Bridging the Gap

A STUDENT COLLECTIVE
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Foreword

I would like to thank the many people who have contributed to this project, by encouraging, and inspiring me to try and take action in whichever way I can. The opportunity to design, shape, implement and evaluate this project has been formative. I hope more students have this experience.

Thank you to my wonderful family for the discussions around our kitchen table, for proof reading my work and helping me to find creative solutions to challenges. Thank you to my friends for reminding me regularly of why it is important that we help those around us, even when it is difficult and tiring.

This project is a drop in the ocean of dealing with racial inequality in wider society. It is similarly localised regarding the national issue of the racial attainment gap in the higher education sector. However, there is power in the grassroots. We should be empowering people, specifically students, to be the inspiration behind initiatives designed to help them.

There is a fine line between consulting students to ascertain how best to support them, without putting the additional burden on them of solving the inequality they face. Success demands that we find the middle ground between listening to those from liberation communities, without leaving them solely responsible for solving issues they did not create.

Finally, I would like to say it takes all of us. We have to be self-critical and self-aware to unlearn the biases that have been taught to us subconsciously. This is difficult but not impossible. There is a lot to do, but let us start with ourselves and our community. SOAS has the opportunity to be a game changer and trailblazer regarding this issue. Let us commit to doing just that.

Maxine Thomas-Asante
I would like to send a huge thank you to every single person that helped bring this project into reality. This student-led project was driven by a direct eagerness to address the BAME educational attainment gap. This project helped bring to light what happens when Department such as Widening Participation support student led initiatives.

The Bridging the Gap student collective is a project rooted in student leadership and engaging students in a meaningful way. I have had the honour of sharing space with some of these amazing students during the duration of this project.

As a previous Postgraduate Taught Student Representative for the SOAS School of Law I had observed the difficulties of students and seen the effect this had on their mental health. I also noticed the difficulty students had in reporting racist remarks in and out of the classroom.

Over the last year, this project has highlighted just how important it is for students to create meaningful healing and supportive spaces for other students to thrive while pursuing their educational goals. I hope this report will help ignite a deeper passion and desire for SOAS to fund student-led initiatives rooted in addressing real systemic challenges within SOAS and other UK universities. The continued support of Bridging the Gap: A Student Collective is a powerful opportunity for SOAS to address the BAME attainment gap in a substantial way.

Regards,

Miranda Sheffield
Executive Summary

Bridging the Gap: A Student Collective, is a student-led programme commissioned by SOAS’ Widening Participation department to address the racial attainment gap. The first year of this programme was led by SOAS alumni Maxine Thomas-Asante and Miranda Sheffield. The programme focused on the School of Law, with hopes of extending this to more departments.

In the academic year 2018-2019 Bridging the Gap has made good headway into raising awareness of the racial attainment gap. It has created a space for BAME students to discuss the challenges they experience and consider solutions. Bridging the Gap has implemented solutions where possible and advocated on behalf of these students where this has been more appropriate.

A summary of our key recommendations to SOAS for the next academic year are:

- SOAS should improve data collection on:
  - final degree classifications prior to 2012 and after 2016;
  - the success of specific projects in decreasing the disparity;
  - the effect of gender, sexuality, mental health status, household income, distance from central London;
  - which support facilities students of colour are accessing;
  - how many students of colour are dropping out and at what point in the academic year this is happening

- Better quality of events and initiatives require a budget and the sharing of contacts. Going forward Bridging the Gap should be provided with a budget.

- In recognising that disadvantage operates in a multitude of ways for BAME, SOAS should consider the difficulties in
  - Beginning university with lower grade attainment prior to university
  - Reluctance to access academic and professional support
  - Challenging classroom dynamics
  - Final grade attainment at university
  - Employability post-university

- The overarching ‘BAME’ category can leave students feeling unrepresented. Communities considered within the BAME bracket should be desegregated.

- Bridging the Gap was commissioned for one year. SOAS should fund Bridging the Gap for another academic year, led by three new students who study in different departments.
Background

Bridging the Gap is a student-led programme run by Maxine Thomas-Asante and Miranda Sheffield. Maxine is a graduate from SOAS School of Law LLB programme and the SOAS SU Co-president for Democracy and Education 2019-2020. Miranda is an alum from SOAS School of Law, having completed her Masters in Human Rights Law. We are working in partnership with Widening Participation with the aim of tackling the racial attainment gap at SOAS Law school. This work began during Miranda and Maxine’s tenure as class representatives in the SOAS Law Department in the academic year 2017-18.

The issue of the racial attainment gap was raised as an agenda item in a Law faculty meeting, reviewing a 2017 data study. Here it was demonstrated statistically that in SOAS’ Law Department black students were 9% less likely to graduate with a first class honours compared to their white counterparts between the academic years of 2012/13-2015/16.\(^1\) Student representatives were concerned by the lack of a proactive response from the department as a whole. Some members of the department expressed concern in the meeting, condemning this reality and asking what can be done. However, other professionals concluded that because the Law school already had anonymous marking, the problem had been sufficiently dealt with. The evidence of the disparity proved that this was not the case and that anonymous marking on its own would not solve the issue.

The sitting class representatives decided more had to be done. We would like to recognise those individuals personally: John Mjwenga, Alis Li, Chetan Khatry, Younus Alam. From this point we had a meeting with the sitting Teaching and Learning Co-ordinator and Department Manager, who also showed great support. In this small meeting it was decided something had to be done. It was the idea of a supportive member of staff in the Law department that we contact Widening Participation and see if a collaboration would be possible.

