ways of knowing. By prioritising perceived superior Western knowledge and drawing on Scotland's historical intellectual virtues, institutions effectively "sell" this dominance (Akdağ and Swanson 2018). This epistemic violence (Mignolo 2011), or what Spivak et al. (1996) characterise as forms of psychopathological violence, promotes an epistemic genocide against global and local "others".

4.2. Academic Culture

International students also discussed ways the policy of inclusion of the university shapes their experience of integrating into the system within a one-year master's programme. Participants described their experience using words such as "stressful", "demanding", "shocking", and "struggling" to relate their experience with the work ethic and academic culture of the UK. Yemi and Patrice, Nigerian and Kenyan, admitted they have never been stressed in their lives like they have been stressed this year on their programmes. Yemi narrated that he had never read articles as extensively as he had read while on the course at the university. Patrice described himself as a "smart guy" and said he had developed a way of performing at his best over time, but it was a different case when he encountered a different academic culture of the University as he had to work extraordinarily for every grade he gets.

> *"Pertaining to the academic culture, I've never been stressed, like I've been in this year, I always thought, you know, I am a smart guy, so I would just pass without much effort. But here, I've had to fight for every mark, I'd have to leave the library really late. So, it really demands a lot from me. And I think that has pushed me to higher levels than I thought I would ever get to. So, of course, that has not reflected directly into the results."* (Patrice, Male, Kenyan, Engineering)

Contrastingly, two participants from Nigeria consider the UK's academic culture less intense than their previous academic experience in their home country (Chucks and Amaka). In alluding to the intricacies of the experience and ability of international students, Kenne feels that the demanding nature of the academic culture of UK universities is not peculiar to only African or Asian students while admitting that she struggled with her academic workload. Still, an intersection of variables impacts how students deal with academic shocks and struggles. "It's a personal thing and not a group thing, if you get brain. . .you get brain", she said.

While probing how their tutors have assisted them in dealing with the academic culture shock and classroom participation, most participants narrated their positive experiences of being encouraged to participate in classroom discussions and manage difficulties in their courses, irrespective of their race and ethnicity. Amaka described the experience as "well-welcoming" and agreed that they were overpampered and used to feel different when her colleagues in the university narrated any difficulty they faced in their courses because the tutors on her course were so good. She explained,

> *"They come to class and say things like I sent you emails; please check your emails. I remember when we started, our classes were from 8 am onward, and people had to write to the professor that they were not morning persons and that he could move the time to 10 am, and it was moved. What I am trying to say is that they try to carry everybody along, even to the extreme. They are so encouraging. We get assessment feedback in just two weeks".* (Amaka, Female, Nigerian, Life Sciences)

Moreover, most participants acknowledged the host university as having a student-centred pedagogy, which is quite different from their previous educational backgrounds. They emphasised the fact that they do have opportunities to relate with their tutors at very

personal levels within and outside the classroom and tutors "have gone the extra miles" (Janne) in helping to solve their problems as international students. Another key factor that must have played into meaningful classroom participation was that most of those in master's courses are mature students (Chuks), and active involvement often boils down to your preference as an individual (Sofi). Out of all the participants, Fatima seems to have not enjoyed this not uncommon, personalised tutor–student relationship of the university as she lamented that the class size is about 150 students, and you do not get to relate and engage actively in the classroom.

In another context, students also discussed the lack of ethnic representation amongst their tutors in a predominantly white institution. Chuks said he had not seen any Africans among the staff members, while some participants said they had seen staff from China and India (Janne and Lei). Still, most of them are Graduate Teaching Assistants, which means there is little they can do to echo the voice of international students at the policy decision-making level. Participants feel that they are not represented by the staff members even though they are the "ones funding the international education thing" (Kenne). At Oasis University, less than 12% of the whole staff across job families are from BAME backgrounds in the 2020/21 academic session, lower than the UK average of 20% (Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) 2023). While probing further about their consumer power awareness, they confirmed to me that they know most postgraduate courses are dominated by international students, with few Scottish students who sometimes do not pay fees, but international students pay huge, and yet the university is not making an effort to actively represent them in its structure by employing people who know where they are coming from (Chuks). This finding is consistent with Brown and Holloway (2008), who observed that high tuition fees and the costs of living amplify students' fear of failure. Students often struggle to manage academic challenges while navigating financial and cultural pressures. Schartner and Cho (2017) similarly noted that while exposure to diverse cultures fosters tolerance, it also creates concerns about reintegrating learned knowledge into a different cultural context upon returning home.