Following this meeting, Julien in Widening Participation invited us to create a proposal for the project.\(^2\) This was approved in July 2018, and the work began in August. It was important that we acknowledged up front that during the project’s first academic year we were unlikely to see quantitative change. Instead we have focused on qualitative feedback on student experience and an increased awareness of the issue. Surveys were conducted at our focus group session.

\(^1\) A copy of this dataset can be found in Appendix 1.
\(^2\) A copy of the original proposal can be found in Appendix 2.
What is the Aim of Bridging the Gap?

1) Raising Awareness

During the initial work carried out as class representatives, it became apparent that students were not aware of what the racial attainment gap was or how it functioned. While Asian and black students especially seemed to be aware that they had to work harder, this was deemed more cultural conditioning than anything else. At SOAS, the students seemed to recognise that racism exists, but did not have a firm grasp of how institutional racism was operating in academia. A large part of this was due to the fact that relevant statistics were not shared with students as a whole. Thus while there was a sense of inequality felt by students, there was no access to statistical evidence of the fact black and Asian students were obtaining lower degree classifications on average. As a result, the first task was to raise awareness of the issue. This is highly significant because students cannot tackle and challenge a disadvantage they do not fully understand.

2) Creating a Specific “Safe Space” for BAME Students

One of the primary aims of the project is to carve out a space for BAME students within the academic context. Though this is also done through societies, Bridging the Gap worked with academics and departments, offering a different approach. We wanted to hear directly from students the type of support and events that would be beneficial. After collecting this information we wanted to be advocates and implementers. This meant that Bridging the Gap had to be fluid and responsive to the requests and needs of the student body. For this reason, it was intentional that Bridging the Gap worked on a departmental level. It allowed students to actively shape the programme. That being said, students attending from other departments did promote solidarity and brought original ideas.

Much of the time, what students really needed was an ear, to be championed and reassured during particularly stressful times in the year. This meant sometimes Maxine would attend meetings in support of students with staff. In acting as a chaperone, it ensured communications were effective and appropriate and that BAME students had direct support. It is important to recognise that this was requested by students. Chaperoning was requested in some cases due to a lack of trust by students in the institution and its processes.
3) Improving Relationships Between the Institution and BAME Students

Chaperoning requests demonstrated the need to rebuild relationships between students of colour and staff. There is a reluctance for black students in particular to access facilities unless the situation is desperate. We elicited feedback that confirmed that this is due to the perception that staff do not truly prioritise the best interests of BAME students. Students at times do not request necessary academic support. This is a problem. A change in culture is necessary to address this, both the perception but also the reality. In the context of the marketisation of our education system, lecturers and tutors are under great pressure to publish, research and accumulate teaching hours. However, it is important to recognise that education is also a social good. Education is essential to foster emerging thinkers and inspire the minds of the next generation. This perspective must never be lost.

Previously, in the context of SOAS School of Law, much of the emotional labour was being loaded onto a few members of staff in a personal capacity. They would informally mentor black and Asian students, due to there being a sense of solidarity and alliance. This may have enabled other members of staff to incorrectly see reducing the attainment gap as solely the responsibility of these few members of staff.

4) Reporting Incidences

Another primary aim was to offer a safe space where students could share their experiences without having to design and implement solutions alone or face daunting complaints procedures that can be alienating.

Existing complaints procedures in the School of Law are not satisfactorily oriented around the success and support of the student. The official complaints procedure is relatively arduous and can discourage students from going so far as to raise official complaints. The more common system in the Law Department is the Staff and Student Consultative Committee meetings. Here, class representatives brought student issues to the faculty. Unfortunately, when issues were raised about inappropriate comments by staff this led to an effective hushing. Responses such as “the student should talk to the staff member” were not unusual. This was inadequate for several reasons. Firstly, unequal power dynamics within the classroom discourage students from coming forward with complaints. This is due to fear that complaining could impact their treatment in the classroom and their grades. There is hope that this issue may be relieved by a considered implementation of the Clements Review recommendations.
Structural Change Discussions

For the experience of BAME students to improve at SOAS, it is essential that the entire culture at SOAS undergoes a shift. This requires thorough evaluations of the day to day operations and processes, which indirectly disadvantage BAME students.

Academic Advisors

During the focus groups held in the year 2017-2018, it became apparent that pastoral care within the department is perceived as somewhat vague and inaccessible. Over the summer break, Maxine met with Carol Tan - the Head of Department - and have been communicating with her since. One of the main bones of contention from student feedback was the role of Personal Tutors, now referred to as Academic Advisors. We have been working on how to make Academic Advisors more sensitive to the issues around the racial attainment gap as the first point of contact with students. The ideas raised in this conversation, whilst supported by Carol, have been difficult due to the restrictions imposed from higher up in the university structure. Following this realisation, we had an initial conversation with Emilia Onyema on how this might be reformed. However, this was preliminary and so it will be essential to continue this conversation regarding future evolution on the role of Academic Advisor. We have also spoken to Arvind Sandhu – the Diversity and Inclusion Manager – about this.

Decolonising the Curriculum

Within the context of the national conversation around the racial attainment gap, it has been raised that students need to see role models who look like them progressing in academia. This can look like academics, but also demands course material that is representative of a wide range of experiences. A primary intention of decolonising curricula is to increase visibility and representation of minorities within the course material. This has been a real issue in SOAS Law School. Firstly, there is only one course focused on Africa: Law and Society in Africa. Towards the end of the second term there was a significant concern that this course would not be offered the following year. Fortunately, the course has been reformed so it can run, though it is now only a half year module. However, this does mean that there is currently only one 0.5 module running on the intricacies of Law in Africa, which at SOAS is unrepresentative.

There is only one course that actively considers the experience of British African diaspora entitled Law, Multiculturalism and Rights. This course is not running in the academic year 2019/20, which is a real concern. In conversations with Head of Department, there was inadequate recognition of the implications...
and effects of this. Failing to run courses on the African diaspora asserts that the experiences of African diaspora are a less important object of study. That this is not material worth learning about and understanding. This has the potential to indirectly influence self-esteem in the context of the institution and its over-arching aims, as well as the title of this educational institution.

When this issue was raised, the response was that the running of modules depends on the availability of experts. Thus, Dr Bano’s research leave during the academic year 2019-2020 was the reason the only course exploring the experience of British BAME communities could not run. This is simply inadequate. These types of modules ought to be a priority for SOAS and reasonable action must be taken to facilitate them being run year on year.
Chronology of Events

Welcome Week

As mentioned previously, one of the first hurdles was to raise awareness of the racial attainment gap. We addressed this from the arrival of the new cohort of Law students. During fresher’s week, Bridging the Gap contributed to the Law School’s official welcome talks, using local statistics from the department to describe the racial attainment gap. We demonstrated that students of colour are less likely to attain first class degree classifications and tend to have higher non-continuation rates. Outside the welcome talks we had a sign-up sheet inviting students of all backgrounds to get involved by attending events and keeping up to date on progress. This initial engagement enabled us to communicate with students who were interested in volunteering for or keeping up to date with the programme. This also demonstrated an initial willingness of the Law school to collaborate.

This transparency was risky from the perspective of the department, but highly successful. It demonstrated that the School of Law recognised the issue and had encouraged students to actively counter this structural inequality. The incoming students communicated that these statistics were unacceptable and that they wanted to be a part of the work that Bridging the Gap were doing. They were also glad to hear that the department an active part of this conversation.
Panel Event

In mid-October we held a panel discussion. The aim of this was to raise the issues of:
- the racial attainment gap in SOAS Law school and in the UK more widely;
- the lack of representation in the legal profession, the reasons for this;
- and what we can do collectively to counter these glass ceilings.

We took inspiration from a panel event hosted by Miranda in collaboration with the careers service in the academic year 2017-2018. BAME professionals talked about their experiences in the legal profession and in other industries surrounding law. We have come to realise in our discussions regarding the racial attainment gap that many people do not even realise that the disparity is a problem. Individuals blame themselves and do not ask for help until it is too late. This event was significant in introducing the issue to new students and existing students, from early on in the year.

Both undergraduate and postgraduate students attended this event, which was very encouraging. The four panellists were Isis Amlak, Cheryl Phoenix, Ilyas Nagdee and Samia Bano. It was our intention that our panellists were from a variety of professional backgrounds that interact with Law but not necessarily in a conventional sense. Isis is an activist working in local communities to empower people of colour. She was very active as an advocate for the survivors of Grenfell. Cheryl Phoenix is the founder of a UK wide network called the Black Child Agenda. She works to counter the ‘school to prison pipeline’ by supporting parents through independent tribunals when there are improper expulsions. Ilyas was the ‘Black Student’s Officer’ for the National Union of Students, and so works nationally on the Racial Attainment Gap in Higher education. This enabled him to offer a unique perspective. Dr Bano, is a Reader at SOAS School of Law, and has managed to reach levels of success within academia. She is also the Teaching and Learning representative for the Law department and so was able to share her experiences of how the racial attainment gap filters into the student experience at SOAS. It is notable that she is also the convenor for the Law, Multiculturalism and Rights course which explores the interaction between Asian and black communities with the law. Her unique experience and expertise inspired ideas of how we can counter this inequality.
The event was well attended, with over 40 people present. The event was open to the public, as well as SOAS students. Following the panel discussion and question and answer session, many people stayed behind to hear more about the issue and to volunteer their time towards the collective. Networks were also made between some of the attendees and the panellists. In prompting momentum for the project and inspiring people of all backgrounds to offer their time, we found this event to be a success. It would be worthwhile to hold another similar event in the future, either as a panel, or as a professional mixer, where more networks of this type could be made.

Two members of staff from the Law department – Professor Tan and Juliet Ssentongo - also attended which was a demonstration of their support for the programme. It would have been encouraging to have seen more. Active departmental support remains a target for future events.
WHERE IS MY PLACE IN THE LAW?:

DECONSTRUCTING RACIAL DISPARITIES IN EDUCATION AND LEGAL PRACTICES

WHEN? 6-8pm Friday 5th October
WHERE? Weston Lecture Theatre, Senate House, SOAS

Panel Discussion Poster
Focus Group

Towards the end of October, we held a focus group, again inviting students from all backgrounds. The idea was that we would use this to strategize and find out how students think this programme could work for and represent them. The attendees predominantly included black Law students and this also raised the issue of how to make the space more inviting to Asian students and allies. We discussed student experiences and asked what could make the scheme more useful. We were also able to get a fair impression of black students’ views of the Law school so that we could include this perspective when engaging with the department.