4.3. Language Anxiety and Fitness

Demonstrating fitness in the language of instruction was also discovered to be a demanding task for international students at Oasis University. Participants narrated how they had to deal with turning in assignments in a language they were not profoundly fit, new grammar and vocabulary, local accents, and extraordinary contexts when speaking with the natives. Students from Asia described themselves as having been hit the most by language shock as they had not been exposed to English as a language of instruction. Janne from India narrated,

> *"I think it raises anxiety. . .especially in the classroom. Then you realise that you are not equipped to demonstrate fitness, which can bring you up to par. When most of my white counterparts speak, I used to think they know more than me. . .but if I look at it from my perspective, I see I know more than them. . .With the language thing, it was something that took me back. . .I was very anxious and still very anxious."* (Janne, Indian, Female, Social Sciences)

But what is more disturbing is how this language anxiety has furthered the bifurcation of the home and international students within and without the classroom, emphasising "racialised impostor syndrome" of them feeling inferior and unfit for the system. As Janne described, it creates a heightened sense of self-doubt and a feeling of not belonging experienced by individuals from racially minoritised backgrounds in predominantly white or elite spaces. Also, Kenne from Nigeria, who described herself to be very proficient in the language, agreed with Janne and that she had to seek mental support during her

first months on the course as she was sceptical if she could carry on with the linguistic demands placed on the course, which was majorly assessed through essay writing. The Chinese participants also narrated how they have always tried to avoid conversations with home students as they admitted the "strangeness of the language culture", especially the local accent (Xiu). Amaka related why most international students often adopt avoidance strategies during classroom participation:

> *"I think the anxiety comes even more when you have to mix up with people who grew up here. . .You don't understand what they are saying, or even if you understand, you might not understand the context of what they are saying, and you don't have anything to add... So, I just have to keep quiet most times to avoid embarrassment."* (Amaka, Female, Nigerian, Life Sciences)

When asked about their perception of the language policy of the university, they acknowledged the university has programmes for language support on academic essay writing and dissertations for international students, especially for Chinese students based on their population and perceived lack of proficiency in English. Participants also opined the language policy is ineffective for master's students who are being graded a few weeks into the course, coupled with the workload, and most students do not attend the sessions. This study aligns with the findings of Cheng and Adekola (2022) and Brown (2008), which suggest that English language support needs to become embedded into programmes instead of as one-off support at induction. This will increase students' confidence in expressing their ideas and making good friends with peers from different cultures.

4.4. Micro-Invalidations, Micro-Insults, and Passive Racism

International students from Africa and Asia encounter racism in different forms. But most importantly within the institution, the findings of this study show that racism (apart from epistemic violence prevalent in the curriculum) often occurs between BAME students and their white counterparts (Kenne). Most of the students reported that they have never felt explicitly racialised by any staff member but have had a series of encounters among their colleagues in the classroom. Micro-invalidations were reported to have played out during group work and assignments where their abilities are being underplayed or dismissed, and their voice or opinions are rendered inferior during group work (Patrice). As the intersectionality of many factors came into play for them to find themselves in the middle of racism, the majority of the participants narrated they had been assaulted socially in the pub, at parties, and on the bus (Yemi and Patrice) and also academically due to their skin colour and language barrier. As Janne narrated her ordeals with racism and the othering binary of "us" and "them", she explained,

> *People never said anything that okay, we are this. They never showed any prejudice openly. But they avoided us. And though I wasn't targeted, someone else in my class was actually targeted. And she cried. . .she felt that she'd been maltreated just because of her colour. It wasn't about the language for them. And that is, I feel even the processes. You could feel it, and I even spoke about this with the course coordinator. But then he shows no interest in doing anything about it. It wasn't spoken openly.* (Janne, Female, Indian, Social Sciences)

Many acknowledged that they know there will always be racism against people of colour through biases and stereotypes underlined by historical and social constructs (Kenne). However, the ways they experience racism in interaction with peers on a daily basis differ from one ethnic group to another. Racism remains an issue for international students in this host university, as participants described experiences of being "looked down upon", "stereotyped", and "invalidated" based on their ethnicity or country of origin. These findings align with Brown and Jones (2013), who reported that one-third of

a cohort of international postgraduate students experienced racism, leading to emotional distress and negative perceptions of the host institution and country. The findings also corroborate the findings of Zewolde (2021), which showed that racism pervades the lived experiences of black African international students in the UK. This study also confirms the denial or normalisation of racism by international students, especially Asian students, as reported by Yu et al. (2024). In their study of Chinese international students' experiences across eight UK universities, they noted the denial of racism ("it is not racism"), the justification of racism ("it is normal"), and taking the blame for racism ("it is my fault") (Yu et al. 2024). By normalising discrimination, these students unconsciously adopt the dominant discourse that marginalises them, which aligns with Bourdieu's (1991) argument that symbolic violence operates through misrecognition—where individuals fail to see oppression as oppression. Therefore, racialised hierarchies and discrimination become internalised through habitus, shaping their views of what is acceptable or inevitable.