This was the first event where we asked attendees to fill out questionnaires about whether the collective has been useful in raising awareness of the racial attainment gap and how it could be improved to work better for students of colour. The feedback was positive with all saying that they feel the collective is helpful.

From this event we were also able to form a committee. These ten students selected the subsequent events that they were particularly interested in. This led to the formation of subgroups for certain events. Wider student contribution significantly improved the student collective because it has meant more ideas for events being brought forward. It also made working more efficient as the workload was spread. Going forward it would increase the capacity of the whole programme if more responsibilities were shared across the committee.

It was also important to us during the formation stage that the work reflected the desire and the will of the students. For this reason, we used the focus group as an opportunity to workshop the name of the collective. The original idea had been to name the programme ‘Minding the Gap’ as a play on words to our geographical setting in London. However, it was more important to the students to demand that this collective was not just active, but a call to action for both the institution and fellow students. For this reason, attendees voted instead for the name ‘Bridging the Gap: A Student Collective’.

We took this opportunity to ask students to fill out a survey on the potential for Bridging the Gap. The feedback was highly informative.
Bridging the Gap First Focus Group. Leading to the Formation of the Committee.

Committee Sharing of Ideas, Meeting of Minds
When asked if Bridging the Gap’s events and projects could help or benefit, attendees reported:

“The informal approach was amazing - it felt really comfortable. I like the fact that there was no hierarchy”

“It has massive potential as it has affected people’s lives and awareness”

“I feel so unsupported like I’m drowning, this is the support group I didn’t even know I needed”

“This programme has the potential to benefit me because it is very comforting to see people who look like me who can relate to my struggles but also have the same expectations”

When asked how the programme could help students some notable responses included:

“I can [learn] from the outset things I can do”

“Collaborate with societies”

“Re mental health: small groups where we have discussion where we can find community/support and ultimately relief. Based on prior evens, we can bring in a therapist for group therapy”

“I’m really invested in carving out a space where we validate and address mental illness amongst black students and how our experience of mental ill health manifests itself when we’re at university”

When asked if they knew about the racial attainment gap before, students responded:

“Nor really - it’s a massive issue that isn’t really spoken about”

“Yes, but not in detail, I now know that it is so much more systematic than I thought”

“I did not know about the racial attainment gap before. I still feel like I have more to learn though”

“Slightly - it was presented in a very diluted way, so it was easy for me to not address how real the attainment gap is.”
We also asked attendees which intersectional identities to consider. They suggested:

- Class/ socioeconomic background
- Sexuality
- Gender
- Heritage (the country relatives were from)
- Mental health
- Racial identity (how students self-define)
- Religion
- Mixed heritage (relatives from more than country)

It was important for us to consider how comfortable students feel in the academic spaces on campus. We asked if the department created a space for you to be your authentic self:

- “They are helpful but not as my authentic self”

- “Yes, to some extent”

- “There is a disparity between senior student status and undergraduates

- “I have a black woman as a tutor and it automatically makes me feel more comfortable”

- “No - I feel as though SOAS Law equates equal opportunity with having a space where the attainment gap is not addressed at all.”

From the focus group responses we were able to draw some key conclusions:

- Students are aware of racial equality but do not have a firm understanding of the racial attainment gap in higher education
- Carving out black spaces within the institution is key to students feeling at ease
- A focus on ill mental health in the black community would be of key importance
- Students feel a number of intersecting identities cause the disparities
- The Law Department made some students feel they had to conceal parts of themselves. This extends beyond concepts of ‘professionalism’ and touches into ‘respectability politics’. Certain ways of speaking, hairstyles and clothing are seen casual, not neat, or unprofessional. These often align with racialised presentations.
Mentoring Scheme

Another aspect of our programme is a mentoring scheme. The idea was to create 4 pods of 4 students. We intended for the pods to work on two levels. Firstly, the pods would provide peer support to one another on an academic level, and with concerns associated with university life. We advised them to meet once every two weeks. In addition to this each pod was allocated a group mentor. The idea being that they meet with this mentor less frequently, approximately once a month.

We launched applications for the mentoring scheme at the end of the first term. Thirteen students signed up over the Christmas break and we did not push to increase this number. This allowed us to create three pods. The mentors are from different professional backgrounds, namely: one barrister - David Neita - one academic - Samia Bano - and one solicitor - Onyema Ugorji.

The target for this work was originally November. However, due to academic demands of the student there was a delay. Mentees were selected by February. In March we hosted a launch party, inviting supporters, mentees, and mentors. Due to the delay, the mentoring aspect only launched fully during deadline season, which did limit the success of this aspect of the programme. Should the programme run again we should aim to have this process completed earlier.
Working with Secondary Schools

Considerable research demonstrates that the disparities between the grade attainment of students of colour and white students are apparent as early as primary school. For this reason, it was important to reach out to local communities, including schools and other charities. Early on in the academic year Maxine attended the Black Child Agenda’s event. The Black Child Agenda is the organisation founded by Cheryl Phoenix, who later spoke at our panel event. Here Maxine met many other charities working on racial equality. We have made links with charities who are already working on these issues and would like to support these grassroots movements.

To achieve a well-rounded solution, we are keen to engage with local secondary schools. We were invited to host a workshop in one secondary school in North London. The intended time for this was July. The theme of these workshops was to empower black and Asian students to reach their potential academically as well as discussing with staff how they can prevent the oppressive trajectory that exists for many students of colour. Unfortunately, we did not make it to any schools in London. However, we did have an opportunity to speak at a school in Milton Keynes.

Potterspury Lodge School

Potterspury Lodge School is located in Towcester. It is a specialist facility that providing tailored education for highly functioning young people on the autistic spectrum. The students ranged from the ages of 8-18. During the visit Maxine hosted an assembly and sat in three citizenship lessons. Lessons last approximately 45 minutes. Maxine has provided an outline of the visit below:

The assembly focused on what it means to construct an identity and the significance of this. The assembly itself was very interactive. After introducing myself, I asked the students to consider their own identity and what words they may use to describe themselves. Subsequently, they were asked to share these ideas with a partner. From here I introduced the racial attainment gap and the various ways Bridging the Gap is attempting to decrease the disparity in the context of SOAS. I also introduced the mindset that we can contribute to the fair treatment of one another in society, by being open-minded and considering the different experiences people have.

Due to the special educational needs of the young people it was a unique challenge to tailor this assembly. I was also supported by the staff to help discern where there was and was not due
focus. The children are free to wander and leave rooms as they please whenever they feel uncomfortable or bored. I was fortunate enough that none left the assembly, and was informed that this demonstrated unusual success.

After this I sat in three periods. I remained with a staff member called Mr Nye, who facilitated discussion about foreign affairs namely Brexit, Shamima Begum and terrorism. In this context I saw my role as infusing social context and considerations like inequality into their own understandings of current affairs.

Overall this was a useful and successful event. There is much more room for Bridging the Gap to visit other secondary schools to discuss the significance about this.

It would also be very useful to have opportunities to speak to staff members about issues around unconscious bias and structural inequality. During my day at the school I saw only one white female student and one black male student. This would suggest that there could be an inaccessibility to specialist services for both people or colour and girls at this institution. If this is the case, it is something that should be actively countered, so that more diverse students could get access to this incredible facility.

Potterspury Lodge was kind enough to provide feedback from Maxine’s visit:

"Maxine Thomas-Asante was invited to visit our school in March of this year and delivered a stunning assembly about equality and about harnessing the potential that exists among young people from all backgrounds in this country…

"The students found her engaging and often inspirational...

"the boys… did not make life easy for Maxine, and her thinking was frequently challenged… Maxine remained coherent and courteous to students at all times, and I felt that her contributions to their thinking was positive and even inspirational."³

³ The full letter can be found in Appendix 3.
Universities UK Conference

The work of Bridging the Gap has temporally aligned with considerable national work on racial equality. Some of this work has been led by key figures within the sector - such as Valerie Amos through Universities UK, and Amatey Doku a previous representative for NUS. Additionally, under Theresa May there was discussion about private corporations and schools publishing inequality data.

On 5th June 2019 SOAS hosted Universities UK’s conference. This conference aimed to analyse and publicly launch the report on the racial attainment gap headed particularly by Valerie Amos and Amatey Doku. Maxine was invited to participate on the student experience panel.

Maxine reports that it was a fantastic opportunity to be on this panel, proposing some of the experiences faced as a student working on this area to academics and students. The success of this event was in opening up conversation across the sector on how to address the issue. Other universities presented during the day and shared details of programmes that had successfully aided the closing of their attainment gaps.

![Maxine Thomas-Asante with Amatey Doku and Adwoa Darko who also spoke at the panel event.](image)

The Guardian

Following the panel discussion Maxine was contacted by journalist Harriet Swain and was offered the opportunity to comment on the racial attainment gap in a Guardian article. This was an invaluable opportunity to be a part of the national discussion around the racial attainment gap. The article was titled: *Black academics ‘can’t fight race inequality alone’*. 4

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Events We Would Have Liked to Do

Group Therapy Session

An idea came from one of our committee members, Linessa, to hold a group therapy session. February is a particularly stressful time in the academic year, and they felt it would be useful to hold an event to support students in alleviating stress. This pattern occurs because February is often a time where there are many deadlines and exams are looming. There was certainly support for this from the rest of the committee. For this reason, we made headway into organising a training session delivered by a local charity – Blurt it Out. They would host, and train us to host, a group therapy session for students of colour.

We wanted to facilitate this event being organised by Linessa rather than taking over this idea. However, there were challenges in our approach to this. We are still keen to support our students in volunteering and organising events. However, going forward we might take a more front foot to bring the desires of our students to fruition. The resignation of our key contact at Blurt it Out also delayed our progress.

Showcase

The idea of a “collective” is a concept borrowed from the art world. There is something inherently positive about sharing resources, skills, and creativity to benefit others. As such we wanted to end the first year of this programme on a high. After exam season, we had planned to host a show at SOAS, demonstrating all of the incredible talent that exists within our very own student body. This could potentially have included singing, dance, spoken word, photography and a play. The idea was to invite all of our supporters, and those we have networked with during this first year. Unfortunately, this was not realised within the time frame. However, I would still be interested in continuing this cultural celebration going forward.

More Relationships with Community Groups

Though initial relationships were created when we attended the Black Child Agenda’s event, in the context of the year we did not reach out to these charities or attend any of their events. Towards the end of the year Maxine was also able to meet a representative from the Runnymede Trust. Should the programme run again, collaborating on events and sharing resources is definitely something Bridging the Gap would be keen to explore.
Impact Statements

Luba Musa Eiggie – Committee Member

“I enjoyed the laid-back discussions that were held because it was a good environment for sensitive topics… [to be] brought forward and discussed…. Greater focus can be given to how [our] ideas can be made reality … [Particularly] engagement with schools and sixth forms/ colleges… [which] is… integral to building awareness.