4.5. EDI Policies as Tokenistic Gestures

Students were asked about their thoughts on the university's overall commitment to equality and diversity in making the academic environment inclusive for international students. Participants quickly declared the policy of inclusion and diversity as an object of "tokenism" (Janne), a marketing tool to get international students into the university (Chucks), and they were asked how the university does diversity and equality, when, as a person of colour, you have to "work the diversity". The international and home fee status was prevalent in the discussion when students said if the university is committed to equality and diversity, it should start with addressing what they described as the "discriminating tuition fees". Students commented on how most establishments within and outside the university display in their adverts that they are equal opportunity recruiters, and you will not find people of colour on their profiles. Chuks narrated his experience as follows:

> *"I don't understand... how do they show this equality? It's everywhere. And they just want to make it so obvious that they respect us. Trying to get people in. You just mentioned everywhere. . . workplace...they talk about it. I have been asking if this thing is real?... I have applied to so many internships. And I've seen my white friends too, with the same qualifications, and even those that I seem to be more qualified than are getting called for interviews."* (Chuks, Male, Nigerian, Social Sciences)

Contrastingly, Sofi narrated how the policy has helped her and colleagues who are Chinese. The university has some signage in the Chinese language, and the course director created a "WeChat" online group for students from China to communicate effectively with the tutors and course director. Apart from that, most restaurants in the university serve Chinese food on their menu to aid the cultural integration of Chinese students or give them a feel or taste of home. Lei and Xiu confirmed that the university has a lot of Chinese students, and it is understandable why they are the focus of attention. Participants discussed that even as they are students of colour in white institutions, they still feel minoritised by the Chinese population, as Black African students seem not comfortable with the way they are not "equally treated" like the Chinese students. Kenne, however, argued that there is a level to which international students can "push" for equality and diversity in the university, especially when the university is publicly funded and has to give back to the host community. Kenne explained as follows:

> *"I will tell you that there's a limit to how much we can push for equality because a nation will always be nationalist first and take care of her people first. Their duty is to the Europeans first, before you, no matter how inclusive and diverse they want to be. Like I said, all of that is propaganda. If you signed the contract, you signed the contract."* (Kenne, Female, Nigerian, Social Sciences)

In giving credence to what Kenne said on the extent to which international students should expect the policy of inclusion of UK universities to work for them, Sofi narrated her experience with the university agent and how it turns to be a mirage upon arrival:

> *"I agree with her [Kenne] I mean; I also agree with her it's almost impossible to guarantee that you will get an all-inclusive blah blah blah and so on. So, it's kind of the marketing language that they use to somehow like. And when we came here, it was like, Oh nothing...Diversity! Diversity! What? it's like when they [University's agents] came to my place, you will get international this and that blah. . .blah...blah. . . It's like Nothing!"* (Sofi, Female, Indonesian, Social Sciences)

However, on their overall experience, students explained that they did get the value for money looking at the standard of courses they have been exposed to, the calibre of tutors on their programmes, the diverse culture enjoyed, and fantastic experiences, but the university has more to do in terms of how it delivers its EDI commitment. The findings of this study are consistent with Ahmed's (2012) work on the racialised and gendered experiences of university life, which argues that the rise in the use of "diversity" has led to the disappearance of other (perhaps more critical) terms, including "equal opportunities", "anti-racist", and "social justice". As noted by the participants in this study, EDI policies could lose meaning and become worn out and worn down due to being overused or disused (Ahmed 2019). Ahmed further argues that the fact that a diversity policy comes into existence does not mean it will go into use, leading to the "non-performativity of diversity"?—when naming something does not achieve the intended outcome (Ahmed 2019).

5. Conclusions

The inclusion of international students from the Global South as epistemic equals must be integral to the metrics and terms of internationalisation that define excellence in teaching and research. Without such inclusion, international students are denied the opportunity to reassert their agency, equality, and rightful recognition as "experts" within the classroom. Pursuing epistemic justice and dismantling colonial vestiges of knowledge production remain pressing challenges for many universities like Oasis University. This study has shown both the intended and unintended consequences of inclusion and diversity policies on the experiences of international students. While some aspects of these policies have enhanced their academic journeys, others have maintained structural inequalities that stifle their full participation and prospects. These findings indicate that institutions like Oasis University must intensify efforts to amplify the positive dimensions of these experiences while simultaneously addressing the structural and productive inequalities that disadvantage ethnic minority students.

The challenge for institutions in "post-race" times is to transcend superficial equality discourses that commodify diversity as "good business sense", targeting raced, mobile, and gendered "others" for inclusion by situating EDI strategies within a much longer history of global entanglements organised by colonial, capitalist relations, rationalities, and complexities. Pursuing diversity and inclusion is a moral and legal imperative; it must also drive transformative changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom environments. A genuinely inclusive and decolonised educational practice must embrace alternative ways of knowing and being.

While it may be beyond the remit of educational institutions alone to eliminate racialised experiences, addressing racism in all its forms is a duty of care. At the institutional level, universities must implement measures that enable students to feel confident in seeking pastoral support and reporting incidents of discrimination. Management teams should foster staff engagement with curriculum internationalisation, encouraging awareness of curricular biases and epistemic violence.

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