The speech [Maxine] gave in the intervals between lectures was a great way to get people’s attention and I really do appreciate that. The more debates held in conjunction with other society’s e.g. the Debate Society or ACS etc, I feel the greater the participation/ interest.

The group chat is like a hub in itself… members of the Committee can play whatever they feel fits once it arises.”

Miriam O Uzoma – Committee Member

First of all, I would like to thank Miranda and Maxine for their great effort in running this scheme this year! I have nothing but positive feedback on the Bridging the Gap program! The events held were very instinctive and I got to meet great individuals who I wouldn’t meet if it wasn’t for this program.

I look forward to growing this initiative in the coming months, as we try to include some outreach programme with other departments and schools in the local community, in an attempt to bring awareness to the attainment affecting the BME group in education.

Nadia Asri – Committee Member

This project is a step in the right direction but unless there is a continued allocated fund and system in place to hire project managers and directors then it as no possibility or potential to make meaningful change in the long run.

Julien Boast – Widening Participation Manager

"I am confident Bridging the Gap positively contributed to reducing the attainment gap. The project provided a space for critical analysis of issues, creative approaches to solving them, and a passionate focus on actually getting things done. Though focussed on Law, it provides a template for any department at SOAS willing to work with students to reduce the attainment gap, and it’s vital the School takes on board the recommendations made.”
"The Scheme is hugely valuable in so many ways. Not least, it provides a safe space for students to share experiences and to feel supported and less isolated in their studies. To know that you are not alone, that you are not the problem, that there are others like you is fundamental to being able to realise your true potential, and the Scheme provides this.

The opportunity to be mentored and to hear from the lived experience of others like you - those who have succeeded and understand your context is inspirational and provides a platform for students to feel that their lived experience is valid, and that with the right support, it is possible to succeed."
Conclusions and Recommendations

This programme was originally given a one year running term. Over the course of this year, we have worked closely and built solid foundations by raising awareness of the racial attainment gap as it manifests at SOAS School of Law. We have also gathered feedback orally and through surveys as to what type of events and structural change would be effective support for students. Bridging the Gap has made an excellent start but there is space to make more of a difference. For this reason, we have suggested ideas of how this project could potentially continue the work it has started. We have also put forward some advice as to what steps the university can take to help improve the experience of BAME SOAS students.

What action should SOAS take?

Data Collection

Accessible collation of data has proven to be a point of considerable weakness. Bridging the Gap requested information in order to tailor the programme and provide support that is as useful as possible. Towards the beginning of the year, when requests were made to access data, the consistent response was that there was little data available about which intersecting identities worsen student attainment. Instead of waiting for the gathering of this information by SOAS, we asked students where they felt support was needed. This was quoted above in the focus group responses. However, statistical evidence would be very helpful in order to ensure the support provided will be effective.

In trying to find out more about possible other reasons we have reached out to Julien Boast in Widening Participation, Arvind Sandhu in Diversity and Inclusion, Angus Lockyer, and Carol Tan in the Law department. Arvind Sandhu was particularly helpful. However, all agreed the information simply is not being collected currently. Bridging the Gap has highlighted to all of these members of staff that in order for the racial attainment gap to truly close, addressing it must be seen as a priority. The first way to achieve that is to have an accurate understanding of the status quo.

Collation of data will require investment. From conversations with Arvind and Angus we understand it is in SOAS’ long term plan to begin researching and analysing the reason for the disparity. However, during the academic year it has felt at times that the issue is not being prioritised. It is our hope, that with SOAS’ aspirational APP plan targets, we will see considerable progress over the next year. Some data that would have been useful to Bridging the Gap and that SOAS should consider collecting would be the following:
- **A broader image**: There needs to be a continual measuring of final degree classifications prior to 2012 and after 2016.

- **Success of initiatives**: An evaluation of the success of specific projects carried out by the institution and an evaluation of which of these are most successful in decreasing the disparity. This could be carried out qualitatively and quantitatively.

- **Intersecting identities**: How do other intersecting identities such as gender, sexuality, mental health status, household income, living on the outskirts of London or at home worsen or improve final grade classifications.

- **Accessing facilities**: A detailed analysis of which facilities students of colour are accessing. Areas such as welfare - especially mental health support - library services and career support should be considered in particular detail.

- **Non continuation**: How many students of colour are dropping out and at what point in the academic year is this happening.

There is a distinct lack of information on dropout rates. We reiterate that it must be a priority to collect this data for two reasons. Firstly, so that our programme can intercede with help before personal situations get so dire that students feel unable to do anything other than drop out. Secondly, so that SOAS can measure improvement, especially in light of other programs like ‘Decolonising the Curriculum’.

This issue is becoming increasingly desperate due to the restructuring and lack of funds of the university. This was made abundantly clear with the change of the role from Personal Tutors to Academic Advisor. The role has been stripped of any pastoral focus, meaning help to students is even further away. More must be done to ensure that students can locate and access help.

**Investing Resources**

During the year Bridging the Gap have done our absolute best to bring in panellists and mentors who are the best in the country at working on these issues. However, reaching out to legal industry professionals, and more high-profile activists has been incredibly difficult due to a restricted budget. While it has been positive to be paid for our labour, rounded support simply demands resources and contacts. It was suggested originally that speakers and trainers were to be paid in vouchers. However, this form of payment is inadequate. It would also be invaluable for SOAS to provide a budget for our events. We are very open to discussions on how this could operate.
Reconceiving the Issue

Most of the conversation around racial inequality at SOAS centres around grade attainment and drop-out rates. It is essential that this issue is seen in a more rounded manner. The five main concerns are as follows:

1. Ability of BAME students to obtain the grades to enter reputable higher education institutions
2. Once students arrive, are they accessing academic and professional service support? This can potentially counter disproportionate non-continuation rates.
3. How do we counter classroom dynamics that make students feel alienated? This is often born from students of colour having their cultures considered distant objects of study, and their lived experience not being valued as much as othering academic studies.
4. Grade attainment
5. Employability post-university

Furthermore, all initiatives should consider the different issues affecting black communities as related but distinct from those affecting different Asian communities. The homogenising term ‘BAME’ can permeate into initiatives, limiting the success of projects. This is a complex but highly significant consideration.

Supporting the Continuation of Bridging the Gap: A Student Collective

As the saying goes: “nothing about us, without us, is for us”. The context of the racial attainment gap is no different. The best interest of the students and the student voice itself must be at the heart of all solutions to support Black and Asian students. It is this recognition that has empowered Bridging the Gap to cultivate uniquely transparent environment particularly for black students. Maxine and Miranda are now both SOAS alumni and it is time to hand over the baton.

Over the academic year 2018-2019 we have cultivated an active committee who are passionate about the cause and have creative ideas of their own. For this reason, we recommend that this project be continued, with three new students at the helm. We would be able to advise which students would be best placed to lead for the next year based on our experience of working with them. We suggest that these three students be from at least two different departments in order to encourage the growth of the programme.

Should the programme run for another year it would be important for there to be a budget outside of labour costs. This way we would be able to host events
with speakers from outside SOAS and beyond higher education. This would also enable us to forge stronger links with the wider communities including schools and other charities. It would also have the effect of actively demonstrating to the entire SOAS community, that addressing the racial attainment gap is a priority for the institution. This in itself may encourage BAME students to regard themselves as equally deserving and entitled to facilities and support at SOAS.
Appendix 1

Classification of First Degree by Department and Ethnicity 2012/13 to 2015/16 (FPE)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>BME</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Other (including mixed)</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Not known/Refused N/K</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014-15</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-16</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend:
- Not applicable
- Third class honours/Pass
- Lower second class honours
- Upper second class honours
- First class honours

Note: The numbers represent the count of students in each category.
Appendix 1 (continued)

Classification of First Degree by Department and Ethnicity
Law School 2012/13 to 2015/16 (FPE)

Classification of First Degree by Department and Ethnicity
All SOAS 2012/13 to 2015/16 (FPE)
Appendix 2

Initial Proposal

What would our programme look like?

It is clear from the research in the Access Agreement 2018/19 that most success is achieved when one-off workshops are supported by continued communication. Inspired by this, we aim to take a similar path. In designing our programme to counter the racial attainment gap in law, we would prefer a two-pronged approach.

**Event 1**

The first aspect of our programme would aim to raise the issue of the racial attainment gap from early on in the academic year. During the two introductory weeks at SOAS we would like to hold an event through the law school, raising the issues around the racial attainment gap in SOAS Law school and in the UK more widely; lack of representation in the legal profession; the reasons for this; and what we can do collectively to counter this.

Initially, we would give a background for why we feel this event is necessary, the statistical and testimonial disadvantages, and SOAS’s active response in trying to oppose this. Following this, we would take inspiration from the recent event hosted by Miranda in collaboration with the careers service. This was a panel discussion with BAME people talking about their experiences in the legal profession and in other industries surrounding law.

One of the biggest issues we have come to realise in our discussions regarding the racial attainment gap is that many people do not even realise that the disparity is a problem. Individuals blame themselves and do not ask for help until it is too late. This event would be significant in introducing the issue to new students and existing students, from the very beginning of the year. We aim for this event to be targeted at both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

**Event 2**

The second aspect of our programme is a mentoring scheme. It is very important that this scheme is active, and not a buzzword. We aim for this mentoring scheme to occur as a focus group and reception occurring once a term. Ideally, we would have four ‘mentors’, who would visit every event. This way networking can be truly progressive. Networking events will be specifically themed as well.

We would like at least some of these mentors to be alums from SOAS law school. The reason for this is that SOAS has a unique approach to its teaching of the law, and this is likely to be appreciated by someone who has had an
academic relationship with SOAS. Furthermore, it is more likely that there will be a personal incentive for the alum to participate in an ongoing capacity.

We are open to discussion as to how this mentoring scheme should operate, but in our discussions so far, we have visualised students volunteering to attend. However, we would be open to an invitation-based system perhaps in conjunction. This could potentially encourage students who are likely to benefit but unlikely to volunteer could be more likely to attend. This may be necessary as we have already established that an unfortunate by-product of the issue is that SOAS BAME students are not always proactive in volunteering. We do not want to create a situation that uses this as an excuse to prevent real change.

**Structural Change**

Another key issue that has been raised during the last year is that pastoral care within the department is too vague and inaccessible. We would like a meeting with representatives from the law school to definitively outline what the role is for academic tutors. This can then lead to a clearer and more effective job description for tutors. Having student involvement in this would allow us to inform the faculty of what we as students actually require from our academic tutors.

The reason this is important for the racial attainment gap is because part of the reason for higher dropout rates among BAME peoples is the lack of on-going support they feel they have during the academic year. When external circumstances are not dealt with, this can increase feelings of stress and being overwhelmed. Having a clearer port of call should decrease the frequency with which this is happening.

If it is not appropriate to redefine the role of the academic tutors, then it will be necessary to introduce the role of a point of call for pastoral care that is able to offer student support in practice. This should not be given to a member of staff that already has a number of job roles, but one who can dedicate a fair amount of time to ensuring the wellbeing of students.

Over the last academic year, particularly in the undergraduate intermediate year key modules there has been a visible issue with non-attendance to lectures and tutorials. Up to this point the department has addressed this non-attendance through a punishment system, whereby when attendance is lower than 80% the students begins to receive emails encouraging them to come to class. Introducing a pastoral care role may compliment this by creating an environment where the university is more inquisitive as to why students are not attending. It would encourage the dealing with students on a personal level as opposed to a statistical one, which could potentially be more successful.
What funding is required?

The main areas where funding will be required are:

- Payment for Miranda and Maxine for the work they put in to the organisation and planning of these events, and the programme more widely
- Payment for panellists for our career’s discussion in the introductory week
- Payment for the mentors for the time spent attending receptions/focus groups

In order to provide a more thorough proposal, we would be interested in learning what funding is available, so that there can be more specificity regarding the allocation of resources.

Key considerations:

**Continuation**

Miranda was on a master’s programme and Maxine was entering her third year when they launched Bridging the Gap. Both feel passionately that should the programme implemented should continue, even when their time at SOAS is completed. The issue we are addressing is key to both hearts and needs to be taken seriously by the university and the law school. It was important to both of us to mention this expressly.

**Mentoring Schemes**

Historically the department has taken the attitude that mentoring schemes should be run exclusively by students. This has led to a vacuum of services. This mentoring scheme must be actively supported by the department and widening participation in order to succeed.

**Measuring Progress**

For both of these proposed events we will also be soliciting survey pre and post to measure how effective these events are specifically for BAME students. These surveys will serve as a measuring tool to help see how impactful these approaches have been to affect the racial attainment gap.
18 July 2019

My name is Taliesin Nye and I teach Citizenship, Politics and Religious Studies at Potterspury Lodge School, near Towcester. Potterspury Lodge is a school for Children with high-functioning Autism.

Maxine Thomas-Asante was invited to visit our school in March of this year, and delivered a stunning Assembly about Equality and about harnessing the potential that exists among young people from all backgrounds in this country.

She used a range of media to support the verbal delivery of her passionate pleading, which engaged our students fully and kept their attention until she finished.

After her presentation, Maxine came into my classroom as a visitor, and joined in with two lessons involving students ages 14-17. Once again, the students found her engaging and often inspirational.

Apart from one transgendered student, all of our students are boys, aged 11-19. They are all on the Autistic spectrum, and are of "average and above intelligence", as these are our criteria for entry and they are generally very computer-savvy. My lessons encourage critical evaluation of the views and beliefs of others, and the boys are very happy to subject my views to critical scrutiny. While they retained the politeness they were expected to show to any visitor, they did not make life easy for Maxine, and her thinking was frequently challenged.

Maxine remained coherent and courteous to students at all times, and I felt that her contributions to their thinking was positive and even inspirational.

I would welcome her back to speak in my classroom, or to the school as a whole, at any time.

Yours,

Taliesin Nye
Teacher
Appendix 4 - Methods of Communication

Email: bthegap2@gmail.com

This was the main way we communicated with our mentors and other charities. An email offered some legitimacy and formality that is not provided by other media. We decided to use an email address outside of the SOAS intranet to allow the freedom for the project to grow in the future.

Instagram: @bridgingtg

Instagram has proven to be a very effective way of keeping stakeholders up to date on the events that we have attended and hosted. Though we have used other publicity methods - such as SU all-student emails and posting flyers on notice boards - social media has allowed us to access students who do not necessarily attend university in person especially for extra-curricular activities. This is important in light of the issue of non-continuation, which is an identified issue for Bridging the Gap in Higher Education. There is a perceived correlation between non-continuation and non-attendance to university. Thus, the idea is that through social media we can engage students and provide a sense of student community and an opportunity for connection before students get to the point where they feel it is necessary to drop out. Some of our posts achieved reach of up to 129 students. This is considerably higher than the number of students who signed up to our mailing lists.

Facebook: Bridging the Gap: A Student Collective (@BridgingTG1)

Facebook introduced the same advantages as Instagram as a social media outlet but has the advantage of broadening our reach. Many other SOAS Societies and departments use Facebook pages, so it also made it easier to communicate with these existing pages. Our Facebook posts also achieved considerable reach, with up to 73 students reading our update posts.

Whatsapp

After the first focus group, which will be explored later in this document, several students volunteered to be more actively involved in BTG. This became our core committee. During the year these students attended events early, would help set up, and also propose more ideas of what they wanted BTG to look like going forward. We were in fairly regular contact with these students during the year. The individuals in the committee are recognised in the acknowledgements section.
Acknowledgements

There are a number of people who were essential in establishing and supporting the programme. We would like to offer special recognition to those people, for their continued support and inspiration:

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